

# EYEMAZING



Beauty is ten million giant butterflies in Alexander McQueen's high-heeled shoes, walking over the Brooklyn Bridge, reciting Brecht prayers to Venus, during an eclipse of the Moon.

# Sara Imloul

## The *Black Circus*, A Disturbing Strangeness

"A small format theatre where the scene, the reverie, the fantasy is being performed. These pictures address topics such as memories, esoterism and collective imagination and are traces of beings belonging to another time. Ghosts are dancing in a dark room, as if on a merry-go-round. A travelling studio where all characters come, get transformed, perform, and disappear. This is where the obscure game of the unconscious starts, in which all is possible." (Sara Imloul)

Sara Imloul, 25, a French photographer who lives in Paris, started the *Black Circus* series when she discovered, four years ago, the calotype process (19th century photographic process using a negative paper leading to picture reproduction through contact).

The original prints are small in size, not more than six inches high. Her exhibits are therefore an invitation to come closer, to discover a mysterious world of intimacy, where a black and white performance is on. A precious little world reminiscent of surrealist photography and expressionist cinema from the 30s.

Imloul's characters are often white or glittery—white clowns, mermaids, dancers, transvestites, passers-by, shadows among shadows—all deep inside an intense black. Do these characters escape from the night of her childhood, from her dreams as much as from her nightmares?

Just as a voyeur or a mesmerised observer, because that's what the photographer invites us to be, we sometimes notice ageless faces, as if their souls had been drained: as if left with only their cheap finery for identity. Look at this white clown, whose make-up and face disintegrate, soon left only with the whiteness of his costume. And this mermaid, so beautiful that we could almost forget that she is without a face. This is maybe why she is beautiful: pure blazing form? Appearing to be simply a theatre for children, could the work of the young Imloul be her first steps of a reflection on her identity?

And since it is claimed that all work of art is only a form of self-portrait, when asked, "Where is it hiding?", she chooses to remain mysterious and gives no reply.

Imloul works with different types of old camera bodies/casings. The first one was a gift from her grandfa-

ther, given to the girl when she was in her teens. The others were acquired in flea-markets. And never mind if the camera she fancies is unreliable, a faulty lens or a faulty shutter release. Surprises are quite common, and Imloul even relies on these; she loves to defy chance for her pictures to get the sort of imperfection she won't be able to control, and will make all the difference.

"The lighting process is the one used in theatres," she explains. She never uses a flash for the shoot, just continuous lighting that gives the pictures a strange and penetrating charm: are characters motionless, moving, unique or split in two? Is it really their image we see in the mirror? The outlines vibrate, the references are lost and yet everything seems to be exactly in its place.

To look at one of Imloul's pictures, is to look at a living scene of disturbing strangeness, that cannot be defined as moving or still, as real or dreamt, but as a scene in weightlessness, as if held in space by invisible threads pinned to the silence the shooting takes.

"Looking at the circus scene I have just created, I press the shutter when I have a strong feeling of *déjà vu*. I am the observer of the image I have created, and at that very moment I forget where I am, I forget I am caught in my own trap and I play with it," She says.

The second act begins, in the dark room, where actors leave the stage for their paper fantasies to enter. The artist touches up each print with brushstrokes: she enhances the whites, working on tinges for the backgrounds, the fabrics, the glitters. It is meticulous work that makes each print unique. From the very first development of her theatre scenes to the ultimate chemical touch, she does it all. As a perfect plastic artist, Imloul loves being in charge of her work, artistically and technically, down to the finest details.

"This is the price I pay," she says with a sense of humour, "in order to choose my pictures, amongst all images in the world, since they manage to be, for me, the exact representation of my imagination." Ah ha! So this is a quest for identity! Imloul, so reserved and yet daring to talk about her work with such dangerous frankness, is not a narcissist; she has the enthusiasm of a young Rimbaud.

In her sets, she reveals a taste for frontal positions similar to the way anthropomorphic pictures are taken; for hardly noticeable actions (the raising of a hand, a floating petticoat, the turning of a head), she also displays a taste for exploring the border between similar and identical, leaving illusion a full place so that everyone can dive into what Roland Barthes calls "this remarkable trembling of time."

For her, the notion of human body aesthetics was challenged from a very early age. Her inspiration? Apart from the obvious influence of the surrealists and the constructivists, there is also Muybridge and his work on breaking down movement. She feels attracted to the unbelievable strangeness of human beings, capable of exhibiting their most extreme deformities. She watched the Crazy Horse shows on television at a young age and was fascinated by the formal beauty of the bodies, sublimated by lights, cut out, adorned.

In her work, beauty is mainly a question of devices. When Imloul dresses her models with crowns, pearls, glitter, it is with cheap and fake stuff. The least valuable an accessory is, the more valuable it is in her eyes. She says, only the memory and memories are irreplaceable.

Memories, you ask? Ghosts in the attic, tuts found in the old wardrobe, hats and coats of another time. She likes it when something forgotten or buried has a chance to re-live. Her timeless ghost reconstruction work is as much a refuge as a shield against fear.

"The beautiful is nothing but the beginning of terrible, that we are still able to bear; we admire it because, in its indifference, it doesn't consider it worthwhile to destroy us. All angels are terrifying." (Rilke)

Imloul seems to catch the frightening angels in full flight. As in children's games, the old camera with bellows can become a birdcage. Just like butterflies pinned on paper, it is only when fleeing angels, ghosts and souls become pictures that this artist will be allowed to rest.

TEXT BY VIRGINIE LUC

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