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Photographing the Women of British Art

ART . WEEKEND

## Mayotte Magnus's Illuminating Women features stage actors, novelists, artists, editors, and Tim Keane 3 days ago

publishers whose breakthroughs coincided with the Feminist movement of the 1970s.

Edna O'Brien Mayothe Magnus Mayotte Magnus, "Edna O'Brien" (© Mayotte Lewinska / National Portrait Gallery, London) LONDON — Photographer Mayotte Magnus's portrait of Irish novelist Edna O'Brien captures her at home in Chelsea, curled up on a sofa,

By contrast, O'Brien is all presence and awareness. Her colored shawl abounds with flora and fauna and its tassels overspill the sofa, as if evoking the voluptuous realism of O'Brien's books - books that, not

blanketed by a shawl, gazing across the sitting room. Magnus's

composition takes in the surrounding space, including what looks to be a Clifford Hall painting on the wall. Hall's painting depicts a reclining

woman hidden under a white shawl, her face turned from the viewer.

long before Magnus photographed her, had been banned and burned in

Ireland, mainly due to their frank depiction of women and sexuality. Such storytelling about women in the arts animates each of the 15 portraits in Magnus's Illuminating Women here at The National Portrait Gallery. The exhibition features stage actors, novelists, artists, editors and publishers whose breakthroughs coincided with the political and social changes ushered in by the Feminist movement of the 1970s. In its original 1978 incarnation at this same museum, from which the images in Illuminating Women were drawn, Magnus's series portrayed nearly 100 British women. Decades later, most of the 15 figures in this current exhibition are still producing culture-defining work. Mayotte Magnus brings an insider's outsider view of British culture. Born in Algiers and raised in France, she moved to England in the late 1950s. By the early 1970s, having given up careers in ballet and painting,

she began taking photographic portraits of British artists, including the

commission from The National Portrait Gallery to create the cultural

Intentionally or not, by framing artists inside their studios and homes, Magnus ensures that the presiding spirit of Illuminating Women is Virginia Woolf, whose famous avowal A Room of One's Own (1928)

likes of Francis Bacon and Elisabeth Frink, which led to the

series honored by Illuminating Women on its 40th anniversary.

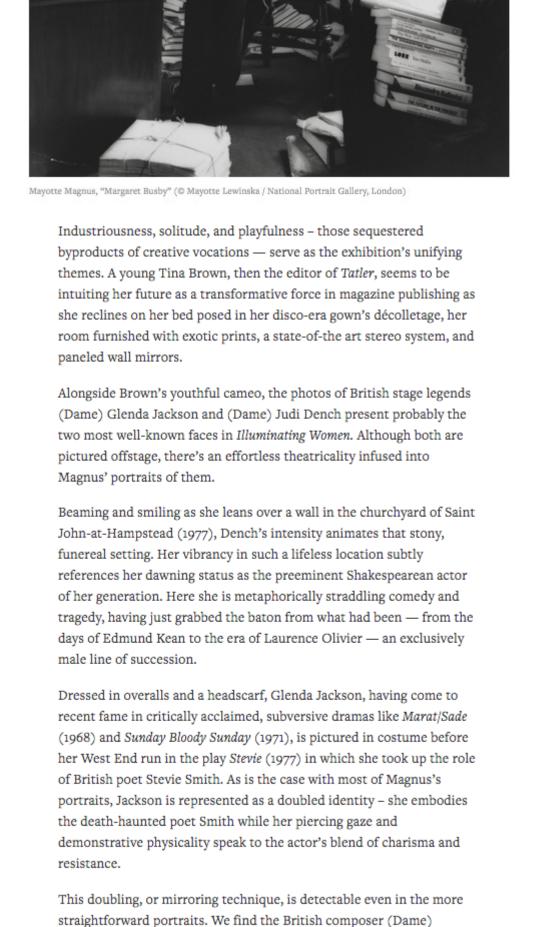
confronts how centuries of sexism have silenced talented women while arguing that a woman's genius requires untrammeled privacy in order to realize itself. To Woolf, the "room of one's own" is not just an existential necessity; it's an economic one. Having herself inherited an annual stipend from a wealthy aunt, Woolf reckons that a talented woman needs "five hundred [pounds] a year and a room with a lock" in order to create. The money bestows on women "the power to contemplate" while the locked room grants "the power to think for oneself"; both produce space where a woman can be in the creative zone, a condition that

It is fitting, then, that UK-based writers who followed in Woolf's

footsteps figure so prominently in Illuminating Women.

Woolf calls "incandescent."

Mayotte Magnus, "Glenda Jackson" (© Mayotte Lewinska / National Portrait Gallery, London) Like O'Brien, Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer's fiction outraged repressive forces in her native country - namely the racist government of South Africa. Magnus depicts Gordimer in a probing close-up, her arms raised in openness, not defensiveness. Novelist (Dame) Margaret Drabble's best known book might be The Millstone (1965), the story of a freewheeling academic who achieves independence and motherhood in modern London. But in a portrait that casts doubt on the writer's personal freedom, Magnus depicts Drabble in her backyard staring through a door window that is itself framed by kitchen implements. The toll of artistic work is often present. A remarkably candid portrait of the prolific British writer Beryl Bainbridge shows her on a break from writing, lost in thought, awkwardly lounging on a sofa. There is a sun-drenched portrait of Margaret Busby, whose publishing house brought numerous black writers into the UK's literary mainstream. Busby sits surrounded by manuscripts and books piled so high on a desk, chair, and overhead shelves that they loom like precariously teetering towers. By contrast, she holds the center of the composition as a figure of serene poise, drenched in the sunlight ricocheting around her office.



Elisabeth Lutyens, pictured a short time before her death at the age of 76, in a bare dining room under bay windows. But Magnus instills this bland domestic setting with multiple allusions to the composer's avant-garde serial technique. Dressed in a checkered blouse and a striped sweater, she sits at a round table carved with radiating lines anchored to the table's disc-shaped center, while the unfurnished

bench couches the composer in a sequence of vertical slats.

Glenys Barton, "Within" (2001), bronze, © Glenys Barton, photo: Anne Hardy (image courtesy Flowers Gallery London

This intertwining between the artist and her art most interestingly plays out in two portraits of visual artists. One is sculptor Glenys Barton, known for classically inflected figurations that complicate the

Often, Bartons' semi-abstract work features heads emerging from a common figure and flowering into competing profiles; others contain multiple figures brought into such close contact that the individual forms integrate themselves into a larger wholeness; her bisected busts often make visible their equally artful underlying layers, as if they're

ancient sculptures exposed like mannequins in a biology lab.

individualizing aims of monumental portraiture.

This blindly bright white "room of one's own" is not only a site for sculptural labor but also a temple for complicated self-reinvention. Similarly, Magnus photographs the American-born, British-based kinetic sculptor Liliane Lijn in her studio, also in an autobiographical dialogue with her work. Holding a cigarette, the artist stares squarely into the camera, standing surrounded by her metalwork installation made up of interconnected metal arcs transected here and there with mirrors, one of which reflects her in profile, creating a double portrait of the artist. She is both the living molder of her medium and an

alternative self that lives inside the sculptures she makes.

Mayotte Magnus, "Glenys Barton" (@ Mayotte Lewinska / National Portrait Gallery, London)

In corresponding fashion, Magnus' portrait of Barton generates a dramatic interplay between the real and the abstract, and between

surface and depth. With the sculptor's hands pressed to the sides of her face, she looks both sanguine and drained, yet her fixed gaze suggests that her mind is focused on the future. Deepening this psychological atmosphere, Barton's face is dwarfed by her semiabstract, sculpted self-portrait - a hieratic white mask propped up against her studio wall.

known in Britain for her public commissions and installations that incorporate the pyrotechnics and possibilities of light itself. In her book-length visual-poetic text Crossing Map (1983) the artist speculates about luminescence as both a scientific phenomenon and as a metaphor for art-making, which her book's serial poem calls the "emissions" and "absorptions" that shape and expand aesthetics and human relationships. In that book's introduction, the artist challenges the reader to wonder, "What would it be like to inhabit a world in which humans become light?" Of course, Lijn's question has direct relevance in thinking through Magnus's chosen medium, photography itself, which seeks to immortalize human beings through the mechanized manipulation of light. Magnus's portraits take this technology one step further. By training her lens on artists and writers in Britain who broke through a male-dominated culture that consigns women to the shadows, Magnus translates a well-documented, ongoing social struggle into the light-

filled, solitary spaces of its extremely individualized, self-creating

TIMET

luminaries.

March 24.

Lijn's presence in Illuminating Women is particularly apt, as she is best

Mayotte Magnus, "Liliane Lijn" (© Mayotte Lewinska / National Portrait Gallery, London)

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Illuminating Women: Photographs by Mayotte Magnus continues at The National Portrait Gallery (St Martin's Place, London, England) through

LIGHT

Liliane Lijn, "Time Is Change" (1968), Letraset on painted truncated cork cone, motorized turntable, diameter: 54 x 25 cm, Tate Collection, London, photo: Richard Wilding, 2014 (Image courtesy the artist and Rodeo, London)

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