

Exhibition Review
Illumination: An Exhibition of Fine Art Photography

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Agora Gallery
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Troubled People 3 - Cambodian HIV+ Children (n.d.) by Bruna Vangi

Recently on view at Agora Gallery (located in Chelsea under the High Line park), the exhibition *Illumination: An Exhibition of Fine Art Photography* included nine photographers. Among the stunning landscapes and abstract images of their co-exhibitors, three women—Bruna Vangi, Hermoine Macura, and Samanta Aretino—stood out precisely because their images included working-class subjects, women, children, and the disabled. These women's images capture global concerns while demonstrating the wide variety of human existence.

Vangi presented three black-and-white portraits of HIV-positive Cambodian children. The children look straight into the camera, holding the viewer's gaze. In one image, *Troubled People 1- Cambodian HIV+ Children* (n.d.), a shirtless boy who appears to be eight or nine years old looks directly into the camera, his face almost smirking. The light spotlights his face, which stands out as his hair blends into the dark interior background, with the result that the eye is drawn to his expression. Without knowing the title of the image, one could take this for a portrait of any boy—perhaps one getting into mischief—and that is the power of Vangi's portraits. Although the portraits lack the typical ebullience of images associated with childhood, there is something strong and almost defiant in the children's faces. They do not appear ill, nor do they have the sad eyes of children in the "save the children" commercials, and that is a quiet subversion in and of itself.

Located next to Vangi's portraits, Macura's photographs focused on another group of stereotyped and stigmatized people—Middle Eastern citizens. Like Vangi's, Macura's images are crisp and detailed, but the majority of her subjects avoid looking into the camera, instead gazing toward something just out of frame. The photographs are striking, with many featuring vivid colors. There is, however, something a little too perfect about the images, and the subjects appear slightly stiff. In *Disabled Refugees, Syria* (2013), three men stand on top of a small pile of rocks, their clothing blowing in the breeze, a dark sky behind them. The two men standing on either side are missing their arms, while the one in the center stands with his hands in his pockets. It's a beautiful image, but some of its power and energy is taken away by the subjects' obvious poses. A photo that seemed more spontaneous was *Druze Man Walking, Beirut, Lebanon* (2007), in which a tan wall with a stripe of graffiti, alternating faded red hearts and question marks, dominates the image, while exiting right is a man wearing all black with a white hat. He seems to be moving with purpose, leaving the viewer wondering both where he may be going and the meaning of the graffiti behind him. Did he notice it as he passed, or is it something he sees every day and thus has faded into the background of his life?

On the wall across from Macura's and Vangi's photographs were those of Aretino. Her images speak to a hand adept with color and cityscapes, which makes the world depicted in the images come alive. *People from Around the World: Indian Women* (2012) is dominated by the color gray. The sky is gray and many of the women are wearing gray saris as they crowd around what seems to be an altar in the foreground. It is unclear if the women are mourning or simply praying, but a sense of intense emotion and power radiate from the image. *Morocco Street* (n.d.) also radiates energy, but it is of a quieter sort. The image seems washed with bright blue, an ornate blue tile street leading to a large keyhole-shaped door that dominates the center of the photograph. In the left foreground a boy sits on a milk crate looking down toward his hands. The viewer feels as if he or she has encroached upon a quiet moment; perhaps the boy is taking a break from school or work. The image feels peaceful, but alive. This is the power of Aretino's images; although the majority of the photographs presented feature a lone human subject, there is always the sense of a vibrant world surrounding them.

The works in *Illuminations* were undeniably beautiful, but were limited by the number of artists in the show. With nine artists featured, many were represented by only three to five images. In the case of Vangi, that limited the impact of her series, as I found myself wanting to see more and to see the breadth of subjects she captured. But all three women shed light on a world that is seldom seen by those who do not inhabit it, and spark curiosity about their subjects. The global focus of the women's work serves as a reminder that while our lives and environments might differ, humanity and individuality are shared, and that we should not flatten the world into few expectations.

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All images courtesy of Agora Gallery