

The Freedom to Be Found in Nature

A hundred years after Anne Brigman's soft and daring forays into the wilderness to photograph herself and her friends nude, women still long for freedom to express themselves without artifice or male preferences. Roxanne Darling revisits this challenge in her series, *I AM: For the Love of Nature*.

"I wanted to go and be free." Anne Brigman

Anne Brigman wanted not just the freedom to be unclothed and photograph in her own style; she wanted to bring a feminine point of view. She wanted to work in the mountains away from the control of her husband or the influence of her mostly male photographic colleagues. Today we consider the female gaze vs. the male gaze, and we note the stunning and continued absence of women artists in museums and galleries. And yet, women artists persist in expressing their own points of view, often using their own bodies as subject matter.

Brigman was initially criticized by Alfred Stieglitz for not focusing more on photographic technique. This remains a concern in some corners of the photo community, represented by the question, "But who clicked the shutter?" As if that finger push is the key element in making an image. Yes, it is the momentary locus of control, but it has little to do with the art of creating the image. That is an artist's exercise, and it includes a dramatically wide range of skills and intuition, from composition and technical settings to being able to answer that essential question: What are you wanting to say here? Why does it matter? Who is it for?

Roxanne Darling, also seeking freedom in the wilderness, relishes these questions and relies on her intuition and conversations with the time and place to initiate the making of a photograph. The painter Carroll Dunham is well-known for saying art is "a craft-based tool for the study of consciousness." Darling connects each of her images to a specific conversation she had in the moment, with nature herself. She has written poems to accompany the photos, inviting the viewer to join her, not just in place and time but in a journey of consciousness.

This series of nude self-portraits gives us, the viewers, a chance to examine many of our own beliefs, from how to express and show the aging female body, to how to tap into the power of nature to expand one's consciousness, and at its core, to explore the holographic connections between self-acceptance and care for our planet. She channeled these notes from nature and is sharing them with us. This overlapping Venn diagram of one's own nature and the nature that supports us, invites one to start anywhere on the path to consciousness. Keep going, and you won't miss anything.

Darling admits, though, to initially making these images unconsciously, following nonspecific urges that she couldn't explain or resist at the time. She was out with her companion, Shane, in an RV for two months after the death of her mother, Blanche.

The trip began as a form of R&R but, without warning, it unlocked the final key for Darling to escape the walls of the corporate home her parents had created, shifting the rigid Capricorn plates in Roxanne herself.

The process revealed itself most clearly to Darling about halfway through the trip, in the Redwoods of Northern California. *Resting in the Redwoods* was created after an hour and a half hiking, with the voice of a singular fallen tree at the entrance to the park, continuously calling her to disrobe, lay down, and make the image with it. On the way out, at closing time, she surrendered.

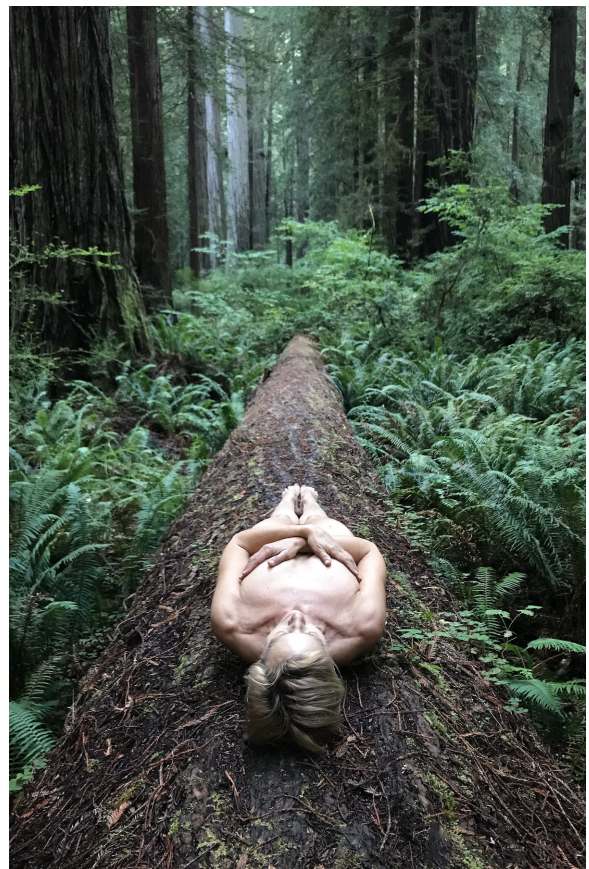
Resting in the Redwoods

As I entered
the old-growth forest
the wood nymphs
whispered my name.

I kept walking.
They kept talking.

“Here, now?” I asked.
“What are you waiting for?”
they answered.

“This is The Present.”



IMMERSION

Given that gift of ‘The Present,’ Darling became more and more attuned to the opportunity to immerse herself in the environment. Initially she explored ways to be present and nude, while also being quite modest, as her upbringing admonished her. She too, was not sure how to be present in the landscape, to confront the risks of portraying her nude body, not in her 30s or 40s when the female form is still considered ‘acceptable’ but in her 60s. We know the cliché: older women might be seen as wise old crones but are best not featured as the naked subject in works of art.

“Time and trouble will tame an advanced young woman, but an advanced old woman is uncontrollable by any earthly force.” ~ Dorothy L. Sayers

Again, nature herself continued the conversation with Darling, and two images from the desert in Arizona confronted this question of aging directly. We see the theme of sunset and long shadows as one of the recurring elements in the series, and especially in *Discussing Age at Sunset with a Saguaro*.



Discussing Age at Sunset with a Saguaro

I learn, the saguaro stands still,
singular and self-contained
for up to 90 years
before growing an arm.

I mention, that
I've often felt like a puppet,
too many arms tangling
in things I don't really care about.

Sun setting.
Tucking my arms in.
Still standing.
Still learning. Still listening.

The unconscious similarities to the work of Ana Mendieta, in her *Siluetas* series, also appear in this work. Though worn by Darling for comfort and modesty, the use of a red scarf morphs into a metaphor for 'sangre de mujer' (blood of the woman) as well as simple physical comfort. In this modern world, the woman can decide what to cover, when, and how, conditioned only to her own momentary instincts.

Rocking my Rebirth

Portals of Power.
Day by day they push us out.
To where? No one knows.

What seems painful becomes art.
The art of becoming oneself.
A rare cliché come true,
if you let it.



Being willing to immerse herself in the varied landscapes, Darling delivers to us the extreme contrasts and contradictions of a woman's experience. From the colorful, decorative, lush image of *65 and In Full Bloom* (filmed via drone camera on Maui) to the harsh, full frontal, prickly nakedness of *In a MeToo Kinda Mood*, we shed any doubts about the power of showing up. For the MeToo image, she recounts a similar hike in Joshua Tree. The black thorny bushes (alive and well in the hot southern desert) repeatedly 'begged' her to get on the ground with them. After 45 minutes, she did, sidling her body into one bush, sure she would never use the image but willing to at least make it.

As art can in fact mimic life, the poem for this image removed the veils not just of propriety but of the pretend impression others may have had about her “buttoned up” persona. She addresses at the very beginning of the poem for this image, her history of incest and rape, as that too is formative in her consciousness. This photograph has provoked some of the most powerful reactions, and, in being willing to show it in public, has completed a cycle of abuse, pain, acceptance, and generosity that are pillars of Roxanne’s life.



65 and In Full Bloom

I was a flower child.
Excuse me, I am a flower child.

The only settling I’m doing
at this age,
is into the deep grass
surrounded by blooms
still soft and fresh and full of color.

No fading out for me just yet.
This party is just starting
and you’re invited.

In a Metoo Kinda Mood

Incest, rape, assault
are prickly propositions.
'Don't say those words out loud.'
So maybe a picture
can tell the thousands
of memories...
be still.

I won't wear a crown of thorns.
I'm no martyr.
But the space
between my legs,
once small & unsafe,
is now mine to manage.



Though much of Ana Mendieta's work was harsher and more animated with anger than Darling's work, *In a MeToo Kinda Mood* swaps places with Mendieta's *Green Things Growing*. In a third work, the two artists achieve harmony between Darling's *Gazing at The Deep* and Mendieta's *Creek*. It's not a unique pose, as Kertész created his version with a male figure, *Underwater Swimmer*. We don't know what the other artists were thinking, but Darling shares this with us:

Gazing into The Deep

Some are afraid of hitting bottom.
I am afraid of being shallow.
No matter the topic,
the body of water,
or the experience,
I usually want to go deeper.

I do this with my eyes open.
I want to see what's below the surface.
I want to see what's holding me up
and what's bringing me down,
so I can learn how to float.
To be unattached to this world
while still in it.



This connection between immersion directly into the raw elements goes hand in hand with the concepts of acceptance (of nature) and self-acceptance (of one's own nature). The grass accepted her, the thorns accepted her, the water accepted her, and at long last, she finally felt at *Home on This Dome*. The shame of her age and her abuse were ecologically recycled in the wild lands. In *Sitting with My Sweet & Thorny Memories*, she acknowledges that even a painful life had moments of delight, and as an older woman, she now has the context and courage to be with them all.





In one of the rare images where she faces the camera directly, *Equus Among Us*, Darling tells us she is now willing to show up, unadorned, welcomed and protected by plant and animal kingdoms. The poem explains how the horses are her peers as “they too are considered prey.” In these small ideas, almost hidden in the poems, we learn about nature and we learn about the female experience, without shaming or blaming, but a strong sense of observational neutrality.

Equus Among Us

More than 10X my weight,
they could crush me.
But they too are considered prey.

So we stand together
in the morning in the meadow
unbridled and undressed
aware of each other yet
minding our own selves.

The big sky.
The big field.
All the big horses.
And little me.

Nature becomes us.

OBSERVATION

This neutrality is more on view in other photographs in the series, where her figure is standing or resting in the landscape, observing more than being immersed. It's as if, "no big deal," she's here having a conversation with a Joshua Tree (*Like the Moth that Depends on the Tree*) or boulders (*Bolder with Boulders*) or just hanging out enjoying the sunshine, as in *El Dorado* and *Wild Winds*.

This neutrality and quietude does not prevent her from sharing strong feelings about our role in the climate challenges or how we treat each other. In *Surveying the Slime*, she has crafted an image that at first glance, appears richly green and blue. Upon examination, though, as we join her in a pose reminiscent of Rodin's *The Thinker*, we see the choked off pond; no oxygen reaching the fish and critters below. The title, though, does not shake a finger but invites an inquiry. Once a viewer has spent time with this series of images, it's nearly impossible at this point not to wonder about the slimy ways we think of ourselves or sometimes treat others. And how that extends to how we treat our natural world.



Darling knows this self-shaming territory all too well and her image, *Saying Goodbye to My Merchandised Self* is a literal and metaphorical pinnacle of self-acceptance. This self-acceptance would not be possible to accomplish, at least in a woman's world, without also rejecting the culture's notions and necessities of consumerism.



Saying Goodbye to My Merchandised Self

I never imagined
I could feel so full
of my own soul
as to dwarf
a container ship
packed dense
with goods and bads,
ferrying stuff I no longer want,
and largely, never needed.

There were times
I thought this impedimenta
could salvage me from the trash talk
I buried myself in.

Bye bye, layers of masks and
shiny distractions.
Bye bye, all the roles I once wore
to impress others or
sell ideas.

I'm staying naked
to welcome
the wind whispering
to me.
And I like the
feeling of freedom
on my skin
in the morning.

She wants the work to be seen. She wants the work to support others who are clamoring for climate change, for respect for aging, for nurturing our own individual natures and Mother Nature, too. She was invited to join a special climate event at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, where she read poems and presented her photography. The work, in its simplicity but rich in breadth and depth, speaks to people young and old, whatever gender. She puts the work out there, much like the forest presents itself: trees, of every age, some standing, some fallen, all thriving together in the ecosystem that supports life on earth.

By not featuring herself prominently, from a facial point of view, and without makeup or doing anything to enhance her appearance, she allows herself to be a proxy for the rest of us. She's willing to bare her body and her soul, that we can find some harmony in the hologram. This state of being "natural" and the photographic style of images that are simple and direct, might remind us of the Instagram era of travel photography. In her curation, the individual photographs themselves must be compelling, visually. But neither she, nor the landscape can be modified; she places herself where nature invites her. Similarly in the image processing, she does very little, preferring the natural state, both literally and conceptually. She credits the landscape for bringing the beauty; she credits herself with bringing the bravery to show up as she is.

"An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times." ~ Nina Simone

In synchrony with this naturalness, she embraces the contemporary appearance of her work. Just as Anne Brigman's images are black and white and soft, owing in large part to the technology available at the time, they still convey this sense of freedom, power, and a feminized contact with the land and the trees. Though Darling's images are mostly in color, sharp, and unambiguous, they too represent a desire for freedom and a feminized perspective, while working with today's technology:

"I am camera-agnostic, happily using whatever tool is within my reach as nature is speaking to me. My photographs are made with a DSLR, an iPhone, and a drone camera, each of which allows me to gather and express the energy of the moment, while providing results that speak to all creatures large and small, the bird's eye view to the ant's view, to the tree's view."

In a review in the *New Yorker*, Sarah Blackwood remarks about Anne Brigman's injured breast not stopping her from taking her nude self-portraits, suggesting "that it could have contributed to her interest in representing women not as earth goddesses but as mortal beings." In the book about Anne Brigman, by the Nevada Museum of Art, the curators sum things up this way:

"Although the term feminist art was not coined until nearly seventy years after Brigman made her first photographs, the suggestion that her camera gave her the power to redefine her place as a woman in society establishes her as an important forerunner in the field."

Roxanne Darling's series, *I AM: For the Love of Nature*, continues a feminist point of view that also respects and presents the feminine point of view — an older woman, in conversation with her Self and her world, shared with us to become more conscious of our own selves, our relationships, and our impact on the planet. She realizes that “nature can live without me, I know. But not I without her.” (*Like the Moth that Depends on the Tree*)



Like The Moth That Depends on the Tree

The female yucca moth
pollinates the Joshua tree flower
laying her eggs in the flowers' ovaries.
Those little eggs hatch and
feed on the yucca seeds.
Neither would exist
without the other.

Nature can exist without me, I know.

But not I without her.

I want to be part of this cycle
of sharing, of blooming,
Of interdependency,
of feasting in the wild.

Nature is my safe word.
Nature is my safe place.

Roxanne Darling respects the difficulty of cultivating a consciousness of self-acceptance, as she names the shame and invites us to join her on the other side. Indeed, she believes it is essential if we are to learn to care for each other and our natural world.

On Fear

Some people are afraid of nature;
others are afraid of their own nature.

Some people are afraid of aging.
(We're told life belongs to the young.)
Others are afraid of the power of age.
(They retreat rather than surge.)

Some people are afraid of women.
Others bring us along to avoid their own fears.

Some people are afraid of being naked.
Others are unaware. . .
Their actions reveal far more than
Removing their clothing ever could.

Some people are afraid of being exposed.
Others share too much,
Hoping the noise hides their deeper fears.

Some fear being vulnerable.
(It feels like weakness to them.)
Others find power by hiding.

No matter.

I long to see you naked,
really naked,
wearing only your soul and your true nature.

The various means we have of stripping away the false, the unnecessary, going down to the bare skin, to the bare bones, continues to be an act of claiming one's own freedom here in the present.

I thought about all of the female performance artists who used nudity as a political statement to bring attention to an important issue or a passion that they had or something that they needed to erupt. You know how you call on deities? Well, for me, it was Yoko and it was Josephine Baker and Nina Simone and many others — Ana Mendieta. Lots of visual artists and women who take risks to make these statements, even though they know that they will most likely be misunderstood, because they're generally ahead of their peers or time. But brave enough to still take those walks. And those women walked with me. - Erykah Badu



Occupying The Present

The road to personal power
is paved
with vulnerability.
Standing alone
I see the world
before me.
Woman. Earth. Sky.
No needs. Only wants.