

Tarrah Krajnak

1979: Contact Negatives

Yasmine Seale

All works from 1979:
Contact Negatives,
2019. Handmade zine
and documentation of a
durational performance
Courtesy the artist

Once, in the ocean, or rather in the cloudy neither-nor close to shore, a creature I had not seen but must have got too close to shot a line of ink in my direction through the shallows. It hung in the water like a message. Later I learned that kind of ink jet is called a pseudomorph, a false body, allowing the animal to escape unharmed under cover of its own calligraphic shadow.

These photographs by Tarrah Krajnak perform a similar maneuver. Though the artist figures in each one, they are not so much self-portraits as projections from some inner darkroom. Enigmatic compositions face their negatives as if in a black mirror, yielding geometries of disorienting doubleness. Smoky, spectral, at times almost abstract, they appear to present a figure advancing masked. But that's not quite right, for to distinguish between self and mask is to subscribe to the belief in some true core. Instead, these images seem to propose that a person is made of fictions. They capture the slippery thing "I" really is, more plural than the word identity implies: a tangle of mimicries, hauntings and experiments, gestures of fierce self-assertion snatched from a vista of stock images and half-digested histories.

1979: *Contact Negatives* (2019), the exhibition and handmade zine where these photographs first appeared, refers to the year Krajnak was born and adopted from an orphanage in Lima, Peru, and brought to live in North America. The work, Krajnak told me, grew out of an intense period she spent in Lima's markets and basements collecting printed matter from the time of her birth, a turbulent interregnum between two coups. In a Los Angeles gallery, she photographed herself among these found images—crowd scenes, architecture, erotica—projected on the walls of the white cube like shadows in a cave. What results are encounters between the artist's body and the troubled surface of a city where she is both native and newcomer. In the maelstrom of this ghostly past, Krajnak is by turns vulnerable, defiant, overwritten, singular, now obscuring and now obscured—a catalogue of attitudes for estranged daughters.

Krajnak's work often responds to the history of photography; her *Master Rituals* series (2018–ongoing) is in witty dialogue with Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. *Contact Negatives* seems to reach further back, to the medium's early interest in the possibility of communion with spirits. Recurring in these images is a white pedestal the height and width of Krajnak's own body. In some she uses it to sit or hide; in others she is holding it, as if catching it fall. Whose ghost is this? Whose false body? What does it mean to be born of a violent act you cannot verify, to be haunted by a life you have not lived? Krajnak turns these questions into dreamscapes. Out of the debris of collective memory she has conjured glowing portals, like so many stations in a search for origins where, as she put it to me, "all you have is the search."

Yasmine Seale is a writer and translator
living in Paris.







