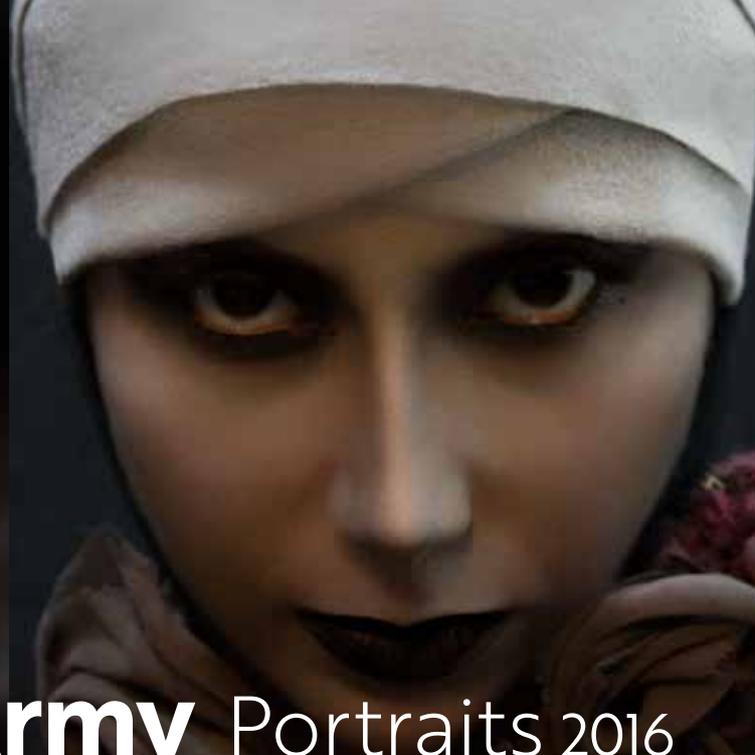


**You & What Army** Portraits 2016  
Francesca Penchant



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# You & What Army Portraits 2016

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By Francesca Penchant

*For  
Arlon Tussing*

## Acknowledgments

“Art is a generosity,” said writer Brenda Ueland, and I am extremely grateful to the artists, writers, collectors, gallerists, and others who generously shared their gifts with me this past year.

First, I am grateful to those whose words, music, and lives meant a great deal to me in 2016: Samuel Beckett, Beethoven, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Charles Bukowski, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, Jean Genet, June Havoc, Henry James, Franz Kafka, Jean Lorrain, Gustave Mahler, Octave Mirbeau, Dmitri Shostakovich, Laurence Sterne, and Brenda Ueland.

But, more importantly, I thank the helpful and creative people who partnered with me this year. Outside of Washington state, I thank Todd Johnson at Black Box Gallery in Portland, and Patric Stillman at the Studio Door in San Diego. In the Seattle area, I thank Janelle Evelyn at Annie Fisher Salon, SOIL Gallery member Moxie Lieberman, Barbara Matthews at the Surface Design Association, and Kelsey Roberts at The Pine Box.

For their patronage in 2016, I thank Kaitie Firm, Chris Gabble, Stacey Gilbert, and Aaron Malpass. For their friendship and involvement, I am grateful for Ben Hirschkoff, Alexandra Jones, Cameron Anne Mason, Christian Richey, Dale Tussing, Naomi Von Dinklage, and Becky Wachtman.

Finally, I thank my mother Sandra Tussing for her strength and support, and my partner Christopher Devlin for going down with the ship.

*“...Mais je ne puis la maudire, pas plus que je ne maudis le feu qui dévore villes et forêts, l’eau qui fait sombrer les navires, le tigre qui emporte dans sa gueule, au fond des jungles, les proies sanglantes.... La femme a en elle une force cosmique d’élément, une force invincible de destruction, comme la nature.... Elle est à elle toute seule toute la nature...! Étant la matrice de la vie, elle est, par cela même, la matrice de la mort... puisque c’est de la mort que la vie renaît perpétuellement... et que supprimer la mort, ce serait tuer la vie à sa source unique de fécondité....”*

*“...But I can no more curse her, than I can curse the fire which devours towns and forests, the waters which sink ships, or the tiger which carries his bloody prey in his jaws into the depths of the jungle.... Woman possesses the cosmic force of an element, an invincible force of destruction, like nature’s.... She is, in herself alone, all nature...! Being the matrix of life, she is by that very fact the matrix of death... since it is from death that life is perpetually reborn... and since to annihilate death would be to kill life at its only fertile source....”*

From *Le Jardin des Supplices (The Torture Garden)*, 1899  
by Octave Mirbeau

## Introduction

When I was a girl, I dreamed of having a small army of miniature people. They were about four inches tall and wore yellow clothes. I don’t know if I got the idea from movies such as *The Devil-Doll* (1936) and *Attack of the Puppet People* (1958), or if it stemmed from something more intrinsic.

In a way, that daydream has come true with this collection of digitally altered self portraits, which are like my own personal army of powerful women. And certainly, some of the portraits express the theme of power, and display the adornments of power—so that old dream may be one influence. But, the photographs have many influences: twentieth-century photographers such as Diane Arbus and Edward Steichen; characters from a wide range of films—often classic Hollywood films and Japanese films; ethnographic portraits of native people; and historical and literary figures. And the most important influence of all is nineteenth-century European Decadent literature, which always remains an aesthetic touchstone.

French Decadent author Octave Mirbeau acknowledges and exaggerates female power in his 1899 novel *Le Jardin des Supplices (The Torture Garden)*. The quotation on the opposite page

introduces woman as a force of nature, a malevolent creature more “natural” and more destructive than man. Other Decadent themes include the idea that artifice is superior to nature; that nature exists to be exploited by humans; and that salvation can be found in the senses. But many Decadents posited ideas that were purposely contrary, to rebel against society’s conventions, to rebel against the conventional idea that art and literature must focus on “beauty,” health, and “goodness.” Decadents’ ideas were as problematic during their own time as they are to postmodern artists—albeit for different reasons; the grand narratives that Decadents were opposing have little validity today.

But even though nineteenth-century grand narratives are no longer valid, to me such dramatic stories are an endless source of aesthetic inspiration. Decadents’ problematic ideas are outrageous, ironic subjects of examination. This is one reason that their dark, cynical, romantic, luxurious, sensual, exquisite, artificial, perverse, neurotic, febrile, decayed, and misanthropic themes will be a lifelong pursuit. Just as the Decadents can illicit a feeling of relationship in me, then with my work, I may also be able to illicit that feeling in some few others.

The following directly influenced the photos:

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- ### Filmography
- Big Trouble in Little China*. Directed by John Carpenter. United States: TAFT Entertainment, 1986.
- Jigokumon (Gate of Hell)*. Directed by Teinosuke Kinugasa. Japan: Daiei Film, 1953.
- Kuroneko (Black Cat)*. Directed by Kaneto Shindo. Japan: Kindai Eiga Kyokai, 1968.

## Photographs

## PHOTOGRAPH 1

**Marianne**

Often, a piece of costume is the starting point of a photograph. Here, it was a vest of feathers. After editing the photo with special software, she had the look of a French revolutionary, which is why I named her Marianne, symbol of the French Republic, liberty, and reason.



### Night Witch

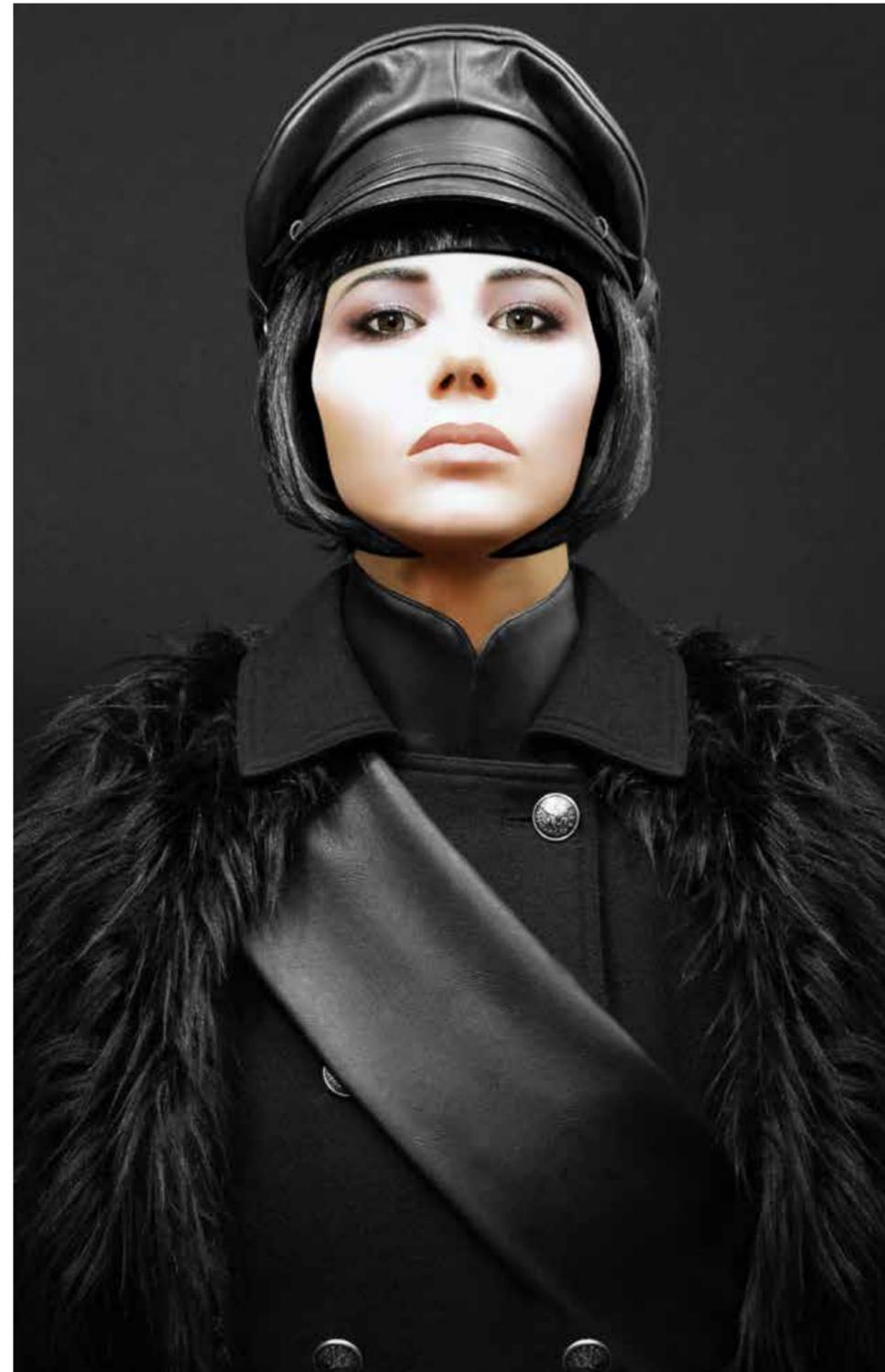
When a female wears a pastiche of military garments, it is parody, burlesque, musical comedy. Military garments on a man have an air of authority, but when a female wears them as fashion, she is flouting that authority. The darkness and military garb of the portrait suggested the name *Night Witch*, which comes from the book *Badass*, in which Ben Thompson describes World War II's Soviet female pilots who flew thousands of missions over the Germans at night in rickety Russian planes, prompting the Germans to give them the name *Nachthexen*.



## PHOTOGRAPH 3

**Erna**

I like the elegance, precision, and pomp of military uniforms and regalia. (For a study of uniforms in fashion, see *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression* by Jennifer Craik.) After I examined this picture, I felt that it had the look of a Nazi uniform, which reminded me of the book *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* by Wendy Lower. One infamous female Nazi whom Lower discusses is Erna Petri, who killed a group of Jewish children who had escaped from their captors. The wife of a senior SS officer, Petri came across the children in a forest near her house. She brought them home and fed them, and called her husband to find out what she should do about them. Ultimately, she decided that she should kill them herself.



**Griselda**

Griselda is a documentary photograph that grew with no end point in mind, by building one layer after another of makeup, clothes, wig, and headgear. The crown is made of artificial fabric flowers.



**Kathy Acker**

Kathy Acker was a feminist postmodern writer who broke implicit literary rules. She is known for the novels *Blood and Guts in High School*, *Empire of the Senseless*, and *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. She said, "Women need to become literary criminals, break literary laws and reinvent their own, because the established laws prevent women from presenting the reality of their lives."



**Inarú**

Táinos were the native people of Puerto Rico when Spain colonized it, and *inarú* is the Taíno word for woman. As an American bi-ethnic person with Puerto Rican and Anglo ancestry, my identity is blurry. What little I know of my Latinx ancestry is an incorrect, romanticized pastiche, as represented here. Passing as white complicates identity, as if one had a secret identity. This character wears fictitious, "native" face paint and feathers, and a jacket that she adopted from her supposed colonizers.



**Bride**

This photo is based on ethnographic portraits popular in the nineteenth century. The idea of studying native peoples that was so popular at that time is unsettling today. Photographing people as if they were scientific subjects is an idea that is unsettling; the looks in their eyes is unsettling. The costume combines pieces from my fiber art collection: a small hoop weaving and a knitted sweater with ruffled ribbon yarn, worn as a hood.



**Sorceress**

The sorcerer in this photo is based on characters in the movie *Big Trouble in Little China*, a movie whose producers appropriate and mix various Asian styles for their sets and costumes. Covering the face makes the photo more abstract. The "hat" is a hoop weaving made of rubber strips. The crochet-covered wire represents the electric rays that surround the sorcerers in the movie.



**Raiko**

There is a moment in the film *Kuroneko* before the character Raiko leads a band of samurai to rape and kill a mother and daughter. (The women later come back from the dead to wreak their revenge.) The camera focuses on disheveled Raiko, hungrily eyeing the women in that dark, dramatic moment of suspense. Depicting that frame was an opportunity to use photo editing software to transform myself into a man. The "armor" is made of pliable metal, wood tiles, and plastic bones, all sewn onto a cotton apron.



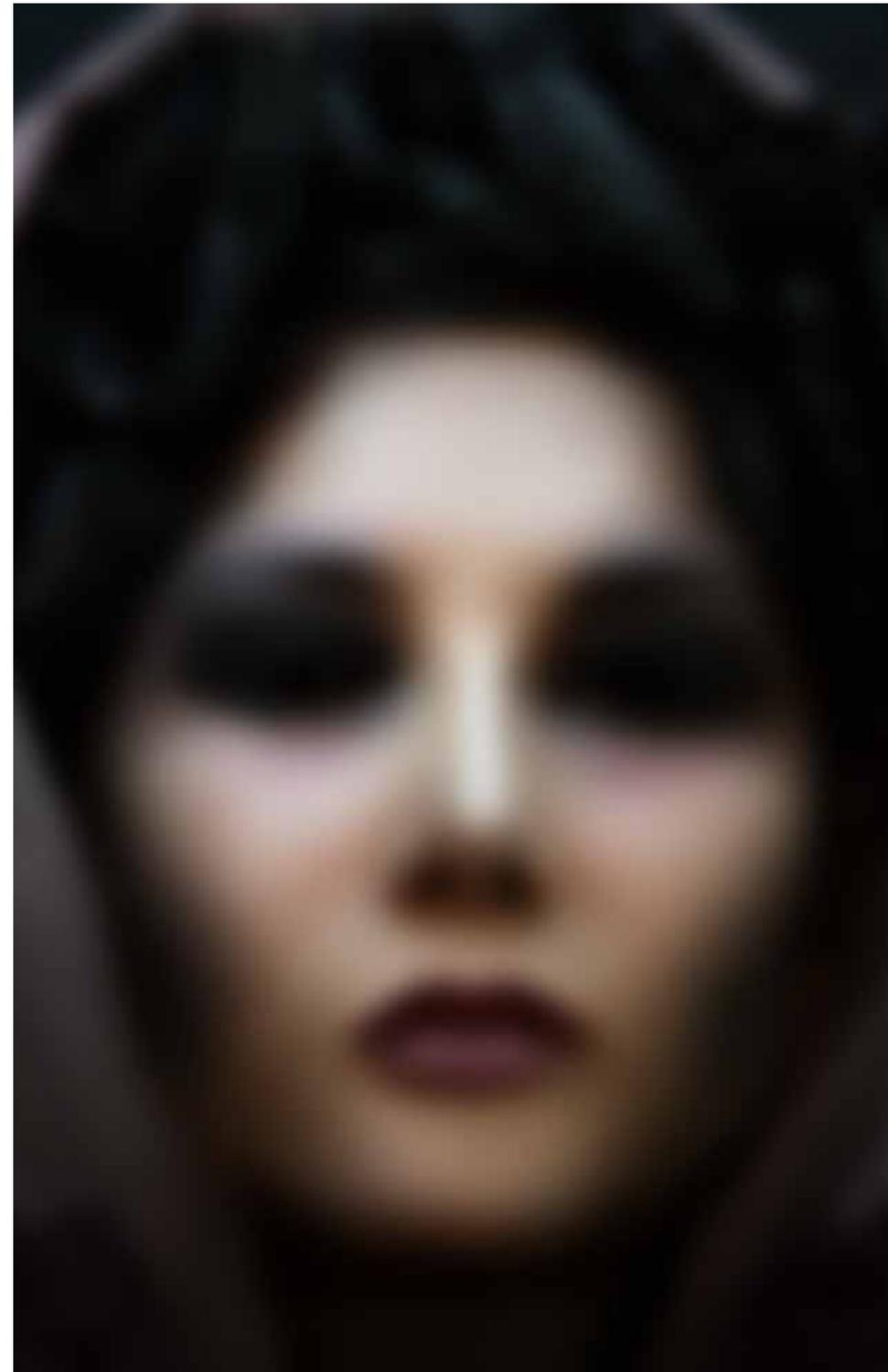
**Kesa**

Kesa is the name of a character in the 1953 Japanese film *Gate of Hell*. Kesa is plagued by a man whom she doesn't love, but she remains sweet and saint-like throughout the film. The emotion in this character's face reminded me of Kesa—sad, submissive, and long-suffering.



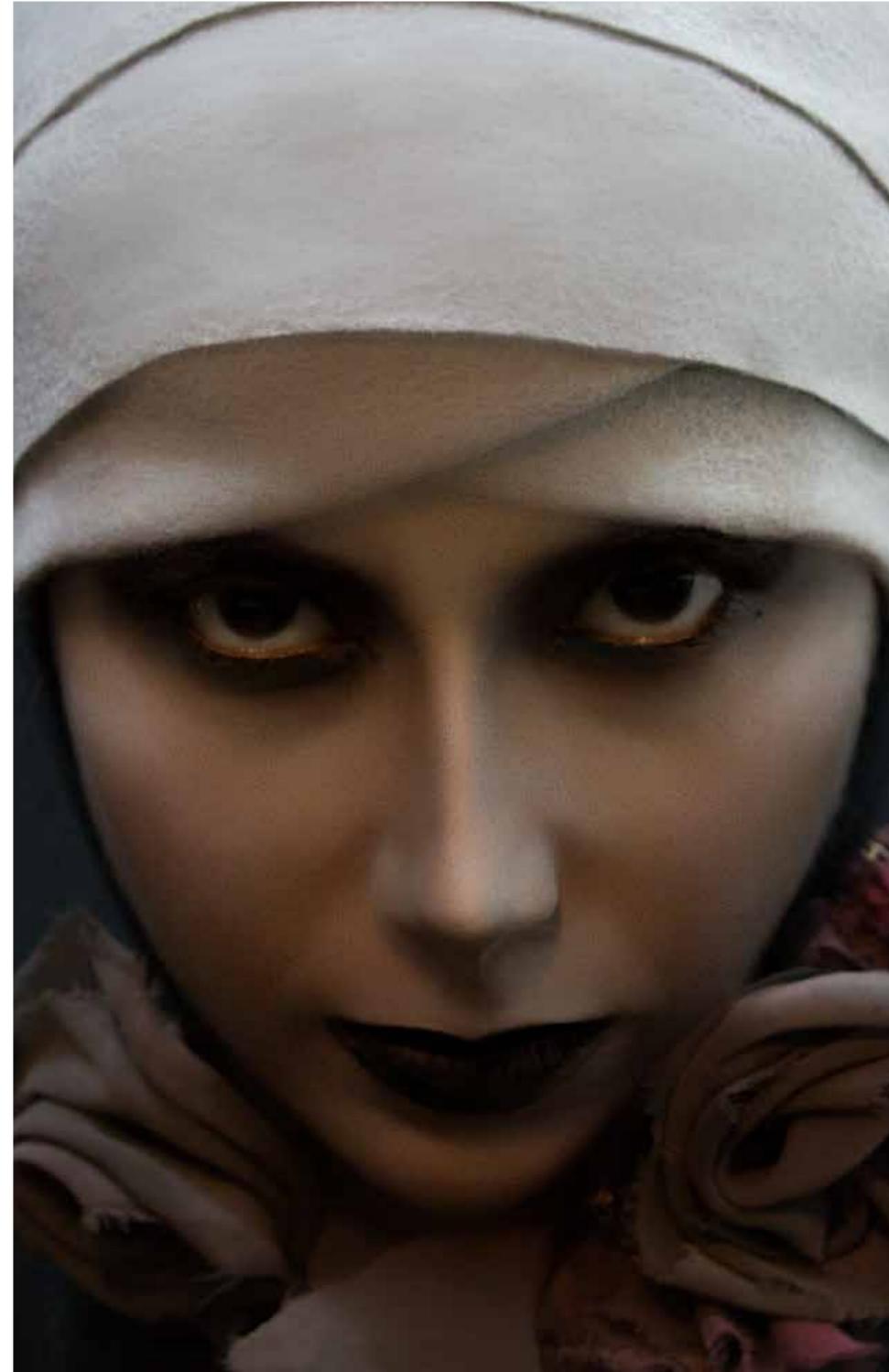
**The Man Who Loved Consumptives**

"The Man Who Loved Consumptives" (1891) is a short story by the Decadent writer Jean Lorrain. The theme—a love of sickness and decay—is the height of Decadent ideals, and represents a reaction to the moral rigidity, conservatism, and ruddy bourgeois health of the *belle époque*. The woman in the photo is a "consumptive," with her purplish and sunken eyes and gaunt face. I blurred the photo to obscure and abstract the face.



**Pola Negri, After Steichen**

There are photos that are in the cultural collective unconscious. Edward Steichen's black and white photo of Pola Negri from the 1920s (upon which this picture is based) is one of them. Negri was a popular star in the silent era, but is now known mostly for throwing herself on Rudolf Valentino's coffin at his funeral. This photo stems from my interest in Hollywood publicity portraits, and Hollywood's skill at myth-making, at creating woman as icon, vamp, goddess, *femme fatale*. For the embellishments, I dyed silk and sewed it into roses using directions from Candace Kling's *The Artful Ribbon*. Strips of felt make up the turban.



**Guide Light**

This is another photo inspired by 1920s Hollywood publicity photos and film stills. I love the black-and-white photographs of stars that Hollywood studios produced as part of their marketing machine during the Golden Age. Leading actors and actresses were pictured as glamorous, enviable, desirable objects of perfection.



**Silent Star**

*Silent Star* is another photo inspired by images of Pola Negri, vamp of Hollywood's silent era. In her book *The Star Machine*, Jeanine Basinger writes about the far-ranging control that Hollywood studios had over stars during the 1930s through the 1950s. Studios would give actors new names; give them lessons in acting, poise, elocution, and dance; tell them what movies to star in; punish them by sending them into inferior films; and control what was written about them. Studio heads such as Louis B. Mayer would even arrange stars' marriages if they were getting into trouble with their love lives. So, although stars from Hollywood's Golden Age were ambitious and talented, they were also victims of a punishing industrial system who were enlisted into creating fantasies of their own lives.



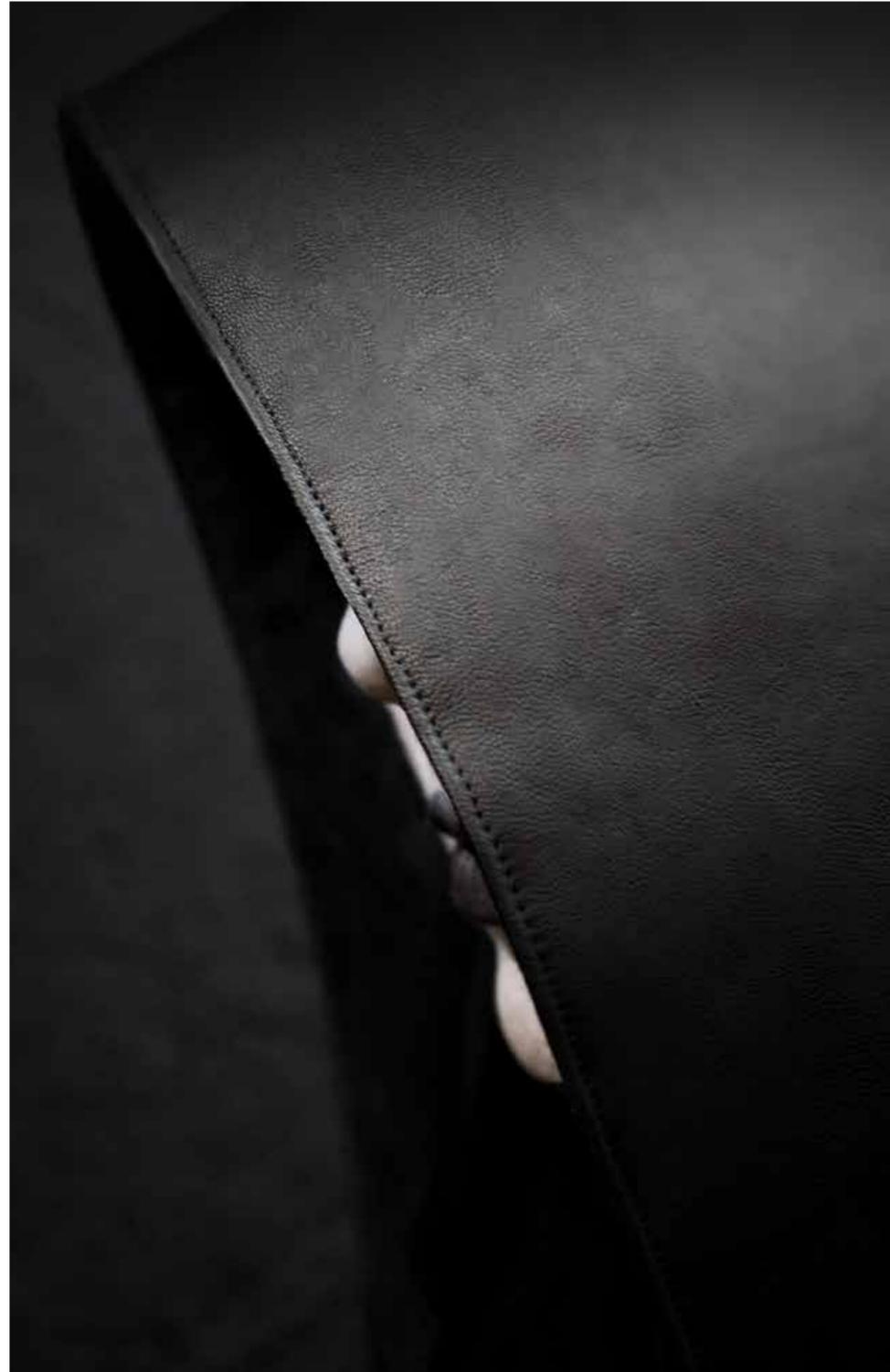
**Horns**

This is one of my experiments with photographing fiber art to obscure facial features and create an abstract portrait. The "mask" in the photo is a hoop weaving made of black wool that is reminiscent of braided hair, and forms two horns in the center.



**Don't Look**

This photo explores hiding and looking—hiding from others, the viewer's gaze (also known in academia as "the male gaze"), the desire to be looked at and noticed, and the desire to hide by using the camouflage of clothes, makeup, or various roles. Humans crave seeing human faces (the faces displayed on a magazine newsstand is one proof), so this photo may be slightly frustrating. Also, Westerners commonly see art and photographs with revealed female subjects, arguably submitting to the male gaze. Nonetheless, the covered female face doesn't appear any more liberated.



This book was written and designed by  
Francesca Penchant using Brother 1816 typeface by TipoType.  
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—Francesca Penchant