

PRESS RELEASE: 20/10/22

## ***Radhika Khimji, Lee Miller: Portraits in Space***

Thursday 17 November, 6-8pm  
17 Nov - 17 December 2022

Sapling is pleased to present ***Radhika Khimji, Lee Miller: Portraits in Space***, an exhibition curated by Coralie Malissard which brings together two female artists' responses to time spent travelling through barren landscapes.

This is the first time that **Radhika Khimji (born 1979)**, one of the few artists to represent Oman in its inaugural pavilion at the Venice Biennale this year, is exhibited in conversation with an avant-garde photographer. Her works on plywood belong to a new body of work and Sapling is delighted to be exhibiting never before seen archival material from the artist's London studio. **Lee Miller (1907-77)** is one of the most fascinating figures of 20<sup>th</sup> Century photography yet, aside from the iconic *Portrait of Space* (1936), the works she made in the late 1930s have had little exposure, perhaps because they mark a transition between her celebrated Surrealist phase in Paris and her later work as a courageous war photographer. This particularly intimate body of work however proved pivotal in her development as an artist.



Radhika Khimji, *Brewing Below*, 2018. Thread, oil, gesso and photo transfer on paper. 30 x 42 cm. Photo: Peter Catchpole. Courtesy Experimenter and the Artist

While seventy years separate Lee Miller and Radhika Khimji's births, and while each artist has their own distinctive artistic language, a closer look reveals interesting echoes between both their practices. The desert, its mountains, forsaken ruins and construction sites hold an important place in their artistic imaginations. They both turn to the camera to capture the drama and harsh shadows in the desert they encountered. For Radhika, the camera is a point of departure. Both share an interest in framing or bracketing the vastness of the scenery in front of them so that their work often acts as portals, or windows into something else that the viewer is then drawn into. Their work plays with thresholds and oscillates between interior and exterior, embodiment and displacement, seeing and being seen and between the notion of place and the feeling of being out of place. Both Khimji and Miller's landscapes are corporeal, even sensual, as they explore the body's relationship to landscape. This makes for two very enigmatic bodies of work that require the viewer to slow down and get up close.

***"It always feels like the image happened to Lee Miller, as if she caught it through her body. That's what talks to me when I look at her photographs. I'm really drawn to the way Lee Miller takes images of places, looking through to them, not conquering them with her gaze."***

**- Radhika Khimji, October 2022**



Lee Miller, *Portrait of Space near Siwa, Egypt*, 1937. Copyright Lee Miller Archives

## **Radhika Khimji**

Sapling is pleased to be showing a rich array of works by Radhika Khimji, including a new body of painting and photographic transfers on plywood, a selection of works on paper, and never before seen archival material from the artist's studio. Khimji's work draws on an array of techniques and combines elements of painting, drawing, photography, collage, embroidery and sculpture. By doing so, she constructs intentionally ambiguous artworks that evade categorisation. In this new body of work, the importance of photography in the artist's labour-intensive process is brought even more to the fore.

Photographs of architectural details and construction sites captured while travelling through the deserts and mountains in Oman are cut out and imprinted onto paper or plywood through a transfer process. This method is haphazard and often leads to unexpected results on the plywood or tears and erosions of the paper. This becomes a starting point on which she builds on by collaging, perforating, stitching, staining, drawing, framing, or adorning her works with small lozenge shapes which recall the necklaces that her family, part of the Gujarati community in Oman, place on their Krishna statuette every morning. Through this slow, layered process, Radhika abstracts aspects of the environment and builds her own psychological geographies.

Khimji sees her works on paper as maps, which are constructed over a period of time with ink, paint, collage, and embroidery. The works on plywood also have their own topographical connotations. They refer to the boarded-off areas of construction sites the artist notices all over Oman. Their surface mirrors the hardness of Oman's desertic landscapes. Radhika also sees the plywood's grain and texture as being similar to skin and she often explores plywood's anthropomorphic quality. Much of Khimji's work oscillates between the abstract and the figurative, her forms often precarious and unstable as she explores the body and its relationship to space. Sexuality is never far away.

## **Lee Miller**

The four photographs in the exhibition belong to a broad body of work that Lee Miller did between 1936-8 during her three-year marriage to the Egyptian businessman Aziz Eloui Bey. Miller left New York and relocated to Cairo but rapidly found the expat life there stifling. She missed the buzzing art scene she had known in Paris and New York. As a reaction, she took up snake charming, camel riding and sought an escape by going on road trips around the country.

Egypt's archaeological sites (such as the Coptic Deir Al-Surian Monastery in the Nitrian desert) and the desert around Siwa became places of exploration. They provided a physical and psychological escape for Miller. The time she spent in Egypt was crucially important to her development as a photographer. She swapped her stationary darkroom equipment for a portable Rolleiflex camera and a small Leica. This compact kit made her more mobile and encouraged her to take more spontaneous and adventurous photographs. Her work therefore naturally shifted from the Surrealist female nudes she had been making alongside Man Ray in Paris in the early 1930s and the elegant portraiture she had been taking in New York until her move to Cairo.

Most of her photographs of that time are devoid of any human presence. They convey a deep stillness, reflecting Lee's interest in the desert's temporality, where time seemed to stand still. The ruins, the rocks and the vast expanses she encountered inspired her to experiment with apertures, strong shadows, ambiguous cropping, and geometric shapes. The resulting images convey a sense of reverie and peace but are also haunted by Lee's own inner turmoil. Nonetheless, a sexual suggestiveness pervades many of her works from the period.

This moment in her life was pivotal on a personal and professional level. The desert became a refuge where she could be herself. It offered her the space to find her mature style and the body of work she made would lead her to become a war photographer later on. During that time she also came to terms with her own private life. In 1938, Lee Miller decided to travel to the Balkans to join her new lover, Roland Penrose, on a trip around Greece, Bulgaria and Romania. The work she made during that time consolidated the new style she had started developing in Egypt. In 1939, on the eve of World War II, Lee Miller parted with Eluoi Bey and joined Roland Penrose in London.

## Biographies



Radhika Khimji in 2019. Photo: Peter Catchpole.  
Courtesy the Artist



Lee Miller by Lee Miller, 1932. Copyright Lee  
Miller Archives

**Radhika Khimji (b.1979 Muscat, Oman)** studied at the Slade School of Fine Art, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and holds an MA in Art History from University College London. Recent solo exhibitions include *A Slight Adjustment* at Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna, 2022, *Adorning Shadows* at Experimenter, Kokata, 2021, *Shift* at Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna, 2019. Selected group exhibitions include *Destined Imaginaries*, Inaugural National Pavilion of Oman at the 59<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, Venice, 2022, *Conversations on tomorrow*, Sadie Coles HQ, London, 2022, *On site*, Bikaner house, New Delhi, 2021, *Rupture* at Experimenter, Kolkata, 2020, *Searching for Stars Amongst the Crescents* at Experimenter, Kolkata, 2019, *The Drawing Biennial* at Drawing Room, London, 2021 and the 6th Marrakech Biennale, *Not New Now*, Marrakech, 2016. The artist lives and works between Muscat and London.

**Lee Miller (1907-77)** was born in Poughkeepsie, New York. Introduced to cameras early through her father, Lee Miller entered the world of photography in New York as a model to the great photographers such as Steichen, Hoyningen-Huene and Genthe. In 1929 she went to Paris and worked with Surrealist artist and photographer Man Ray, succeeding within a year in establishing her own studio. Returning to New York in 1932 she set up her studio for two years and was highly successful. It closed when she married Egyptian businessman Aziz Eloui Bey and went to live in Cairo, Egypt. Fascinated by desert travel, Miller photographed desert villages and ruins. Visiting Paris in 1937 she met Roland Penrose and in 1939 left Egypt for London as WW2 broke out and became a freelance photographer at *Vogue*. Between 1939 and mid 1944 Miller's fashion work was published on over 400 pages of British *Vogue*. In 1942 she became a correspondent to the US Army. Among her many exploits she witnessed the siege of St Malo, Liberation of Paris, fighting in Alsace, liberation of Buchenwald and Dachau and famously billeted in Hitler's apartment. Whilst still working at *Vogue*, in 1947 Miller married Penrose and contributed to his biographies of Picasso, Miró, Man Ray and Tàpies. Her portraits of 20<sup>th</sup> Century artists are powerful, but it is mainly the witty Surrealist images which permeate her work that she is best remembered. Post war, the effects of what she had witnessed caused her to struggle with depression. It was through her fascination with food that she reinvented herself as a gourmet chef and found a way using her creativity to recover. Lee Miller died at home at Farleys in East Sussex in 1977.

**Coralie Malissard** is a Franco-British curator and art historian who has held curatorial positions at the Courtauld Gallery and the Barbican in London. She is now based in Rome where she is the director of an artist's studio. She most recently curated *Modern Drawings: The Karshan Gift*, the Courtauld Gallery's reopening exhibition (Nov 2021 - Jan 2022) and co-edited the accompanying publication. Alongside this role, she also curated an exhibition about Family in Contemporary Art at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (due to open October 2023) and has also worked as a freelance researcher for various institutions, academics, private museums, and artist residencies. Prior to the Courtauld, Coralie was at the Barbican where she worked for over three years as the Assistant Curator of *Modern Couples: Art, Intimacy and the Avant-garde* and edited the accompanying publication. During her time there she contributed research relating to *Basquiat: Boom for Real*; *The Japanese House*; *Into the Night: Cabarets and Clubs in Modern Art* and *Noguchi*.

Coralie has an intimate connection with both artists. She participated in 'Deep Dive' an in-conversation with Radhika Khimji for Experimenter in Kolkata back in 2020 and has had the pleasure of exhibiting the work of Lee Miller both in 2018 (Barbican) and 2022 (Courtauld).

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