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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2118 words.

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On using your work as a way of seeing

An interview with Portuguese photographer Pauliana Valente Pimentel

You've spent the past year documenting youth culture in the Azores, moving between two very different worlds, between hanging out with kids in poor fishing villages and with kids who come from affluent families on the island.

This island is very isolated and even now it's only starting to open up to outsiders. They have kept all the old traditions from Portugal—everything from the kings to the pirates. Society here is still very segregated according to wealth and people from different worlds don't really mix. For instance, the first question that someone might ask you here is "You are the daughter or son of who?" They want to know the name of the family. That's still very important. People that live in the villages might never come into São Miguel—the city—and people who live in the city, like my gallerist, have never been to any of the villages. They just don't mix... and it's not a very big island.

There are things that exist here that you just don't see anymore on the continent. They have this high society thing here, these balls where the young girls wear crazy dresses and are presented to society. They dance with their fathers and then the father presents them to all of these young men. They are dressed like brides and it's this whole culture that is sort of private and celebrates these very old traditions. You don't really see that in Lisbon. I was so curious about all of that because it's as if on these islands certain traditions crystallized in some ways. They just froze in time.





At the same time, there are these other very modern seeming developments that are surprising. The fishing villages are still very much this old-fashioned male culture—the men go out into the sea on fishing boats every day, they don't know if they will come back alive or not. It's very rough. But you also have this visible gay community here, lots of gay and trans young people who are very visible and seem to be very accepted. There is a young boy in one of the photographs who I met when I saw him dancing on the street. Very openly gay, loves to dress up and wear makeup, but is also a fisherman. He goes out and works in the sea every day and, from what I could see, everyone just accepted. Of course this is a good thing, but not what you would expect. At the same time, it is a very sexist culture for women in these villages. It's easier for a man to be gay here than a woman. Women are often very restricted. Women told me that they aren't welcome to go into the coffee shops, which are full of men. At the beach you'll see women going into the water fully dressed, fully covered up. It's very weird.

The body of work in your exhibition *The Narcissism of Small Differences* really gets you into the interior lives of these two different groups of kids—wildly different social classes—but they are all being shown in the same light, on the same emotional level. As a photographer who spent a lot of time with these kids in their teenage bedrooms just hanging out, would you say that there's something universal in the teenage experience?

In certain ways they were all the same in terms of their demeanor. They all have iPhones, they all like to present themselves in a certain way, they are all into the internet and they liked to be photographed. All of them were really excited. Of course, they all also live by different codes of conduct and behavior. It was fascinating, just little things I noticed about the way they would eat if I was around or the way they would react to certain images. In the beginning the girls were a little bit more suspicious and not entirely comfortable, it took them a while to open up, but the boys—especially the gay boys—were immediately very happy to have me there. I found them dancing in the street and when I asked they said, "Yes. Yes. Please come to my house!" They were much more open and really proud to show themselves.



They really want to be seen.

Yes. But it's true what you were saying—I wanted to present *all* of these kids on the same level, despite their backgrounds or gender or sexuality or wealth. That's why all the prints are the same size and they are all mixed together. They all have the same fears, the same wishes. They want to have boyfriends and girlfriends and they want to be happy. Almost all of them expressed to me how they would like to leave the island. Of course, the realities of their lives were very very different. To go in between these different worlds was funny for me, to be in all of these different kinds of houses all still on this one small island.

You have photographed people from all walks of life, including people in very marginalized communities, in places all over the world. How do you gain their trust? How do you convince people to let you into their homes?

In the case of these photos from São Miguel, most of them didn't really understand what I was doing at first. I explained that I wanted to make portraits of the young people on the island and that I was using this certain type of camera and film, which most of them had never seen. They'd watch me open a roll of film and put it in the camera and then ask, "Ok, can I see the picture now?" And I'd have to explain that this isn't like an iPhone, it's not a digital photo. They thought that was strange.

I would usually bring a book of my images so I could show them my work. I'd share my website with them. I'd say, "This is my style" and then all of a sudden they'd seem to understand that I wasn't just asking them to pose and smile. I need them to trust me and forget me. I really want them to be comfortable in their own environment. It's not really a pose. I want them to be themselves. So I need them to relax. To do that, I spent many hours with them. I never just showed up to take photographs and then went away. I hung out and talked to them...a lot. I didn't just want to take a photo of them, I wanted to actually know them.



Being from Portugal, why did it feel important to be able to do a project like this in the Azores?

My work often feels very social and very political, but I've always been interested in youth. Particularly right now with all of these global crises happening, I'm just very interested in how young people feel and how they live. I started doing this kind of work in Greece when the big crisis was happening there, I've also done this kind of work in Northern Europe. This is the first time I've done any kind of work in the Portuguese islands. Being from Portugal, the Azores were always very interesting to me because they also felt so remote. Until recently, most Portuguese people were never able to actually visit the Azores. It was interesting for me to come here and work on an island with these very strict traditions, to explore these divides between young and old, rich and poor. There is also a very strong sense of religion on this island. I wanted to talk to people, to listen, to start a good debate. Also, to create awareness of these islands that so many don't know anything about.

Why do you think you are drawn to doing this type of photography? Is it based around just having an empathy for people and their stories?

I think so. I'm very social and I like to talk with people. For me, most important is not the photography itself but all the involvement I have with the people. When I'm happiest is when I'm taking photographs, when I'm with the people, when I'm talking with them. I can spend hours in the house with a certain person. As I said, I want to know their lives, to know their story. I think I'm just really curious and empathetic and generally interested in people. They become like a family. The most important thing is the process. To go to a house that I don't know, not knowing how it will be, and experience how they live, where they sleep, how they eat. It's a very personal thing. Then the photography comes after.

Photography is interesting because it's not just about the practical skills of how to use a camera or how to make a print. Those are important skills, of course, but so much of it involves a sensibility that is hard to explain or teach. It's like a way of seeing.

I cannot explain it. People ask, "Oh, you do that. How?" For instance, my students, they come to my workshop because they know my work and they know that I do good portraits. Their aim is really just "How can I do a portrait like this?" It's very difficult to teach that. How do you teach someone how to make other people comfortable? How to allow people to be themselves? It's hard. The way that I relate to people, of course, is different from how other people might. I think people often embrace me because I'm just so curious and so open. I'm so into the process and so excited that they are often like, "Ok, come in." It's just my way. You can give people advice about that, but you can't really teach people...





It's like teaching someone how to see. It's about how you see things.

So much of this stuff is established when you're young. It's this way of being that is always inside of us. I think this is why it's important to see museums, to see paintings, to see movies, to go to concerts. Always expose yourself to new things. If you make art, that is really important.

When I know some students that don't go to galleries or don't look at books, even photography books, they cannot do anything. This is also a very difficult thing, to make an installation, to decide how many pictures to include, how they will communicate, what size they should be. That is one of my favorite parts of the process, but it's also different from just looking at a book or even making a book of images. Knowing how to show the work can be as important as the work itself, but that's something you can only learn by going out and looking at all kinds of work. That is how you learn.

I liked it that people came into this new show and said things to me like, "This is almost like a movie." That made me happy because that's what I wanted. You want there to be a narrative. You look at these images and you can see that in many ways these people are from different worlds, but your mind is already looking for ways to connect them. You write your own story about what it means. I don't like to say too much. You'll notice I don't like to even have captions. Since these subjects are so young, I wanted to keep their identity private, but mostly I wanted viewers to create their own story around what these images mean. I don't want to impose anything.





All images from THE NARCISSISM OF SMALL DIFFERENCES, by Pauliana Vilente Pimentel
Courtesy of Fonseca Macedo Arte Contemporanea

Pauliana Pimentel recommends:

THE NARCISSISM OF SMALL DIFFERENCES

Quel Pedra (That Stone)

Youth of Athens

Make-up

transcaucasia

Name

Pauliana Pimentel

Vocation

Photographer

Fact



Photo: Vera Marmelo

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