



Funny Feet, *Cape Nudes in Water Series*, 1989

Karin Rosenthal

LANDSCAPES OF THE BODY

BY CLAIRE SYKES

Karin Rosenthal looked out the airplane window down onto the Greek island of Santorini. There, partially emerging from the water, was a woman's nude form. She did a double take, and then she got it: from that height, the afternoon sunlight glowed on the edges of the island the same way it did on the bodies of nudes she'd photographed in that same sea.

"I realized the body and the land were one and the same," recalls Rosenthal. It was 1979, and she had just spent a year on the islands of Crete and Lesbos on an alumna fellowship from Wellesley College. Though she'd been photographing nudes in water since 1975, she says, "The biggest breakthrough for me was that fellowship. I was able to fail for a couple of months until I finally stumbled on the way I wanted to work, and then it all fell into place." The result was her *Greek Nudes in Water* series, which she expanded during two more visits in the summers of 1980 and 1981.

For over 40 years, the human figure in water has been the focus of Rosenthal's work, which is largely black-and-white. It was water that inspired

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her to photograph nudes in the first place. In 1971, she and her friends began renting summer houses in the New England countryside. She swam so much in the lakes and ponds that she was dubbed “the mermaid.” She observes, “Warm, satiny water is very sensual. And swimming is a meditation. It’s also like being in a womb, touched all over by water.” When she wasn’t in the water, she was often sitting on docks gazing at reflections of reeds and grasses. “I could look at them forever. Still water calms me. I’m drawn to it in a way I can’t explain.”

But when it came to photographing water, initially bathtubs interested her more. In self-portraits, she liked the way the two-dimensional plane of the water cut through her three-dimensional form and reflected the bathroom window on its surface, fusing two different realities. At a summer rental in New Hampshire, in 1975, Rosenthal tried to capture that effect with one of her friends, but it didn’t work the way she envisioned. Another woman suggested the nearby lake and offered to model.

In the resulting black-and-white photo, “Flying-Floating Nude” (1977), the floating woman looked deathlike to Rosenthal — but, when she turned the image upside down, the figure “was flying, empowered.” She enjoyed the paradox of the same image having opposite meanings, one of life and the other of death. The equivalent visual density of flesh and water evoked the sense that water is the cauldron of all creation, with the body as the core of existence. “Since that photograph, the cycle of life, paradox and water as primordial soup have remained fundamental to my work. These themes keep returning with every series I shoot, but without my thinking about it.”

Rosenthal finds black-and-white intrinsically less literal and more abstract than color. She says, “Being direct has never been my intention with the nude. I’m not interested in the specifics of a person’s body, but rather the human concepts evoked in the



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Beauty, B&W Infrareds Series, 1993



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photograph — the psychological, metaphysical and spiritual.”

Independent gallerist and curator Nicky Akehurst, of Akehurst Creative Management, has represented Rosenthal’s work since the nineties. Akehurst says, “I think once you’ve been introduced to her work, you would recognize one of her images if you saw it out of context. She has a unique visual signature, something only a small proportion of photographers can claim. She has never allowed current influences or market forces to interfere with her vision.”

In her photos from the fellowship in Greece — where she absorbed the contours of the mountains — a new idea entered unconsciously of uniting the body with the landscape. One day, she positioned three models in water among rocks. She climbed up a rocky ledge to photograph them, but the water glared with reflections — so she moved her camera to make the sun peek out from behind one of the rocks. The serendipitous aura effect in “Monolith” (1980) was a breakthrough for Rosenthal, teaching her how to harness the ever-present Greek light. Once she understood how she could use it, she placed the reflected sun behind the body. That led to “Belly Landscape” (1980), where the body and land first merged. The darkroom in her stone-and-mud house gave her daily feedback. On one contact sheet she discovered another addition to her visual vocabulary — a look suggestive of print solarization, which involves re-exposing photographic paper during the development process to yield silvery lines between highlights and shadows.

Rosenthal says, “These methods of controlling bright sunlight gave me the anchor of intensity I was looking for. My work has a complexity that’s expressed in a simple way. Water is my ally, a medium of malleability and transformation. There’s an alchemy that happens when water, light and the body come together. For example, I can create two simultaneous worlds in one image — one of high contrast above water, and another of low contrast below water.” She sometimes sees these two worlds as representing consciousness and unconsciousness, allowing a fuller portrayal of human nature.

“Karin is very adamant about the way she uses natural light,” says Richard Gadd, Director of the Weston Gallery in Carmel, California, which shows Rosenthal’s work. “She’s done a lot of scouting, so she knows just when the overhead sunlight will give her a refraction through the surface of the water against the fig-

ure so it creates that edge, that line. I find it intriguing and unique to her work.”

Rosenthal discovered another way to use light that she calls “blackwater,” as in “Dimpled Landscape” (1994). For this photo, shot at a steep-sided pond where the light fell on the water and the background was in shade, she placed the figures in the light and exposed for them. The background went black and reflected without detail.

Reflections and shadows increasingly transformed her figures, taking them from the obvious to the abstract, transcending their corporeal existence. In seas and ponds, among sand and rock, her photographs speak of dichotomy and ambiguity. In “Nude in Two Parts” (1980), skin takes on the texture of nearby rocks, their shapes and the spaces mimicking those of the figure’s partially submerged body. And in “Lily Pads” (1991), are those plants floating on the water or someone’s rear end?

“There are so many layers to Rosenthal’s work. They can be near and far, or real and abstract, all at once in the same image,” says Tony Decaneas of Decaneas Archive in Revere, Massachusetts, who met her back in the eighties. “She uses what I would call geometric constructs to call your attention to what she really wants you to see, especially in her water nudes. ‘Vortex’ (1997) is a stunning example. The water line distinguishes between the real, human figure above and the reflection of what’s real in the rippled water below.” The circular shapes of the two contrasted halves collide like conflicting currents in a whirlpool.

Rosenthal took this photo on Cape Cod where she first went in 1988, continuing to photograph nudes in water. A friend told her about the warm kettle ponds and the “Greek light,” so she rented a house near the National Seashore. She found the ponds, but the light shifted constantly, unlike the light in Greece. While she continued with auras and solarization, the New England light encouraged her to loosen up and explore further. In two series, *Cape Nudes in Water* and *B&W Infrareads*, her nudes blend so well into the landscape that it’s hard to tell where skin ends and water, rock or sand begins.

Grass, too, as in the photo “Dune” (1996). For this image, with no time to walk to the distant spot in the dunes where she usually went, Rosenthal arranged her model in a new place. Quickly, she saw that it was too close to a rise of sand and dug in, positioning herself low to avoid getting grasses in the shot. “I saw

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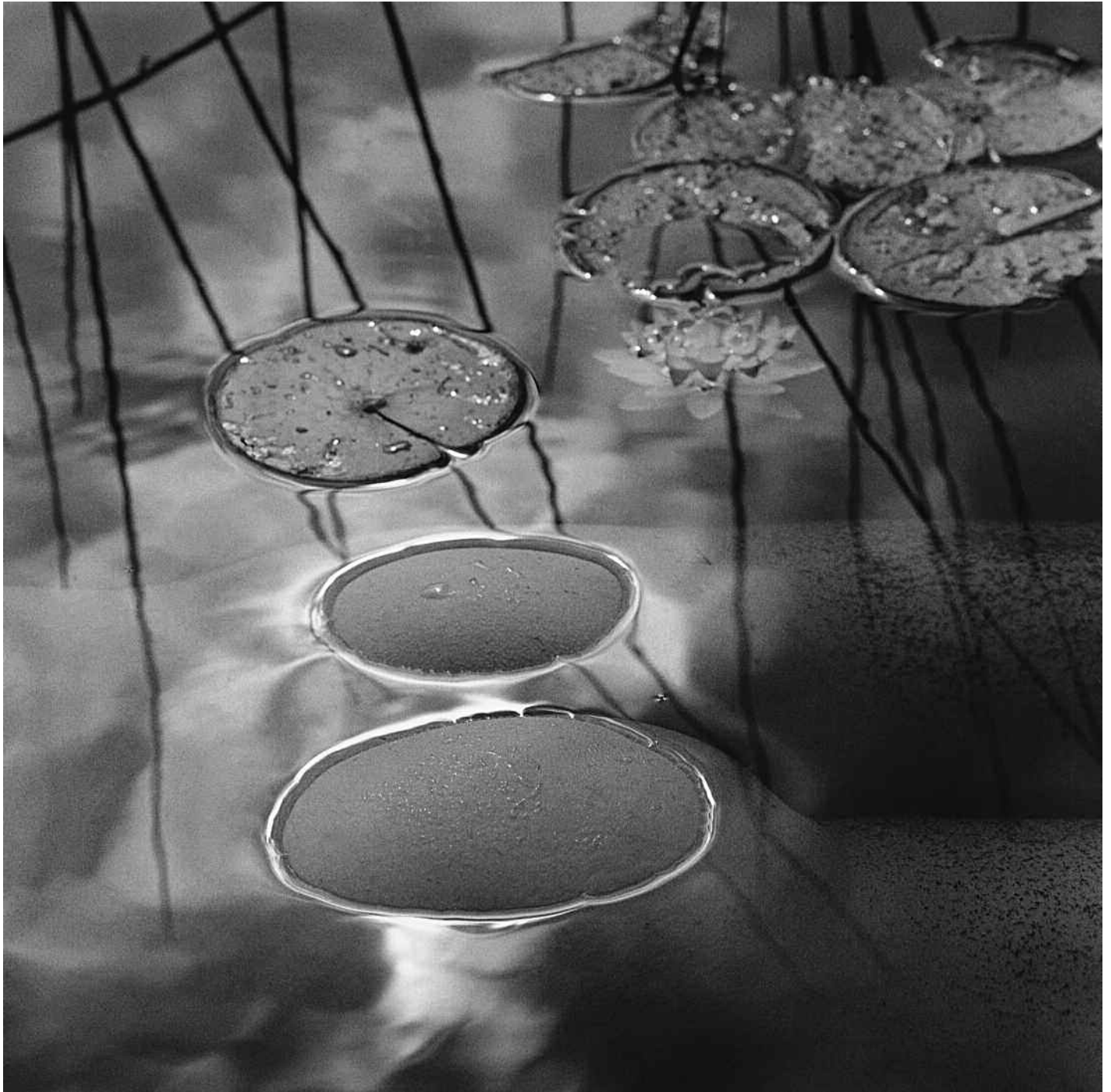
Floating Hand, *Cape Nudes in Water Series*, 2002

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something better than I could ever have imagined,” she says: the grasses lined up perfectly with the woman’s pubic hair.

“When I’m in a concentrated state of mind, very focused but also very open, I see things like that. Being in the moment is when special things happen. In nature, you’ve got to work with what you’re given, even if it doesn’t conform to your original idea. Many of my best photographs have come from accepting failure and accidents as part of the creative process. I’ve always been interested in pushing what you can see through the lens.”

Influences also come into play — the surrealist photographs of



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Lily Pads, Cape Nudes in Water Series, 1991

Man Ray and Bill Brandt; the classicism of Edward Weston; the simplicity of Harry Callahan; the dreamlike images of Ralph Gibson; and the abstract, minimalist nudes of Eikoh Hosoe.

“I believe that whatever you’re passionate about, whether you love it or hate it, becomes a part of you,” says Rosenthal. “And if you’re passionate enough, it becomes an unconscious force that sometimes surfaces in your work. You don’t always know when you’re drawing from these influences, but they’re yours.”

Rosenthal’s earliest influences were her grandmother and mother, both photographers; her mother was also a painter. In

1937, her parents emigrated from Nazi Germany to Hartford, Connecticut, and her grandparents arrived three years later, escaping via Bolivia. Her ophthalmologist father was fascinated by medical photography and made photographs of retinal diseases.

Rosenthal remembers being in her mother’s basement darkroom at age three, rocking prints in the developer tray for her. When she was six, she asked for a camera. She says, “In my family, learning to photograph was like learning to ride a bike. It was the obvious thing to do.” So, too, was critiquing her mother’s paintings and assisting her when she photographed

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children. At age 14, Rosenthal taught herself how to develop and print her own pictures, some of which already had won local and national prizes.

Everyone in the family took their cameras with them on vacations. As they traveled in the States and Europe, they always visited galleries and art museums. Meanwhile, a darkness lurked in the Rosenthal home. “I grew up knowing that my parents, grandparents and other relatives had escaped from Nazi Germany, and I occasionally heard that other relatives had been killed. My father, like many survivors, never talked about his losses, and my mother only a little. But to me, this seemed normal.”

It was also a given that Rosenthal would become a doctor, a profession she was groomed for by her parents. She attended Wellesley College, majoring in biology and minoring in art history. She recalls, “Looking through a microscope, it was amazing to see the world in a petri dish — something you couldn’t witness with the naked eye, but real. This had a huge impact on me. In retrospect, I realize that I saw through the camera in the same way I looked through a microscope, seeking something I couldn’t ordinarily see.” Rosenthal kept returning to photography at Wellesley and also became interested in film, running the college film society and a national student film festival.

After graduating in 1967, she got a job with a film company doing stills and production work. Then, from 1970-1972, she went to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, to become a fine-art photographer. While there she created a photo series of people in the subway, lost in their own thoughts. She also worked with kids from the projects, teaching them photography.

Following art school, Rosenthal created another series: portraits of developmentally disabled men at an institution where she worked part-time tutoring them in life skills. She also managed a community radio station. While keeping up her personal photography, she began freelancing, shooting portraits and photographs for Boston’s educational TV station, nonprofits and the occasional magazine.

The fellowship in Greece catapulted her career as a fine-art photographer, and by the early eighties her nudes had landed in museums and galleries. Rosenthal had solo shows of her work at the Arthur Griffin Center for Photographic Art, the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University and the New

England School of Photography, to name a few. Since 1990, she has made her living mainly from print sales and teaching workshops. Her photos have been featured in *fotoMAGAZIN*, *Print Magazine* and numerous public collections, including Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Brooklyn Museum, Fogg Art Museum and the International Center of Photography. *Karin Rosenthal: Twenty Years of Photographs* (Hard Press Editions, 2000) accompanied a retrospective of her work at the Danforth Museum in Framingham, Massachusetts.

After the retrospective, Rosenthal continued her Cape Cod nudes for several years. Then, from 2004-2012, she started working mainly in color, and her photographs became emotionally darker. *Inheriting Loss*, a series begun in 2013, deals with her family members. She drew from her own research and Nazi-era family letters and documents sent to her by cousins. Eventually she recovered the names of 17 relatives, among them her father’s siblings, their spouses and children, plus her mother’s grandmother and great aunt. “I finally have the context for all the forces at play in our family. I have a much deeper understanding of a world I never knew, of events before I was born. I also realize now that, as a child, I lived with powerful events that I didn’t experience directly, and I’ve come to see how those hidden family stories formed the surreal basis of my work.”

She began her *New Nudes* series in 2014, in response to the recent deaths of her mother and several friends as well as her own aging process. “I think I’m making peace with the fact that we all become part of nature again. We’re only permanent within the elements of nature. When we die, we’re back to carbon, all the basic elements.”

She continues, “Some of the best photos are made from mysteries lurking inside us that seek expression. But they’re nebulous; we don’t know what they’re about. In expressing that mystery, and finding a form for it — in this case, the photograph — we wrestle with that material. I like the mystery.” In the end, the mystery will always keep Rosenthal making photographs. ▲

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