

# I Follow Invisible Lines

Diana Blok in Conversation with Kyoo Lee



*Diana Blok, Self-portrait in Arles, 1982*



*Kyoo Lee, Diana Blok: Looking Back, 2025*

**ABOUT DIANA BLOK:** Diana Blok (b. 1952, Montevideo) is a Dutch-Uruguayan visual artist whose work explores identity, gender, sexual diversity, and cultural heritage. She began her photography practice in Amsterdam in 1974 and later integrated multi-channel film installation. Multilingual and shaped by her cross-cultural background, Blok is known for her poetic, confrontational imagery. Her notable projects include *Invisible Forces*, *Blood Ties and Other Bonds*, *Adventures in Cross-Casting* and the *Gender Monologues* installation. In 2024, the Cobra Museum presented *'I challenge you to love*

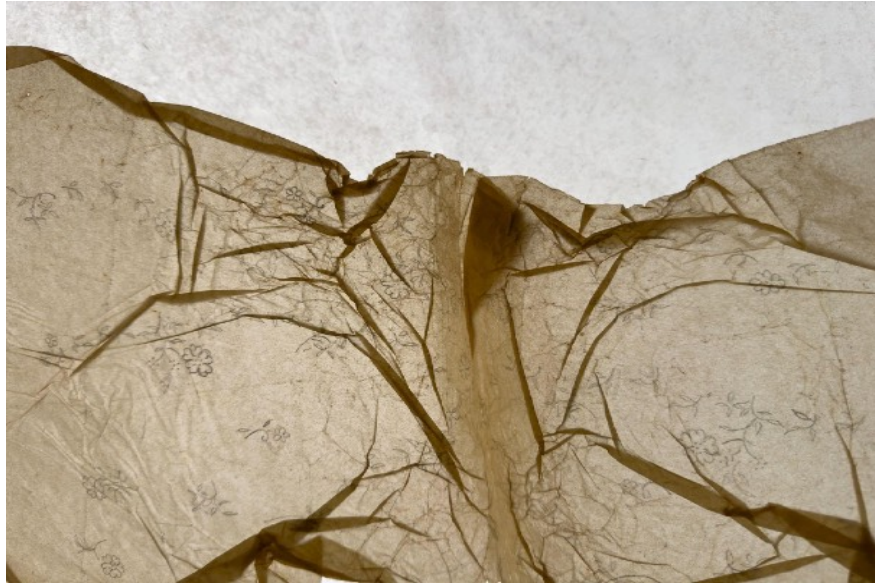
me', a 50-year retrospective. She also teaches and lectures across the globe.

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**ABOUT KYOO LEE:** Professor of Philosophy at the City University of New York, a philosopher, curator, writer, art/literary critic, editor, (small press book) publisher.

Her publications include *Reading Descartes Otherwise: Blind, Mad, Dreamy, and Bad* (2012, Fordham UP) and a chapbook, *Writing Engtenglish: come in Englysshing With Gertrude Stein, Zhuangzi...* (2015, Belladonna Series), and co-editor of *Women's Studies Quarterly* on "Safe" Issue (2011, The Feminist Press) and *Critical Philosophy of Race on "Xenophobia & Racism" Issue* (2014, Penn State UP), currently works as a philosophy professor at CUNY, where she teaches a wide range of courses at all levels: *Modern European Phil* to *Classical Chinese Phil*; *Critical/Feminist/Gender/Justice/Race Theories* to *Theories of Reading*. <http://www.kyoolee.net/>

In the following conversation between Diana Blok and Kyoo Lee, the photographer and the philosopher delve into nine photographic works selected by the artist herself. All the other pieces, an appendix to this conversation, are also from Blok's portfolio.



*The Origin of the World (2024)*

**Q: Let's begin with *The Origin of the World*. This piece emerged after your retrospective, *I challenge you to love me*, signaling a shift in your line of work. I remember seeing it first on my phone when you sent it to me. You were excited and intrigued, and so was I. Then I saw it later in print in your studio. Exquisite. What is the origin of this work? There is an allusion to Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* and perhaps Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*.**

D: Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* is what I recognized in the process of making. Actually, something drove me to reopen my mother's archive. The patterns, samples and garments shaped and drawn from my mother's hand in the 1930's traveled with us from her birthplace Buenos Aires, to Montevideo, to Bogota, Guatemala, Mexico and The Hague where she passed away. Twenty years later it feels like I am transforming, reshaping the past with precious leftovers, giving birth to her, as it were.

**Q2: Any details you wish to highlight? What is your current plan with this piece?**

D: I tape the folded patterns onto a window and see how their shape unfolds. Holding the translucent patterns against the light, scanning them with my eye, through the lens, I see compositions, geometrical shapes with lines, traces, folds, thoughts and flowers: a

butterfly, a bird in flight, a torso, a vagina, a woman, a womb, a landscape and an abstraction of Courbet's Origin.

It is a work of selection and assembly, appearance and disappearance, like memory itself. It takes me to places I have never been, in a reciprocal process. I illuminate the work and am illuminated by it. This is a work in progress, programmed for exhibition in April 2026.



*Living Leaves 2021 - 2024*

**Q3: Photography is such a temporal art, musical flows arrested in “light-written” images. Places become processes and vice versa, especially in your work that revitalizes such archival folds of time. In your current project on the archival reconnection with the mother, where your biological mother (re)appears as a concrete complicated correlate, you revisit—retrace and restage—those temporal folds by playfully “unveiling” various, queerly fluid shapes, its sexual materialities and energetics. Can you talk about the compositional genesis of *Living Leaves*, another recent piece, and how it reflects or does not reflect your usual approach to photographic artmaking?**

D: *Living Leaves* was quite a new and mysterious process where silence, light, forms and meaning fall together. Once I stepped into it, it became the simplest project I have done, extracting the most from the least. Still life is very different than portraiture: the energy exchange is on another level. My artist soul seeks reconciliation and understanding of the complexities of life; this becomes a great opportunity.

During the pandemic I spent 5 months in the high desert of central Brazil, collecting dead leaves with shapes interesting to my eye. Hundreds of leaves passed through my hands. Some were immortalized and others not. Giving new life to dead leaves became a metaphor, a self-portrait of time passing.

**Q: I also recall you saying that you are a self-taught, “intuitive” photographer who just “follows invisible lines.” On your focused attention to the “invisible” dynamic: how does art become and remain attuned to such singularly vibrant events?**

In staged photography I first develop the idea, then improvise within that frame. With this project, the 'stage' was set early on in the available garden, natural light filtered through opaque glass, extremely basic. The rest is observation of the object and light. One grows into abstraction: it is never the beginning, but a question of time. A selection of 54 portraits of leaves is now published as a cahier.



*Portrait of My Mother and Father (1987)*

**Q: You allow or wait for things to portray themselves, including time. Literally, it takes time to photograph things, an analog time, especially today in the age of digital totality. In the striking double silverness in the *Portrait of My Mother and Father*; there is also a quasi-biblical serpentine twist on the conjugational trope of “double happiness” as it is called in Chinese. Yet constitutive complications, not computational combinations, are what keep relationships alive. Such richly embodied double happiness at crossroads, a double happenstance, seems a structural constant in your visual fields of animated humanity and alterity where X/Y meets Y/X and opposites await one another. How did you get them, your parents, to sit together like that in the first place?**

D: This staged image of my parents has become perhaps my most iconic image, published and collected internationally. It transmits the promise of love beyond all catastrophes and differences. They were opposites, North and South, quiet and talkative, both migrants from different parts of the world, different backgrounds, but they found one another and spent 60+ years together quite harmoniously.

The original inspiration of this portrait was the biblical story of Samson, whose power was in his hair. In the concept it was only my mother who would pose. Since she had long beautiful hair, I wanted to give her the power, coming from a feminist point of view, but it was actually my father who was the feminist of the two.

I asked her to wear it loose for the photograph, something she never did in daily life. As we were setting up the portrait, my father innocently asked if he should be in it too. I could not say no. So he chose his most precious suit and dressed up. There they were together, sitting at the table which I had prepared. The final touch of placing her hair around his shoulder was an intuitive act of improvisation. There is a certain amount of clarity of vision combined with flexibility and collaboration with the portrayed.



*Mother's Wedding Negligee (2006)*

**Q: So instead of putting on a wedding gown, you took out your mother's wedding negligee and photographed it ... a lot in there including the active feminist in both you and your father.**

D: (Laughter) That is a brilliant thought of yours! Photographing the garments my mother designed and embroidered during her lifetime generated memories mixed with imagination. After my mother's death in 2006, I went through such a process of mourning, of coming to terms with our differences but also her admirable qualities. It was not easy for her to bring up four daughters in Latin American countries where male dominance is quite extreme.

**Q: Family, culture, loss, reconciliation ... again, so much there.** As a queer daughter of a Catholic mother our relationship was not an easy one. I photographed a large collection of still life images in black and white of the garments, using the unique Agfa Scala BW slide film. After developing them in the lab, I found out that I had underexposed them all. Very disappointed, I left the rolls on the light box for almost one year. They had a dinosaur-like quality, very deep blacks, grays and whites. Ghostlike. When I finally had them scanned and printed digitally this ghostly underexposure became their strength. By 2012 it became an exhibition called Time Tells, a book and a 37-minute film around our family history. It was a healing process which has now taken on a new form, *The Origin of the World*.



*Incorporating Juliet (2022)*

**Q: Healing in revealing is another recurring theme in your work. Take *Adventures in Cross-Casting* (1997), a theatrical exhibition, and *Gender Monologues* (Since 2016), an interactive media installation. Details are telling. Here, the expansive exploration of self-identity in collaborative partnership with “alter egos” happens through various enactments of gendered wishes, dreams and hopes, scripted or spontaneous.**

D: In 2022, Luca, in the picture, was inspired by my series on view, *Adventures in Cross-Casting*, the forerunner of *Gender Monologues*. A young theater group visited the exhibition with their teacher and created a performance where they followed my

concept of choosing their theatrical dream role of the opposite sex. Luca chose Juliet. For his piece he wore a wig, but after the performance I asked him to remove the wig so I could see all of his features. It was so much more powerful to reveal the femininity innate in him without props. There is something about the beginner's spirit which fascinates me in this portrait, touches my heart.

**Q: How do these languages of desire get engendered? And how do they, and these countlessly ensouled passengers of time that are basically us *and* them, become and remain *photographic*? What sense do you make of your own queer feminist take on life and death? What is it that runs through the unfolding series of your artwork on gender, sexuality, individuality, domesticity, intimacy, vulnerability, authenticity, autonomy, diversity, etc.?**

D: I think my work is born from a need of independence, of questioning power and authority. Having seen and known so many people and places one cannot help but to be continuously surprised at the diversity and transformational qualities of life. We are not static and nothing is forever. Genders can transmute, sexual preference is mutable. When I look at my face in the mirror and see how I am aging, it is surprising, because I do not feel old. The soul is timeless, the body not ... a genderless truth. Photography by its nature freezes time. Transformation is implied, but our knowledge and experience give it movement. It is important for me that the work I do comes from an honest and sincere place, a place true to myself. I was questioning gender issues and sexual identity from the start, mid 70's. Now this topic is huge, fashionable and politically complex.



*Portrait of Eddie and Hannah Woods (2016)*

**Q: Diana Blok, the Amsterdam-based photographer of friends and family ... of the mother, father, daughter, lover, performer, dreamer, collaborator, outsider, traveler ... also met at a certain point Eddie Woods (b. 1940), a an independently spirited poet and publisher from New York, a former journalist who moved to Amsterdam in the late 1970s and had active and lifelong connections with the Beats. Amsterdam was, as you know, an expatriate hub for the “new American poetry and prose” of the post-WWII period along with London, Paris, Bombay, Bali, Nepal, Morocco, etc. And the magazine Eddie started in Amsterdam, *Ins & Outs*, became a generative outlet for your**

**work as well in the 1980s. Such extensively international, intercultural and intergenerational cross-fertilizations also form an integral part of your artistic landscape. What's the story behind or around this portrait?**

D: Eddie and Hannah Woods, Grandfather with granddaughter, both queer, both poets.

Eddie published a few of my first postcards in 1980. We collaborated several times merging performance, poetry and photography along the years. Perhaps our most intense collaboration was a gender-bender version of the Pieta, 1980. Eddie was Mary and I Jesus. At that time I was intensely collaborating with photographer Marlo Broekmans on various projects, in particular the ground-breaking project, *Invisible Forces* (Bert Bakker publications, 1983). Inspired by the photograph, Eddie then wrote a revolutionary poem titled 'I am Mary' (Iron, nr. 43, June 1984). He discovered his granddaughter Hannah in 2016, and not only was she his physical clone, but a fellow wild spirit, twin soul. The main reason I asked them to pose together is that they are both non-binary, bi-sexual people with open, experimental minds. Portraiture has been a fascinating subject for me.

**Q: Interestingly, your artistic landscape is also friendscape.**

D: I am very autonomous, so it's difficult to take on commissions, with few exceptions. I love to photograph people I know, who touch me, new ones and old ones. With Eddie I have shared work since 1980. An intense and long-lasting friendship.



*Male Wet-nurse (1996)*

**Q: Speaking of heart-touching moments, there's also a case of, say, "breast envy." Kinship as part of, in Korean English, "skinship." What made you select this piece? Why is it so special?**

D: I selected this image because it continues to fascinate me. It is so credible!

When the series was first exhibited at the Theater Museum in Amsterdam, a well-recognized art critic came to the preview. He stood in front of the image full of wonder. This was 1997, when photoshop was just coming to the surface, and it was not a collage. So this border of real/unreal brings me to the surreal, beyond conventional reality to desires, dreams and other illogical productions.

**Q: Sounds really surreal and surreally real indeed.**

The situation in my studio during this session was memorable. Sjoerd Didden had made tiny wigs for both his sons. Their biological mother was literally feeding the child and passing it on to him. The older son kept pulling off his wig, too nervous and excited to pose, running around naked. Their dog and the two make-up artists who shaped his breasts were also present. The whole series was a fascinating project, creating a bond with each and every actor.



*Self-portrait with My Sister (1985)*

**Q: Speaking of intimate skinship, nakedness is another key element or focal point in your art. In his interview with you, "[Diana Blok: The Beautiful Imperfect](#)," Alasdair Foster gently spotlights the "unique" "ordinariness" of naturally naked people in your work, which, as he says, "brings them together." This is such an insightfully framed observation. How did this idea of doing a self-portrait with your sister, for instance, come about, and how did this line of work develop afterwards?**

D: This piece is from the project, *Blood Ties and Other Bonds* (1985-1990). I wanted to challenge taboos and provoke alternative thoughts around what makes up a family. It was a study around identity, emotional proximity, nudity and the naked truth. A controversial way to expose family relationships as in this intimate portrait with my pregnant sister. It was very successful in its time, internationally acclaimed. Today it is censored in all public media except art books and gallery exhibitions.

**Q: Perhaps you could comment on “explicit” images and social taboos, also given the modal differences between nudity and nakedness as debated in the history of art.**

I grew up in Latin America. In our family we were never nude in front of one another. It was culturally a taboo. In The Netherlands I was shocked to see for the first time so much nudity on the beach. So it became a challenge to see through this taboo through a nonsexualized lens. To see the beauty of the human body with all its imperfections and portray individuals in close relationships stripped of all cultural references.

The first portrait happened in a session planned as a staged image. While loading the camera, I saw this couple of women standing together, naked with such tenderness. I recognized the moment and asked them to hold their pose, and took the first image of what became a full project, *Blood Ties and Other Bonds*. Whereas generally it was well received, there was also criticism. I was accused once of portraying pedophilia in a portrait of father and daughter, and also criticized for showing female body shapes which contradict the glamorous male-dominated commercial gaze. To borrow Elena Poniatowska’s aphorism I am fond of, “they pose naked, but the expression in their eyes is dressed.”



*World Upside Down (1987)*

**Q: You say you are “an anarchistic photographer.” In what way does this artistic self-understanding become a stylistic choice? Perhaps you could offer some thoughts on creative risk-taking as well. This piece with which we will conclude our conversation, which also resonates with the first image, *The Origin of the World*, shows a figure posed upside down and again, naked. Positively upside down and inside out, sure, and indeed why not? And that is a quintessentially artistic move, part of an avant-garde spirit.**

D: As a young girl I used to love standing on my head seeing the world upside down. Years later I was introduced to yoga and other mystical studies like Tarot and the Celtic Runes. This image and its follow-ups are inspired by all of this together. Sacrifice is an intriguing element for me in all of this, its presence in the history of art and in the mystical.

**Q: And you are a “left-eyed” photographer, you say?**

Being left-eyed defines my compositions and probably also the content. Regarding my ‘style,’ I prefer to call it the ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ of my work. When I find a theme and approach it, my ‘style’ changes. Then when I develop projects like *Living Leaves*, I enter a whole other realm of photography. So only those who truly know my work realize it is made by the same person. I was never able to continue endlessly with projects. This is part of my ‘anarchistic’ nature. To recognize the beginning and end of a project is so essential and so difficult! It is here that we need to dig deep down and upside down to know what is next.