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BROOKLYN RAIL

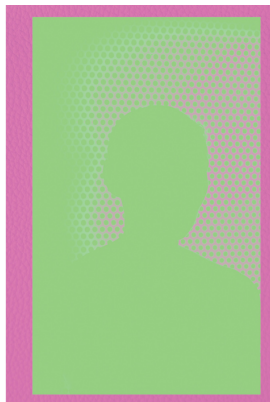
HANNAH WHITAKER with Naomi Elias

By Naomi Elias

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Hannah Whitaker speaks with Naomi Elias on the occasion of her new photobook Ursula, out in 2021 from Image Text Ithaca

In her opening monologue at TechCrunch's 2017 Annual Crunchies Awards, comedian and host Chelsea Peretti asked the room why every mainstream AI personal assistant was given a female name. "I'm surprised there isn't just one called Mommy," she exclaimed. Since then feminized AI assistants have only become more popular and prolific, even making their way onto television shows like NBC's *The Good Place* where D'Arcy Carden's Janet character, though portrayed by a woman, frequently reminds people she is neither a girl nor a person but rather a creation built in the shape of one to serve others. In her new book, *Ursula*, Brooklyn-based photographer Hannah Whitaker explores this phenomenon and considers how much modern technology and our very conceptions of the future are a product of male fantasy.



Ursula's cover shows a silhouetted woman. Modeled by Whitaker's close friend Karen Eydie Meléndez, she is the artist's muse for the project; page after page Meléndez's body is transformed with the addition of geometric shapes, lights, radiant color, celestial backdrops, and other imaginative tools from Whitaker's studio. The photographer uses these female figures—inspired by science fiction's genre tropes and gendered modern technology like digital servants and sex robots—to genially interrogate the ways the

male gaze alternately deforms, sexualizes, and subjugates the female form. They are luminous, lively, and transparently devised with great attention to the nuanced and evolving visual language of the tech industry. Each image is crafted with confidence. Accompanying her photographs in the book are two written pieces from Dawn Chan, a

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former editor at *Artforum* and visiting scholar at NYU's Center for Experimental Humanities and Social Engagement, and science fiction writer David Levine. Their pieces provide, respectively, historical context and fictive narrative shorts for the images and ideas contained in Whitaker's portraits.

In advance of the book's publication, I spoke to Whitaker about the project over the phone in September. We talked about the sexist histories of photography and advertising, and how she was inspired by the color of spaceships.

Naomi Elias (Rail): Tell me how this book came about and where the title *Ursula* comes from.

Hannah Whitaker: I started making the photographs before I necessarily envisioned them as a book, probably two years ago. The initial impetus for making them was interested in a return to making conventional photographs again. I had been working for many years using this really labor-intensive analog process. I still do make those photographs—I layer multiple exposures onto 4×5 film with the intervention of hand-cut masks. Through that method I create these images that are really controllable from the ground up, and I can layer different kinds of graphics onto an image while still using all optical means. The process feels very mechanical and very automated in certain ways. I have to come up with a plan and carry it out in this very rigid sort of predetermined, programmatic way. I started thinking about that process and I got really interested in the human form, specifically the female form, and I started using that form in this mechanical, repetitive way.



I also shoot a lot of commercial work and have amassed lighting skills from doing that, so I started thinking about who the figure was in my work and what her life is, or what her world is. I started using a lot of the lighting techniques from my commercial life. It was just super satisfying because it took a lot of the ideas I'd been exploring as an artist, but I got to exploit the immediacy of just making a straight photograph again, the sort of

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challenge and joy of a conventional shoot which I hadn't really done as a part of my work in a really long time. Returning to that sort of conventional form of picture-making was really rewarding. So I started making these pictures. They're all of this close friend of mine. I'd just kind of have her over to my studio regularly. That's kind of how the project began.

I don't know why really early on I wanted this project to be called *Ursula*. I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that the most famous Ursulas I can think of are all relevant to the project in certain ways. To me, the one that comes to mind first is Ursula the sea witch from *The Little Mermaid*. And so there's the villain. And then there's also Ursula K. Le Guin, who's a well-known feminist sci-fi writer, and then there's Ursula Andress, who is a sex symbol/model/actress. I felt like the triangulation of sci-fi, villainy, and sex symbol was really relevant to the project. I felt like the name Ursula is both retro and futuristic. My photographs are meant to be futuristic but they also incorporate a lot of retro visions of the future. In some ways, they embody a history of techno-futuristic design tropes. There's a wide time period that I feel is contained within them, so I feel like the name Ursula sort of goes in both directions.



Rail: What type of camera did you use for this project and did you use any other materials?

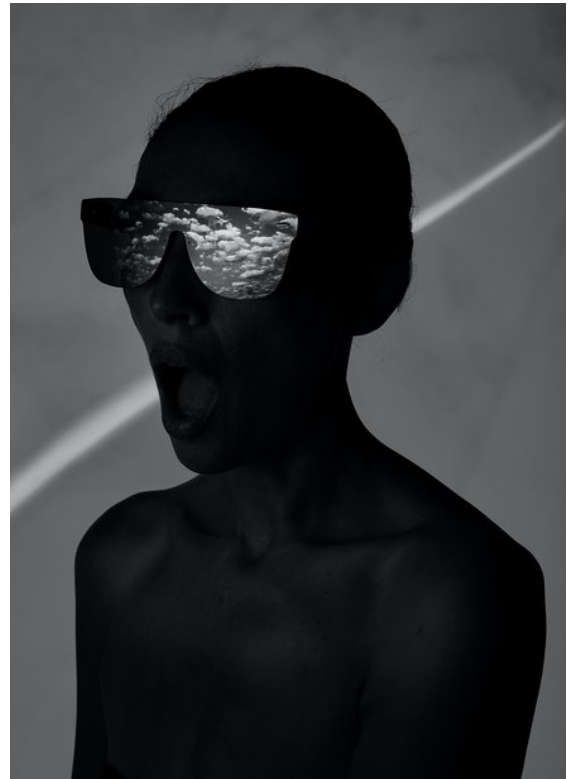
Whitaker: I used a Nikon digital SLR camera; it's a high-end professional camera. I don't know why this is important to me exactly but I feel compelled to point out that the photographs are not digital composites. What you see was constructed in the studio so the cloud backdrop, for example, is a printed cloud backdrop lit with colored gel, and she's lying on something in front of that backdrop. I did do some things digitally—I'm not claiming to have done zero work in Photoshop—but it's very minimal stuff. I didn't compose them in Photoshop. These worlds were made in my studio.

Rail: You have a lot of experience doing fashion/brand editorials which is a genre of photography that I feel frequently disembodies women by highlighting specific body parts like their eyes or arms. Was your approach to photographing the female body in

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this book more similar to how you do product photography or to traditional portrait photography?

Whitaker: I think shooting artwork as opposed to shooting for a client is just a fun, different kind of experience and assignment. When I'm shooting something, whether it's for a magazine or as a commercial assignment, I really feel cognizant that I'm doing something for hire and that there's a client involved, and that's how I make my living. So I feel like—no, I don't feel like the treatment of the body would be similar in any way. With this close friend of mine, I was directing her and she was very generously complying with whatever I wanted her to do, and there wasn't anybody to please lurking in the background of this project. It was really just getting at a certain kind of imagery that I was after. But at the same time, part of this work and part of all my work is informed by the history of photography, which includes the way that women are depicted in advertisements. In the history of photography, the woman is the traditional subject, and a man is the traditional photographer. I do feel like that's something I think about in the work certainly, and also the kind of visual language of the tech industry like those Apple ads where there's a really silhouetted figure. I think this body of work in general is done with a critical eye to the sources that I'm referring to but at the same time, it's also indulging in the same things that I'm critiquing.



Rail: A couple of years ago I came across Julie Wosk's work on what she calls "artificial Eves," the women that men manufacture, which feels like an apt term for the female forms in your book. Wosk is a professor who incorporated her knowledge of writing for *Playboy* and how women have been sexualized in advertising, and then also obviously contemporary tech, into a book. It's a very interesting read and she hits on similar themes that Dawn Chan brings up in your book.

Whitaker: Artificial Eves? Sure. I'm actually not familiar with that work. But thanks for bringing that to my attention.

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Rail: In Dawn Chan's piece, she traces the genealogies of these manufactured women from the original Pygmalion myth to film adaptations, like Audrey Hepburn's Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* (1964) and ELIZA, an early chatbot named after Hepburn's character, to the present day where we're surrounded by what she calls "servile female AIs" like Alexa and Siri. Were you influenced by that history when staging your portraits or was it something you wanted people to think about while looking at the images?

Whitaker: I think both for sure. Dawn and I talked a lot about what areas of research would make sense for the book. I wasn't familiar with all of the references that she ultimately drew from, but those figures and ideas are certainly something I was thinking about in the book. I was thinking a lot about male fantasy and the sort of contemporary realization of long-imagined fantasy from sci-fi, the way that science fiction from the past 50 years has imagined all this stuff that is now suddenly possible, and how some of that emerges in the very gendered technology that we are seeing explode right now. But I also think that's not everything. The work is not all critical. It's also very playful and indulgent. Part of why I wanted Dawn and David Levine—who are both actually good friends of mine—to write is because I felt like Dawn would write something critical and smart and scathing about the world, and David would write something that kind of drinks the Kool-Aid a little bit. I felt like both were important to the project.

Rail: His piece references some pop culture imagery like the chessboard in *Alice in Wonderland* and the grid framework in the *Tron* movie and I noticed you use grids as a recurring motif in this book. What attracted you to that pattern? How did it help you tell your story?

Whitaker: Well, the grid is this powerful symbol of techno-futurism and it's something that emerged in the '80s as a part of futuristic fantasy. It's a handy and useful device. I tried not to use it too directly. My grids are sort of deformed and colored, not like your standard black and white. I didn't want the work to be placed too squarely in the '80s. I was very cognizant of not overusing the grid because of what a design trope it is.

Rail: A lot of the photos share a color gradient backdrop. Gradients were big in the '90s and have obviously become really trendy again in web design, product packaging, and even as jigsaw puzzles. Can you talk about your color palette overall for this book and what interested you in gradient transitions?

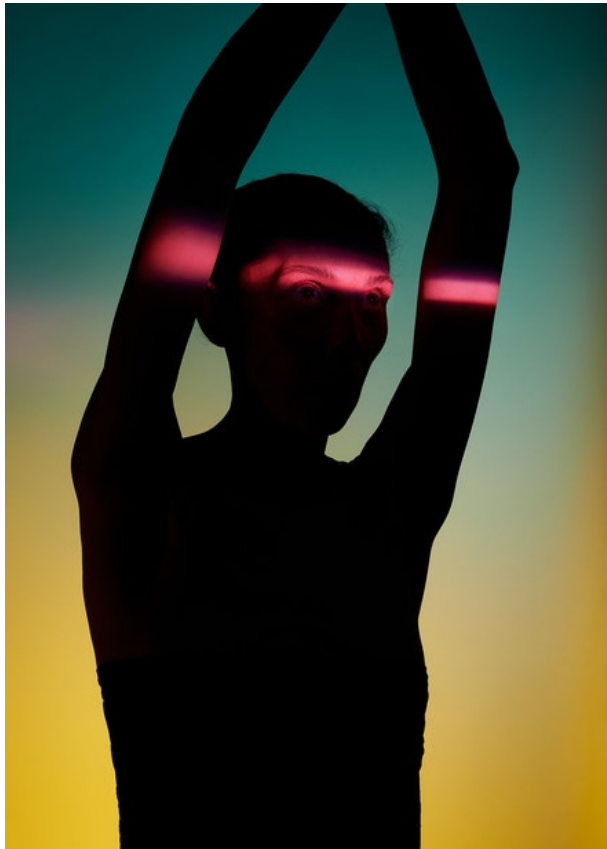
Whitaker: Oh that's so interesting that you bring up jigsaw puzzles, I hadn't thought about that. I have for many years been using a lot of gradients in my work. What's really interesting about them is the way that they're used by the tech industry to evoke a kind of confidence in a product, or cleanliness, or a kind of clarity or capableness. I think

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that's part of the interest in it. But there's also the sort of glow from science fiction—every spaceship has this kind of gradient light.

Rail: And you alluded to not wanting to use a lot of black and white or gray. It's a very colorful book. What's the color story you had in mind?

Whitaker: It wasn't really predetermined. I mean, I've had a lot of people come to my studio and tell me that it's sort of trashy, like not very sophisticated or elegant or something, which I don't really mind. The way we described the book when I pitched the idea was the photographs are sort of maximalist, the opposite of modernist restraint. When making them I wasn't intending for the palette to be so wild, it just came about instinctually.



Rail: Has working on this project made you look at the world or your field differently?

Whitaker: I guess working on the project has inspired me to do a fair amount of research so in that sense, it has complicated my view of some of these ideas. It's so hard to pinpoint because I've been working on this project for a couple of years now and there wasn't a single moment where I felt like it was finished and could reflect back on it. In reading and doing research, I have gained some perspective certainly. While working on this project actually, the UN issued a report about the gendering of technology and digital servants about how it's actually damaging to society and fosters damaging stereotypes towards women that have actual real-world consequences. I feel like I wouldn't necessarily have come across stuff like that if I wasn't hyper-focused on these ideas.