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Artist Jila Nikpay transformed lives with Heroines Project

Some people go through serious illness without changing their outlooks on life. But those are not the women whom artist Jila Nikpay included in her Heroines Project.

When Jila Nikpay started photographing women with breast cancer six years ago, she didn't know precisely what she was looking for.

But as an Iranian expatriate, she sensed that many of the women were undergoing a spiritual transformation that felt familiar to her. She wanted to capture that quality in her starkly poetic black-and-white photographs, so she gave the women lengths of black-and-white cloth, allowing them to expose or conceal as much of their bodies as they wished. A new kind of strength and beauty emerged in the photographs.

These women were not merely cancer survivors, Nikpay realized. They were heroines who had entered strange new terrain where the routine and even the language were different -- much like her own immigrant experience.

"Whether it's an illness or a different culture with a new set of ideas, values, sceneries, smells, customs -- all of that is completely disorienting," said Nikpay, 50. "It has the potential to make you look deeper into your soul and find out who you are because your whole being is shaken."

Her resulting book, "Heroines: Transformation in the Face of Breast Cancer," is part of her larger Heroines Project (www.heroinesproject.com), which includes a photography exhibit, poetry set to music by local composer Carol Barnett, a workshop for women with breast cancer and a conference in October at the University of Minnesota's Center for Spirituality and Healing.

"We're not saying, 'You survived.' No! You are a heroine. You went beyond. Other people can learn from you. So it's giving people's story a focus. It's like looking at something with a camera that is out of focus and then bringing it into sharp focus with colors," said Nikpay.

Some artists strive only to express themselves; Nikpay presents questions about people discovering life's meaning. In the process, she seeks to strengthen her own powers of observation and intuition. As she talks about "Heroines," she measures her words carefully, then listens warily to yours: Can she trust that you understand?

"There are a lot of mythologies -- stories of heroines going through seven gates or through fire -- that have that element of vulnerability. There are many ways that different cultures talk about vulnerability. By opening up, opportunities come your way. If you believe you will grow, you get past the gate and through the fire and become wiser."

Nikpay is known for confronting loss, isolation and dislocation in her stylized photography and films, which have earned her McKnight and Jerome fellowships and showings in galleries from the Walker Art Center to the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts, said George Slade, artistic director of the Minnesota Center for Photography.

"There's a sense that her art addresses turmoil, some inner landscape that needs to be traversed," Slade said.

Embracing life and death

It was a cold day in March 2001 when Sarah Wovcha, then 32, went to Nikpay's studio. She had just completed her last hellish chemotherapy session and felt sick and depleted. "I was at a place of being very fearful. Not a moment went by when I didn't think about cancer and death."

Before Nikpay started making pictures, she talked with Wovcha, gently asking what she had been through.

"Normally, I'm camera-shy," Wovcha said. "Before the session I was thinking, 'I can't tell my story to people. They don't want to hear.'"

Cancer was a taboo subject among her close friends, Wovcha said. Nikpay's openness gave her permission to express her fears and think deeply about the purpose of her life.

"The project was an invitation not to hide what was happening, but the opposite: to show people all the pieces of the illness. Not to put a wig on. Not to put on a happy face."

Wovcha chose a soft, white cloth from piles of white and black fabrics that Nikpay had purchased at textile outlets and draped it diagonally from her shoulders to her feet -- like a monk's robe, or a shroud.

Her body lists slightly in the photo. Her head is bald. Her right hand rests on her shoulder, as if bracing it. Her left hand steadies her gaunt face. Large, dark eyes peer through the viewer to a world beyond.

"Jila's black-and-white images tap into an unfamiliar world," Slade said. "They strip the color out of things so you have to make a leap into the picture to begin to grasp it. You have to adjust your vision."

Shrouding double meaning

Large prints of the 21 "Heroines" from her book line the entry of Nikpay's studio in Minneapolis' Warehouse District. She gazes at the images fondly, recalling Mary Bloomquist's warm hugs and Kris Moreton's wisdom. There was something in the loss that each experienced, she said, that allowed them to shuck the superficial and retrieve something deep, profound.

"Every one of them left important memories with me," she said. "Every one of them looks beautiful to me."

Her studio is a serene sanctuary with hardwood floors, heavy drapes that cordon off her work space and lighting equipment that she uses to create visually sculpted photos. In one of the book's most strikingly heroic poses, Jymme Golden bares her chest after a double mastectomy. With her breasts gone, her muscled arms and smooth chest make her appear as powerful and ageless as a Greek goddess.

"When I first saw this book, I thought immediately about how meaningful it will be for women diagnosed with breast cancer," said Mary Jo Kreitzer, founder and director of the University's Center for Spirituality and Healing. "In its rawness and simplicity, it opens the door to a world of emotion."

Nikpay is highly protective of her art and can be very persistent. "You almost can't say no to her because she's coming from this deep, passionate place," said Cass McLaughlin, the center's outreach coordinator. "She doesn't like the term 'survivor.' She wanted people coming to the exhibit to connect to their own healing within themselves: that it's available to everybody all the time."

Nikpay came to the United States for school in 1973 before the Iranian revolution. She has been back twice and finds that Iran is not a place in which she can live, largely because the imposition of Sharia law has stripped women of many rights and requires them to wear body-obscuring hajibs.

"To me, Iranian culture veils the body and American culture veils the soul," she said. "I have two different realities, and neither celebrates women."

Wovcha believes that Nikpay's use of shrouds to reveal or conceal carries multiple meanings from both cultures. With her Heroines Project, Nikpay wanted to create a public dialogue about the true nature of feminine strength. Working with women facing their own mortality gave her the chance to have deep conversations about meaning and purpose.

"In the beginning, I didn't know I was looking for transformation," she said. "I was looking for people who are engaged with life. But I hadn't named it. People who are transformed are curious. They ask questions. They say, 'I'm not done with it. I'm done with a *part* of it.' "

As she worked with the women with breast cancer she struggled: How best to convey their stories? They had put themselves on the line, exposing their vulnerability. Nikpay could do no less. So she told their stories through her own poetry, so private that up to now, she had reserved it as part of her personal artistic process. Taking that risk was transforming, she said.

Kreitzer loves it that Nikpay calls the women heroines. She puts Nikpay in that same category: "The hero, after going through a series of trials and tribulations, comes to a new place -- and it is impossible to go back unchanged. That is what transformation is all about and is why illness offers such an opportunity for growth."

Closing down and opening up

There is a second picture of Wovcha in "Heroines," taken two years after the first one. Paging quickly through the book, you wouldn't realize it's the same woman.

Her dark, curly hair has returned. Her face is full. Her gaze is strong, tender, but assured. Her hands circle and embrace her belly. She is pregnant with her first child.

Wovcha had married just six months before her cancer diagnosis and was planning to do all the things that many young people do: buy a house, have children, continue a career. She had a law degree and a degree in public health from Harvard. She loved her job as executive director of Children's Dental Services in northeast Minneapolis, the Twin Cities area's largest provider of dental care to poor children.

But after her cancer treatments, Wovcha's doctors, friends and co-workers cautioned her against working too hard. They especially warned her against having kids. Hormones from pregnancy could trigger a relapse. And any child she had might be left motherless.

"Cancer can close people down or open them up," she said. "I was moving down the path of it closing me down until my session with Jila. That day in front of the camera, I found that I didn't have any fear."

She decided she had worked too hard to abandon work she loved. And she wanted children. Once, she was pretty in a conventional way and vain, Wovcha said. She wouldn't leave the house unless her hair was fixed just so. "Now I don't care if I have breasts. I don't care if I have hair. I feel content to move through the world and feel the sunshine and the rain. And I feel beautiful if my body can be a recipient of those experiences."

Jila Nikpay's 2006 book, "Heroines" (\$22, Zenith Services), is available at Open Book, Minnesota Center for Book Arts bookstore, 1011 Washington Av. S., Minneapolis. 612-215-2520. www.mnbookarts.org.

It also can be ordered from Zenith Services at 1-888-831-6277 or www.heroinesproject.com.

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