

The following text is from an article produced by Reade Tilley about the artist Layla Love and her upcoming 2018 NYC Art Show Fundraiser for her nonprofit *Rise of the Butterfly*.

*Photographer Layla Love charts a path from darkness to redemption
with her new show Rise of the Butterfly—and you're in it*

Words: Reade Tilley

Both photographs and butterflies rely on transformation, but if the wings of the latter represent a linear achievement, the former's realization is more meridian and perhaps incomplete. At the culmination of capture, develop, stop, fix, rinse, wash and dry (or its digital equivalent) the metamorphosis of photography renders light as where it was, a kind of process to origin. What happens next is to the beholder, and it is on this final stage of transformation that photographer Layla Love is focused.

"My whole point is to shock people into action and then to have a means of action available to them," Love says of her work, most recently aimed at ending human trafficking. A series of new shows and images compel viewer confrontations with stark slavery and desecration alongside elevated visions of liberated woman-defined sexuality. Any resulting dissonance among viewers is answered with a means to resolution as well, and it is here that Love's work surpasses former explorations of horror. *Rise of the Butterfly*, a non-profit dedicated to combating human trafficking and to supporting its survivors, will benefit from the photography, as will any who see it and who contribute by purchasing works or a *Rise of the Butterfly* book. Founded by Love with feminist icon Gloria Steinem, *Rise of the Butterfly* empowers viewers beyond simply discomforting them even as the work empowers its subjects by bringing their suffering out of shadows. From the gallery walls, the viewer is given the honor and the means to bring the work outside again, back into the world transformed into change, and that makes the show satisfying as well as provocative.

"Media is a form of activism, but I'm not a protester," says Love. "I'm more on the tip of being a protector. I think exposing the violence and the rage is only useful when you offer solutions, when you offer calls to action and when you offer beautiful things in contrast. Otherwise it's

just bombarding the senses, which is sensationalism, which is the way so much of our society is being destroyed.”

As committed to documenting everyday life as she is to illustrating exceptional themes both horrific and beautiful, it is Love’s pointed work that is her most discussed, and that is rather the idea: “Art loses its ego when paired with purpose,” she has said, and while there is something for Love in creating her photographs, certainly, she is not the point of them, and that greatly expands the images’ potential for impact.

In this show, titled *Rise*, and in her other work her subjects are engaged, often as fighters or survivors (or both) across a wide spectrum of personality and experience. Measured advocates for change such as Moby are as regarded as riotous agents such as Pussy Riot. Likewise, whether it’s P!nk, Kanye West, Barbara Walters, Laila Ali, Marianne Williamson, Steinem, formerly unheralded women around the world or the artist herself, those before Love’s lens are factors of action. That viewers of the resulting photographs are invited to advance with them is another elevation, one especially inspired by *Rise of the Butterfly*’s path to participation.

The source of this engagement is a lifetime spent in consideration: of Love’s own place in the world, of environments and the people who inhabit them, of the way those people treat each other (and themselves) and of how that treatment travels. For the 7-year-old girl with a point-and-shoot camera, the girl with the gypsy mother who moved her more than 30 times before she turned 18, photography was a way to hold on—to places, to school friends and family, and to other things. Love held onto that which was precious as if her life depended on it-- and to a degree it did as she found freedom in creation-- found solace in creating something out of raw emotion that she could reflect upon and transform from-- art was a mirror into the world as she desired it to be-- art was her healing-- her movement when she was paralyzed and the amplifier of a small girl’s voice in a man’s world. Diagnosed at the age of 5 with a debilitating disease that had her in a wheelchair for a time and which today, by consequence of treatment, has threatened her sight, Love told friend and noted writer Anthony Haden-Guest in 2011 that her youthful self “thought everything was beautiful and fleeting. So I photographed everything. It was a way of holding onto people I loved,” she said in a piece published on *artnet*. As Love grew and traveled, living in a commune in England, then in a city ghetto, then wherever the next place was, photography appears to have become something

more: a way to gather everyone into light. Think Sally Mann's *Immediate Family*, if that family was everyone in the world, and in fact Love claims Mann as an influence.

"Sally Mann's book [*Immediate Family*] was the first photo book I ever saw, when I was 12 years old," Love says. "And Henri-Cartier Bresson's work, that became really important to me as a kid, 'the decisive moment.' Don McCullin, his India stuff... But I didn't know these people until later. I didn't get a good education because I was moving all the time; different school systems, different languages, Waldorf to private to super-ghetto *Dangerous Minds* type of schools. I didn't learn about photographers until way after."

Twelve was also the age at which Love met a mentor who introduced her to the darkroom, where the young photographer would spend much of her time. And by this point, she had reconnected with her father as well.

"Dad was a stable guy, career-focused. Mom is like a hardcore gypsy, and she comes from real gypsy parents. She was like this hippie: got pregnant with me on vacation, married when I two, divorced when I was five, and we moved a lot. Different countries, different socioeconomic situations... I learned a lot, how to relate to different people. It shaped me to be who I am; whether I liked it or not doesn't really matter."

A graduate of University of California Santa Cruz with a degree in Visual Communications and Journalism, Love says a mentor there offered to pay her to photograph women in West Africa who were self-mutilating to avoid being taken into the slave trade—"They would blind themselves and their daughters, that's the way they wouldn't be attacked," Love explains. Among the first of her forays into documenting and exploring the spectrum of women's power in this world, it led to other assignments and "service work," as Love puts it, rendering beauty, pain, and strength for consideration en route to transformative action. This was as vital in photographing a young victim of trafficking in Cameroon as it was in documenting the Women's March in Washington, D.C., as it was in showing women in China being persecuted, as it was when Love photographed herself following an assault in Australia; and so it goes.

"It's a tango," she says. "I followed my work more than anything, and my work now follows me... The ability to be there and be brave, I didn't just feel the strength and a rage in me that allowed me to go into these places and bring that truth out of the dark corners. Hopefully when

you bring something to the light, it transforms it. Art transforms raw emotion into something more useful than itself.”

Indeed. With Steinem’s urging and support, *Rise of the Butterfly* took flight several years ago (the two friends had met to discuss a project involving elephants) and now it’s bringing together other nonprofits, survivors of human trafficking, poets, virtual reality artists, dancers including the New York City Ballet, the viewers and the show’s subjects, all for realization and change. At some point, Love says, she’d also like to admit the perpetrators of the trafficking and sexual violence that are behind her work.

“I want to invite perpetrators into a safe space, too, and allow for conversations,” she explains. “These people are over-programmed on patriarchy and on a violent masculinity that’s not serving them either—reducing human life to capitalism! They’ve gone through so much, that they could devalue a life to such a degree. ‘Come, discuss.’ If there is not love to embrace them somehow, we’re never going to get through this problem; though I don’t know how to embrace this complexity.”

There’s more work coming as well, new approaches and explorations of transformation, literally and figuratively. One involves deconstructing a wooden chest constructed from wood planted by slaves of one of the U.S.’s most celebrated founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson; others with recasting male-driven costuming in an empowered, woman-held light. In all of it there will be purpose, that is sure, even as *Rise of the Butterfly* begins the next stage of its journey, with *Rise* opening this May in New York.

“I’ve always donated to different causes along the way, it’s just a beautiful way to make art, to honor the ‘coming through you’ instead of ‘from you,’” says Love. “This is a higher purpose. Art is something sacred and profound. Culture moves through artifacts—everything is buried. It’s down to art that we decide what we were.”

A snapshot of us all as much as it is a collection of images from our time, *Rise of the Butterfly* may encourage future evaluations that if we were capable of ugliness, so were we able to transform and to become beautiful again. In that potentiality Love captures a light of both

revelation and redemption. How far that light will travel is up to those who view her work and is yet to be seen, but Love has given it a chance, and perhaps that's all it needs.

—END—

SIDEBARS

The *Rise of the Butterfly* Art Show, entitled *Rise*, will run May 17 through June 15 at 555 W 25th Street in New York City. The show is curated by Anthony Haden-Guest with an introduction by Gloria Steinem and will feature traditional fiber-based darkroom prints made by Layla Love alongside virtual reality composites and other forms. Grounded in the straightforward truth that “Humans should not own other humans” and dedicated to transformation and to the fight against human trafficking, the show will feature 70 artworks across seven walls in a two-story gallery, offering seven different perspectives to viewers. Works from the collection are available for purchase and will include a limited selection of ultra-exclusive prints made with 24K gold leaf on copper sheet, along with prints on various other rare platforms. Proceeds from artwork and book sales will go toward *Rise of the Butterfly*.

Supporting shows include *Big Art*, a NYC group show by Anthony Haden-Guest; a *Rise of the Butterfly* event in Houston, Texas, hosted by mayor Sylvester Turner and Curry Glassell; and an event in Los Angeles. Follow-up shows are scheduled in major international cities.

Rise of the Butterfly is a non-profit co-founded by photographer Layla Love and conceived by feminist icon Gloria Steinem to address the global issue of sex trafficking and slavery.

Layla Love's work includes *She of God*, *Activation*, *Her World Within* and other books and collections. Her art has been exhibited at Paris Photo Expo, Art Basel Miami, AiPAD in New York and other showcases and in solo shows. Her work is in the permanent collections of The Obama White House, The Alex Grey Foundation and The Women's Museum in Dallas, and her photographs appear in 30 Tiffany & Co. stores around the world as well as numerous galleries and private collections.

For more information on Rise of the Butterfly, Layla Love or her shows, or to learn how you can help to end sex trafficking and slavery, visit riseofthebutterfly.com