

gold

created by Olga Stefatou

“Chrysalis” is a portrait series recognizing and celebrating the individuality of cisgender and transgender women refugees and asylum seekers living in Greece.

Hailing from countries such as Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Cameroon and Congo, the participants take the stage clad in golden costumes fashioned out of emergency blankets. The portraits and accompanying texts depict each woman’s different experience and path of migration, while the setting places her courageous expression at the heart of the image.

Since 2014, more than 1.2 million people fleeing conflict, violence and persecution have travelled through Greece, undertaking perilous journeys in search of safety and a better life in Europe. Tens of thousands still remain in the country, with many living in squalid conditions.

Chrysalis refers to the final stage a larva goes through before transforming into an adult butterfly. It is the moment of a great change for this species which, still enclosed in its golden cocoon, is preparing to unfold its wings for the very first time.

Driven by the symbolism the color gold has, I repurposed the material that has become synonymous with the refugee journey and, in collaboration with designer Guram Chachanidze, turned it into a garment. Each costume is unique and reflects the women’s spirit.

Narges
Roaa
Mahboubbeh
Leila
Nazanin
Sophie
Elahe
Maryam
Shafigheh
Raha

Samar
Riri
Parisa
Hnd
Cationa
Maryam
Maya
Nayrouz
Aisha



Narges

I am a divorced mother.
My husband was violent.
We never loved each other.
I had to work to support myself and my two children.
Life was very hard.
I left.
I crossed Iran and Turkey to reach Greece, alone with my children.
I want to forget the awful time in Moria camp on Lesbos.
My mother in Germany sent me money to cross the northern border.
The smuggler stole it all, along with my documents.
The relocation program denied us family reunification.
We live for free in an apartment in Athens, waiting for asylum.
The designated social worker never visits us.
I feel so lonely and uncomfortable in public.
I want everyone to know that Afghans are living a very tough life.
It does not matter where in Europe we are.
We just need peace and support to start our life again.
I want a nice house and education for my children.
I want to enjoy my freedom.

Narges, 27, from Afghanistan



Roaa

I brought my own golden shoes to the photo shoot.
My family and I crossed from Iraq into Syria, and then into Turkey.
We would only walk at night.
Both of my boys are still haunted by the ordeal.
ISIS didn't want people from Mosul to escape.
They were the journey's scariest threat.
We arrived on Greece's Kastellorizo Island by boat.
Thankfully, it did not sink.
Now we live in Athens as 'prosfiges' (refugees in Greek).
Here, I attend a cooking school and I work.
Having a job makes me feel stronger.
I dream of opening my own restaurant serving Iraqi food.
I want to encourage other Iraqi women to seek change.

Roaa, 27, from Iraq



Mahboubeh

I fled because of political and gender oppression.
I crossed the border from Iran to Turkey at night.
It was so dark I could not see my husband.
Like if somebody blindfolded you and forced you to move.
The smugglers were beating me to run faster.
My toes were bleeding.
On the boat to Lesbos we were more than 40 people.
I fell into the cold sea twice.
We finally reached the island.
I planned to go to Germany but the northern border was shut.
Now I have a residence permit.
The journey made me fearless.
I want to forget the hard time I had in Iran as a woman.
I do not speak Greek or English.
Cooking has become my way to communicate.
I feel free in Athens.
I wish the same for all the women in my society.
Like I have in this moment, talking about my dreams on camera.
I love dancing.

Mahboubeh, 33, from Iran



Leila

I left with my husband to be safe and to live with love.
But I also left for my own art - acting, and to be able to perform freely.
My husband is a DJ and he was in danger.
Playing music at parties is not allowed and he was arrested several times.
At first, the police beat you.
But if they catch you again, you might even face the death penalty.
The third time he was arrested, we did not know what the ruling would be.
So we decided to leave.
After a month-and-a-half of failed attempts, we crossed from Turkey into Greece.
It was a rainy January night, with two boats travelling together.
Both hit a rock at Farmakonisi Island.
One of the motors exploded and 15 Syrians were killed. We survived.
The sea now reminds me of the night we almost lost our lives.
For three years now, we have been living in Athens.
We have been granted asylum and we love Greece but it is better if we left.
Refugees need citizenship, support and opportunities.
In Greece, I have had the chance to perform freely for the first time in my life.
I am also studying, working, and volunteering.
I have big dreams.
But I was suppressed for many years, and I fear this freedom will end soon.
I keep telling myself: "Lily, stop worrying about the future, think about the present."

Leila, 31, from Iran



Nazanin

Twelve times I have tried to cross borders.
I was married at 14 and then moved to Iran.
Reaching Greece with my husband was agonizing.
Once in Turkey, police arrested us, put us in jail for 45 days and then deported us.
When we managed to cross the Turkish border, I was pregnant with my daughter.
I was so scared.
In Greece, my husband and I had problems and he left us for Germany.
We also have a son who lives with my parents-in-law in Sweden.
They do not let me speak to him.
I really want to leave Greece and be with my boy as soon as I can.
So far, I have tried to cross the northern border three times.
And every time, I ended up in jail.
If I had money, I would try again even though I do not have the papers.
With the baby, it would cost €6,000.
I currently live with my daughter in a squat in Athens.
My husband is calling me right now, telling me to stop the photo shoot.
I know it is a mistake but I will probably return to him.
I have to do this if I want to see my son again.
I have always been unlucky.
I want to finally experience good fortune, now and for the rest of my life.
Inshallah.

Nazanin (not her real name), 25, from Afghanistan



Sophie

In Matadi town in Congo I was a grande dame.
For more than 10 years, I worked as a secretary at a church.
One day at work, someone brought an envelope and told me to give it to my boss.
Later, two uniformed men entered the office and abducted me.
Every night for a few months, several men would come to abuse me.
I would spend my days crying and singing, singing and crying.
A man came and told me 'I heard you singing and I want to help you',
This man saved my life; music saved me, as well.
The man who had helped me booked me a flight to Turkey and gave me \$200.
Now I am in Athens, I have twins, two boys.
The children's father has recognized them but we have no contact.
It's really hard being a single mother. It's HARD.
I used to work as a cleaner but I've been without work for two years.
Many nights I cry alone; I can't sleep worrying how I'm going to buy milk.
My children are the best gift of my life.
I am trying to keep my courage. I keep trying for my life.

Sophie, 40, from The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)



Elahe

With or without papers, I will go to Germany to my daughters.
I have never seen my three grandchildren.
I live in central Athens.
I am ashamed of my living conditions.
I refuse to let my children visit me here.
Some days I have no food.
I suffer panic attacks.
I am taking medicines for diabetes and blood pressure.
My only fear is remaining in Greece.
I am tired.
I only keep going because of my love for my children.
Only for them.

Elahe, 61, from Iran



Maryam

I was born a refugee.

Afghan refugees in Iran cannot access higher education.

So, I worked as a restaurant cleaner and as a nanny.

In Iran, women are forced to cover themselves, but I found this very hard.

I was arrested and tortured several times by the police.

I ran away from fascism.

The father of my daughter is Afghan; and of my son, Iranian.

At 17, I was forced into a marriage.

A year after my daughter was born, my husband left us for a friend of mine.

For six years, I lived alone with my daughter with no support from my family.

They believed that for him to leave me, I must have not been a good wife, and a good mother.

Then I met my boyfriend who I loved and became pregnant for the second time.

But I could not marry him as I still did not have a formal divorce.

Unmarried pregnant women face many risks, so I escaped with my daughter.

We stayed in Turkey for four months before we tried to reach Italy.

The wooden boat caught fire and we were picked up by the Greek coastguard.

We were granted asylum in Greece two years ago.

As a refugee, my life has been destroyed.

I have to fight for my freedom.

I have to fight for women.

Maryam 27, Afghan from Iran



Shafiqeh

My grandparents are from Tajikistan but relocated to Afghanistan. I was born there but my parents moved to Iran when I was six months old. I don't have feelings for any country. I am looking for a real home because I never had it. It was me who convinced my family to leave everything behind. We arrived on Lesbos in October 2017; I had never seen the sea before. I now live in Athens and have been granted asylum. As a child, I was always curious about sewing. When I did my first fashion show in Athens, I couldn't believe it. Greece gave me power and self-confidence. Now, I can talk about my self, I can introduce the real me. For me, this is power. I work hard and I am a very busy woman. I would also like to apply for a job at Dior in Paris. This is my big dream.

Shafiqeh, 24, Afghan-born Tajik refugee in Iran



Raha Raha

It happened six years ago.
I had all the beauties of the world and in one night, everything was gone.
It is a miracle I can still talk and walk.
I did 52 surgeries to treat my burns.
In Iran, everyone - children and adults - were pointing at me.
"Look, she looks like the devil."
I began covering my face with a mask, but my life was destroyed.
Crossing the forest in Turkey to reach the sea was a nightmare.
The blackness of the sea was horrible.
My wounds were bleeding.
After getting off the boat, I was taken to a clinic on Lesbos.
I was very afraid to take off my mask.
But the doctor said, "You are very beautiful. There is no need to wear it."
I have not used it ever since.
In Greece, nobody points at me.
My hair is my pride.
I will forever feel sorrow for my country
In Iran, you are punished if you walk without a veil.
I never accepted this kind of oppression.
After six years, I am standing on my feet again with hopes for my life.
Since I was a child, I have dreamed of becoming a model and a singer.
We have to fight for a better life from the day we are born.
I always picture freedom as a butterfly.
And that is how I think of myself, as a butterfly.

Raha, 27, from Iran



Samar

I wanted a better life and more freedom.
When things became violent and dangerous, I decided to flee.
First to Lebanon, then to Egypt, Turkey and now Greece.
Often, I was depressed.
Life has all been about survival.
On the boat to Lesbos Island, there were 25 children.
It was raining.
I could not move because of the cold.
After we were rescued, we tried to cross the northern border.
But we arrived too late.
I got stuck in Hersos camp.
I started working as a translator for military nurses.
I was a girl, alone and did not wear the hijab.
Traditional people judge you for this.
As a woman you always need to remind yourself of who you are.
My mum told me when I was 16, "It's your decision now to be your self or be part of a life you do not want. Look at how beautiful you are."
I was able to work along the journey because I speak good English.
Now I am comfortable with what I get for my efforts.
I dream of continuing my education.
I am independent.

Samar, 24, from Syria



Riri

I left Syria 7 years ago because of the war and my sexual orientation. Syria doesn't accept LGBT people by law and religion. My first memory of feeling different was when I was 5. In Syria, I witnessed the war for 18 months: fear, excitement, and courage. I was studying business management but my college was bombed. I tried twice to cross to Greece. It was scary. An organization has given me a flat but now they're pushing me to leave. I have nowhere to go. This really sucks. Four years ago, five people attacked me in front of a gay bar. I enjoy make-up art, dressing up and dancing. I will go back to Syria when this regime will respect people's wishes. I often go to the beach at 6am with a friend to enjoy the sunrise. My strength is to be my self.

Riri (nickname), 26, from Syria



Parisa

I am an Afghan refugee born in Iran.
I arrived in Athens 10 months ago with my younger sister.
We were alone during the journey; that was the most difficult part.
I do not want to say why I left Iran.
My sister was facing a serious problem.
I left with her to protect her.
Our family did not support us.
But our friends helped us financially and we were able to make this journey.
We did not have any particular destination in mind.
We have been granted asylum and live in a shelter for minor female refugees.
As a woman and a refugee in Iran you forget your abilities.
Only a few dare to change their lives.
I began training in kickboxing when I was five years old.
But being a refugee, I was not allowed to participate in any championships.
That was painful.
Kickboxing allows me to release negative energy.
It helps me psychologically and emotionally.
My dream is not to rely on anyone.
I want to be independent.

Parisa, 18, Afghan from Iran



Hnd

The revolution started when I was 9 years old.
One of my brothers died in the war. I felt like something was stolen from me.
I left Damascus with another brother. The journey was very long and tough.
The scariest moment was at sea. I don't know how to swim.
In the end, we made it to Greece. I was 16.
In Athens, I stayed at a camp, then at a squat for 3 months. It was awful.
A refugee pregnant woman took me in at a room she was renting.
I moved into an apartment with other girls after I got a job at a restaurant.
I was working 11 hours a day; I was paid 10 euros.
At the moment, my dream is just the basics: a job, a house, a school.
I miss the family feeling, it's gone.
I'm proud of myself because I'm strong and I'm still trying.
Even though sometimes my mind tells me to give up.
I want to do something I love.

Hnd, 19, from Syria



Cationa

My name means, 'Someone who has a good heart.'
When my father died, my uncle wanted me to marry a 70-year-old man to pay back a loan for the funeral. I refused.
I had to try to make it to Europe to see if I can find a better life.
I took a flight to Turkey in 2014.
There, I met my Nigerian husband, the love of my life.
I took a boat to Greece with 60 others.
It was winter, very cold and I was 3 months pregnant and alone. Can you imagine?
On January 1, 2015, I was in Greece.
For 3 years, I was on my own until my husband arrived.
Thank God I'm alive; I now have two beautiful children, a girl and a boy.
I used to work at a hair salon but I had to stop due to COVID-19. My husband lost his job, too.
Finding work as a Black person here is very difficult.
I'll look at my children and husband, think of my life before and overcome them.
We keep on going.

Cationa, 29, from Cameroon



Maryam

My mother is Iranian and my father Afghan. They fell in love and got married despite their parents' objection. Once, my mother's cousin tried to kill my father by stabbing him. My mother's family is very rich and powerful. They forced my father to promise that me and my sisters would marry our cousins. But we threatened to kill ourselves if we were made to marry these old men. My father got frightened and so we escaped. While crossing the river from Turkey into Greece, we had to walk in the water for four hours. One of sisters collapsed. She was freezing. I kept her and the whole family was crying. People must help refugees; they experience unimaginable situations. I now live in Athens with my parents and two younger sisters. I feel safe. I need to be a bit older and then I can take all the decisions for myself. I want to become a politician or a businesswoman to support people. I hope I will change something in this world.

Maryam, 16, Afghan from Iran



Aisha

Syria was beautiful before the war; I miss it a lot.
I had a hair salon in Aleppo and was happy with my family.
When the troubles began, the regime arrested my husband, like many others.
I was searching for him but couldn't find him.
A year later, I got a call that he had died in prison.
I was left with five children, in insecurity, and with little work.
My mother was also scared that my youngest brother would be forced to join the army.
So, in 2013, we all fled to Turkey to reunite with my older brother.
My first tattoo was the first letter of my late husband's name; the second was his surname.
When I remarried in 2015, my husband asked me to cover both of them.
I didn't want to marry him in the beginning; I knew he had a wife and children.
But after I saw how much he loved me, I felt the same.
He cared for us and I wanted a father figure for my children.
At first, I was very jealous of his first wife but now we have become like sisters.
We left for Lesbos in 2016; I was so afraid of the water.
Living in Moria camp was like being in a horror movie.
I now enjoy working on boats because I can provide for my children.
My dream is for them to have an education and for me to work again as a hairdresser.
Women in Syria feel weak because there is so much violence against them.
But a woman should be strong and able to express herself.
In Greece, I feel stronger.
I want my voice to be heard.

Aisha, 33, from Syria



Maya

I realized my nature at a very young age.
At 17, I was arrested in Tunis because I was a trans girl.
Despite my age, I was put in prison with adults who raped me several times.
My family did not visit me out of shame.
After my release, I moved to Sousse and got my first job in entertainment.
There, I got the name Maya.
Working in the show made me feel like a star, like an artist.
Five years later, a group of people came into my house and tried to kill me and my boyfriend.
I knew then it was not safe for me to remain in Tunisia.
I flew to Turkey and began working at a club.
But life is dangerous there for trans people.
Some of my friends were killed and I decided to escape to Greece.
I feel safer here but the situation for refugees, especially LGBT refugees, is still not good.
LGBT people are being housed in mixed accommodation with non-LGBT people.
This lack of privacy has left me depressed.
In Greece, a trans girl is considered a sex doll, so finding a normal job is hard.
I have been waiting for my ID to be renewed and move to France.
I want to open a restaurant and form a group of trans artists.
My dream is to create a place like Moulin Rouge.

Maya (pseudonym), 30, from Tunisia



Nayrouz

My life in Syria was good until the war.
Back then, I had three children: two boys and a girl.
We left for safety in 2012.
On our way to Turkey, we had to cross many army and rebel checkpoints.
It was scary.
Things were good in Turkey initially, but then we felt hate and discrimination.
There, my husband met a woman with five children and they got married.
In Syria, some men might have multiple wives but I never imagined I'd face such a situation.
It was hard in the beginning, but now we have become like sisters.
They have two children together, and we have had another one since we fled.
The water was the scariest thing of the journey to Greece.
We made it to Lesbos and stayed there for a year before moving to a camp in Sounio.
I recently started working as a boat cleaner.
Working after seven years in Greece is a relief.
But I will leave this job if I get the chance to work in a hair salon.
That was my dream growing up.
My advice to women is to do their best to make their dreams come true.
I feel strong, and I like to empower the people around me.

Nayrouz, 39, from Syria



Chrysalis newsprint zine [↗](#) VIDEO

Self-Published “Chrysalis” newsprint zine by Olga Stéfátou

Designed by Panos Papanagiotou

Language: English

Type: Broadsheet Newsprint zine, 55gsm

Edition of 100 copies

Pages: 16

Size: 35 x 50 cm

Year: 2019

signed

Exhibited 2019 Fanzineist Vienna Art Book & Zine Fair

Exhibited 2019 Athens Photo Festival

Exhibited 2019 Zoetrope Athens “PLATEAU 034,
An exploration of Greek self-published photobooks”

Exhibited 2019 The Athens Zine Biblioteque goes to Sikinos Vol. II

Chrysalide newsprint zine [↗](#) EDITIONS LIGHT MOTIV WEBSITE

Published by Light Motiv

Designed by Panos Papanagiotou

Language: French

Type: Broadsheet Newsprint zine, 55gsm

Edition of 100 copies

Pages: 16

Size: 35 x 50 cm

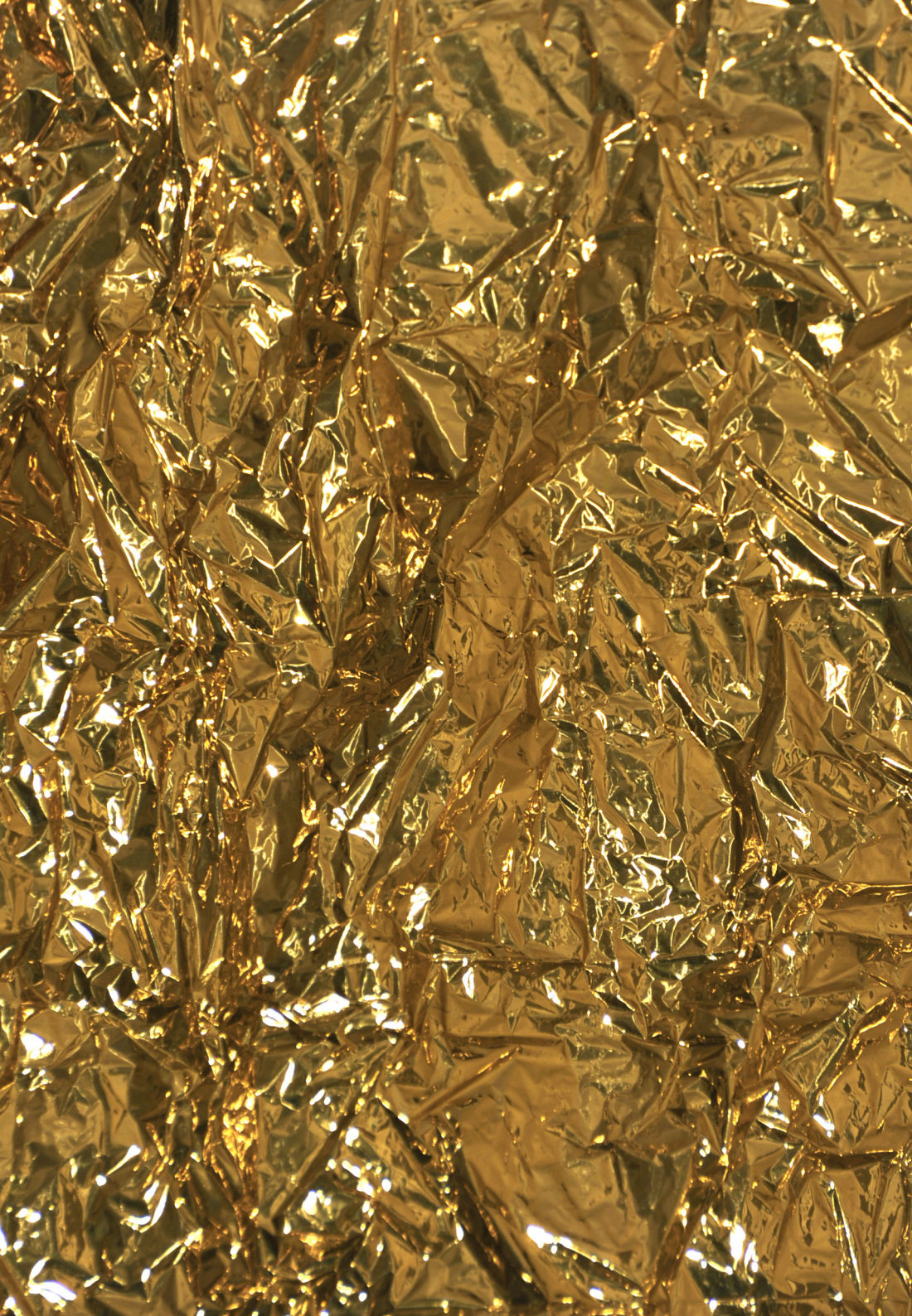
Year: 2019

Signed



Click on the Vimeo link to see the limited edition newsprint zine

 vimeo.com/328717738



Credits

Olga Stéfatou

Concept, Photography, Research, Production

Guram Chachanidze

Costumes designer

Awards / Competitions

Los Angeles Month of Photography, [🔗 MONTH OF PHOTOGRAPHY WEBSITE](#)

House of Lucie in DTLA, USA,
April 11-14 2019

Head On Photo Festival, [🔗 HEAD ON WEBSITE](#)

Portrait Prize Finalist,
Paddington Town Hall, Sydney, AU,
May 4-19 2020.

Women Photograph 2019 Year in Pictures [🔗](#)

PRESS

Al Jazeera Interview: Striking portraits celebrate individuality of refugee women [🔗 ALJAZEERA WEBSITE](#)

Kathimerini [🔗 KATHIMERINI WEBSITE](#)

Bird In Flight [🔗 BIRD IN FLIGHT WEBSITE](#)



Aga Khan Museum



Aga Khan Museum



Doha Fire Station



Doha Fire Station



Pyrrou Square



Pyrrou Square



MOMus-Museum of Contemporary Art



MOMus-Museum of Contemporary Art

Exhibitions

Aga Khan Museum

Toronto, Canada, March 21, 2020 – August 23, 2020

Virtual exhibition in 3D

Chrysalis, by artist and photographer Olga Stéfatu, introduces viewers to 11 women who fled their old countries in search of a better life. Each woman's story is different, owing to the unique forces that caused her to uproot her life, flee to Greece, and eventually cross paths with Stéfatu.

Chrysalis is presented as a companion to another exhibition exploring personal experiences around displacement and migration. *Sanctuary* features rugs designed by 36 leading artists, including Mona Hatoum, Brendan Fernandes, and Ai Weiwei. Both exhibitions appear in an immersive environment developed by Sarajevo-born artist and architecture historian Dr. Azra Akšamija. Created from recycled and reused materials, Akšamija's design references the transient shelters of those seeking sanctuary and honours the Earth as a sanctuary for all life.

Videos

Artist Conversation:

Photographer Olga Stéfatu on *Chrysalis*

Curator Conversation

Marika Sardar Curator of *Chrysalis*

Doha Fire Station

Gallery 3, Qatar, February 12-29 2020

Video

Solo Show: Doha Fire Station

Pyrrou Square

Photometria Festival, Ioannina, Greece, Sep 25, 2021 – Oct 10, 2021

MOMus-Museum of Contemporary Art

Photo Biennale, Thessaloniki, Greece, Oct 08, 2021 - Feb 20, 2022



Galerija Photon



Galerija Photon

Exhibitions

Galerija Photon

Ljubljana, Slovenia, June 22 - July 28 2023

Synthesis Gallery

Sofia, Bulgaria, July 20 - September 15 2023

Photon Gallery

Vienna, Austria, Oct 6 - November 12 2023



Synthesis Gallery



Synthesis Gallery

Coming Shows:

2024- **Chrysalis**, Biennale Della Fotografia Femminile
Circuito OFF (Mantova, IT)

Olga Stefatou is a visual artist, documentary filmmaker and photography consultant. She travels worldwide for projects and returns to her creative base in Athens, her new studio, the atelier délos.

In her practice, Stéfatou works with mixed media and mainly with photography. She investigates the idea of freedom and its connection to geopolitics, heritage, and social structures, with a special interest in gender issues and women rights. Believing that image-making should engage the personal and collective consciousness, her work entangles documentary practices with performance elements as tools to reflect alternative realities. Stéfatou has exhibited her work at Aga Khan Museum (CA), Doha Fire Station art space (QA), MOMus Museum of Contemporary Art (GR), Benaki Museum (GR), Los Angeles Month of Photography, Head On (AU), Les Boutographies (FR) and Gallery Negpos (FR) among others.

Stéfatou has an extensive experience in multimedia journalism, collaborating with international media such as Der Spiegel, Die Zeit, The Economist, NBC News, and Vanity Fair, among others. In 2021 she was selected to photograph the DIOR Cruise 2022 collection with nine other Greek female artists. In 2015 she documented as a crewmember the pioneering Solar Impulse mission – the round of the world using only solar power. In 2011 she directed three short documentary films for the award-winning collective multimedia project The Prism GR2011: Red Light, Women For Sale – Battlefield, Claiming Agios Panteleimonas Square and Free Smoking.

Stéfatou has a close collaboration with Qatar Museums, most recently curating the Live Program for the 2023 Tasweer Photo Festival. She is the creative director of the Saristra Festival Arts program, a festival celebrating music and arts on Cephalonia Island, Greece.

She studied photography at the University of West Attica, and in 2012 she earned her Master's degree in Multimedia Journalism from the University of Bolton, UK, while being based in Beijing, China, where she investigated and directed 16 short portrait based documentary films about domestic violence against women in China, titled Parched Homes.



OLGASTEFATOU