

gold

created by Olga Stefatou

“Chrysalis” is a portrait series recognizing and celebrating the individuality of refugee women living in Greece. Eleven women from Syria, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan take the stage in golden costumes made out of emergency blankets. The portraits and accompanying texts draw out their vastly different experiences and paths of migration, while the setting places the women’s courageous expression at the heart of each image.

More than 1.2 million people fleeing conflict, violence and persecution have traveled through Greece during the past three years, undertaking perilous sea journeys in search of safety and a better life in Europe. But the closure of the Balkan borders and an EU-Turkey deal has trapped some 103,500 refugees in Greece, with most languishing in squalid conditions.

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

Chrysalis refers to a nymph in its final stage of transformation. Going from a larva to a butterfly is a moment of great change for the species, still bodied in a golden cocoon and ready to unfold new wings.

Roaa

Nazanin

Elahe

Samar

Narges

Parisa

Mahboubeh

Maryam

Leila

Maryam

Raha



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



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



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



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



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



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



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



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.
I could not pursue my goals, what I truly wanted for myself.
The father of my daughter is Afghan; and of my son, Iranian.
Every woman wishes to be able to choose her husband.
But 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.
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.
But 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 believe when we are born, we have everything.
We should not have to fight hard for our rights.
But I have to fight for my freedom.
I have to fight for women.

Maryam 27, Afghan 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.
In Turkey, we paid the smuggler \$6,000 for the journey to Germany.
He disappeared and left us without any money.
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



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



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



Chrysalis newsprint zine [VIDEO](#)

Self-Published "Chrysalis" newsprint zine by Olga Stéfátou

Designed by Panos Papanagiótou

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 Papanagiótou

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 Stéfátou

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](#)



Aga Khan Museum



Aga Khan Museum



Aga Khan Museum



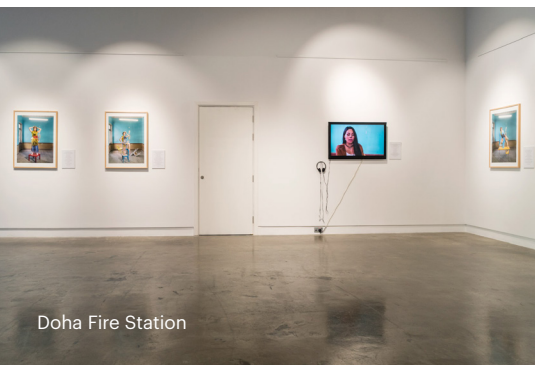
Aga Khan Museum



Doha Fire Station



Doha Fire Station



Doha Fire Station



Doha Fire Station

Exhibitions

Aga Khan Museum, [AGAKHAN MUSEUM WEBSITE](#)

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

Virtual exhibition in 3D [3D](#)

Chrysalis, by artist and photographer Olga Stéfátou, 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 Stéfátou.

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 Stéfátou on *Chrysalis* [VIDEO](#)

Curator Conversation

Marika Sardar Curator of *Chrysalis* [VIDEO](#)

Doha Fire Station, [FIRESTATION WEBSITE](#)

Gallery 3, Qatar, February 12-29 2020

Video

Solo Show: Doha Fire Station [VIDEO](#)

Upcoming Exhibitions

Thessaloniki PhotoBiennale 2021
2021 Chrysalis, Photometria Festival (Ioannina, Greece)

Olga Stéfátou is a visual artist and curatorial consultant.

She recently moved back to her native country Greece after working with Qatar Museums as photography specialist for two years. In her practice, Stéfátou 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. 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. Stéfátou has exhibited her work at Aga Khan Museum (CA), Doha Fire Station art space (QA), Los Angeles Month of Photography, Head On (AU), Les Boutographies (FR) and Gallery Negpos (FR) among others.

Some of her major projects include the long-term series Red Ruby in Myanmar, while in 2015 she participated in the pioneering Solar Impulse mission – the first-time attempt to circumnavigate the world using only solar power. Stéfátou has travelled worldwide and extensively in Asia, producing photography and video on social and humanitarian issues. She has an extensive experience in photojournalism, collaborating with international media such as Der Spiegel, Die Zeit, The Economist, NBC News and Vanity Fair among others.

Stéfátou is the creative director of Saristra Festival Arts, a festival celebrating music and arts on Cephalonia Island, Greece.

She studied photography at the Technological Educational Institute of Athens and in 2012 she earned her Master's degree in Multimedia Journalism from the University of Bolton, UK, while being based in Beijing, China.



