In 2005, Norwegian artist Anne-Karin Furunes was browsing in the library at Sweden's Uppsala University when she happened upon a curious collection of photographs. They were photos of unidentified people categorized according to groups such as “criminals,” “Gypsies,” and “Jews.”

The photos, she learned, were from the archive of the State Institute for Racial Biology, a eugenics institution established in 1922. Its first director, the physician Herman Bernhard Lundborg, believed that unsavory genes needed to be rooted out of the Swedish population to ensure the dominance of a superior race. The institute's research was ultimately used to justify a shameful government program that led to the forced sterilizations of nearly 63,000 people—a vast majority of whom were women—between 1935 and 1975. Many European nations created similar programs in the years leading up to World War II.

“I believe the photos were made as part of a process of mapping their so-called ‘research.’ Lundborg was systematically mapping the Swedish people,” Furunes said via email.
The anonymous faces of the men, women, and children moved Furunes, so the next year she returned to the library with the intention of using the photos for a series of artworks. The resulting project, "Of Nordic Archives," was recently on display at Ryan Lee Gallery in New York City.

"I wished to bring their portraits back into our time without the label from the archive, to present them as people again," she said.
Furunes' goal, she said, was to transform the portraits' meaning so that viewers couldn't deny the individuality and humanness of the people portrayed. To that end, she scoured the archive for images of people who returned the camera's gaze directly and strongly.

"In these photos, there is no posing, no smiles. I was searching for portraits, because even though they are anonymous, each individual is interesting. They have their own personality, strength, and integrity," she said.

Furunes perforated the images by hand, starting with a monochrome canvas and letting the portrait emerge through the negative space. The technique, she said, serves to evoke loss and the complexity of memory. It also makes the images more modern, she said, forcing viewers to imagine the subjects as contemporaries.

"I hope the onlooker experiences the sense of facing another person, as if it were a real meeting with a real person at this moment in time," she said.
Jordan G. Teicher is the associate editor of Slate's Behold blog. Follow him on Twitter.
A Palatial Setting for Surreal Imagery in Venice
By RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS
JUNE 18, 2014

VENICE — Palazzo Fortuny, the former Venetian studio and home of the artist Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo, has been reanimated by its director, Daniela Ferretti, as a vibrant showcase of modern and contemporary art.

The palazzo’s permanent collection — bearing witness to Fortuny’s career as a painter, draftsman, sculptor, photographer, fabric maker, fashion and theater designer — has not only provided a unique backdrop for a wide variety of temporary exhibitions, but also stimulated a number of contemporary artists invited to create works inspired by the Spanish-born artist’s diverse activities.

For her latest group show, “Spring at Palazzo Fortuny,” Ms. Ferretti, who was appointed in 2007, has brought together an all-woman lineup of artists, including an exhibition devoted to Dora Maar, bringing her work to the public in Italy for the first time.

Now primarily remembered as Picasso’s lover, muse and model, Maar was also, as evidenced here, an artist meriting attention in her own right.
Maar is joined by three contemporary artists — the Norwegian painter Anne-Karin Furunes, the Japanese glass artist Ritsue Mishima and the Venetian jewelry maker Barbara Paganin. Their work shows alongside “Amazons of Photography,” a display on the Palazzo’s ground floor of works by women photographers from the 1860s to the present day, from the collection of Mario Trevisan. All of the exhibitions will be there through July 14.

When Maar died in July 1997, only seven people attended her funeral. After her split with Picasso and traumatic wartime events, she suffered a nervous breakdown in 1945, after which she was psychoanalyzed by the French psychiatrist and writer Jacques Lacan. Thereafter, she lived as a virtual recluse, her own work fading from view.

During the 1990s there were the first signs of a revival of interest in Maar as a photographer and member of the Surrealist movement in the 1930s. This was further stimulated, after her death, by the sale of the contents of her Paris apartment and the country house that Picasso had given her.

In 1993 the Spanish art historian Victoria Combalía obtained a rare interview with Maar on the phone. After Maar’s death, Ms. Combalía organized a traveling exhibition, “Dora Maar and Picasso,” in Munich, Marseilles and Barcelona.

At the invitation of Ms. Ferretti, Ms. Combalía puts Maar firmly center stage at the Fortuny in “Picasso Notwithstanding,” a show of over 100 of her images, including street scenes, nudes, publicity shots and Surrealist collages, with additional photographs by friends and colleagues and two portraits of her by Picasso, one on canvas and one in bronze.

Dora Maar was born in November 1907 in Paris to a Croat father and French mother and christened Henriette Theodora Markovitch. The family lived in France and Argentina, where Maar’s architect father had large-scale commissions. At the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, she became friends with Jacqueline Lamba, who was to marry André Breton in 1934. Some of Dora’s later portrait and nude studies of the beautiful, blonde Jacqueline are included in the Fortuny show.

Having switched to the Académie Lhote, where she got to know Henri Cartier-Bresson, and then the École de Photographie de la Ville de Paris, she won her first commissions as a fashion photographer in 1928. In 1931, Maar opened a studio with Pierre Kéfer and they marketed their images jointly as Kéfer-Maar. Two nudes under this signature published in a periodical “Formes Nues,” a copy of which is still in Fortuny’s library, have been added for the duration of the show to the cabinet displaying the Spanish artist’s cameras and photographic equipment.

Maar was a skillful photographer of the female nude, able to remain within the necessary bounds of “artistic” taste while producing unmistakably erotic images. She also, through artfully framed close-ups, managed even to bring out the surprisingly sexy and phallic suggestiveness of some decorative public sculptures, as she did with her shots of “Pont Mirabeau” and “Pont Alexandre III.”

Among the most memorable of her images here are of streets scenes captured in Paris and Barcelona, of market folk, peddlers, beggars, the blind, marginalized families and ragged
children living in shacks and caravans, to which she brought an acute and sympathetic eye.

Some of these studies also indicate that she was a natural Surrealist with an instinct for spotting the incongruous and odd in everyday life. This was a talent that she would develop in the Surrealist images she created — a number of classic examples are exhibited here — after she became associated with the group through her friendships with Paul Éluard and Ms. Lamba.

It was also Éluard who introduced Maar to Picasso in early 1936. The meeting initiated a passionate, obsessive and frequently fraught relationship, which was to last until 1943, when Picasso began an affair with Françoise Gilot. Maar abandoned her career as a photographer in 1937, but not before making an invaluable photographic record of the making of "Guernica" between May and June of that year; the photographs are on loan to the Fortuny from the Museo Nacional Centre de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid.

Photographs are also the starting point for Ms. Furunes’s “Shadows,” eight enormous canvases hung on the palazzo’s second floor. These were inspired by her investigations in Fortuny’s own photo archives, where she came across a series of images taken by Fortuny in the late 19th and early 20th century of some of his Venetian female workers, employed in the palazzo’s workshops manufacturing textiles and clothes.

Beginning in her student days at the Academy of Fine Art in Trondheim in 1993-94, Ms. Furunes has perfected an extraordinary pointillist technique of recreating photographic images by perforating canvas with thousands of minutely graduated holes that let through varying degrees of light.

She first applied this technique to pictures taken from her family album after her mother died, which she found infused them with light and created a strong but elusive sense of presence. She went on to treat archival pictures of anonymous individuals, including German soldiers during the occupation of Norway, Finnish women fighters, and Roma and other victims of the Holocaust.

Only one of the names of the Venetian women workers whose images Ms. Furunes has chosen is recorded: Giorgia Clementi, who exudes an air of self-possession and also apparently sat for Fortuny as a model.

Each of Ms. Furunes canvases requires many hours of work of great precision, but the results are evanescent and haunting. As Ms. Furunes herself describes the effects in the show’s catalog: “The images come and go depending where the viewer stands. It is like trying to catch a vague dream, the image evaporates as one gets closer to the canvas. Close up, you begin to see the real walls through the empty holes.”

The orchestration of subtly changing light effects also lies at the heart of Ms. Mishima’s glass creations. Her "Tras Forma" is a collection of 11 pieces made especially for this exhibition, which have been positioned among Maar’s photographs and Fortuny’s wall hangings and paintings on the palazzo’s high-ceilinged piano nobile, or first floor above ground level.
Ms. Mishima divides her time between her native Kyoto and Venice, where she has worked with the Venetian glass master Livio Serena and, since 2011, with Andrea Zilio. She employs colorless “cristallo” glass, first made on Murano in around 1450 by Angelo Barovier, who perfected a pure transparent glass as pellucid as natural rock crystal. Ms. Mishima’s luminous pieces have intriguing configurations inspired by organic forms.

Several of her works here allude to Fortuny’s multifaceted activities at the palazzo, including “Instruments,” a collection of mysterious tools, and “Pomegranates,” a favorite motif in his textiles. In “Babel,” Ms. Mishima has departed both from her exclusive use of clear glass and from her customary avoidance of figurative forms by adding a band of glass sprinkled with gold dust, echoing the gold of Fortuny’s painted fabrics, and by making this vitreous sculpture strongly suggestive of a standing female figure.

Ms. Paganin’s adventurous jewelry is represented in major museums, among them the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. For her “Open Memory” exhibition here she spent three years working on a series of 25 elaborate, surreal brooches built around miniature 19th-century painted and photograph portraits. To these she has added tiny found objects — collected from antique shops and markets on her travels in Europe and America — arranged in her own hand-crafted gold, silver and glass settings.

Each brooch is a kind of Lilliputian shrine to the nameless, long-forgotten person or persons depicted, adorned with porcelain good-luck charms in the form of hippopotamuses, mice, frogs, badgers and rabbits, ivory elephants and giraffes; minuscule metal shoes, dresses and utensils that once furnished dolls’ houses; and decorative elements from old jewelry, such as emeralds, sapphires, rubies and opals.

The brooches are displayed on the palazzo’s piano nobile in one of Fortuny’s cabinets of curiosities — an ideal place for these tantalizing, enigmatic and evocative objets d’art.
The hauntingly beautiful, large-scale black-and-white works that made up Norwegian artist Anne-Karin Furunes's recent American solo debut are instantly arresting. Viewers are confronted by faces of anonymous women, closely cropped but reproduced to measure more than 5 feet by 7 feet, each with a penetrating gaze of melancholy and defiance, bewilderment and resignation. Approaching more closely, the images dissolve into thousands of tiny holes. But according to dealer Barry Friedman, who inaugurated the fall season of his new gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea with Furunes's “Portraits of Unknowns,” even after the artist's method is explained, some observers still have difficulty grasping that these "paintings" are constructed by making myriad punctures of different sizes in black acrylic canvases and placing them against the white backdrop of the gallery walls.

The verisimilitude is so striking, and subtleties of emotion and light are conveyed so masterfully, that, indeed, as you walk away and the picture comes back into focus, the fact that you are simply looking at holes in a black canvas seems astounding. No clues are given as to the identities of these captivating subjects — each work simply titled “Portraits of Pictures,” with a number — and yet you sense they come from a different time and place. In fact, the works are based on photographs from a Swedish archive that scientifically categorized citizens by ethnicity and other social criteria, flagging deviants for sterilization. Collected in books with such headings as Jews, gypsies, Lapps and criminals — but representing all aspects of society — this monumental project was undertaken by the Rasbiologiska Institut in the 1920s, the first nationally funded study of its kind. It was a model for other European countries, including Germany, though it remained classified until the 1970s, when documentation was found in bins headed for the trash.
The artist has long been concerned with historical recovery. In earlier series, Furunes, 46, has constructed images based on pictures of women who fought in the Finnish Civil War of 1918; Norwegian Jews deported by the Nazis; tuberculosis patients in the children's hospital that was converted into the home where she currently lives, and teenage soldiers sent to Norway by Germany as they were losing World War II. Even in landscapes, such as depictions of the sky based on weather reports from a wartime atlas, the images seem to reflect national moods and aspirations. Most of these were found in libraries in and around Trondheim, where Furunes is based and where she teaches at the Trondheim Art Academy. She initially worried that perhaps she was once again stripping her subjects of their humanity by reproducing coerced images, but ultimately felt, and maintains, that her work achieved precisely the opposite effect— to “bring them back simply as portraits,” without identifying details, to be encountered at face value.

Although Furunes isn't Jewish, her grandfather was sent to a concentration camp for defying the Germans, and she views the “disappearance” of Norway's Jews as a challenge to the country's national memory of the Holocaust. “History is more complicated than the picture we usually want to see,” she said in an interview with the Forward, noting that while her generation was raised on the notion that Norway, which was occupied during the war, fought “on the right side,” through her research, she learned that many Norwegians, especially members of the police, collaborated with the Nazis. Contemplating the “terrifying” implications of Scandinavians’ own racial policies, she notes that her husband's grandmother suffered from epilepsy, a condition that warranted sterilization. “He and my children wouldn't have been born,” she said, adding that, into the 1970s, Norway's government maintained a policy of clandestinely sterilizing Roma.

All this helps to explain her work's emotional resonance. “I always wanted to make pictures that simulated a glimpse or faint memory,” Furunes said, noting a particular interest in “found material carrying incomplete histories.” Through carefully mapped and intricately hand-punctured absences of space, she reconstructs images that were concealed and nearly obliterated. At the same time, Furunes questions notions of reality, presenting these portraits for re-examination in a new context as images that change according to the viewer's perspective.

It's a slow and painstaking process, though Furunes insists that it is “almost meditative.” She completes, on average, just 10 new works a year, manually administering as many as 30,000 holes to each painting. Before this begins, Furunes delves into obscure archives and, for her latest series, had to cut through red tape to gain access to classified files. Once she uncovers her material, after mapping out a grid and sometimes sketching patterns on the canvas, she sits on the backside wielding a hammer and hole-puncher with more than 30 different-sized punctures, generally used for making
belts. She often has to make corrections as she goes and uses a mirror to see the evolving picture from a distance.

Like this arduous labor, the way in which Furunes arrived at her method directly relates to the work at hand. She recalls how, at the start of her career, in the early 1990s, she approached the act of painting with trepidation, equally annoyed by and afraid of the large, blank white canvas. “The painterly history was so heavy, and it was impossible to do something new,” she explained. “I wanted to aggressively confront the male tradition of throwing paint on the canvas, to destroy and rebuild at the same time.”

But unlike the punctured paintings of Lucio Fontana, she creates illusion by “taking away something rather than adding to the surface.” Also at play is a fascination with photography and training as an architect. “Photos are very much about grasped moments, and when they’re gone, they tell you more about what you have lost in a way,” she said. On a more basic level, her pictures are about space — real and perceived. The images, created by carving out space, shift depending on your relationship to them, and by virtue of their dimensions, they command the spaces they inhabit.

The sheer scale of the work partially explains why, despite overwhelmingly passionate responses to the pictures, they are difficult to place. When Friedman first discovered Furunes at the Art Berlin fair in 1999, he actually bought two works for himself but they didn’t fit on the walls he had in mind. So he offered them at the inaugural Art Basel Miami Beach in 2002, where, Friedman recalls, “I had no less than 50 clients for each.” (They ended up in two major private collections.) He continued to introduce her work to broader audiences at international art fairs, but couldn’t accommodate it in his old Upper East Side gallery. Now, in addition to representing Furunes in Chelsea, he is bringing works from the series that was exhibited there to Art Basel Miami (December 6-9) and Palm Beach III (January 11-14). The pieces are priced at $19,500 each.

Meanwhile, Furunes creates even larger public works, including commissions for Deutsche Bank and the National Theater train station in Oslo. These are all on steel and aluminum so the holes have to be laser-cut by factory machinery. They also incorporate contemporary portraiture but the common denominator is a piercing humanity. As Furunes says of her train station project, 1,500-foot installation based on photos of women from generic family albums: “I wanted to create a kind of strength in shared experience. Standing on the platform, as you meet these portraits, you also mirror yourself in the steel plates.”

Whether historical or contemporary, the faces that Furunes revives from the void at once assert themselves and remind us that they are ephemeral. For history marches on, and with it, just like Furunes’s elusive portraits, our memories and perceptions continue to shift.