

## ***Solidarity, Defiance and Me Too: Love Under the Patriarchy, Portraits***

by Shazia Ahmad

“Me too.” I still recall posting those words as my Facebook status, when I had my first account on that platform, no hashtags and nothing more or less. Friends of mine, geographically near and far, did the same. I then remember the occasional “friend”, usually male, commenting on why it took us so long to speak up. Had we been victims of any other crime, would we have waited years or decades to come forward? The analogy stunned me because it was specious and nonsensical. There is plenty of shame associated with anything even tangentially sexual, and obedience is reinforced through silence. This is patriarchy pushing survivors back into the corner, far from sight.

In the midst of this moment, as more survivors came forward with harrowing tales of sexual abuse and assault, Christeen Francis created a compressed wood relief self-portrait to say, “me too.” Simultaneously, Renee Sharpe had started informal conversations

with friends on the same topic, which then evolved into a podcast called *Love Under the Patriarchy*. Francis joined Sharpe in editing a collaborative zine, after which she began creating woodcut portraits of friends who had survived sexual assault or sexual abuse. The on-going project currently consists of sixteen relief portraits printed from the same compressed wood as the first portrait, in black ink.

There is sensitivity, certainly in how the form emerges from the material. The revelation of each portrait is delicately handled, a far cry from how sexual assault and abuse survivors are treated, dealt with, or simply unacknowledged. Each portrait is carved lovingly and the fluidity of the line work stands in contrast to the durable nature of plywood. Francis chose the medium as she was already working with compressed wood panels; she appreciated how the texture obscured and fragmented the portraits.

In spite of the delicacy, there is strength as well. And there is something else also happening here. The eyes are staring back at the viewer, regaining ownership of themselves, forming a connection with the viewer but also perhaps daring the viewer to look away. The portraits are not simply a catalogue of friends and loved ones who

are survivors. Instead, they tell of the ability to reclaim one's self in the wake of these acts, especially when questions of shame and culpability are reinforced by patriarchy. *Love Under the Patriarchy, Portraits* celebrates survivors' struggle and recognises their power.

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