

**The Power of a Circle I** (Angela Davis) 2022, from the series *The Prophet*  
Epson ultrachrome pigment ink on handmade cotton paper, framed between two glasses

## **“The Prophet series”: Higher beings not giving a damn.**

Ana Roldán has a wide array of series, to which she returns over time again and again. One of them is “The Prophets” which consists of photos from popular media that she has transformed. The series started in 2007 with police photographs of two of 1345 students imprisoned at the demonstration on Mexico’s City’s central Tlatelolco place on the 2nd October of 1968. A date that is engraved in Mexican collective memory, as an estimated 400 students were shot by the snipers of the authoritarian PRI government who did not tolerate any dissent prior to the summer olympics of the same month. One of the few victims that became known was Ana Regina Teuscher, a 19 year old medical student, who died with six bullets in her back, and whose photo was published in a magazine. She captured public imagination, and was even written about, in a semi fictitious book that converted her into a mystic martyr at the center of a cult called „Los Registas“. The depictions of the Tlatelolco massacre are as iconic in Mexico as the photos of the murdered Kent State students are in the US. <sup>1</sup>

All of this is Roldán’s starting point. The photos do not show the horrors of the repression. The student, hands in his pocket, leans nonchalantly against a wall, with an inscription that reads “FUN”. The female student looks up, and has a tattoo-like inscription on her arm saying “SUN”. The title “The sun’s pun above profanity, version agitator” plays with the mythical meaning of the sun in Mexico’s tradition and its deity Huitilopochtli. At the same time Roldán plays with words, by mixing fun and sun with pun. Thus Roldán takes one of Mexico’s most loaded historical events, and zooms out to get a more distant perspective by introducing a subtle allusion to precolonial history, mixing activism with prophecy and playing with the meaning of the photos through her wordplay.

In 2012 Roldán worked on a picture of Jean-Claude Trichet, who himself mocked his ascribed role as a prophet. When asked by journalists about future developments, the president of the European Central bank formed a binocular with his hands. Roldán made the triangle that was soft in the two agitators stronger, Trichet’s eyes vanish in black circles, and the prophet becomes part of a construction of geometrical forms.

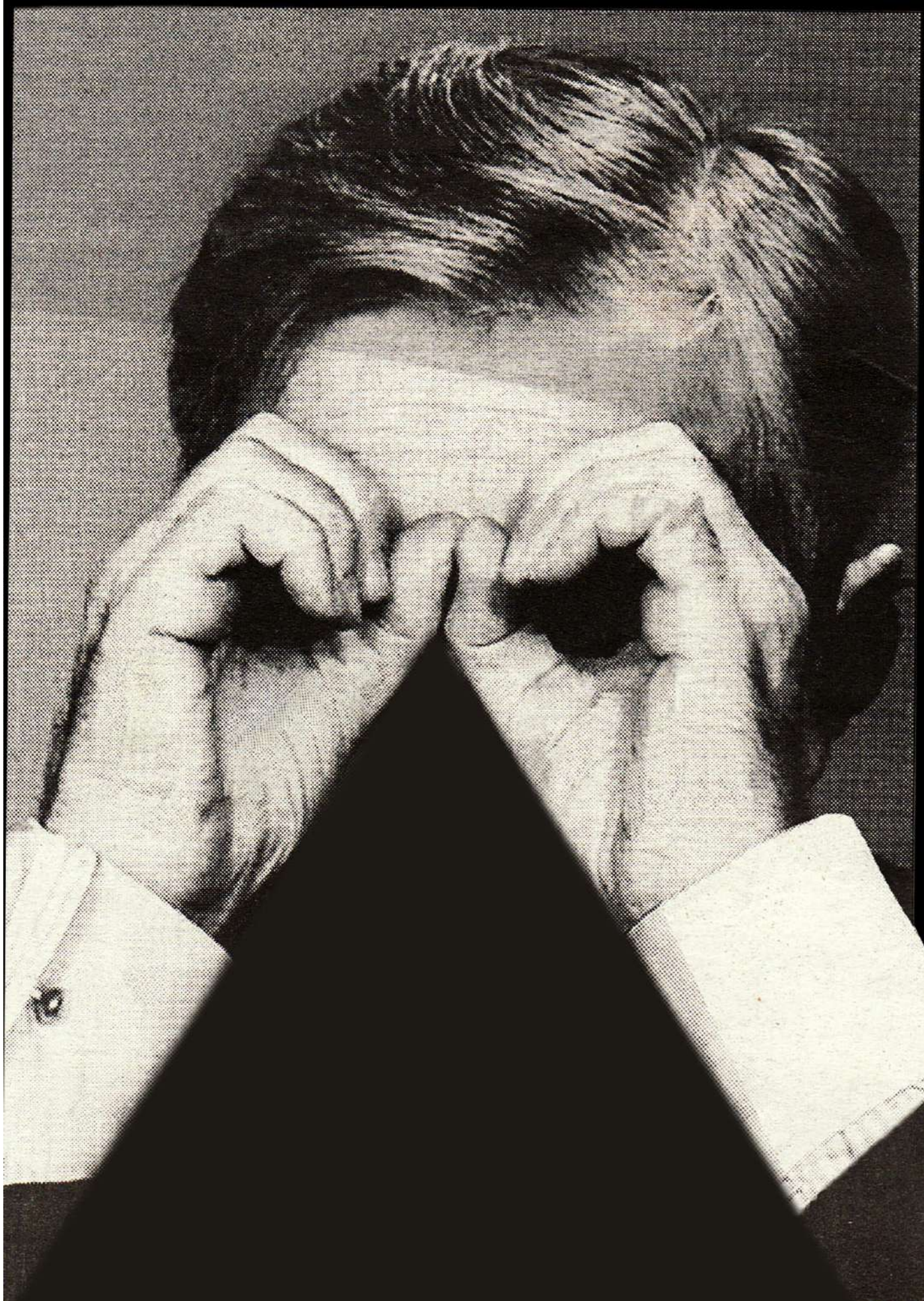
In the two versions of the *The Power of a Circle I* and *II* a triangle is placed in the central axis. It evokes the pictorial language of esoterism through its blurred sides, and it cites modern abstraction. Roldán reminds us that modern abstraction is rooted more in esoteric teachings than in rational thinking, be it Kandinsky’s search for the pure spirited expression. Or Mondrian’s belief in theosophical metaphysics. Of course it is with a smirk, that the title puts the circle against the triangle, hinting at the political meaning of Angela Davis’ hairstyle which was a sign of liberation as well as a form of protest in the Sixties and Seventies.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1970 the National Guard killed four students and wounded 9 during an anti-war demonstration in Ohio. The incident became a key point in the struggle between the government and the counterculture, Neil Young wrote a song about it and author James Michener wrote a 500-page report. In order to understand the impact, one has to know, that at the time, the murdering of civilians was not something that happened regularly and the US was like any other civilized nation.



**Translator (Jessie)**, 2016, from the series *The Prophet*  
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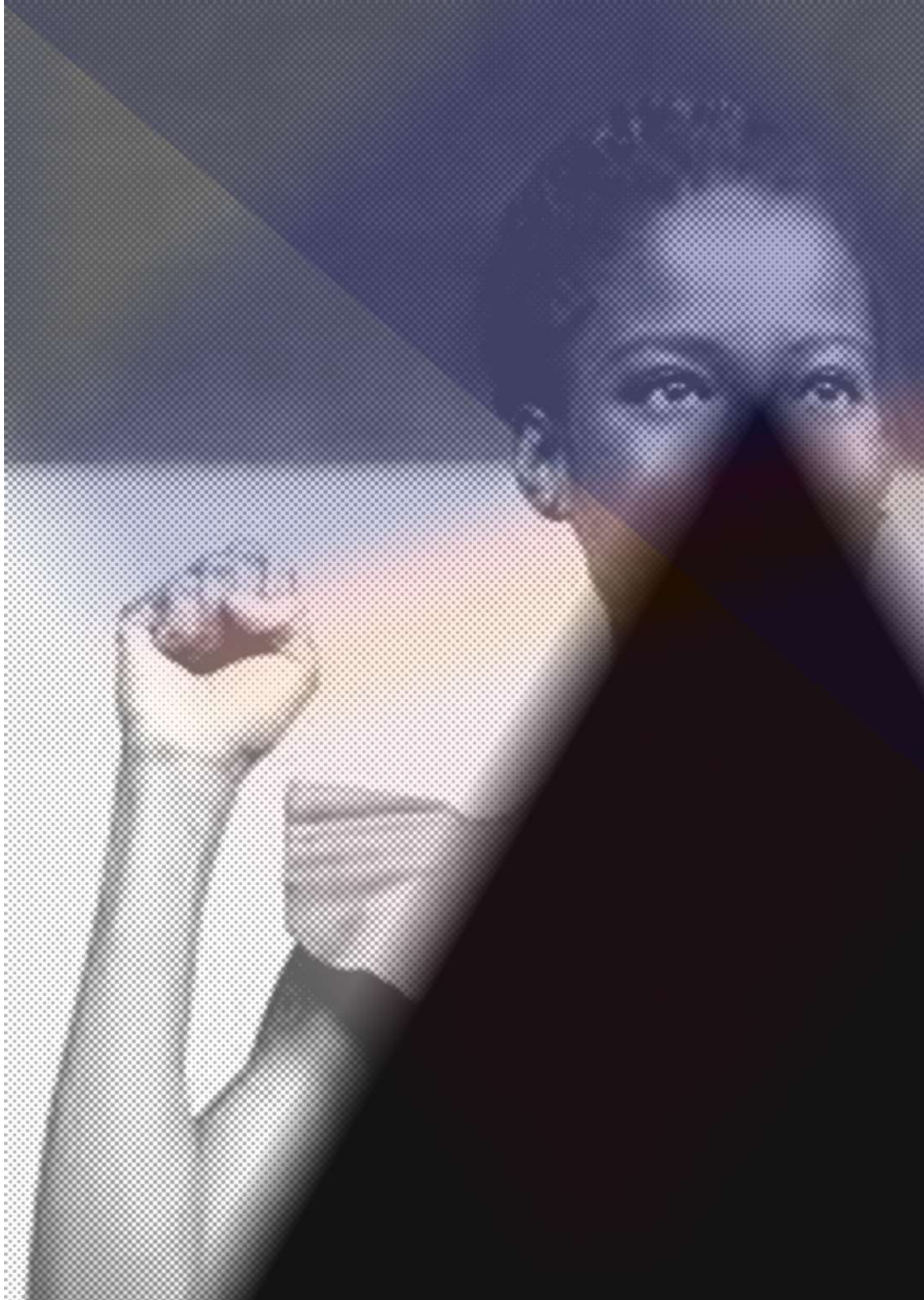
**The Prophet** (Jean Claude Thichet), from the series *The Prophet*  
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**The Sun's Pun Above Profanity, Agitator I** (student 68<sup>o</sup> movement Mexico), 2008, from the series *The Prophet*  
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**The Power of a Circle II** (Angela Davis), 2022, from the series *The Prophet*  
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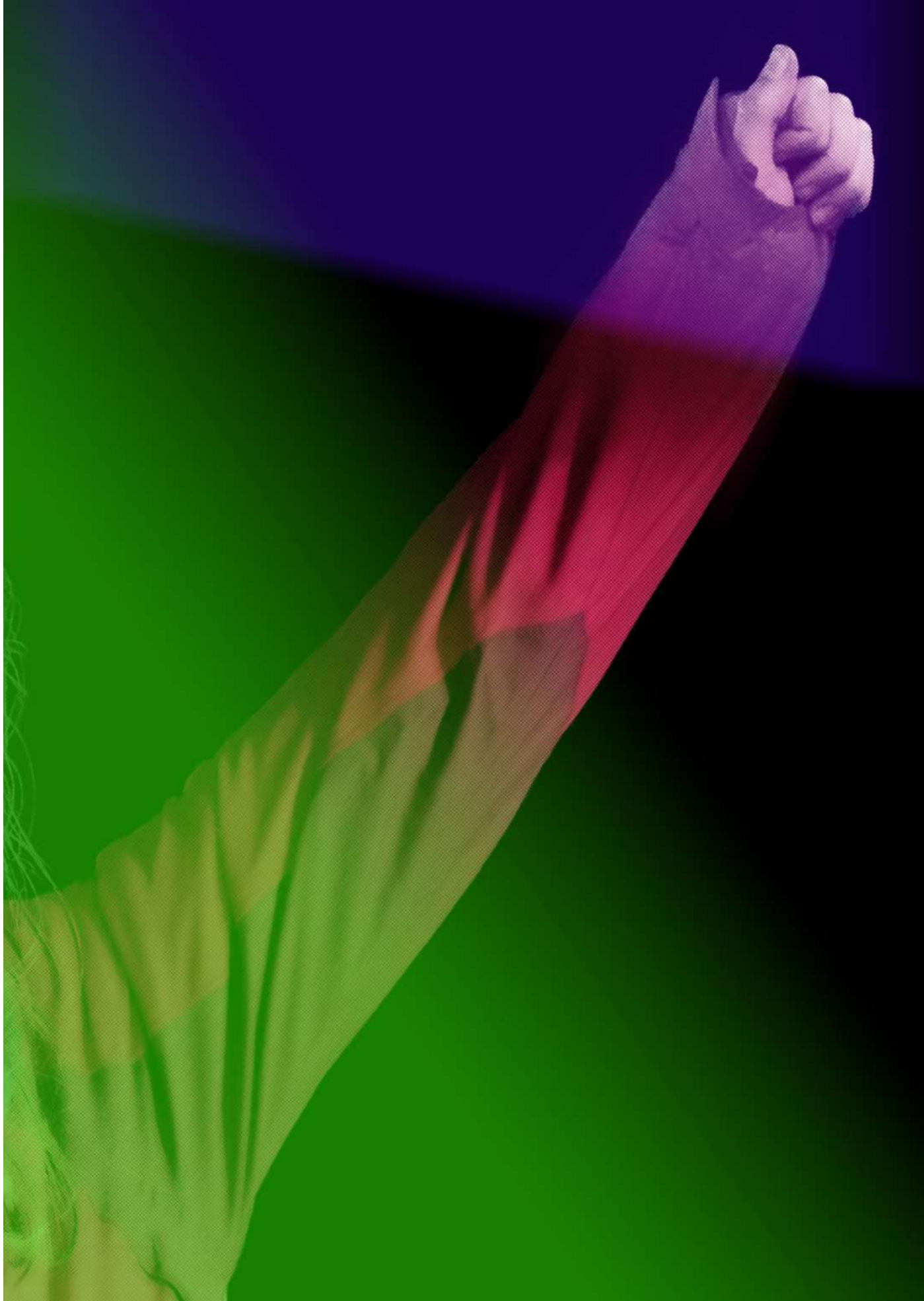


**Bold Light** (Amanda Gorman), 2020, from the series *The Prophet*  
Epson ultrachrome pigment ink on handmade cotton paper, framed between two glasses



**The Sun's Pun Above Profanity, Agitator II** (student 68<sup>o</sup> movement Mexico), 2008, from the series The Prophet  
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**Paint lower left corner green** (Greta Thunberg), 2022, from the series *The Prophet*  
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In “Paint lower left corner green” Roldán uses Greta Thunberg’s arm and fist as a diagonal, and again, we find the different layers of meaning: the reproduction of a news photo, its constructive transformation, the connotations related to the name of the prophet, the allusion to the spiritual and to art history and - through the title - the humor. The title is a citation of Sigmar Polke’s work “Höhere Wesen befohlen: rechte obere Ecke schwarz malen!” (1969), which means “Higher beings commanded: Right upper angle must be painted black!” Roldán pays reference to Polke’s playfulness, as well as a deeper meaning: the question about what causes artists’ aesthetic decisions. And for someone as word conscious as Roldán, it is no coincidence that it is the left angle. And that it has to be painted green.

The question why someone does paint an angle black or green goes to the core of the understanding of artists. And it is related to the roots of abstract art, which justified what it was doing not by underlining its autonomy, but by referencing eternal laws and insights. In short: Higher beings.

In one of her seldom talks Ana Roldán cited Konrad Farner, an influential marxist Swiss theologian and art critic, who in his book “Aufstand der Abstrakt-Konkreten”<sup>2</sup> (Uprising of the abstracts), enumerated meticulously to which degree the European heroes of abstract art, were esoterics and adherents of obscurantist beliefs. She said what united all of her prophets was this “chutzpah that is a privilege of youth, the grand gesture that has an impact if it coincides with the historical moment.” This is exemplified by Amanda Gorman after Trump’s defeat, reading at the inauguration as a young, black woman a poem, closely watched by the whole world, after many years of her speech impediment. By Trichet, nonchalantly making fun of journalists, while in a position, where every word could cause huge losses or gains of the stock market and whole economies. By Greta Thunberg, being hated and loved, just doing what she thinks has to be done. Agitator II, posing for a photograph in police custody, cool and oblivious of the dangers he is in, like he would have foreseen the demands of social media, where your pose is key. Angela Davis, defying the status quo of a hostile US. And the olmecs “Cabeza Colossal”. What a gesture, having decided more than thousand years BC to build something that weighs 25 tons! That made sure that - this is a big part of its prophecy - it would very probably stay, whatever the circumstances and the ups and downs of history would develop.

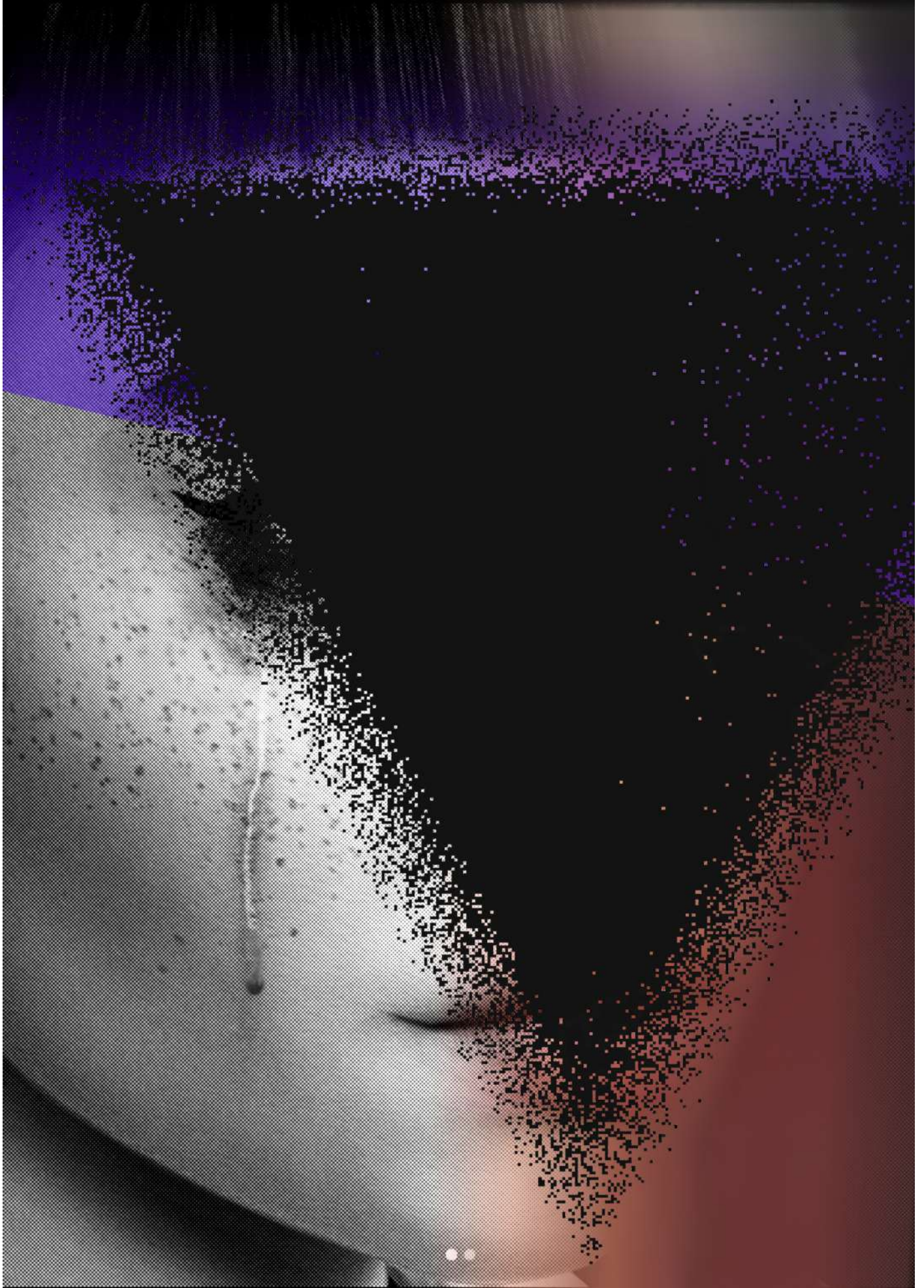
Ana Roldán’s prophets testify to these stubborn perspectives. To the convictions to know what is best. What has to be done, or - to say it like Gore Vidal, her prophets know who they are, what they want to say and do not give a damn.

This was - once - the case of the artist herself. These days she is loaded with questions, with skepticism, with knowledge, all of which are making her work complex and differentiated. It might also have to do with her life’s course, as someone who has lived in Mexico City, in Zurich, Switzerland, in São Paul, Brazil, in Kunming, China or in Tbilisi, Georgia. Blunt paroles and easy answers do not fit, the vim of youth has faded for a more mature and differentiated view of the world which is represented in the way she depicts her prophets.

Thomas Haemmerli

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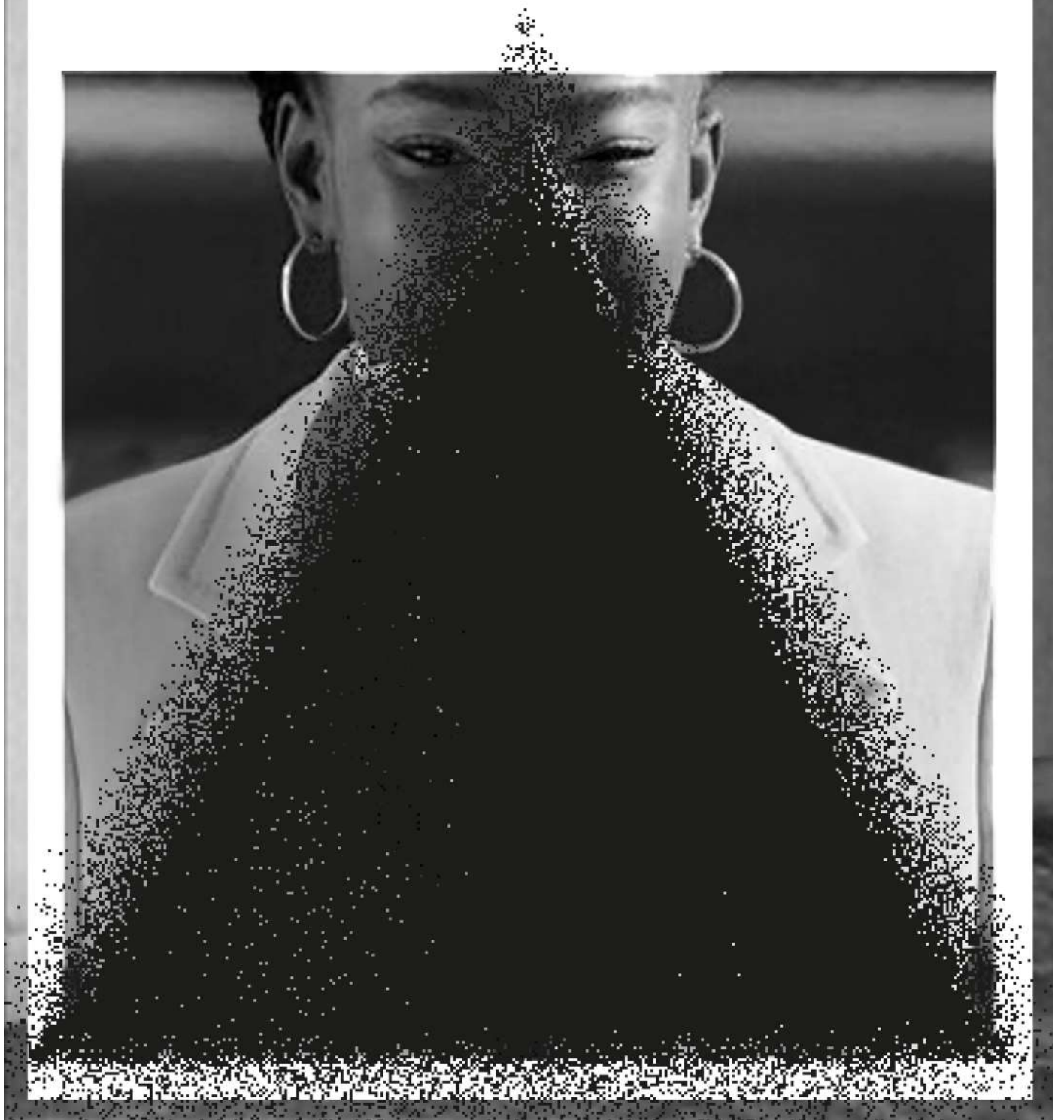
<sup>2</sup> Konrad Farner. Der Aufstand der Abstrakt-Konkreten, oder die Heilung durch den Geist. Zur Ideologie der spätbürgerlichen Zeit. Luchterhand, Neuwied/Berlin 1970.



**Artificial Feelings** (Lil Miquela), 2021, from the series *The Prophet*  
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**Inmortal** (Cabeza Colosal 1, La Venta), 2022, from the series The Prophet  
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**Undafraid** (Amanda Gorman), 2020, from the series *The Prophet*  
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