Jane Burden Morris has one of the most recognizable faces on the planet. Paintings of her hang in the world’s greatest museums, and define one of the greatest moments in art history. But very little is known about her. Unlike other famous muses, Jane never had the privilege of a medium through which she could express her own feelings and creativity. From within the confines of her canvas frame, she has been silently watching the events of her time, beckoning us to reach out and touch her. The real her. But for us, Jane was gone forever, silenced by time and the shadow of the great men who painted her.

Then, something miraculous happened.

Imagine if one day you happen to stumble upon a dusty old photograph of a woman from another time who looks just like you. As you look at the image, you are dumbfounded for a moment to see the same face staring back at you. Is it from another life? Is it a Photoshop trick? You could have been twins had you not been separated by over a century of time. This is exactly what happened to artist Margie Bijl, who discovered her Pre-Raphaelite doppelganger quite by accident. “An artist friend gave me a framed print on which she had written the words ‘previous life,’” explains the artist. “At first glance I thought that she had secretly scrawled and digitally edited a self-portrait I had just made. When I realized it was another woman altogether she became something to marvel at.”

Suddenly, a strange new prospect presented itself. Here was an opportunity to give someone pushed aside by history, the voice she so deserved. Here was a chance to give Jane her moment in the spotlight, not as a muse, but as a flesh and blood woman. And so, Margie set out to turn a faded myth into a breathing story, using herself as Jane’s surrogate.

Jane owed her public existence to Rossetti’s view,” Margie explains. “She inspired Rossetti to create a new beauty ideal of which she became the embodiment. He did not paint her natural beauty, however, but imagined her as a mythical goddess. The difference between the image of Jane Morris in the photos and the paintings is so extreme that my photos resemble her more than her painted resemblance. It is therefore my underlying intention to free Jane Morris of the myth that has been created around her.”

As Jane’s physical double, Margie found herself in the unusual position of being both the observer and the

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observed — both the artist and the muse. She could simultaneously admire the many paintings featuring Jane Burden, at the same time remaining conscious of the fact that she was looking at her own face. It would be a strange experience for anyone, but it was especially strange considering that this wasn’t just any look-alike; this was a woman who set the standard for female beauty for a whole generation, and defined the look of an entire school of art. For some, that realization might be extremely flattering. But for others, it is a burden. Because there is no separating the fact of your resemblance from the reality that Jane’s exterior appearance was her one and only contribution (as far as we know) to the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Who she was, her voice, her talents and desires simply didn’t matter to the history keepers, or art historians for that matter. To the world at large, she was just a pretty face.

This realization gave Margie a solid standing to re-interpret history, and put some wrongs to right. “I have created a role for myself based on Jane’s history to complement and modernize her persona,” explains Margie, who created a series of staged photographs in Jane’s former home featuring herself as the Pre-Raphaelite muse. “I transformed her world into my own. Decorating a room in the William Morris Gallery with these pictures, I created a place in which Jane could be remembered without being overshadowed by William Morris and Rossetti.”

Beyond their physical appearance, there were some strange coincidences between the two women that served to shift the boundaries of identity. “When Jane was 17 and I was 16 we were both in the company of our sister when we were sponsored by an artist who was
It was an interesting parallel: Margie transforming herself into Jane, who had in turn completely transformed herself in the months leading up to her marriage to painter William Morris. Over the course of a few months, the poor and uneducated Jane turned into someone so refined and well-read, her contemporaries described her as "queenly." In fact, the transformation was so profound, she is said to be the inspiration behind the character of Eliza Doolittle in George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion*, later turned into the film *My Fair Lady*. "She was able to transform her life into something much bigger than what was to be expected from a girl with a humble background. This is a beautiful reminder for me that I can also free myself of the 'myth of the suffering artist,'" Margie explains. "I treasure having found a soul mate and it reassures me that she will always be there wait-