

blind

DOCUMENTING THE FREEDOM OF YOUTH IN NEW YORK

Abigail Glasgow
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Photographer Marie Tomanova's portraiture is the perfect argument against the age-old cliché that "youth is wasted on the young." Her latest photo book, *New York New York*, provides the reader with slices of the ethereal essence that defines the capital-C City, infused with the attractively messy characters within it. Alongside a powerful intro by art historian Thomas Beachdel, Tomanova personifies sex and play through her strikingly colorful subjects — sharing a vision that could entice any onlooker to relocate to any of the five boroughs. *New York New York* launched in autumn in New York, followed by a solo exhibition at C24 Gallery in Chelsea. To get a sense of her approach and creative evolution, *Blind* sat down with Tomanova to hear more.



Phineas & Cameron, 2019 © Marie Tomanova

Tell us about your background.

I grew up on a small farm south of the Czech Republic. I always dreamt of being an artist, and [eventually] got accepted to an art school for painting. I wasn't ready for the gender discrimination and misogyny that basically defined most of that experience [and] felt that there was no space for me to be an artist in Czech; so, after I finished my Master's, I came to the United States.

How did you get into photography?

I was inspired by Francesca Woodman's 2012 show in New York at the Guggenheim. I similarly had used journals and imagery as a way of coping with my new environment, culture, and identity exploration. I had been taking pictures with a small digital camera and cellphone during my early twenties when I was studying painting—and I was actually spending more time doing that than painting. So in 2017, Thomas Beachdel and I put together some of my early work [for] an exhibition in New York, titled "Live for the Weather" (2017); it focused on my teenage years and early 20s, documented me growing up in Czech Republic, and, in a way, is very connected to my new project. I always thought that I got into photography after coming to NYC; but, in fact, I have been taking pictures since [living in] Mikulov in my late teens.



Janibell, 2019 © Marie Tomanova

Can you expand upon how you integrate identity, gender, immigration, and memory into your work?

I think the easiest way to do this is to give you a quick history of my major bodies of work:

When I started taking pictures in the United States, I would take pictures of myself in the landscape. As an immigrant living in America, I felt displaced—I felt free, but I also felt lost and apart sometimes. I was coming to terms with my identity, so taking pictures of myself in nature was a way of actually seeing myself in the American landscape. It was part of making that place real for me and also fitting in somehow. That sense of fitting in or belonging was hard, and it involved struggling with identity, immigration, memory, and gender, too. Those early self-portraits in nature felt so right, because they reminded me of my past—of the fields and hills in which I played as a child, connected to the earth, connected to nature, connected to my family farm, and to the history of South Moravia, where I was born. But at a certain point, I moved into taking photos of others—photos that really brought me close to people. This process of taking these images was really about meeting and connecting with people, seeing myself in a social landscape, or fitting in or belonging to that—belonging in America, especially at a point which was very challenging and scary for immigrants. It was the natural next step for me seeing myself in a new place.

When I was finally able to go home in 2018, I took pictures of my home and family for a body of work called *It was Once My Universe*. This work is about memory, home, and identity—leaving one place and being in another. It's about disorientation from being home. And my most recent project, *World Between Us* (2021), is a collaboration with my mother during a month-long residency this summer in my hometown of Mikulov. This was the first time I was actually able to spend time at home for a longer period of time, so I spent time taking pictures of my home, my mom and what home means to both of us. This is a really intimate work about my identity and my mother's. It is about home, about family. And about being gone and being present... again.



Nicky, 2016 © Marie Tomanova

Let's talk about *New York New York*. What themes and photos do you highlight?

When shooting *New York New York*, I wanted to show other identities—because my identity had become less of a struggle (my immigration status had been resolved, I had been back home). The book is a portrait of New York City and a landscape of youth—it twists those two genres into one. It's about the freedom I felt when I first moved here and the insecurity and distance I felt from my immigration status. *New York New York* is about being and becoming yourself, [which] is not an easy thing. In these pictures, everyone is exactly who they are or who they are becoming, which is something Kim Gordon talks about in her foreword: she came to New York City as a young artist and was negotiating [with] the city, fitting in, and finding herself and her voice. I relate to that and I think the people in the book do too. And while New York City to me is special and magical, that idea of coming to someplace new and finding yourself is really a more universal one. It is the song of movement, of immigration, and emigration; it is a song of youth.

What do you hope people will get out of this book / your work?

At the heart of my work (and me) is a desire to be together with people; and I hope people get that synapse-firing connection. You know what it is, [because] you have had it. You meet someone, or you see something, and you connect, in some way. That is what I want. For people to see themselves as part of everyone else.

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