



MARIE TOMANOVA CAPTURES THE NEXT GENERATION OF EXTRAORDINARY NEW YORKERS

Emily Dinsdale
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Marie Tomanova, "Diamond and Jiggy" (2019), New York New York (2021), published by Hatje Cantz

Growing up in a rural border town of the Czech Republic during the wake of the end of communism, aspiring painter Marie Tomanova gathered with her friends to watch bootleg DVDs of *Sex and the City* and dream of New York. The city became a kind of mythical, imaginative repository for the promise and possibility Tomanova believe her future held.

Years later, when she eventually moved to New York, it did not let her down. The environment of the city allowed her to space to reinvent herself as a photographer and she has been taking portraits of the distinct NYC landscape and its residents ever since.



Marie Tomanova, "Aheem" (2020), New York New York (2021), published by Hatje Cantz

Her debut book *Young American* (Paradigm, 2019) featured an introduction by photographer Ryan McGinley and depicted Tomanova's hopeful vision of what an inclusive American society might look like. Her latest book *New York New York* (Hatje Cantz, 2021) continues to pay homage to the city and the extraordinary next generation of New Yorkers Tomanova encountered.

The book includes an introduction by art historian Thomas Beachdel and a foreword by Kim Gordon. "Marie's book is a celebration of that young community. You don't mind struggling for rent and food because you feel alive in the city," Gordon writes. "This was not really my early '80s NY, I was already old, twenty-seven. I had anxiety about the art world. I felt way too middle class. Discovering the downtown music scene was a hunt; it was work, or my kind of fun. I wasn't looking for that. I was looking for becoming . . .". She goes on to say, "In this collection of exuberant photos Marie captures the inside look, as it is now, being 'cool' is accessible to all, a New York kind of democracy."

Take a look through the gallery above for a glimpse of some of the stunning portraits in *New York New York*. Below, we talk to Marie Tomanova about the allure of the city, the immigrant experience and overcoming the sense of displacement, and how she lost and found her identity in the frenetic landscape of New York.

What does New York mean to you? What's your affinity with the city?

Marie Tomanova: Coming from a family farm in a small border town in the Czech Republic, I only knew New York City from the bootleg DVDs of *Sex and the City* that I would watch with my friends growing up and dreaming. When I first moved to the United States in 2011 it was initially to North Carolina, then Upstate New York, and then finally to New York City itself at the beginning of 2013.

It was only when I moved to NYC that I felt right about where I was. And maybe that is what is special to me about NYC – it feels right. It is so much of everything and there is a certain freedom to be myself and to find myself. While I took photographs in Czech when I was studying for my MFA in painting, I saw myself as a painter not as a photographer. Coming to NYC, I was lost, in a sense – especially as I felt there had been a systemic discriminatory bias against female painters when I was doing my MFA in Czech – and I found or refound myself as a photographer living in the city.

I came here to follow my dreams, but those dreams were still being formulated. The city acted as a generator and catalyst for realising those dreams. Here, I could be anyone I wanted to be. So, for me, NYC is freedom and opportunity – which I think are the core drives of many people who come here to find themselves and be themselves. I sometimes look up as I walk through the city and I think, ‘Wow, this is New York City.’

For those people encountering your images for the first time, please could you introduce yourself and your work?

Marie Tomanova: I was born and raised in Mikulov, a small border town near Austria in the Czech Republic during the wake of the end of communism. I was quite shy as a child and spent most days after school working in the field with my family. We used to grow most of our vegetables ourselves and had chickens for eggs and goats for milk. We also had vineyards and made wine. So most of my childhood was defined by the cycle of nature and the work that was required around the land and farm.

I think this is why when I started taking photographs after moving to the United States... I took self-portraits in nature as a way of connecting with my past but more importantly, connecting with a new place – literally seeing myself in a new landscape, in a new place, in a new environment.

At the same time, I was taking photographs of people in NYC who I admired, or identified with, or wanted to be like, or just with whom I found some sort of something, and these became the Young American work. I needed so badly to connect with others and to see this new place, America, in a positive light despite all of the difficulties and struggles.

Ultimately, this work with others continued and we can see that in *New York New York*, which is about people and place. It's a portrait of a place and a landscape of youth. Or maybe it is a portrait of youth and a landscape of place.

How would you define your aesthetic?

Marie Tomanova: Real. Direct. Raw. Connected. In love. My favourite colour is yellow.

Are there any recurring themes in your work? What draws you to keep exploring these ideas?

Marie Tomanova: It is easy to find these themes relating in some way to gender, identity, displacement, home, and memory. They seem to always be present.



Marie Tomanova, "Kate (Bath)" (2017), New York New York (2021), published by Hatje Cantz

There is another aspect I have been thinking about lately and that is struggle. I struggled to find myself and to fit in, or maybe to re-find myself when I came to New York. Then when I went back home to Czech after eight years in exile, I struggled to find myself there. That work, which was taken in December 2018, on the cusp of the new year is called *It was Once My Universe* and it was part of the Louis Roederer Discovery Award 2021 curated by Sonia Voss for the prestigious Rencontres d'Arles Photo Festival in Arles, France.

I am thinking it will also be my next book project. But I say this because I was so uncomfortable with the work as I was making it. I felt so displaced, being home. And it is funny, right? I go to NYC and I feel displaced, then I go back home and I feel displaced. I felt in-between, but the most important thing is that, through the experiences and spending time, I begin to adjust and I wonder if all of this is relatable to others – experiences of struggles, joys, and discomforts.

When I exhibited in Berlin in 2019, everyone was from somewhere else and they all related to the immigrant experience. I hope my work relates to people who see it. When I showed in Prague in 2019, an old man had come from three hours away to see the *Young American* work and he said it gave him hope. I think this is why I keep going. If someone looks at my work and identifies... this is powerful to me. If someone sees themselves, or more clearly sees others.

I was home in summer 2021 at my little family farm and I did a project with my mother, *World Between Us*, for a special site-specific exhibition and I think that project really brought us a lot closer in a way. I believe in the power of images and work to bring us all closer, I believe in magic.

How did Kim Gordon come to be involved with the project?

Marie Tomanova: I did a cover shoot with Kim for *Suited* magazine and then she invited me to her concert and I felt that there was something special there. Again, I use these non-specific words because there are some things that are just not described well in words, things that go beyond words. I felt an affinity, an identification. And so I asked her to write the foreword and she did. It is really amazing. It is perfect.

Kim writes so honestly about coming to New York City and feeling like a bit of an outsider, which I totally relate to. She writes powerfully about these connections between people, these relationships, and community. She writes about herself and her experience, her youth and dreams, and New York City itself.

What do you think the book communicates about the ‘landscape of youth’ in NYC?

Marie Tomanova: I think the book communicates the freedom and power of youth. There is an energy and acceptance in NYC that is dynamic. In a way, it is very warm here – you can find people like yourself or people very different from yourself, and you can be together.

‘Landscape’ is such a wonderful word. It seems so loaded and even old fashioned, like the landscape painters of the 19th century out with their easels trying to capture the light. But it is a beautiful word in its vastness and flexibility of meaning. The ‘landscape of youth’ is so poetic but it is also specific, especially when connected to a place like NYC.

How did you find and choose your subjects? What qualities about a person make you want to take their portrait?

Marie Tomanova: This is a very tricky question because I really don’t have an answer for it. I will just say so simply that I really like people. On some level, I identify deeply with everybody with whom I make a picture.

I have an affinity with each of the people whose portraits I make and I am not always sure why. There is just something there. When I was doing *Young American* between 2015 and 2019, it felt like I identified with each of those people in the photographs and they stood in some way for who I wanted to be and for what I wanted America to look like. This was during the period when immigrants were being rounded up and there was so much scary politics about building walls and separating people. As an immigrant, I was also very scared.

So the *Young American* work was my vision of what my America should look like, what the future should look like. In the Introduction to my 2019 *Young American* book, Ryan McGinley said it far more beautifully than I ever could when he said, ‘This is a future free of gender binaries and stale old definitions of beauty. In Marie’s, world people can just simply be. I wish all of America’s youth culture looked like Marie’s photos of Downtown – diverse and inclusive.’

In general, what compels you to keep picking up your camera?

Marie Tomanova: It is never actually about the photograph, but about the experience of the shoot. It is about being with people and the energy we create together. We talk about who we are and what we want – our dreams and our pasts, why we are here, where we came from, and where we are going. And the photos are really just representations of that, they are full of life.



Marie Tomanov, "Serena" (2020), *New York New York* (2021), published by Hatje Cantz

Marie Tomanova's *New York New York* is published by Hatje Cantz and available here. You can also see her work on display in the solo shows *Finding Magic Together* at Gallery C24, New York (until December 24 2021) and *It Was Once My Universe* at Jimei x Arles International Photo Festival, Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Xiamen, China (until January 3 2022)

<https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/55068/1/marie-tomanova-captures-the-next-generation-of-extraordinary-new-yorkers>