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MARIE TOMANOVA'S PHOTOGRAPHS ARE EXCAVATIONS OF IDENTITY, HER OWN AND OTHERS

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"Seashell" from the series *New York New York* © Marie Tomanova.

Marie Tomanova's photographs evoke multiple feelings and these intensify amid a pandemic. The work exudes a sense of intimacy and life at a moment when loneliness and isolation prevail. It is diaristic but not mundane; the individuals depicted may be strangers, Tomanova included, but the emotion that rips through them is not. Following an exhibition *Live for the Weather*, at the Czech Centre Berlin as part of the European Month of Photography, Tomanova reflects on the work exhibited and her relationship to photography more broadly. The exhibition comprised three bodies of work — *Live for the Weather*, *Young American*, *New York New York II* — and a new series, conceived during Tomanova's first trip home to her family's farm in South Moravia for eight years, *It Was Once My Universe* (2019). Together, the various projects reflect Tomanova's introspective artistic-drive, delving into her identity and the identities of others, through her powerful images.



"Shahzaade" from the series *Young American* © Marie Tomanova.

British Journal of Photography: What is the significance of the exhibition's title *Live for the Weather*?

My 2017 photographic series *Live for the Weather* inspired the exhibition title. The series comprises diaristic photographs of my life shot between 2005 and 2010 of my friends and life in my hometown of Mikulov, Czech Republic. I took the images on an early cell phone camera, which I carried with me all the time; I was the only one among my friends to have such a device back then, and never thought of the pictures as anything but a visual diary; I had also been keeping a journal with text and drawings at the same time. I never imagined that these images would be exhibited; they were just a way for me to keep fleeting moments alive a little longer.

The art historian, Thomas Beachdel, saw the images from Mikulov and decided to put them together for a 2017 show he was curating called *Baby I like It Raw: Post Eastern Bloc Photography and Video*, a show that included artists such as Slava Mogutin. Beachdel was taken with the immediacy of the images that reminded him of Nan Goldin and Ryan McGinley's early work — he thought they were a "deeply personal and emotional photographic trace."

They are some of his favourite images, as he suggested they form the basis for the 2020 Berlin show and serve as a counterpoint to the *It Was Once My Universe* series that I took in late 2018 when I was first able to return home to Mikulov, after eight years away, and as a point of comparison for the *Young American* (2015-2109) and *New York New York* (2019-2020) series that form the rest of the Berlin exhibition.



“Kate and Odie” from the series *Young American* © Marie Tomanova.

BJP: The exhibited images derive from different periods of your relationship with photography. What are the central themes, which run through them? How do these manifest in the photographs?

MT: This is such a hard question. The reason it is so hard is not that there is no answer, but, because the answers themselves are not concrete — they are enigmatic.

I could list what my work is about intellectually — displacement, place, community, self, and memory are the key themes. But, and I am feeling this more and more, such a list may alienate the work instead of bringing it closer.

My work is about looking; about seeing; and, most importantly, about connection — the things that make us human. It is about being human and having human experiences. Increasingly, I perceive it as relating to togetherness and reflecting identification or empathy. The images reflect the relationship, the connection, which I have with my subjects; the connection I have with you as a viewer, which allows you to see not only me, but yourself, and others, more deeply. It is a triangle between me, you, and others, which the work makes visible.

A quotation of mine, which was published in the 2019 publication *Young American*, published by Paradigm Publishing, by Thomas Beachdel, may articulate this best: “The work is really a portrayal of humanness. I hope people can look at these pictures and see themselves — I see myself in them. And I hope that people see that we are all just that: people, with the same human core.” This is what I hope to convey in images such as *Kate and Odie* (2017), *Aheem* (2020), *Massima* (2016), and really all my portraits — connection, an empathetic connection. They are fundamentally about people just being; being themselves, being human.”

Moreover, the portraits are also about the affirmation of identity, and the idea of belonging; the idea that we all have the right to be ourselves, present, visible, and seen. The portraits are a testament to the fact we all matter, no matter our race, creed, religion, nationality, sexuality, identity. In the portraits, the ‘subjects’ (a term, which I hate) are precisely who they are, and so am I. Wolfgang Tillmans once said something about portraiture that inspired me deeply, or maybe it was that I identified with what he said: “the process of it, is a very direct human exchange ... The actual dynamics of vulnerability and exposure and embarrassment and honesty do not change, ever ... it requires me as a person to be sort of intact and fluid.” (*Wolfgang Tillmans*, Royal Academy Schools Annual Lecture, London, 22 February 2011, in *Wolfgang Tillmans*, ed. Theodora Vischer, exh. cat. (Basel: Beyeler Museum; Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2017), 71.)

I really relate to that because when I take a portrait, or maybe even any photograph, I have to be honest and present and open, otherwise, the photograph does not work. And similarly, the sitter also needs to be open. In a way, what is most special is the relationship between myself and who I am photographing. The idea about belonging, or positive affirmation of identity, is really important to me.

When I first showed *Young American* as an exhibition in 2018 at Czech Centre New York, I had a loop of 222 portraits in a 30-minute large scale video projection install called *So Far from Mikulov* (2018), which displayed all the kids’ faces 12-feet tall. The energy of the 300 kids who came to the opening of my show overwhelmed me; how touched they were to see themselves as they are — it was a validation to be who you are; no make-up, no pretense, that you are great just as you are. This is so important; I relate to it. And it is significant when there is so much (Instagram, for example) telling you to be something that you may not be, or showing you something that someone else has but you may not.

BJP: How has your approach to photography evolved as you yourself have evolved? How is your personal evolution reflected in your work?

MT: That is so difficult to see in oneself; in myself. That process of maturation or evolution comes so slowly that it is not immediately apparent. It is only seen with hindsight. I am not sure enough time has passed for that insight.

I do know, however, that overall I feel more confident. I feel more comfortable. I am not as shy as I once was, and, I guess, you could say that I own my identity more now.

I was giving a talk to a group of Berlin art historians at my *Live for The Weather* show and I noticed that I was speaking about the *It Was Once My Universe* series a little differently than before. I was discovering the preciousness of going home, instead of the discomfort, dislocation and confusion I felt when taking the photos. I kept coming back to *Chairs* (2018), an image I took of the chairs in which my mum and stepfather always sit and I felt so strongly about these chairs, which I used to regard as a mundane space. In going home and taking the photos and then having some space from the experience, I saw their value — for me, for my family, for relationships, for home. Ironically, I am almost sure that neither my mother nor stepfather would see these chairs like that. They are just chairs.

I also realised that the early *Live for the Weather* body of work was all about being out with friends; being out, escaping home, after all, then I went to the US. Whereas, the 2018/19 series *It Was Once My Universe* was all about home. That work made me so, so uncomfortable, and now it doesn’t. Maybe that is the sort of perspective shift that is important.



"Chairs" from the series *It Was Once my Universe* © Marie Tomanova.

BJP: Can you tell me about your newest project, which is on show, *It Was Once My Universe*? What was your experience of returning home, and how does it manifest in the work? The images feel different from many of your other series.

MT: Again, *It Was Once My Universe* series is about displacement, or dislocation, identity, memory, but also about returning home. I was so uncomfortable with the work and returning home threw me after not being able to go back for so long. I moved to the US in early 2011 and used photography to work through my feelings of dislocation. When things were difficult. I idealised 'home' in my mind. After eight years, I finally returned to Czech in late 2018. I was unprepared for the deep confusion and conflict I felt; I had become alien, and yet I still belonged. It was home, but so was America.

Standing at home in my Dad's sweater (*Dad's Sweater* (2018), the only thing I have of his (he died just two days before my sixteenth birthday), this work is about home, family, memory, distance, and time. The date stamp shows a specific time, a moment, yet there is something off-kilter, just as my return home — the camera was still set to New York time. I am becoming more comfortable with this work and I am very excited to show it, especially in contrast, or connection (I'm not sure which, really) to the *Live for the Weather*, *Young American* and *New York New York* series. I felt so distanced from home when I was in the US; the *Young American* series was about connecting with others and envisioning myself in that world — all the people I photographed were inspirational to me as part of who I would like to be and my ideal of America. Here I was far from home, in America, unable to return home, and so those portraits of all of those kids were who I was and who I wanted to be. And yet, returning to Czech I was lost again, but this time it was at home; those quotidian rhythms felt so strange to me, yet they weren't.

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"The Way to School" from *It Was Once My Universe* © Marie Tomanova.

At the same time, I savoured moments as can be seen in *Willy with Horses* (2019) or *The Way to School* (2019). But they also felt so odd; a feeling that is palpable in *Sphinxes* (2018), a place very close to where I was born. *The Way to School* shows the path I would take to school for eight years and yet when I returned — it was important to me to visit familiar places — it somehow felt different. When I look at the image, it feels to me like it could be the beginning or the end of the day — it is unclear which. And that beginning or ending, coming or going, sort of encapsulates these images.

BJP: Do you see yourself in the people you photograph? How do you endeavour to translate their distinct characters into your photographs?

MT: I addressed this above, but I will touch on it again and say that this is almost the most essential part of my work — it is not about seeing someone who seems like me on the surface, but a conveyance through photography of deep humanness that we all share, not just between me and the people I photograph, but a deep connection, empathy, humanness between us all. My greatest hope is that you see it, too. That everyone sees it. In my *Young American* book, Ryan McGinley wrote the introduction and he said about my work, "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." I relate to that. Ryan summarised so perfectly what my work is about and really, I believe in this just simply being. That is why an image like *Makenna and Doe* (2020) is so important, not for what can be read into it politically, but for what it is. It is exactly what it is. They were just themselves. I saw them in Tomkins Square Park after months of quarantine in early summer and they just were — all I did was take their picture and we were really all just there.

I never try to translate anything. All I do is make a connection and press a button. What is there, is there.



"Makenna and Doe" from the series *New York New York* © Marie Tomanova.

BJP: Who are your main influences?

MT: I don't really feel like I have a lot of influences, but I also don't know how true that is because I find photographers such as Francesca Woodman and Ryan McGinley so magical. When I lived in North Carolina in 2011, I saw one of Ryan's photos of a girl holding a wolf and it was a big part of why I moved to New York. I wanted to be photographed by Ryan, and I was just a young woman with dreams who loved adventure. So when I opened *Young American* at Czech Center New York in Summer 2018, I asked Ryan at his opening the next day to come and see my show and he did. I asked him!!!! I had to. And he came to see the show and we sat and talked and it was such an important moment for me because it validated all that I had been doing, but even more deeply, it allowed me to see myself as a photographer. I didn't quite realise it at the time but part of the reason I left Czech was that I had originally studied and got my MFA in painting, but the system really did not support women very well and so Ryan's support was more than just support, it helped chip away and dissolve this negative image of myself that a lot of young women or women in general (and many other people, too) deal with in the face of some sort of oppression or negativity.

In 2012, I saw the Francesca Woodman show at the Guggenheim and I was so taken by it. Here is a woman doing something I could relate to so much. And I was also writing journals, so I related to that, too. Her work has been an inspiration, but I am also inspired by the act of her just making it. In 2016, I did a photo *Homage to Francesca Woodman* (2016) and that was the first time I ever did anything like that but it was so important to me. I used to think that I started taking pictures because of Woodman's show. I now see that it all really started with that little phone camera in 2005 in Mikulov.

<https://www.1854.photography/2020/11/marie-tomanovas-photographs-are-excavations-of-identity/>