

British Journal of Photography

MARIE TOMANOVA COMES FULL CIRCLE WITH HER EXPLORATION OF THE HOME IN A NEW PHOTO BOOK, IT WAS ONCE MY UNIVERSE

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October 5, 2022



Aquamarine eyes, shaved ash-blond hair, porcelain skin, and androgynous features: New York City-based artist and photographer Marie Tomanova was born in Mikulov, a small, border town in the South Moravia region of the Czech Republic. Her deliberately ambiguous appearance, corresponds to the equally iridescent perception she has of the world around her.

In 2011, Tomanova – then fresh out of a MFA in painting – decided to move to North Carolina. A mixture of unfamiliar feelings instantly filled her head. Will the journey be worth it? Will her artistic career ever take off? Will her closest friends be there when she returns? Frightened and ecstatic, Tomanova got a job as an au pair. Soon, however, she began to feel displaced: an alienating experience that, if only subtly referenced in her previous two monographs, *Young American* (2019) and *New York New York* (2021), now echoes through every page of her newest photo book, *It Was Once My Universe*.



By the Vineyards © Marie Tomanova.

“I landed in North Carolina with one piece of luggage, poor English, and no expectations,” writes Tomanova in the new book, in which she centres on the shifting notion of home as told from the perspective of an expat. “Never had I felt so lonely and isolated,” she says. “Everything was new, different, and foreign. But at some point, discovering the unknown became my new passion.”

Because of complications with her immigration status, the painter-turned-photographer could not visit the Czech Republic for eight years. In that time, Tomanova relocated to New York City and established herself as one of the most exciting voices on the emerging photography scene. Nearly a decade after she first set foot in the US, freedom arrived in an envelope delivered to her East Village flat in the autumn of 2018 – it contained her Green Card.

A few months later in December, Tomanova finally made it back home to Mikulov. Her life was not the only one to have changed. “My nephews and nieces had grown up, my grandma had passed away,” says Tomanova. “Not even my dog was there anymore.” Though these were all things she had been informed about, the reminder of not being there to witness them was heartbreaking.

Tomanova’s new monograph – possibly her most personal, revealing book yet – emerged from that first trip home, a 20-day-long stay with her family. “I was taking pictures in an old quarry where I used to walk with my dog and swim with friends in the summer,” she says of the moment when the book’s title “popped” into her head. “I was overwhelmed by the fact that, for so long, this little corner of the world was my entire universe. It was all that mattered.”



In Dads Sweater all That Is Left, 2018 © Marie Tomanova.

Shot with her loyal analogue Contax camera, the series chronicles the photographer's attempt to reconcile with the deeply contrasting emotions that the long-awaited homecoming evoked in her. It takes Tomanova's vivid observation into a new context, where the rural landscapes of her family's farm are shown alongside self-portraits in which she appropriate clothes, paintings, living spaces, and outdoor locations of her fading memories. *It Was Once My Universe* offers a portrait of the artist that is as endearing as it is haunting. She has outgrown the wooden-floored rooms of her family home, and feels, once again, unrooted. "I shot everything that sparked feelings, memories or confusion," she says. "I felt like a collector of sorts, trying to assemble and capture everything that defined my home and myself."

The opening photograph of the book, for example, shows Tomanova standing in a field behind her house, wearing an oversized, pine green jumper and a pair of worn-out jeans. Titled *In Dad's Sweater (All That Is Left)*, the image is a moving dedication to her father, who died two days before her 16th birthday.

The photographs that follow [in the book] continue the artist's search for grounding among emotional turmoil. Three years on from that trip in 2019, the existential dilemma – "where is home?" – eventually saw Tomanova regain a strong sense of self, grounded in the enriching complexity of her Mikulov and New York City experiences. "Today I know that Mikulov will always be home," she says. "That's where my family and closest friends are. Nothing can change it."

<https://www.1854.photography/2022/10/marie-tomanova-it-was-once-my-universe/>