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Marie Tomanova's intimate Polaroids trace a year in her life

The New York-based photographer challenged herself to take a self-portrait every day for a year and now these highly personal images are on display in the exhibition, *Lost and Found*



Slideshow Images Courtesy of Marie Tomanova

TEXT by EMILY DINSDALE

On New Year's Day in 2022, photographer Marie Tomanova resolved to take a self-portrait every day over the coming year. She stuck to this intention consistently, taking a picture with her instant camera every day, with the exception of three weeks in July. "Rather than being a failure, those empty weeks – that missing work – became something greater. Those missing weeks stand in for all that cannot be seen or understood. They stand in for the photos that are not shown, the moments behind the camera that cannot be seen, the life and depth of self that is not captured on film," Tomanova tells *Dazed*.

Renowned for her candid and compelling portraits of New York youth culture, Tomanova's upcoming exhibition, *Lost and Found*, finds her turning the camera on herself. The show is inspired by the presence – and absence – of this series of images: 344 Polaroids are on display, but we can't help but wonder about those missing 21 photos. In a sense, their presence is dwelt upon more keenly. Opening on September 12 at New York's C24 Gallery, the exhibition combines this broken sequence of photographic self-portraiture with paintings and works on paper. The show also includes works made between 2005-2010, before the Czech-born artist moved to New York.

"During that time, I was unsure of myself and of who I was, before finding myself as a photographer," Tomanova recalls of these earlier works. "[Whereas], these new paintings are all variations on self, a subject that speaks to a contemporary culture saturated with an obsession with identity."

While she has already exhibited extensively internationally, for Tomanova, *Lost and Found* is "terribly significant" because it represents a particularly poignant personal triumph. "I got my MFA in painting but was criticised as a female working in the arts; that I would fail, that I should fail," she explains. "This show closes a circle that began over a decade ago with the aspirations and dreams of a young girl who wanted to become an artist but became so disillusioned. This show for me is a reference point, a milestone for the formation of what is an attempt to trace the self and overcome adversity."

Below, we talk to Marie Tomanova about the allure of self-portraiture, making peace with our past experiences, and the freedom of moving between photography and painting.



Marie Tomanova, "November 20, 2022", *Lost and Found* (2024)
Courtesy of Marie Tomanova

What would you say is the guiding principle or statement of intent for the show?

Marie Tomanova: This is a really difficult question because I want to say it is about the process – or should I say struggle – of finding oneself, myself; it is a self-portraiture show both in the paintings and the photographs. I am very exposed, especially in the paintings. It is an exposure of uncertainty and doubt and it runs very deep. These feelings come up against years of what I felt I could do and what I could not do.

If I were to sum up the show, I would say it is about something that is always missing, something that is beyond grasp, something that is beyond understanding at any certain point in time. The self-portraits are really a search for self. And things only become clearer from a distance, after the work is done, after the paint has dried so to speak. Doing the work is a search for myself – who I was comes up against who I want to be and how I really see myself.

There's a long-established tradition in art history of artists making self-portraits. What do you think is the fascination or allure of exploring one's own image?

Marie Tomanova: I think people do it for different reasons. Primarily, it's a way of seeing oneself. But there also may be practical reasons, of having yourself as a subject – you are always there. That was certainly my reason for the early self portraits in nature series that I did when I first started to take photos in the United States. For me, as an immigrant living in the United States, these photographs allowed me to really see myself in this new place.

What has become very crucial for me with this show is the enormous difference in the portrayal of self through the two different media. In the instant photographs I could work with what is actually in front of the camera. I am not going to get deep into self-image and acceptance of self but those things do play a role in this photography. Whereas in the painting self-portraits, I had a free hand. And by that I mean freedom. It is absolutely liberating and, at the same time, bit scary to have the freedom to 'create' myself as I see myself from the inside. I painted myself the way I understand myself. If that even makes sense. Through painting, I could express all that I have been missing in my photography practice. The approaches to self-portraiture through those two media couldn't be more vastly opposite and I am interested in all the nuances where they meet, mirror each other, or greatly vary.



Marie Tomanova, "November 5, 2022", Lost and Found (2024)
Courtesy of Marie Tomanova

Which artists, if any, would you say have inspired your practice of self-portraiture?

Marie Tomanova: I have always loved the German expressionists because I related to their sense of emotional depth and feeling. I identify with Francesca Woodman, and I think there is a similar aspect of having herself as a subject and a search for understanding herself. She is not a painter, but she has been a powerful presence in my life as a photographer and that touches painting, too. Cindy Sherman and her process of looking at the self, especially over a long period of time is fascinating and inspiring. And from artists closer to home, I am obsessed with Sasha Gordon, Tschabalala Self, Alannah Farrell, Bony Ramirez and Laura Limbourg, to name a few in no particular order.

“One sees a photograph and thinks they understand something, but what they are really seeing is a ghost, a trace, one moment in a temporal sequence that is just one of many”

– Marie Tomanova

Can you tell us about transitioning between photography and painting? How do the differences between the mediums register? Be it emotionally, spiritually, practically or intellectually?

Marie Tomanova: This transition could not be more different. Superficially, it is easy to see that painting takes time that photography doesn't. I can take many more photos than I can paint paintings. Also the fact that you have the photograph; it exists when it happens. The painting is a process – slower, meditative, more intuitive, full of decisions about what is the next step. There is a difficulty there that comes with uncertainty and the ability to ruin a painting before it is done. That doesn't happen with a photograph.

Both are intense spaces in which to work, but the painting feels intense in a very different way, a riskier way – there is utter freedom. Tapping fully into my imagination in the process, painting gives me all that photography can not. I can create unreal scenes and landscapes, and proportionally distort my body. I find intensity in color combinations and obsess over every detail of the painting because I am fully in control. I am not limited by the reality like when capturing photographs (I don't crop or retouch photos, or manipulate). And I need to constantly remind myself that I can paint whatever I want.



Marie Tomanova, "March 31, 2022", *Lost and Found* (2024)
Courtesy of Marie Tomanova

What did you learn about yourself during this process?

Marie Tomanova: For me, the painting really isn't about my body or even how I appear, but it is more about how I feel. That inner state – the full understanding of which is still beneath the surface, just outside of my reach. The photographs are easier, I am not sure why. Perhaps we are all more used to photographing ourselves or having our pictures taken. And it is always in a setting of reality that is set and pre-constructed. I think this idea of discovery of self – you, me, us – is the essence of this show. And it really may not be about the actual study of ourselves as physical beings but more the struggle with ourselves as emotional beings.

Lost and Found is running at C24 Gallery in New York from September 12 to November 8 2024.

<https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/64578/1/marie-tomanova-lost-found-exhibition-new-york-self-portraits>