

# Forbes

## PHOTOGRAPHER MARIE TOMANOVA SHOOTS AMERICAN YOUTH TO EXAMINE HER OWN RELATIONSHIP TO HER NEW HOME

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Image from photographer Marie Tomanova's 'Young American' series

Czech-born, New York-based photographer Marie Tomanova has been, up until this point, primarily known for her self-portraits that visualize her own body contorting against and communing with nature. Having grown up in the countryside of the Czech Republic, the images serve as a way for Tomanova to hold onto her origins while rooting herself in her new home, chronicling the importance of geographic location and setting as markers of identity. In her first solo exhibition *Young American*, curated by art historian Thomas Beachdel and on view at Czech Center New York until August 10 where it is part of the institution's New Bohemia exhibition series, Tomanova turns her lens towards others.

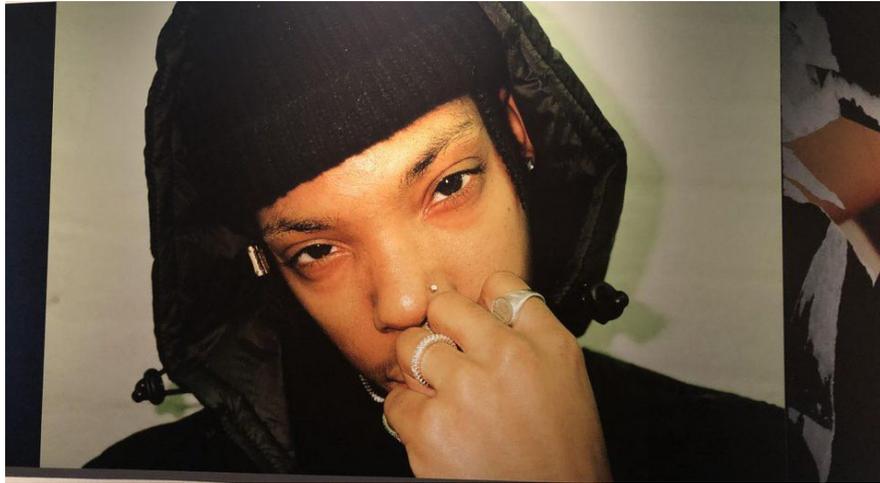


Image from photographer Marie Tomanova's 'Young American' series

Displaying a wide breadth of youthful inhabitants of New York, Tomanova is still examining her identity in relation to her new home. However, the approach is different. Through the images, you sense Tomanova grasping onto these fleeting personal connections in effort to make sense of who they are and who she is in relation to them. This onslaught of interactions comes together to form a highly personalized social document of a city and a country. With the world burning down around us, New York can still be celebrated as a location of art, diversity, sexual and gender fluidity, and experimentation. Tomanova's subjects are celebrated for exactly who they are in these images, flaws and beauty alike accentuated under the harsh glare of flash photography. All Tomanova asks of her subjects is that they allow her too to be nothing more and nothing less than who she is.

The exhibition is divided into two slide shows and a series of large-scale prints. The first slide show, *So Far From Mikulov*, focuses primarily on the subjects' faces. These faces, in all shades of color, gender and sexuality, largely eschew typical fine art or fashion gesturing for a more relaxed and fluid visual appeal to the viewers. The kids smirk, they sulk, they balk in bemusement and luxuriate in ecstasy. The second slide show, entitled *Like A... Star*, gets sexier, displaying Tomanova's natural sense of framing and lighting the human body. Limbs latch onto torsos and many of the images could express sexual experimentation as much as they could emotional attachment. The final aspect of the exhibition displays a series of prints largely culled from the images screened in the slide show, solidifying the exhibition's message and appeal.

*Young American* has tapped into something of a cultural zeitgeist. It's certainly not hard to see why, either. There is of course the easy to appreciate photographic style. Tomanova's images aesthetically recall the harsh color flash photography of Juergen Teller but eschew the fashion legend's irreverence for a sincerity and moody atmosphere that harkens closer to Nan Goldin. And then of course there are the political concerns. In a truly dark period of the country's history, it is joyous to witness the multitude of freedoms bestowed upon the youth of this city. The exhibition is entitled *Young American* but it certainly feels easier to read as a document of New York more than it does the entirety of the nation, and surely the displays of diversity and experimentation endemic to the project are far more visible and celebrated here in the Big Apple than they are, say, Des Moines, Iowa (no offense to Des Moines, I'm a big Slipknot fan).



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But critically, Tomanova hews far closer to art historical classicism than one would initially give her credit for. By providing such a wide ranging (over 200 images) and diverse set of portrait subjects, Tomanova is in essence providing a contemporary social document. Though obviously narrower and more rarified in its scope, *Young American* forces one to recall August Sander's prolific and extensive documentary portraiture of early to mid 20th Century Germany.

Tomanova keeps her subjects limited to those that she meets on the New York art scene: at openings, parties, fashion shows. She then photographs them upon meeting them, or later has full portrait sessions at their homes. While certainly not as ambitious in scope as Sander's efforts to provide a lens into every aspect of German culture through portraiture, Tomanova is using photographic portraits to provide viewers a lens into a time, place, and culture. With her chosen subjects young, fluid, and markedly diverse, one wouldn't be mistaken for making hackneyed critical claims of "August Sander meets early Ryan McGinley" in regards to Tomanova's work.

Tomanova's conception of beauty is admirable. Unlike so much of what we see in contemporary and fashion photography, where the subjects are either digitally airbrushed to the point of mutant beauty (Vogue Magazine) or overly stylized to achieve a kind of gritty and more queer but nevertheless occasionally faux "alternative beauty" (Dazed Magazine, iD), Tomanova gives equal weight to her subjects' diverse beauty as she does their various imperfections and flaws. One such image, a close-up of a young man's face, accentuates the perfection of the man's jaw lines and sharp cheeks while letting those features clash with his massive, almost aggressively so, eyes and pupils. This celebration of bodily diversity and assault on narrow societal beauty standards recalls the painted portraits of Lucian Freud who also not just accentuated physical flaws, but also made them the primary location of an art work's beauty. Tomanova's subjects are young. While youth is so often fetishized as desirable, we often forget what it's like to be young: confused, embarrassed, awkward, anxious, but excited. Tomanova's subjects have immersed themselves in a New York art culture that rewards youthful displays of angst, but they are still figuring out who they are.

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The young Americans of *Young American* may have left behind suburban oppression in a racist, sexist, and batshit crazy country for a city that for all its flaws and financial excesses still allows, like few places on earth, the vast personal freedoms required of natural born outsiders to find themselves and live, as the youth say, their best lives. And the most fascinating aspect of *Young American* is that while we see these youngsters learning about themselves, we also get the sense that Tomanova's own outsider status as an immigrant artist is being reflected back to us. It's widely believed that the best portraiture always says more about the artist than it does the subject, but in Tomanova's case, the artist, the subject, the time, the place, and the culture are all given equal consideration. This is a vast, immense, and complex photographic project.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/adamlehrer/2018/07/30/photographer-marie-tomanova-shoots-american-youth-to-examine-her-own-relationship-to-her-new-home/?sh=55a439b54b73>