

Aneta Bartos Explores Family Dynamics

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | SEPTEMBER 12, 2016



Aneta Bartos and her father, from the "Family Portrait" series
(Courtesy of the artist)

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Suffused with a hazy glow, Aneta Bartos's photographs possess a quality of myths, or dreams. For a previous series, she shot images of her father—a lifelong bodybuilder—as he strutted, posed, and flexed in the Polish countryside near where Bartos was born. This time around, she's brought herself into the compositions, resulting in scenarios that are alternately surreal, comic, and a little bit unnerving. We spoke with Bartos about the "gentle giant" who inspired these projects.

Your photographs all have a very particular aesthetic, a certain fine grain that makes it hard to tell if they were made using analog or digital technologies. Can you explain your technical process?

I shoot using expired Polaroid and Instamatic film. Because they are no longer made, it has become increasingly expensive and hard to

find. Using film that expired almost ten years ago can be a pain in the ass though. Sometimes I shoot something and no image appears at all, or something else unexpected happens. It is that layer of magic and chance that makes photography exciting to me.

An earlier body of work focused almost entirely on your father, alone, in various scenes and scenarios. Can you tell us a bit about your dad, and how you approached him to be the subject of that series?

When my dad was 68 years old he asked me to take few portraits of him in a Speedo before he turned 70. He has been involved in competitive bodybuilding since I was a little girl and he wanted to be immortalized in a beautiful and artistic way before his body inevitably ran its course. This form of fitness was always his passion, it gave him lots of pleasure and stamina, not to mention the pure satisfaction of achieving the closest ideals of masculinity from classical Greece...as he puts it. It didn't take me long after his request to realize he could be the ideal subject for a new project. The aim of the first series was to re-create my childhood memories, revolving around my father in his native landscape. He has spent all his life in a small city in Poland surrounded by lakes, forests, meadows and beautiful farmland, and has been molded by its culture, rural living, and decades under a Communist regime. His appreciation for simplicity, his commitment to education, fitness, and organic foods kept him young and full of vitality. Always consistent, kind-hearted and unmotivated by greed, he was the idealized representation of strength and stability: a gentle giant, and a powerful, loving father.

In these new images you also appear in these photographs alongside your dad. How did you decide upon some of the specific compositions and arrangements for this series? Were you nervous at all as to how these photographs would be received, given the semi-taboo territory you are exploring?

I realize that these images can be read as provocative, but they are more innocent, and less contrived, than your question suggests. Poland is a very Catholic country and I grew up with that all around me, but my father believed in the beauty of the body. It was very natural for him to walk around the house in nothing but a Speedo and for me to walk around in just underwear. At the time I did not think of it as subversive, or taboo, or unnerving at all. I did realize that it was in stark contrast to what was going on outside but I liked the feeling of rebelling, of embracing the natural. I guess I still do.

All of the images are an exploration of a father-daughter relationship. The first series was more nostalgic, and references the perspective of a younger child. In the second series, where I accompany him in every shot, he no longer plays the figure of a hero-like father. Instead of idealizing him and recreating my sweet childhood memories, I am channeling different levels of our relationship through all the years, ultimately peeling back some layers through humor, irrational juxtaposition and symbolism to grasp our complex dynamic.

Would you say that your father considers himself a collaborator in this series?

I control the shots but when he comes up with an idea that fits my vision I gladly take it. He can be very creative and he is never shy or unwilling to take a challenge.

Your work has often tackled topics of eroticism, whether that's couples in a landscape ("Spider Monkeys"), or young men masturbating in hotel rooms ("Boys"). How has photography helped you to learn more about sexuality in general, and your own sexuality in particular?

Sexuality definitely played a big role in those projects and also "4 Sale," a collaboration between four girls exploring the roles of exhibitionists and voyeurs. However, that was a meditation on the creative power of sex and our place in the world rather than a commentary on eroticism. I worked firmly from the female perspective to deliberately challenge the male gaze and traditional presentations of sexuality, which provided me with a glimpse into the complexities of women in gender politics. It became apparent that we still live in a patriarchal society of sexual inequality and oppression.

As I moved to my "Spider Monkeys," I shifted the focus away from sexuality into spirituality. These *aren't* couples in a landscape having sex, and it's very interesting to me that this is the way that most people perceive them. I think it's a very common and puritanical way of looking at bodies in general. We automatically tend to assume that a nude, or even partly nude, body in any form of presentation has to do with sex. It shows how simplistic and negative our thoughts are about something as natural and complex as the body, and the interaction of bodies.

In the "Spider Monkeys" series what we actually see are multiple nude females merging into one creature. I am approaching it as a representation of duality, an alter ego where two parts of a whole make up different personalities. It's a place where opposites meet and merge in order to form a completeness. Spider Monkeys are a part of a mythology that explores our time on this Earth and our place in the universe; the reconciliation of our spiritual self and relationship with the physical being.

Who are some other photographers and artists who continue to influence your work?

Some of my favorites are [Francis Bacon](#), [Gustav Klimt](#), and Leonor Fini. Recently, I have been loving Lisa Yuskavage.

For more on Aneta Bartos, visit her [website](#).