





If her images appear unsettling, that's our own hang-ups, says **Aneta Bartos**, who photographed herself with her ageing father, a bodybuilder who was much more than a masculine archetype. Words by **Hannah Abel-Hirsch**

Family Portrait



Aneta Bartos' photographs of her and her father are ripe for psychoanalytic interpretation. The pair – he a veteran bodybuilder in Speedo-style trunks, and she sporting swimwear or lingerie – frolic through bucolic scenes in the photographer's native Poland. Their exposed skin and the intimacy between them are unsettling: an older man and young woman licking ice-creams, walking hand-in-hand, lounging in the sun. The series, titled *Family Portrait*, defies the stereotypical conception of a mature father-daughter relationship, and in doing so provokes a sense of unease. We are unsure how to interpret what we see – is Bartos' relationship with her father affectionate or sexual, playful or inappropriate?

"We are a father and daughter," asserts Bartos on the phone from upstate New York, where she goes to escape her apartment in the city, "so it is really other people who have hang-ups about the work." The photographer's father raised her between the ages of eight and 16 in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, a town in central Poland, after which she moved to New York City to live with her mother. The rural town and the area surrounding it are conservative and mostly Catholic, but Bartos' upbringing was not. Her father was a competitive bodybuilder and she often accompanied him to train and compete. At odds with the puritanical society in which she lived, Bartos grew up at ease with the body: "It was not taboo." Bare skin was normalised and celebrated. It was not indicative of something sexual as the majority of those around her may have perceived it.

Her father's commitment to bodybuilding, which he practised for 55 years, rendered his physique masculine in the most conventional sense of the term. But his outlook was more complex. "My father seemed to have very divergent views from the stereotypical, macho bodybuilders," says Bartos, who explains that his passion was part of a wider commitment to education, fitness, healthy eating, and simple living, as opposed to some obsession with being a man. He played the role of father and mother, embracing duties traditionally ascribed to the latter. "He never felt self-conscious about being feminine, or whatever you want to call it: showing emotions, sensitivities, basically letting his guard down," she says.

The series – from which a selection of images is exhibited as part of *Masculinities* at the Barbican, in a section titled 'Too Close To Home: Family & Fatherhood', alongside artists such as Duane Michals, Larry Sultan, Anna Fox and Richard Billingham – recalls Bartos' childhood. The collaboration began after her then 68-year-old father asked if she would document his body before it began to deteriorate. The project developed into the series *Dad*, for which Bartos photographed her father in their hometown with a Kodak Instamatic camera and expired film over three summers. The romantic images capture a man on the cusp of old age. "They were taken from the perspective of a younger child idealising her father – her powerful, loving father," says Bartos. "They recreate my childhood memories and represent that idyllic life that he created." Her father's body is emblematic of the stability Bartos associates with her youth – it has become a symbol of that time.

As *Dad* came to a natural end, Bartos decided to insert herself into the frame. Three years on, and her father's physique has aged, accentuated in part by Bartos' youthful body, visible in each photograph. If *Dad* evokes the innocence of Bartos' childhood, then *Family Portrait* explores the complexities of a father-daughter relationship during adolescence. The surreal images capture moments from Bartos' teenage years, but they are complicated for viewers by the

fact she is enacting them as a woman, and her father is now an elderly man. "I wanted to dive deeper into my dreamscape of memories, re-enacting fleeting moments, and alluding to the rebellion and complexity of when a daughter grows up and comes of age," she says. At ease with her body and the body of her father, for Bartos, the images are an exploration of a specific stage in their relationship. It is we who cannot help but see more.

"As soon as people see a body they get stuck on it – it is hard for people to go beyond that," says Bartos, who mostly dons swimwear or underwear bar some shots where she wears modest, traditional dress [opposite, above]. Her father sports small swimming briefs throughout. The sexuality and eroticism denoted by the pair's minimal clothing are accentuated by the poses they adopt. In one photograph Bartos lounges on a chintzy sofa downing wine [page 73] while her father lingers in the shadows; in another, she wraps her arms around him as he gives her a piggyback. The scenes, which are shot by her boyfriend, are Bartos' attempts to recreate memories or feelings from her childhood, however they are also provocative. The photographer references a specific image in which she and her father are pictured leaning against a lakeside cabin eating ice-cream [opposite, below]. He is wearing black swimmers and she a red-and-white bikini. The scene recalls one of Bartos' favourite childhood pastimes, and was one of the most natural to shoot, but the image may also be read as erotic.

Both Bartos and her father inhabit each scene, but there is a palpable separation between them. Their poses are often incongruous – her father flexing for the camera while Bartos plays or poses alongside him. She slips between childish playfulness and a more mature awareness of her body and its sexuality. "What is wrong with fathers and daughters being comfortable with their bodies? We are two separate entities with different sexualities," says Bartos. "Both our sexualities are evident but we are not aiming them at each other." And yet there is an atmosphere – tense and awkward. Perhaps this derives from Bartos re-enacting her adolescent relationship with her father, or maybe it stems from something darker: intense psychosexual energy between the pair that is only perceptible to outsiders.

The project is multilayered: sentimental, sexual and also strangely sombre. Bartos documents her father's ageing physique and thereby acknowledges his mortality. In images where it is evident that her father is older, the atmosphere feels different – gentler, less tense. "There is definitely a vulnerability," says Bartos. "You can see it – they are very poignant and sad." One photograph depicts the pair mid-jump, suspended in the air. Bartos leaps upwards while her father appears slightly hunched, his right hand reaching towards her as if in need of support. The series moves beyond the body as Bartos, and her father, come to terms with his ageing. "The last chapter became very spiritual – it is about watching someone transition into their old age and reach a new plane," she says.

Family Portrait inspires us to think, and Bartos welcomes our interpretations, keen for external reflections on a project that was instinctive and spontaneous to make. "Other people have their sensibilities, and they bring their own conscious to the work," she says. "They shine a new light on it, and I think that is great." Bartos rejects convention and in doing so encourages us to consider our perception of, and relationship to, the body, sexuality and gender in the context of a familial relationship. The images are complicated to look at, and what we see says as much about us as it does about the work. **BJP**

anetabartos.com





Adi Nes, Aneta Bartos, Sunil Gupta,
Samuel Fosso, Hans Eijkelboom

Karen Knorr goes inside London's
exclusive gentlemen's clubs

Michael Stipe, Laia Abril,
Leica SL2, Brandt/Moore

British Journal of Photography



Liberation through Photography

A special issue exploring the theme of *Masculinities*,
Barbican Art Gallery's blockbuster exhibition

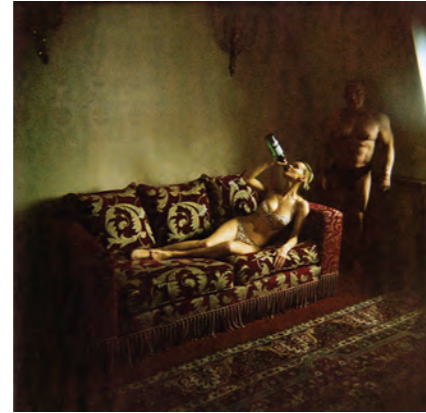
British Journal of Photography

Masculinities: Liberation through Photography

Issue 7892 February 2020



42-49_Adi Nes: Soldiers



68-73_Aneta Bartos: Family Portrait



80-85_Samuel Fosso's self-portraits



50-66_Karen Knorr: Gentlemen



86-90_Hans Eijkelboom: With My Family



34-41_Karlheinz Weinberger: Rebel Youth



74-79_Sunil Gupta: Christopher Street



20-23_Bill Brandt/Henry Moore



16-19_Laia Abril: A History of Misogyny

UK£9.99 CAN/NZ\$23.50 US\$21.25 AUS\$22.99



Established 1854

1854

We are 1854 Media

A multi award-winning digital media business with a simple mission:
to champion photographers worldwide through our exclusive platforms and
opportunities, empowering them to get inspired, get seen and get paid

A platform assisting some of the world's best-known brands in commissioning
visual content from photographers and filmmakers within our community

Publisher of *British Journal of Photography*: established in 1854, *BJP* is the world's
oldest photography title and today holds an influential audience of millions

**British Journal
of Photography**
Established 1854

Investments of this nature carry risks to your capital. Please Invest Aware.

Complete your collection.

**Take a 10% discount
with promotional
code access10 and
have it delivered
straight to your door.**

www.thebjpshop.com

**British Journal
of Photography**