

## Aneta Bartos, Family Portrait @Postmasters

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / September 22, 2017

## ON VIEW

Aneta Bartos, Family Portrait  
September 8, 2017 - October 14,  
2017

Postmasters

54 Franklin Street  
New York, NY 10013

## OTHER LINKS

Aneta Bartos artist site  
*New York Magazine (Vulture)*

**JTF (just the facts):** A total of 15 color/black and white photographs, framed in brown wood and unmatted, and hung against yellow walls in a single room gallery space. All of the works are archival inkjet prints, made between 2015 and 2017. The prints are sized roughly 30x31 and each image is available in an edition of 5+2AP. (Installation shots below.)



**Comments/Context:** For much of her early career as an artist, Aneta Bartos has been exploring the aesthetic edges of sexuality and the female gaze. She has made photographs of simmering erotic pairings of women in dark empty rooms, solitary men masturbating on dimly lit beds, and entwined naked bodies whose extended arms and legs make them look like crawling spiders. In each case, she has pushed toward open vulnerabilities and edgy hauntings, incrementally testing the typical limits of the nude genre, and in the process, refining her own artistic voice.

In recent years, Bartos has turned her attention back to her native Poland, mixing her father and her homeland into her charged scenes. The unusual twist on this family story is that her father is an accomplished bodybuilder, and even though he is an obviously aging man, he seems more than happy to show off his sculpted physique, proudly flexing his muscles in his tiny posing trunks. Bartos began to explore these familial dynamics by making portraits of her father posed on his own, and in her newest series, she has extended the family connection further, bringing herself into the frame and creating father-daughter pairings that inhabit the hazy edges of personal memory.

Shot on a mix of grainy Polaroid and Instamatic 126 films, Bartos' prints have the look and feel of slightly faded pictures plucked directly out of a family album and enlarged a bit beyond the resolution of the original negatives. The very indistinctness of her aesthetic seems to deliberately recall the coded textural patina of nostalgia, the soft casual blurs creating a rich painterly surface that feels almost Pictorialist, but is somehow also steeped in the specific timelessness of rural Eastern Europe in the early 1980s.

Many of her summertime scenes echo family album memories common to us all, with father and daughter frolicking in the garden, climbing trees, lying in the sun, visiting the beach, and eating messy melting ice cream, and then slowing down for relaxed moments inside where the two spend time together in the living room. But even though Bartos' scenes follow these usual patterns of charming casual play, her pictures are decidedly unsettling in their emotional tone, the whole project built on an intense strangeness in the staged relationship that quietly unbalances the normal parent-child cues and behaviors.

Much of this consistent weirdness can be attributed to the macho preening of the father. His nearly naked strutting and showing off in his Speedo seem oddly inappropriate, his look-at-me expressions of masculinity evoking a complex brew of possible rationales and reactions. Do we see him as powerfully manly and lovingly protective of his daughter? Or vaguely ridiculous and delusional, obliviously flexing and posing for himself (or other nearby admirers we can't see), asserting his presence much more than necessary? Or even downright sad? And what is his daughter's interior response to these exhibitionist poses? Tenderness and affection for the old man? Or the thoroughly modern "ew" of disgust and embarrassment?

What's fascinating about these paired portraits is that Bartos' role as the daughter is equally sexually charged. While she often poses as an innocent child in these recreations, in modest bonnets and peasant frocks, chasing chickens around the farmyard, she does so in the fully formed body of a young woman. Soon she is wandering around in her bikini or in a lacy bra and panties combo, flirtatiously drinking from a wine bottle, sprawling on the couch, or seductively crawling on all fours. And all of her antics are taking place at the same time that dad is right nearby proving his manliness, so the whole father-daughter bond suddenly feels on the edge of tipping toward either farcical comedy or taboo.

If the two weren't so obviously asexual toward each other, their individual sexiness (both subtle and overt) might create a heavy dose of uncomfortable tension. But their two worlds are largely separate, even though they inhabit the same pictures. When they sunbathe in matching thongs, or she sits on his lap in a vaguely bridal nightgown, the dreamlike pictures refuse to resolve entirely – their intimate allusions and perspectives are conflicting, so our voyeurism becomes confused. Is there tension simmering in his ghostlike lurking or not? Are we seeing something that isn't there? We repeatedly ask *what exactly is going on here?* and are offered no clear answers, and that open-endedness of the role-playing keeps us looking.

As seen here, Bartos' examination of the male/female gaze is thoughtful and sophisticated. If we turn the pictures around and try to see them through her own eyes, perhaps there is no sexual tension at all, just a daughter hanging out with her eccentric father, going through the motions of the old times with a healthy dollop of loving sentimentality. Maybe these are images that simply celebrate her father in all his quirkiness, the playacting with the sickle or the muscleman poses fondly reminiscent of real memories. And maybe she's genuinely proud of him, in all that he is and has done for her.

That these photographs could be so deliberately and fantastically inconclusive is where their strength lies. They hold up well to the scrutiny of multiple alternate interpretations, leaving plenty of room for viewers to invent their own stories.