

on Arousal

**Aneta
Bartos**

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‘I take pleasure in my transformations. I look quiet and consistent, but few know how many women there are in me.’ Anais Nin wrote, a statement that might be considered when looking at the amorphous representations of the female body Aneta Bartos creates. The image we see is the image we want to see, whether we look at ourself in a mirror or at others. In the discussion of the female nude, the male gaze often preoccupies, still, in itself a revealing default mechanism. The gaze of the viewer/spectator is not acknowledged in Bartos’s work. Female arousal is ambivalent, and this is drawn out in Bartos’s shadowy, phantasmatical photography. Naked bodies appear to perform ancient rituals through a lens on ayahuasca.

The subject of the gaze is still central to the discussion of contemporary photography by female artists: who is looking, who is being seen and what is the reaction of the subject of the image to the gaze. What is your approach to the gaze in your work?

I am a female gazer and I am looking through my own female perspective both at men and women. Male gaze suggests that women can be made to view the world and themselves through the eyes of a male, and the woman is expected to be the gazed-upon, not the gazer. This has been a very well-established male-power phenomenon that some women, including myself, have begun to face and challenge.

*What about the gaze of your subjects? In *4 Sale*,*

for example, the face is covered or blurred, the gaze is sort of obliterated.

I wanted to keep my subjects hauntingly intimate and anonymous. My aim was to generate a self-sufficient, sexually and dangerously charged world of females, completely independent of men and their gaze. As my brother perfectly put it: ‘This seductive quality of an erotic dream tempts me to enter, but as I try to get closer, I am suddenly discouraged by an uncomfortable sensation which makes me stop myself in fear of losing something that makes me a man... a penis perhaps.’

*You followed up *4 Sale with Boys*—a series of portraits of men masturbating. How did the reaction differ?*

Moving from *4 Sale* to *Boys* was a deliberate step further to grab the reins of my expression and ‘manhandle’ the gaze. I wanted to challenge what is visually and expressively ‘expected’ as compelling when sexuality is owned by a female perspective. I strongly ignored male/religious taboos to champion what I see to be beauty in the male condition.

The *4 Sale* project generated an incredible amount of interest, which resulted in great press, an amazing show and new opportunities. *Boys*, however, found a bit of resistance. It surprises me that couple of erect penises can steer such discomfort. It feels that certain people are still unable to go beyond that and discover a whole other spectrum of complex emotions that these images may portray.



Aneta Bartos
Mertynka, 2010
C-print from Polaroid
40.6 x 50.8 cm