

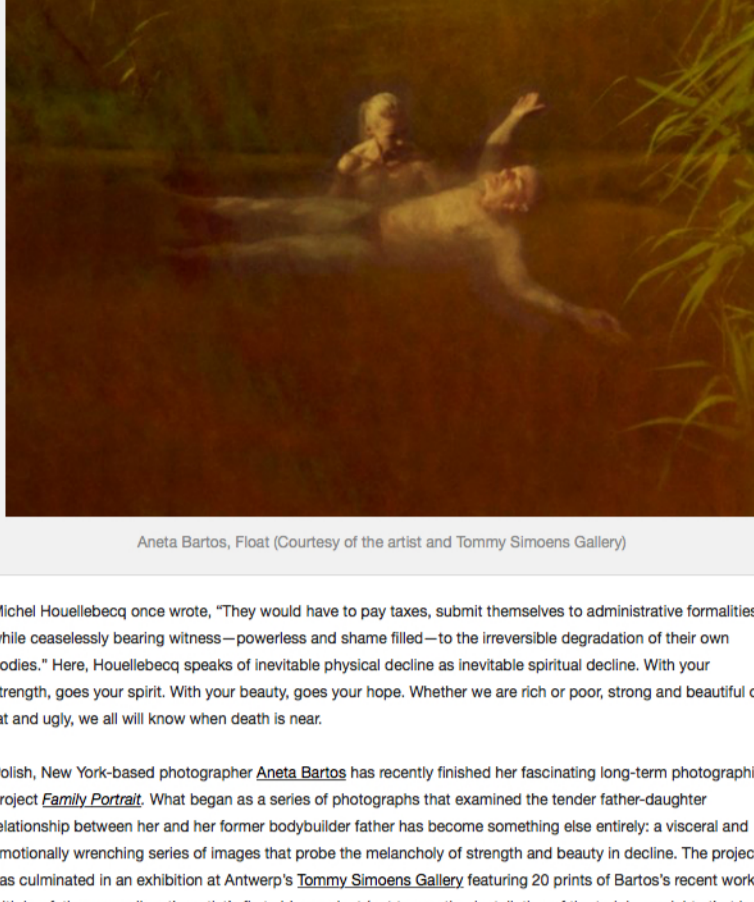
filthy dreams

For Minorities Who Don't Even Fit Into Our Own Minorities

ART

Aneta Bartos Sought To Portray Her Father's Immortality, Then Old Age Caught Up With Him

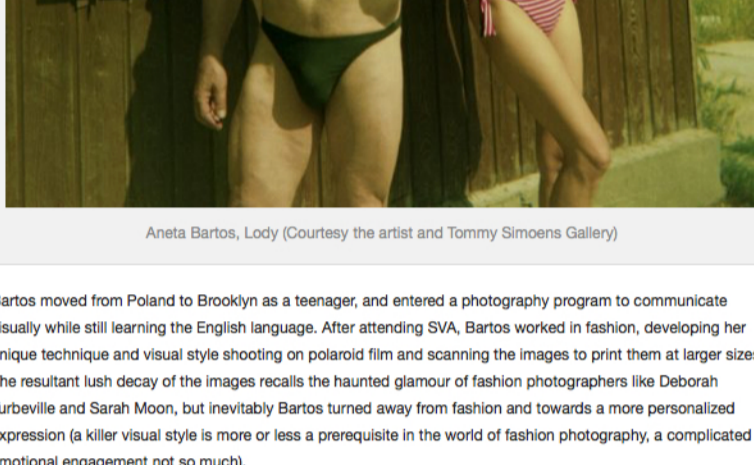
Posted on June 1, 2019 by ADAM LEHRER



Aneta Bartos, Float (Courtesy of the artist and Tommy Simoens Gallery)

Michel Houellebecq once wrote, "They would have to pay taxes, submit themselves to administrative formalities while ceaselessly bearing witness—powerless and shame filled—to the irreversible degradation of their own bodies." Here, Houellebecq speaks of inevitable physical decline as inevitable spiritual decline. With your strength, goes your spirit. With your beauty, goes your hope. Whether we are rich or poor, strong and beautiful or fat and ugly, we all will know when death is near.

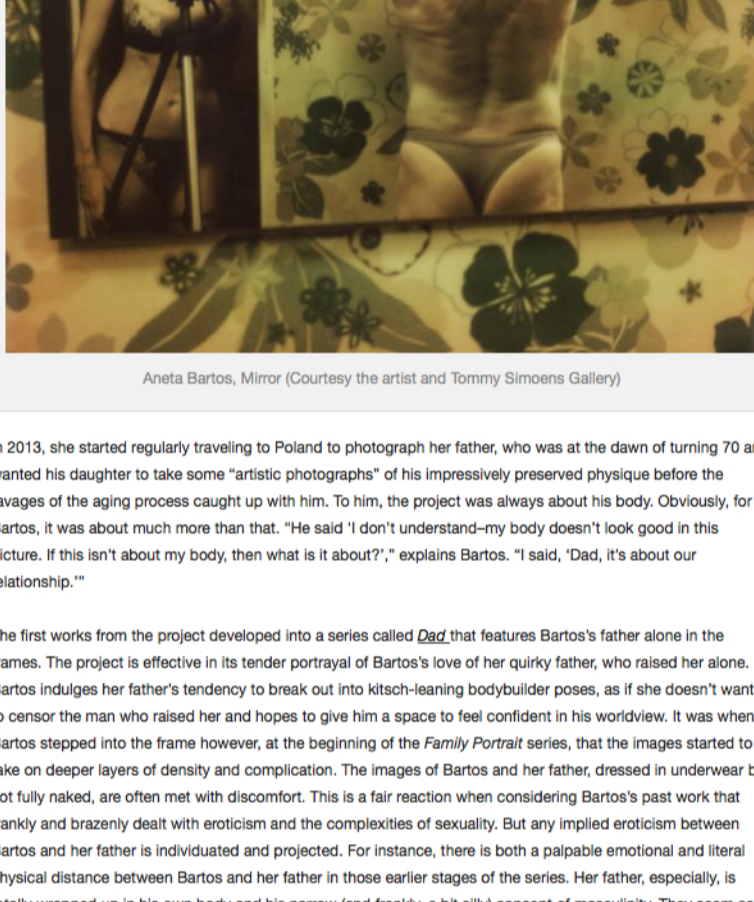
Polish, New York-based photographer [Aneta Bartos](#) has recently finished her fascinating long-term photographic project *Family Portrait*. What began as a series of photographs that examined the tender father-daughter relationship between her and her former bodybuilder father has become something else entirely: a visceral and emotionally wrenching series of images that probe the melancholy of strength and beauty in decline. The project has culminated in an exhibition at Antwerp's [Tommy Simoens Gallery](#) featuring 20 prints of Bartos's recent work with her father, as well as the artist's first video project (not to mention installation of the training weights that her dad used to hone his physique over the years). "[My father] can't cope with aging," says Bartos, who called me on Skype from Antwerp in mid-May and seeming equally relieved, exhausted, and a bit distressed to finally be moving on from this project. "Until he was 70. People were just always complimenting him and he was so used to it. His body became a symbol of masculinity and beauty."



Aneta Bartos, Lady (Courtesy the artist and Tommy Simoens Gallery)

Bartos moved from Poland to Brooklyn as a teenager, and entered a photography program to communicate visually while still learning the English language. After attending SVA, Bartos worked in fashion, developing her unique technique and visual style shooting on polaroid film and scanning the images to print them at larger sizes. The resultant lush decay of the images recalls the haunted glamour of fashion photographers like Deborah Turbeville and Sarah Moon, but inevitably Bartos turned away from fashion and towards a more personalized expression (a killer visual style is more or less a prerequisite in the world of fashion photography, a complicated emotional engagement not so much).

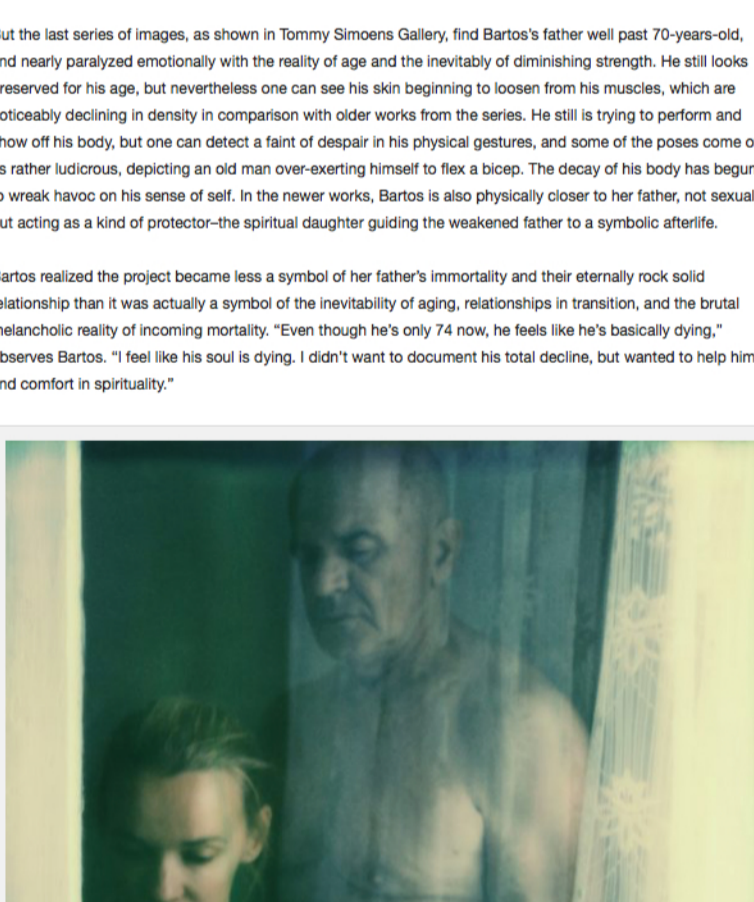
Over the last 10 years, Bartos has used photography to explore her desire, the desires of men (as in her *Boys* series), and our complex relationships with our bodies (as in her *Spider Monkeys* series). Throughout all her noted series of works, Bartos connects her personal experiences to larger themes of spirituality, renewal, and the cycles of life. "The universe is in constant movement and transitions," is a quote typical of Bartos's broad and humanistic worldview.



Aneta Bartos, Mirror (Courtesy the artist and Tommy Simoens Gallery)

In 2013, she started regularly traveling to Poland to photograph her father, who was at the dawn of turning 70 and wanted his daughter to take some "artistic photographs" of his impressively preserved physique before the ravages of the aging process caught up with him. To him, the project was always about his body. Obviously, for Bartos, it was about much more than that. "He said 'I don't understand—my body doesn't look good in this picture. If this isn't about my body, then what is it about?'," explains Bartos. "I said, 'Dad, it's about our relationship.'"

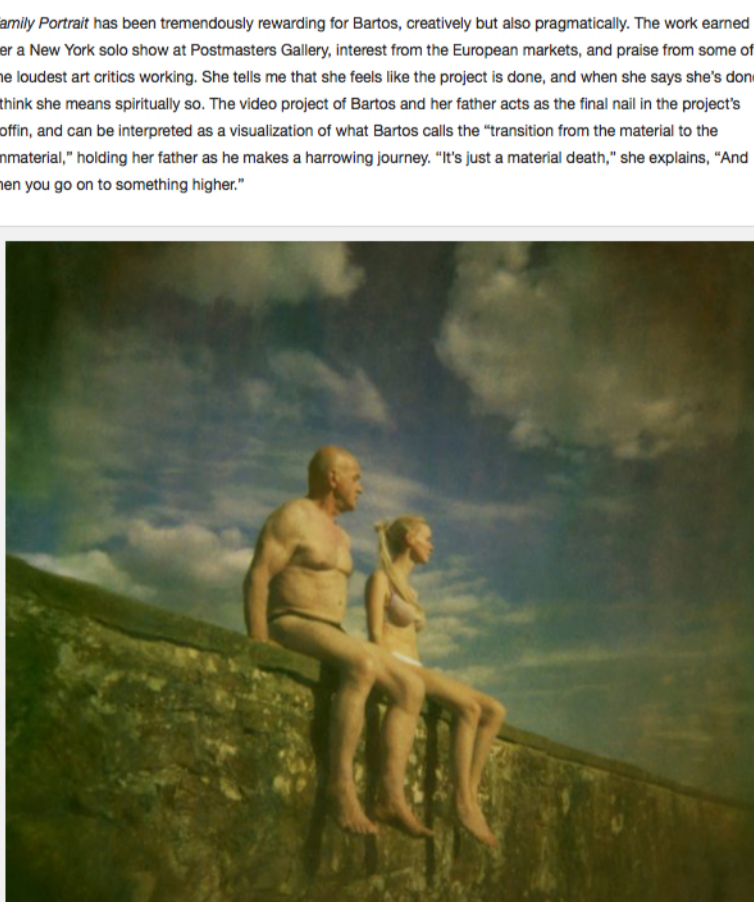
The first works from the project developed into a series called *Dad* that features Bartos's father alone in the frames. The project is effective in its tender portrayal of Bartos's love of her quirky father, who raised her alone. Bartos indulges her father's tendency to break out into kitsch-leaning bodybuilder poses, as if she doesn't want to censor the man who raised her and hopes to give him a space to feel confident in his worldview. It was when Bartos stepped into the frame however, at the beginning of the *Family Portrait* series, that the images started to take on deeper layers of density and complication. The images of Bartos and her father, dressed in underwear but not fully naked, are often met with discomfort. This is a fair reaction when considering Bartos's past work that frankly and brazenly dealt with eroticism and the complexities of sexuality. But any implied eroticism between Bartos and her father is individuated and projected. For instance, there is both a palpable emotional and literal physical distance between Bartos and her father in those earlier stages of the series. Her father, especially, is totally wrapped up in his own body and his narrow (and frankly, a bit silly) concept of masculinity. They seem as singular portrait subjects that happen to appear in the same image. "I even had to ask him to stop posing so much with his bodybuilder poses," says Bartos.



Aneta Bartos, Yellow (Courtesy the artist and Tommy Simoens Gallery)

But the last series of images, as shown in Tommy Simoens Gallery, find Bartos's father well past 70-years-old, and nearly paralyzed emotionally with the reality of age and the inevitability of diminishing strength. He still looks preserved for his age, but nevertheless one can see his skin beginning to loosen from his muscles, which are noticeably declining in density in comparison with older works from the series. He still is trying to perform and show off his body, but one can detect a faint of despair in his physical gestures, and some of the poses come of as rather ludicrous, depicting an old man over-exerting himself to flex a bicep. The decay of his body has begun to wreak havoc on his sense of self. In the newer works, Bartos is also physically closer to her father, not sexually, but acting as a kind of protector—the spiritual daughter guiding the weakened father to a symbolic afterlife.

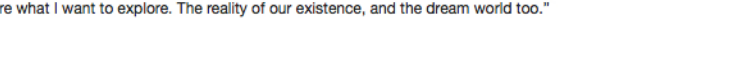
Bartos realized the project became less a symbol of her father's immortality and their eternally rock solid relationship than it was actually a symbol of the inevitability of aging, relationships in transition, and the brutal melancholic reality of incoming mortality. "Even though he's only 74 now, he feels like he's basically dying," observes Bartos. "I feel like his soul is dying. I didn't want to document his total decline, but wanted to help him find comfort in spirituality."



Aneta Bartos, Reflection (Courtesy the artist and Tommy Simoens Gallery)

What makes a long-term photographic project a unique artistic document is that the prolonged duration of the project allows for a simple concept to widen in its scope and thematic touchstones. *Family Portrait* initially was a very personalized love letter to a simple concept, written from an artist daughter to an off-beat and adoring father. But Bartos never could have conceived when she started this project six years ago that her father would begin rapidly descending into old age, nor could she imagine that her father's vanity and masculinity would be so woven into his body image that it would literally create a palpable tension between the two. Bartos's *Family Portrait* now speaks to the most art historical of concepts: death. Her father is getting old, and we can see him getting old, and this Polish man's identity is so narrowly defined by physical strength and beauty that, like in the books of the aforementioned Houellebecq, Bartos is able to depict the despairs of old age as an emotional decay as much as it is a literal physical decline. "That aspect of it shifted the project," says Bartos. "I wasn't aware of how narcissistic he is. When I started this he was 68 and still looking the same as he was when I was a little girl. Now, it's like he's ended his life journey. It's been very hard for both of us, the fact that he's rapidly aging and acting that way."

Family Portrait has been tremendously rewarding for Bartos, creatively but also pragmatically. The work earned her a New York solo show at Postmasters Gallery, interest from the European markets, and praise from some of the loudest art critics working. She tells me that she feels like the project is done, and when she says she's done, I think she means spiritually so. The video project of Bartos and her father acts as the final nail in the project's coffin, and can be interpreted as a visualization of what Bartos calls the "transition from the material to the immaterial," holding her father as he makes a harrowing journey. "It's just a material death," she explains, "And then you go on to something higher."



Aneta Bartos, Distance (Courtesy the artist and Tommy Simoens Gallery)

She's already working on concepts for what her next project will be, and the direction she's going in might surprise you. Towards the end of our chat, Bartos began to talk about a documentary she's recently watched, [Unacknowledged](#) from 2017, that purported to document a US government cover up of human interactions with alien life forms (I'd be derelict to mention here that the "documentary" has been widely debated in terms of its veracity, with numerous out of context quotes, long discredited "experts," and quite a few old debunked theories). An artist constantly seeking to comprehend the enigmas of existence, the documentary got her gears turning. "I've just been gathering some ideas based on archeological and historical evidence," she describes. "There is evidence everywhere, but we block it out."

That statement, that we remain willfully blind to the universe's mysteries in order to cocoon ourselves in safety, might be accurate even if the documentary isn't. Nevertheless, Bartos's next planned project isn't a series of photographs, but a film. And not an experimental art film. A narrative film, a science-fiction film shot on Super-8 or Super-16. Bartos plans on using the contorted human figures from her *Spider Monkeys* series, weaving them into a cohesive story. Bartos mentions that I recently posted images from genius Polish science-fiction filmmaker Andrzej Zulawski's 1988 psychedelic and meta-textual head fuck of a sci-fi film [On The Silver Globe](#), and that she watched it and plans on using it as a reference for the science-fiction project ("I like that he plays with extreme emotions, and that they manifest in the body," she says in deference to the filmmaker). Obviously, I'm intrigued. This ambition sums up everything about Bartos as an artist. Her deeply personal content and sumptuous visual aesthetic are always in service to larger themes of humanity. Whether photography or science-fiction films, it's all art made by the human, grasping for truth and knowledge. "We have been trying since the beginning of time to learn the formations of culture, taboo, and religion," she says. "And sex too. It's all symbolic of creation. These ideas are what I want to explore. The reality of our existence, and the dream world too."