

Grappling With the Final Stages of a Father's Life

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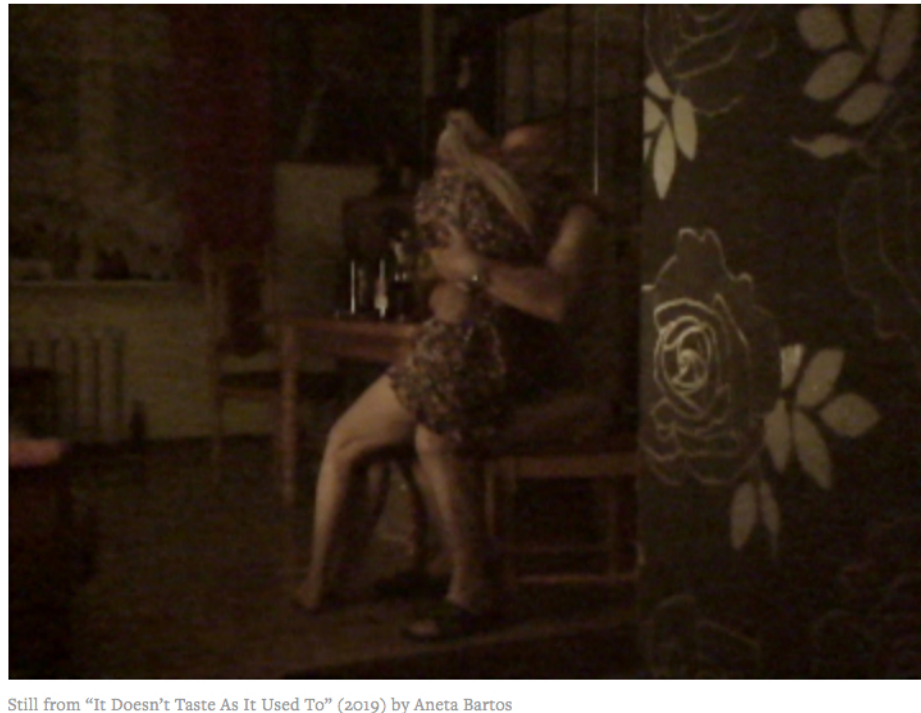
Susannah Gruder August 30, 2019



Still from "It Doesn't Taste As It Used To" (2019) by Aneta Bartos (all images courtesy the artist)

Aneta Bartos is fascinated by forms that exist past their prime. For several years the photographer has been experimenting with expired film — which she refers to as “vintage.” Her work seeks to capture the surreal space of memory, blurring real and imagined worlds in order to represent that which is beyond fact or fiction — something approaching truth. When carving out these ethereal landscapes, Bartos engages with mediums that are themselves from another era. Her latest project, “It Doesn’t Taste As It Used To,” (2019) is a video art piece and her first foray into video, shot on now-obsolete MiniDV video cassette tapes.

“I love all the things that are just not what people use,” Bartos told Hyperallergic in her Kips Bay studio in early August. “Maybe because it’s all disappearing.” The short video, which screened for a small audience at the Wythe Hotel in July and which Bartos hopes to bring to more venues later this year as part of an upcoming book tour, is a continuation of her collaboration with her father Zbigniew, a former bodybuilder living in their native Poland. In the photo series *Dad* begun in 2013, she shoots him in a variety of poses wearing little more than a speedo, while fishing, sunbathing, or sharing a sweet moment with a sheep — moments that portray his masculinity along with his humanity. The photo shoot was her father’s idea. At 68, he wanted his photographer daughter to record him at his physical prime before he turned 70. *Dad* was a representation of stability and strength, my memories of this idyllic and worry-free world produced by a powerful yet loving and gentle father,” she says.



Still from "It Doesn't Taste As It Used To" (2019) by Aneta Bartos

Then, in the series *Family Portrait* shot in Poland between 2015 and 2018, Bartos decided to jump into the frame, also clad in underwear or a bathing suit. The two pose in the bucolic Polish countryside, licking ice cream cones, riding a bicycle together, climbing trees, and chasing chickens. It was a natural progression for the artist. “I wanted to dive deeper into the dreamscape of memory. Reenacting fleeting moments and the joy and the rebellion and the complexities of when a daughter grows up and comes of age,” she says. “People gravitate toward such sinister readings because it’s your dad, but it’s like, what does that come from? We’re a family. He made me.” Jerry Saltz called the photos “The most memorable thing I saw at the art fairs,” after they were shown at the Spring/Break art fair in 2017.



Still from "It Doesn't Taste As It Used To" (2019) by Aneta Bartos

As someone who was equally enamored with her work after seeing it for the first time at Spring/Break, I felt a sense of familiarity with these unusual portraits — Bartos’s penetrating gaze and Zbigniew’s palpable energy were soothing in their strangeness. There is something magical in the way the aged film transmutes the images to match her memories and mimic her own fuzzy perceptions. But to witness the images of Bartos and her father suddenly animate on screen in her new video was uncanny, like shaking hands with someone you’d met in a dream. Shot largely in the same locations as her photo series, the video brings a liveliness to the static world of *Family Portrait* but also an echo of morbidity. No longer in his physical prime, the new work shows the realities of an aging body on video, a medium far less forgiving than expired Polaroids. There’s a sense of foreboding throughout, with a Lynchian mix of dreamy sensuality and impending body horror. Even Zbigniew, formerly a subject more than willing to take part in the various iterations of his daughter’s work, was less enthusiastic about being on camera this time around. “He prefers photography because with posing, he knows how to pose and he knows how to move his body so his body looks good,” Bartos said. “He started seeing the first signs of deterioration of his body and his organs and he just couldn’t cope.”



Still from "It Doesn't Taste As It Used To" (2019), by Aneta Bartos

For Bartos, the project has shifted from capturing her father’s unlikely vigor to finding a way for both of them to process the final phase of his life. With her father no longer a god-like figure, Bartos is herself dealing with the reality of his age, and the reminder that she too is getting older. “It Doesn’t Taste As It Used To” serves as an exploration and celebration of nature, while also being a ritualistic farewell to the material world. Throughout the video, Bartos serves as her father’s spiritual guide. Instead of interpreting death as a definitive ending, she helps him to confront the conclusion of his time on Earth, as well as the potential for what may lie beyond. “I explored through this ancient theory that the universe is governed by elements: earth, air, water, fire and spirit. The earth is the most material and primitive element, and there’s a hierarchy where it just goes up,” she explains. The video begins firmly rooted in the earth, with Bartos and her father emerging from the woods, followed by images of her father lying in the grass as if he were about to disappear into it. She then ushers him through the elements — jumping high into the air with him (presumably on a trampoline just out of frame) and giving him a baptismal bath in the river. As they dance wildly in front of a bonfire, their images become increasingly blurred and distorted. “Fire can exist in both the spiritual and material world, and the fifth element can be interpreted as reaching enlightenment, higher consciousness,” Bartos explains.



Still from "It Doesn't Taste As It Used To" (2019), by Aneta Bartos

It’s bittersweet to see Bartos try to help her father let go of the physical world, and his body’s space within it. “I think I find comfort in mysticism and spirituality,” she said, “so we don’t have to be so attached to this world, which is really hard because that’s the only attached that we know.” And while there are moments in the video where it feels like both father and daughter are approaching a higher plane of existence, Bartos’s ambivalence toward the importance of the material world emerges in several key sequences. At one point, her father helps Bartos as she attempts a few bench presses at the gym. At another, Bartos sits on her father’s lap, enveloped in a loving parent-child embrace. It’s here, in these achingly affecting shots, that we’re reminded just how much our parent’s bodies mean, and the hole they leave when they’re no longer living, breathing sources of strength.