

ART

An Artist's Fraught Portraits with Her Bodybuilder Father

In a series of photographs with her father, Polish artist Aneta Bartos pushes, teases, and challenges our notions of families, bodies, and sexuality.

Zachary Small October 3, 2017



Aneta Bartos, "Creature," 2017, archival inkjet print, 30 x 30.65 in (all images courtesy Postmasters Gallery)

The Polish artist Aneta Bartos may speak softly, but her photographs vociferously announce her unique, if challenging, approach to family ties. When I first met her at Spring Break Art Show 2017 months ago, Bartos was presenting a small selection of photos from her then recent series depicting herself, scantily clad alongside her Speedo-wearing, bodybuilder father. Now that series is on full display in an exhibition entitled *Family Portrait* at Postmasters Gallery in Tribeca.

Thinking back to that first encounter with Bartos in May, I remember her shyness, our small talk about Warsaw's drab postwar skyline, and the candy she gave me to eat as I perused her work. The fudgelike confection was a rich indulgence that orally transfixed me, while my eyes remained transfixed on her photographs. I marveled at these haunting, grainy images with a self-conscious, uncertain voyeurism. What was I seeing? A commentary on gendered roles and sexual politics within the family unit? Or simply a lurid expression of sexuality between a father and daughter? And if it was the latter, was that necessarily wrong? Bartos is Nabakovian in her pursuit of these conundrums, constantly twisting and tugging at the viewer's comfort levels while needling the hard line drawn between family intimacy and sexuality.

Loss of innocence overlays the mid-sized, square compositions of Bartos's Polaroid and 125mm film photographs. She infuses guilt into guiltless scenes of family bonding. In "Lady" (2017), for example, the pair lick vanilla ice cream off their cones. Both of their eyes are closed and a shadow from the above roof nearly eclipses their faces in shadow. Bartos's father stands in the foreground, baring his imposing physique in a black Speedo: the image of an aging man desperate to recapture time and former glory. This image is charged with sexual imagery that would otherwise go unnoticed if Bartos were still a small child, or her father more clothed — like the white, melting ice cream that alludes to semen.



Aneta Bartos, "Lady" (2017), archival inkjet print, 30 x 30.65 in

Elsewhere, Bartos experiments with the variables of her own costume, wearing long, flowing dresses and bonnets. In "Scythe" (2016), she stands emotionless, poised yet puritanical. Subsequently, Bartos dons the costume and demeanor of a stoic governess. Again, she stands behind her father, here holding the titular farm tool. This bucolic scene plays out as fantasy for the pastoral. Or is it a nightmare? The ambiguity here feels intentional, allowing Bartos to vary between reverence for her father's lifestyle in Poland and displeasure at society's tendency to minimize women.

A few of the portraits appear to be straightforward parody. "Chicken" (2016) is a perfect example. Here, the artist wears a black bikini with an accompanying black bonnet. Her strong (if perhaps unintentional) channeling of "Little" Edie Bouvier of *Grey Gardens* fame signals the oddball nature of her portraiture. The comedy of her chasing down a chicken denotes the infantilizing of women, particularly in traditional family structures. Although her specific relationship to her father is never fully explicated (the two rarely touch in the photographs, usually appearing in their own separate worlds) we perceive that Bartos is a woman trapped between her role as a daughter and society's expectations of women.

Tragedy also pervades the *Family Portrait*. The loss of innocence we all experience is magnified in her dual exploration of womanhood and nostalgia. The pastoral setting of her family home gestures toward an elusive idyllic past. But her body — now fully mature — no longer matches the image of childhood. Like her father, she's trying to recapture time. The result is bittersweet, like medicine.

Aneta Bartos's *Family Portrait* continues at Postmasters Gallery (54 Franklin Street, Tribeca, Manhattan) through October 14.