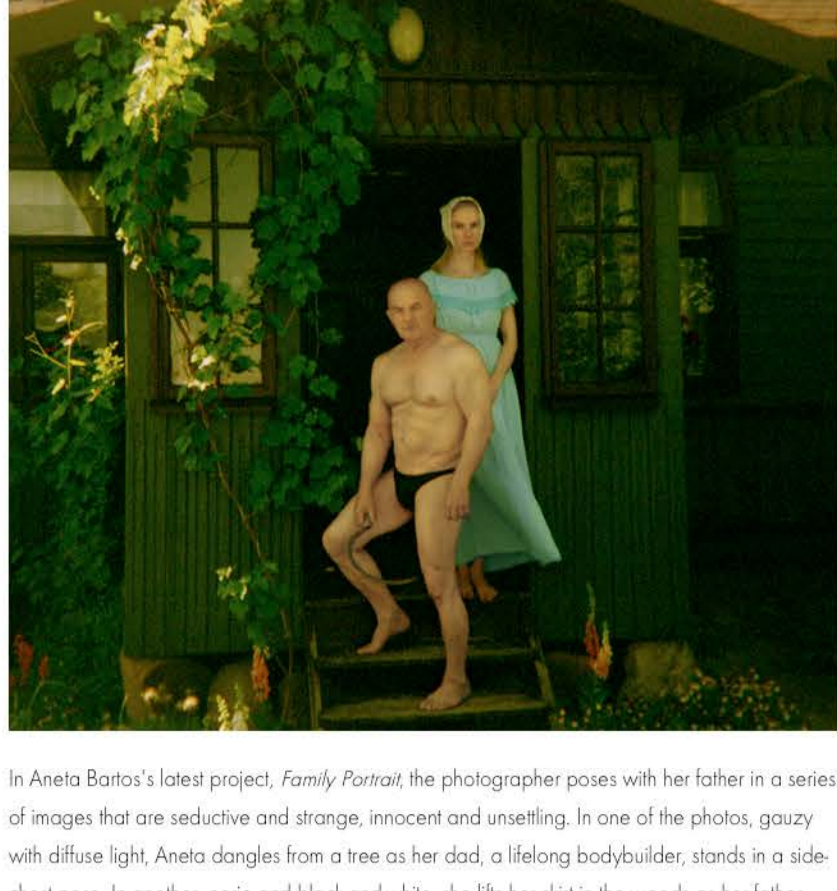


PHOTOGRAPHY | Zia Bata | 7 October, 2016

these uninhibited family portraits explore the relationship between a bodybuilder and his daughter

Aneta Bartos mines her memories and recreates them in dark and dreamy photographs



In Aneta Bartos's latest project, *Family Portrait*, the photographer poses with her father in a series of images that are seductive and strange, innocent and unsettling. In one of the photos, gauzy with diffuse light, Aneta dangles from a tree as her dad, a lifelong bodybuilder, stands in a side-chest pose. In another, eerie and black-and-white, she lifts her skirt in the woods as her father flexes a bicep. *Family Portrait* is an extension of Aneta's previous project, *Dad*, for which she photographed her father from the perspective of her childhood. In those photos, her dad, who is still sculptural at 69 years old, appeared alone, and was depicted as a "powerful, hero-like gentle giant." But in *Family Portrait*, Aneta flanks him in each of the images, and dives deeper into their father-daughter relationship.

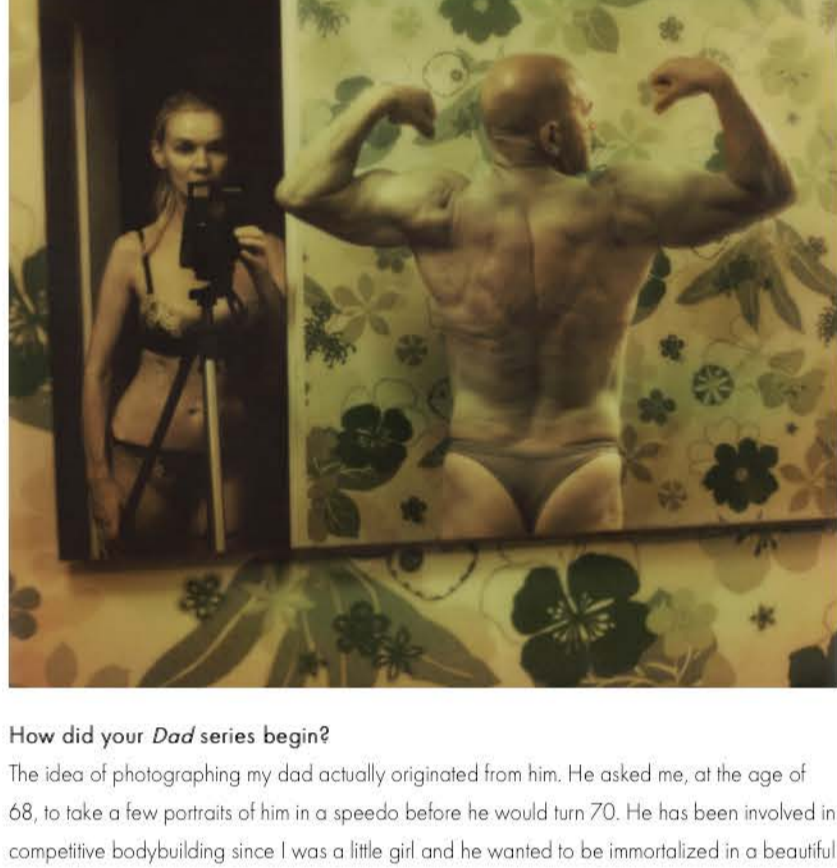


"Introducing myself into the series seemed like a natural progression," Aneta explains. "The second series is more of a collection of memories, pushing and pulling through a contraction of time, channeling different levels of our relationship and peeling back complex layers often through juxtaposition, symbolism, surrealism, and humor." Her re-imagined memories evoke a sense of idyllic timelessness, but can also waiver into the weird — Aneta wears lingerie (or less) in some of the photographs with her dad. But the uninhibitedness is an honest reflection of her childhood and memories, as she explains in the following interview. "Memories have a great significance in shaping who we are," says Aneta, who was born in Poland but moved to New York to live with her mother at 16. "They are the sensory imagery in our conscious and subconscious. They are like a fading dream, a distant reality that keeps altering and bending. Recreating these memories and transforming them into a photograph serves as a portal where I can go in and out of time, revisiting an existence that was cut short when I left Poland."



Where did you grow up? What was it like there?

I grew up in a small city in Poland surrounded by forests, lakes, meadows, and beautiful farmland. Even though my parents never had much money, my childhood seemed like a stretch of endless days in a beautiful, magical world. During the early years my whole family (parents, brother, and myself) lived in one small room of my grandmother's old house. My early teens were full of adventures and new discoveries. Spending time in nature, playing sports, going dancing, talking about boys, and sneaking cigarettes in the attic were my main activities. In my mind, it was an ideal youth.



How did your *Dad* series begin?

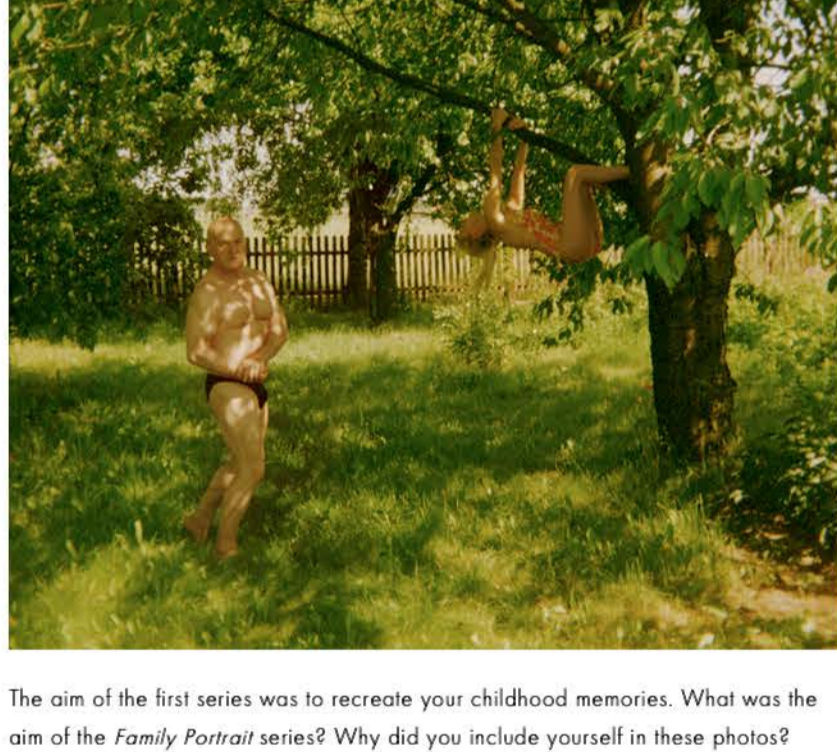
The idea of photographing my dad actually originated from him. He asked me, at the age of 68, to take a few portraits of him in a speedo before he would turn 70. He has been involved in competitive bodybuilding since I was a little girl and he wanted to be immortalized in a beautiful and artistic way before the inevitable process of aging took its toll. This form of fitness was always his passion that gave him pleasure and stamina — and the satisfaction of achieving the closest ideals of masculinity from Classical Greece, as he puts it.

It didn't take me long after his request to realize he could be the ideal subject for my new project even though the plan seemed like a logistical challenge. We only see each other once a year and for only one to two weeks when I'm visiting Poland.



What made him the ideal subject for you?

He possesses a charisma that shines through. It's a combination of exhibitionism, confidence, and a bit of narcissism that gives him this quality of a natural performer. He feels good in front of any audience and never gets shy or uncomfortable. Since he had some experiences with theater, and was always passionate about the arts, he also understands and respects a creative process and is able to contribute his own ideas into the work.



The aim of the first series was to recreate your childhood memories. What was the aim of the *Family Portrait* series? Why did you include yourself in these photos?

Introducing myself into the series seemed like a natural progression. I wanted to dive deeper into the father-daughter relationship, surpassing the perspective of a younger child who was idealizing her powerful and loving father. The second series is more of a collection of memories, pushing and pulling through a contraction of time, channeling different levels of our relationship and peeling back complex layers often through juxtaposition, symbolism, surrealism, and humor. The project alludes in some ways to the rebellion of an adolescent girl and the transition from childhood to adulthood. It also explores the complexity and fragility of a powerful aging man and a desperate attempt to stop the process of inevitable human collapse.



How were you raised to view nudity and sexuality? It wasn't awkward to wear lingerie in front of your father, or pose provocatively on the sofa?

Even though I grew up in a very Catholic society, which made you constantly feel shameful about your body and sexuality, my parents seemed to be disconnected from this mentality. In our house, my dad was always lounging around in his tiny speedos while my mom sunned herself topless in the garden. As a little girl, I would spend hours around shirtless boys working out at my father's gym. I would travel with my dad for bodybuilding competitions and even began taking part in them at the age 13. It was natural and fun and approached with a great sense of adventure and playfulness. It never felt like anything sexual or inappropriate. Posing with him in our underwear for my series felt exactly how it felt then.



Why do you think nudity and the body play such a large role in your work?

These are the things that I find fascinating. The way we perceive bodies. Without clothes, we are usually reducing everything to nudity or sex and dismissing everything else that might be lurking beneath. This approach shows the close-mindedness of our perceptions and how simplistic our thoughts are about something as natural and complex as the body and the interaction of bodies. That might be part of the reason why I play with it in my work. I have always been intrigued by bodies and see them as a spiritual, magical and mysterious...



What do you want people to think about or understand when looking at your work?

I certainly enjoy strong reactions from my work, both positive and negative. I feel that if everyone processed my work the same way or understood it the way I do, it would make it unchallenging and boring. I enjoy creating artwork that has multiple layers of meaning and defies simplistic reading. I also don't believe it's an artist's job to dissect their own work and interpret it for the viewer. Everyone brings their own experiences and consciousness to a work of art and there should be room left for their own interpretation and understanding.