

ANETA BARTOS: *Family Portrait*

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Fatherhood, compared to motherhood, remains less-charted terrain. *Family Portrait*, Aneta Bartos's first exhibition with Postmasters Gallery, delves into the artist's relationship with her father, a former bodybuilder living in central Poland, with photographs full of vigor and vulnerability. *Family Portrait* extends from Bartos's *Dad* series, in which she remained exclusively behind the lens, documenting her father in Poland. Shot in various public and domestic sites during the New York-based artist's visits to her hometown, *Family Portrait*, with Bartos's entrance into the frame, grasps the intricate relationship between an aging father and his daughter.

Bartos, whose parents separated when she was young, spent her early-teenage years in Poland with her father, Zbigniew, until moving to New York at the age of sixteen to live with her mother. The artist's meticulous process, in which the nostalgic texture of Polaroid photographs encounters technical possibilities granted by digital printing, conveys an unsettled relationship to her father. Bartos, however, complicates the notion of longing; memories, lacking due to her departure, and the consequence of absent photographs echo with a

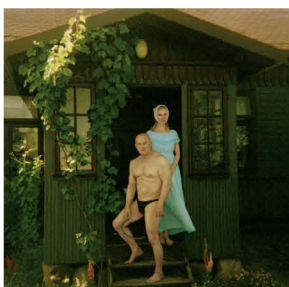
deferred nostalgia. Polaroids are put through a scanner, which allows the artist to digitally enlarge their scale and alter the color spectrum, adding a painterly, hazy surface to the final inkjet prints. The balance Bartos orchestrates between old and new photographic methods complements the family she portrays: the conditions of today veil the memories to which they cling. Their familial bond, cultivated during Bartos's childhood years, and her successive departure for the United States constitute the essence of their relationship equally, and are illustrated through surreal visual narratives.

The pastoral beauty of their hometown provides backdrop for a group of photographs that follow the two protagonists lingering throughout green hills of Eastern Europe. In *Mostek* (2017), they lounge on a densely green surface under the Northern sun; dad sports a Speedo—his sole attire throughout the entire series—next to his daughter in a purple bikini. In other bucolic moments, such as those captured in *Dangle* (2016) and *Zalew* (2015), Zbigniew stretches his declining muscles—this recurrent mien salutes his bygone heydays, his herculean frame contrasting the mellow scenery, while encapsulating the artist's childhood memories of her father-figure.

In opposition to the tenderness of the outdoor photographs, peculiarity and tension pervade the works shot in domestic settings, intensified by Bartos's use of directional light and harsh angles, and complicated by scenarios she orchestrates for the duo. In *Creature* (2017), Bartos crawls through a door like a beast, next to which her dad leans against the doorframe. The image summarizes an unresolved relationship.

The artist's theatrical posing expands her role from that of a photographer to a keen model in curious settings. What appears at first sight to be a couple experimenting with various postures unfolds further readings; both sensuality and unease gradually arise. *Apparition* (2016) demonstrates the male figure in a vulnerable moment, lying reclusively on a couch, haunted by his ghostly and aloof daughter, who stands on top of the couch. His face is bowed into his hand, avoiding the camera—unlike most other photographs, which depict a powerful man, confident in his body and assured in his actions. In *Slide* (2016), for example, the father poses on top of a staircase, his hands resting confidently on his waist, emphasizing his built posture, claiming authority over his daughter, who sits passively on the handrail. Bartos implements a faint absurdity into the series with *Tea Cups* (2017) and *Scythe* (2016), which reenacts Grant Wood's *American Gothic* painting—the duo's sullen expressions amidst pastoral naïveté, spoiled by a sickle in Zbigniew's hand.

Mirror (2015) best epitomizes the entire body of work because of the psychological and emotional depth Bartos achieves through her use of a mirror. Initially conceived as part of the earlier series, *Dad*—which documented the powerful man in bucolic settings—*Mirror* is the only photograph to include a camera and Bartos as an active agent. This eerie moment is heightened by the bodybuilder's back reflected onto the mirror as a colossal heap of flesh, lacking the taut refinement of his other muscles. He contrasts his daughter's tranquil preeminence over the framework as she stands with her hand on the camera, wearing lingerie. The conversation between his decay as a father-figure and the sway his ideal form holds over his daughter as a confident and sexualized woman encapsulates the heart of *Family Portrait*. Following *Dad*, Bartos's inclusion of herself in this series—even further developed in *Mirror* with her camera-holding, omnipresent image—salutes a long tradition of art-making in which the artist's gesture is present, from Velázquez's *Las Meninas* to Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Breath*. The artist assumes charge, declaring creative and physical triumph over the subject matter. In Bartos's case, the subject is personal. In some semblance, she gains control over her father figure, while he flexes his tired muscles.



Aneta Bartos, *Scythe*, 2016. Archival inkjet print, 30 x 30.65 inches. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters, New York.



Aneta Bartos, *Mirror*, 2015. Archival inkjet print, 30 x 30.65 inches. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters, New York.