

I FELT LIKE I DIDN'T BELONG HERE ANYMORE. SHE PHOTOGRAPHED HOW SHE RETURNED FROM THE UNITED STATES TO MIKULOV

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August 6, 2021



Photographer Marie Tomanová has established herself in New York, and is now exhibiting an ensemble from her native farm in Mikulov in Arles, France.

A cliché is imposed on a talented young woman from a small town, in this case Mikulov, who has made a career in the world. But what's the point, even for a photographer from Prague, Munich or Paris, it's not uncommon for the editor-in-chief of New York Magazine to declare his films to be the work of a new creative generation of the New York scene and then give him a dream job?



Marie Tomanová, *My Old Clothes, My Old Room*, 2018

This is exactly what happened to thirty-six-year-old Maria Tomanová. "It looks like it's happening all at once, but there are many years of work before that," says an interviewed painter in *Aktuálně.cz*, who replaced the brush with a camera and earned extra money by babysitting four years ago.

She now has a solo exhibition at the prestigious international show *Les Rencontres d'Arles*, where she has also christened her second book on New York. In the south of France, however, she was particularly interested in a private ensemble from Mikulov.

For example, she photographed herself in front of a closet of old uppers after returning home in 2018, for the first time in eight years in the United States. The series called *It Was Once My Universe* is a testimony to the impossibility of building on childhood and seeking understanding for the adult self.

When you returned home after such a time, you probably had no idea how sad photos you would take here. How did they originate?

I expected to take pictures, but I had no idea what. I was looking forward to going home for a long time, and when it did, it was different than I expected. I arrived for two and a half weeks over Christmas and New Year 2018 to 2019. In the US, it wasn't always easy, so I idealized my home. It is a place where one can always go, where one feels safe and belongs there. But suddenly I was here and I felt like I didn't belong here. It was confusing.



Marie Tomanova, *Family Picture*, c. 1997, 2018. From the series *It Was Once My Universe*.

Did you have to change a lot abroad, become independent?

Certainly. And at home, I clashed with my past. My room still looks the same, my old clothes are here, my mom left everything as it was. We have a small farm, life is still spinning in the same rhythm: milking goats in the morning, feeding chickens, rabbits and other things. It's the rhythm of a small town that has remained the same, but I've changed. It was a confrontation of time, distance and one's own identity. Confrontation of childhood and adulthood.

So you photographed everything around you to understand?

Everyone kept asking me what it's like to be home. I couldn't answer, I felt surprised by everything. I also had the feeling that those moments at home are quickly disappearing between my fingers, that I can't cope with the present moment. That's why it was crucial for me to take pictures. Every day and everything I saw. For example, two chairs, on which mom and stepfather always sit. I took a picture of the chairs at sunset that were just falling into the living room. I photographed a lot of ordinary things that I wouldn't normally notice at all as a teenager. Taking pictures of those things meant I could touch them while I was there. Two and a half weeks is an awfully short time. The photo shoot allowed me to create a visual diary full of all those beautiful moments and my loved ones.



Marie Tomanova, *Willy with Horses*, 2018, From the series *It Was Once My Universe*.

You left a tape with the date and time in the photos. Why?

I wanted to have a time trail there. For example, I photographed the last sunset in 2018. I also recorded my mother's wedding. She married shortly before the end of the year, waiting for me to be home. It was emotional.

But the time and date written in the photos corresponded to the New York zone, because that's how I had the camera set up. It reflects my reality at the time, I was somewhere between New York and the Czech Republic, in the space between two worlds. I perceive that the past and life here is completely different from what I experienced in America. It seems to me that these are two different lives. By not going home for so long at all, I created a new world there, a new identity.

You came back as a successful photographer. Did you hope for that when you left in 2011 as a 26-year-old?

No, I left saying I didn't even know what I wanted to do in life.

However, you studied painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Brno University of Technology. Haven't you thought about an artistic career?

I studied with Martin Mainer, but I don't like to remember it. There was a toxic environment and significant gender discrimination. It completely discouraged me from painting, and I actually felt that I would never be a good artist. After school I gave up and decided to leave. I planned to be in America for about half a year, a year, and in the end it was eight years old. I've been there for eleven years now, but the last three I come back from time to time. And I started taking pictures in America, which is great.

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Why didn't you come back from the US before?

I could not go to the Czech Republic due to the complicated immigration situation. If I left the US, I couldn't go back. I didn't even travel much in the States, especially when Trump was president. It all got worse and I only stayed in New York.

You went there as an au pair. How did you become a photographer?

I spent the first year in North Carolina. I wrote diaries there a lot, because I still wanted to develop creatively. The second year I went to New York State, also as an au pair. I went to town every weekend. The very next week I went to the Metropolitan Museum - the entrance fee was only a dollar. At the museum, I met Thomas Beachdel, a professor of art at New York University. We became friends and the next weekend he took me to the Guggenheim Museum, where I first saw the works of Francesca Woodman. At that time, they exhibited not only her photographs but also her diaries. This resonated with me and I decided to enroll in an evening school of photography at the Manhattan School of Visual Arts in Manhattan.

That's when your self-portraits were made?

Yes. I didn't know any people and I needed to touch the photo somehow. Being in front of and behind the camera meant that I had 100% control over how it went and what it looked like afterwards.

You were photographed naked in the middle of the wild, mostly with your head missing in the photo. How did you come to this?

I am from South Moravia, we always had a field and a garden and a vineyard. I spent my youth climbing trees and poking in the dirt. In 2013, I moved directly to New York City, I found myself in a huge city. When I had time, I went out into nature. It is different in America, there is, for example, ten-centimeter moss, and I was tempted to lie down and climb trees. It was a return to childhood. Photographing in the countryside made me feel like I belonged there. For a long time I felt like I was visiting. Like a stranger who has to leave again. I was an immigrant. But the longer I was there, the greater my desire to fit in, to belong there. Self-portraits in nature gave me the feeling that I really am in America and I belong there.

From self-portraits, did you get to take pictures of young New Yorkers?

Yes, it became the series and also the book *Young American*. I longed to fit into the social landscape, among people. Belong to the downtown scene of artists and creatives. I first presented the *Young American* series at the Czech Center in New York in 2018. It was my first solo exhibition. The curator was Thomas Beachdel, with whom I collaborate on exhibitions and books. We have already prepared 11 exhibitions around the world.



Marie Tomanova, *Isabel (Skinned Elbow)*, 2020, from the book *New York New York*. Photo: Hatje Cantz publishing house

The exhibition and then the book *Young American* made you very famous. Did they help you become part of the New York art community?

Certainly. There is a lot of creativity in New York, the city is still pushing you forward. It's very young and predatory and at the same time there is a lot of freedom. I feel like I already belong there.

What makes New York so free?

One can choose what one wants to be, how one wants to look, what one wants to do. Even the craziest is possible there. I wrote this down in my diary right at the beginning: no matter how crazy one is, one will always fit. There is always someone who is even crazier. It's not like in a small town, where when a person deviates, he is immediately a thorn in the side. I, too, found my freedom in New York. Now that I can go to Bohemia, I commute between two homes. I think my new book says a lot about New York's free will.

The one you introduced in Arles?

It is called *New York New York* and I will baptize it in Prague on August 26 in the Fotograf Gallery.

Are these also portraits?

Yes, from 2019 and 2020. Unlike *Young American*, it was photographed at a greater distance. There is more of the portraits, figures and also there is more of New York. It is a portrait of the city through people. Most of them came from elsewhere to fulfill their dreams. Like me.

It was only in New York that you began to take seriously your older photos, which you took before leaving for America. How did this happen?

I took pictures at home while studying painting, but I didn't see myself as a photographer at all. In the Czech Republic, it was considered that a person is what he studies, and if he does not study something, it is not. Photography was a necessity for me, I always had a desire to record moments. Between 2005 and 2010, I took a lot of pictures. On a small phone with a camera. This resulted in the *Live For the Weather* series.

When did you realize that even these images have value?

It wasn't until 2017, when I looked at my archive with Thomas Beachdel again. He was excited about it. At that time, I was experiencing great longing for home and suddenly I had old photos from Mikulov in front of my eyes. There was a bunch of very close friends with them, with whom I went for apricots, to swim in the quarry at night, hitchhiking around the republic. Simply, the experience of real youth, when a person is in college and does not yet have an adult life, does not go to work. Memories began to pop up. It was like a past life, very distant. I was surprised by those photos, there is youth and rawness in them.

They can be seen on your site. Have you exhibited them yet?

Yes, for the first time in New York at the group exhibition *Baby, I Like It Raw*, then last year at the Czech Center in Berlin on the Month of Photography and also in the Prague gallery 35m2. I also plan other projects with that. It connects with what I'm doing now. I am a foreign guest at a symposium in Mikulov and I take photos. I focused on my mom's portraits. I want to explore our relationship, a little to replace the eight years I was away and didn't go home.

I take polaroids and film. There will be an exhibition called *World Between Us*, on Saturday, August 7, it will open in Mikulov at the chateau and will be on view until October 31. My mother and I will choose the photos, the collaborative process is very important in this series and completely new for me and my mother. I'll let her choose her favorite photos that capture our relationship. I'm really looking forward to it, it's another way to spend time together and deepen our relationship. I haven't been to Mikulov for so long since I left. I'm here for a month and a half and for the first time in the summer.

Will you exhibit the early works in Mikulov? There is a lot of nudity in them and Mikulov is not New York.

But definitely, sometime in the future it would be great. I think for a lot of friends it could be a nice return to the past.

After the publication of the first *Young American* book in 2018, you attracted a lot of attention, you gave over 90 interviews in half a year. Even the biggest celebrity will not succeed in the Czech Republic. Are you famous in America?

This is difficult to judge. I never see what it looks like from the outside, I'm in the middle of it. But there were a lot of conversations. I nodded to most, because there's a lot going on in New York and reviews and interviews are important. They give me a voice, visibility and the opportunity to present people my work from my point of view. I see every interview as an opportunity to get closer to the audience.



Marie Tomanova, *Gracie*, 2020, from the book *New York New York*. Photo: Hatje Cantz publishing house

Was any groundbreaking?

When I read on my mobile a few years ago that they were interested in an interview in my favorite British magazine, *iD*, I had to sit on a bollard. I was just leaving work and I couldn't believe it at all. I had a feeling that now the world would change, that it would be "it". But of course, I soon found out that it was different. There's a lot more to those conversations, it's a long way to go before that changes. I have been taking photography full time only since last year. I have my second book this year and I am planning a lot of exhibitions. For example, they chose an exhibition from Arles for the *Jimei x Arles International Photo Festival* in China, and after three years I will be exhibiting again in New York, at the C24 Gallery in Chelsea. It may seem like it happened all of a sudden, but I've been working on it for years.

Success on the art scene has also brought you commercial contracts. How do you manage to connect them with free creation?

Great so far. The first major order was for *New York Magazine* the year before last. It helped that I christened Young American in Manhattan at Dashwood Books, and many people found out. The foreword was written by Ryan McGinley, an amazing photographer. Thanks to that, the editor of the New York Magazine called me to stop by. I was on a branch of it. They wanted me to photograph the entire autumn fashion portfolio for the September issue, ie several pages, things from the biggest brands such as Dior, Chanel, Gucci. I took pictures all July, over 20 people. Large production. I photographed it all on young people, like they were in my book. They weren't supermodels, and I enjoyed it the most.

Great production, it sounds like you don't have much creative work left for you.

It was different. The main photo editor, Jody Quon, was flipping through my book during our first meeting, which was a beautiful moment for me. She has already experienced a lot and suddenly says that when looking at my photos she has the same feeling as years ago when Ryan McGinley came up with his first portfolio. She looked at his photos and told herself that a new generation of creative young people from the New York scene was coming. And she reportedly experienced it again with my book - a great honor for me.

She asked if I could shoot fashion just like the portraits in my book. It was supposed to be with that high-end fashion, but to make it look completely natural. It's not quite easy. These are things that none of us or my friends can afford. I'll put them in and I need it to look like it's real.

How did the photo shoot turn out?

I took care of everything in this job. I chose which pieces of clothing from different brands to take pictures. I assigned it to people to suit them. I took care of the whole casting and I also found all the locations. I took photos all over New York, mostly without an assistant. Me with a small analog camera, as always. Just this time we had a bunch of fashion brands on the couch and gradually dressed. It was a great experience.

So no make-up artist, hairdresser or lighting assistant?

Mostly not. I like to work alone. Sometimes it doesn't work without a make-up artist, stylist and assistant, but I still take pictures without lights and other extra things.

What else did you take pictures of?

Last cover for Czech-Slovak *Vogue*. I took pictures of Paulina Pořízková at her home in Manhattan. It was exactly the 40th anniversary of her first German *Vogue* cover. Paulina thought we were going to take pictures just for fun when I came alone with only a small camera, and in the end it was an envelope. At *Vogue*, they were initially afraid that, due to nudity, it would not pass the Condé Nast leadership. But it was a great success and they approved the spread on all fronts. It caused quite a stir and eventually other titles wrote about it, *Fox News*, *People*, *CNN*, *The Guardian* and others. I couldn't have wished for a better first spread for *Vogue* than this one.

Aren't you afraid that the world of fashion will grind you over time and you won't be left with creativity for art photos?

Fashion photography is very fast. One learns that he will do something, it is planned for a week, for another photo. It's a quickie. But an art photo, exhibitions and a book are different. I have been working on one project for several years. It is a much slower and more internal process, very important to me. I'm already starting work on two more books and I'm slowly planning exhibitions for next year. Photography is my passion, and when I'm not taking photos, I think about new projects. It's a creative process that is my own, and I feel it doesn't end there. I take it as a content of life.

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