

**British Journal  
of Photography**

**MARIE TOMANOVA CELEBRATES THE CITY THAT  
HELPED SHAPE HER PRACTICE**

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*John*. 2020 © Marie Tomanova.

In 2011, Marie Tomanova left her family's farm in the small border town of Mikulov, Czech Republic, and travelled to America's West Coast. She was 26 and alone. Despite having just completed an MFA in painting, she felt lost. It was only a year later, two weeks after moving to New York, that she found her direction after visiting a 2012 show of the late Francesca Woodman's work at the Guggenheim museum. Woodman's work resonated, and so began Tomanova's journey as both a photographer and a resident of New York, employing photography to understand and carve out a place for herself in this new world.

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*New York New York*, which follows her acclaimed first publication *Young American* (2019) and launches today 29 September at Dashwood Books, New York, brings together portraits made across the city, mostly during 2019 and 2020. As Kim Gordon, formerly of the band Sonic Youth, expresses in her foreword: New York is a place of “freedom”, “good times” and ultimately somewhere that “being ‘cool’ is accessible to all, a New York kind of democracy”. And in *New York New York*, an assemblage of young and – for lack of a better phrase – ‘cool’ individuals, who Tomanova captures in her distinctive style, embodies this spirit. Indeed, this is Tomanova’s New York, and a sense of her world – the adventure, experimentation and freedom – bursts through the individuals immortalised on its pages.

Below, Tomanova discusses making the work.

**British Journal of Photography: What motivated this project. How did it develop?**

Marie Tomanova: There was not a specific motivation other than taking pictures of people, meeting people, and sharing and collaborating. Everything after that is just a wonderful result. The exhibitions and the book, which have emerged, are just other ways of being together and sharing – ways of communicating.

I mostly made the photographs for *New York New York* between 2019 and 2020. Although there are some from before – from as early as 2016. I had been wanting to do a more expansive and sweeping project than the *Young American* (Paradigm Publishing, 2019) body of work, which was very specific and focused in many ways. Although, at its core, that work is also about connection and identity.

**BJP: What are the main themes that run through the publication?**

MT: The main theme of *New York New York* is New York. That was the title from the beginning; it just...fit. However, there were some other titles that came up as we edited and shaped the work. These loosely indicate the thinking behind the project. *Coming to and Becoming in*, was one, and *Inside Outside* another. These were never real titles, but instead glyphs for the project’s themes and feelings.

*New York New York* is about identity and freedom. The freedom to find yourself and to be yourself. It is about New York as a place of becoming. This is part of what Kim Gordon touches on in her foreword. She shares her experience of coming to New York as a young artist. It seems similar to mine and the experiences of so many of the people photographed for the book. We all come here for a reason—to be ourselves, maybe to find ourselves, our most true selves, to create ourselves. Growing up and becoming who you want to be, not what others want you to be, is not always easy. New York is a special place for that becoming. It may be a difficult place, but it is also magical. Maybe we all come for that magic.

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**2 4***Gracie.* 2020 © Marie Tomanova.**How have you endeavoured to capture the atmosphere of the city and your subjects through your images?**

It is just there. I make images with people in places and there is always the sense of creating together: the image just flows from there. The photographs in *New York New York* flowed a little more easily than in *Young American*; I step back further in *New York New York*, and I'm more at ease. I have literally opened up the frame.

Indeed, in *New York New York* I feel like I've found a home. This is how *New York New York* is different to *Young American*, which was about me seeking connection as someone who felt outside of something as an immigrant living in the city. I photographed *Young American* during a difficult time when I was trying to see myself, and fit into the social landscape of the US in some way. Of course, I was also making it during a period when the country's political landscape was particularly rough and conservative. I was often afraid, but also disappointed, and *Young American* was my antidote; it is what I wanted America to be.

Ryan McGinley articulated it beautifully in his introduction to the book, "This is a future free of gender binaries and stale old definitions of beauty. In Marie's world, people can just simply be. I wish all of America's youth culture looked like Marie's photos of Downtown, diverse and inclusive." And this is what *New York New York* looks like. It is what *New York New York* is.

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*Isabel.* 2020 © Marie Tomanova.

**BJP: Can you select one of the images and describe the story behind it?**

MT: This is a summer 2020 photograph of Isabel [below] with a skinned elbow after falling off a skateboard. I met Isabel at this crazy skate event at Tompkins Square Park one afternoon. I don't know if it was a weekend or what—the days just blended together. But, this was during a time when the city was like I had never seen it before. Every day, there were huge Black Lives Matter protests, and at night there were sirens, people setting off fireworks, helicopters with lights overhead and the pandemic still raging and all of this fear.

Isabel had this energy and I related to her. She is fierce, strong, inspiring, and New York. So we created several photographs that day and then we got together and made some more. And this image is from one of those days, again at the East River. When I came to the US, my initial work depicted me in the landscape. I was trying to see myself in the space that is America. This image is, in a way, an extension of that.

**What does the work express about New York and youth culture, today and historically?**

This is such a good question. It feels like one I am not entirely equipped to answer because it is so vast. But, I suppose that is what all of the 145 photographs in *New York New York* do together. They answer the question for me. They show New York and youth culture, or really New York Cities and youth cultures, as plural, because New York is really millions of places and youth culture is so many cultures, some which overlap and some that do not. *New York New York* is about all of this. It is about our identity and identities, as individuals and as a whole, as being human.

<https://www.1854.photography/2021/09/marie-tomanova-celebrates-the-city-that-helped-shape-her-practice/>