

ARTFORUM

Tomasz Machciński

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Tomasz Machciński, *Untitled*, 2002, gelatin silver print, 9 6/8 × 13 3/4".

Born an orphan in Poland during World War II, Tomasz Machciński (1942–2022) is four years old when he receives a photograph of an American actress, Joan Tompkins. The image is signed “With love to ‘Tommy’ from ‘Mother’ Joan,” leading him to believe that she’s his mother—in fact Tompkins has spotted him through the Foster Parents Plan, which links conflict-affected children with sponsors. Portrait photography makes a decisive entry into his life as the place of the Other, where fantasy might materialize. Self-taught, alone, and living in great material deprivation, this outsider artist goes on to tirelessly construct an atlas of 22,000 self-portraits surveying the human condition. Reflected through a Camp mirror, this natural-born actor disguises himself, develops an entire vocabulary of gestures, and invents an ever-changing personal mythology.

He will not be recognized in Poland until four years before his death, with the creation of the Tomasz Machciński Foundation. This rare solo exhibition features a selection of forty-two small black-and-white prints made from 1966—the year of his debut—to 2006, followed by an entire wall of forty-two larger color portraits dating from 2007 to 2020. All are dated but left untitled. Tomasz Machciński first focuses on close-ups, his face magnified in accordance with the aesthetic codes of Hollywood’s golden age (think Humphrey Bogart or Marlene Dietrich). Color, which appears with the arrival of digital photography, amplifies his presence; he doesn’t hesitate to put his aging face and body on display. Some portraits are comical, such as a 2015 photograph of an eccentric woman, mischievous and jovial, while others are darker, delusional, or grotesque to the point of monstrosity. Clearly, he doesn’t care about what others see—nor, in a more obvious sense, about market pressures. His successive incarnations evoke dada, the theater of the absurd, Brecht, Rose Sélavy, and the *transformistes* (drag) cabarets popular in interwar Europe. Rimbaud’s “*Je est un autre*” (“I is another”). In this way, his portraits beg comparison to Cindy Sherman, whose work he presaged.