

ROLE PLAY: TOMASZ MACHCIŃSKI AND TOM WILKINS

by Charlotte Jansen
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Tom Wilkins, *My TV Girls* #059, 1980, Grid of nine 5x-70 Polaroids, 18 1/8 x 15 3/8 in. (46 x 39 cm), Courtesy Ricco/Maresca and christian berst art brut



Tomasz Machciński, *Untitled*, 2005, Black and white analog photograph printed on baryta paper, 3 5/8 x 5 1/8 in. (9.3 x 13 cm), Courtesy Ricco/Maresca and christian berst art brut

One is known as the “man of a thousand faces,” the other was an obsessive recluse who died in obscurity. The strange and beguiling worlds of Tomasz Machciński and Tom Wilkins collide at Independent this year in a dual presentation by christian berst art brut, Paris, and Ricco/Maresca, New York. The two figures occupy an unusual place in the history of photography, both outsiders who brought a raw, deeply personal intensity to the genre of portraiture, yielding staggering bodies of work and often disturbing results.

Machciński was a photographer by intent. Born in the Polish village of Górki in 1942, his early life was marred by tragedy. Orphaned from infancy, he grew up in children’s homes and hospitals, where he was treated for bone tuberculosis and learned how to walk again. The young Machciński became profoundly attached to the American actress Joan Tompkins, who wrote him encouraging letters as part of a remote adoption program for war orphans. The realization, years later, that Tompkins was not his mother provoked a crisis of identity that became the centrifugal force in his artistic practice.

By the time Machciński passed away aged 79 in 2022, he had created more than 22,000 self-portraits, both still and moving image, in black and white and later color. Working before Cindy Sherman—who bears an obvious comparison to Machciński—he cast himself in a dazzling cornucopia of roles. Through these images he personifies a flamboyant woman wearing a electric blue dress, red lipstick, and a lampshade hat; a soldier caught mid-shave, his face covered in foam; a supplicating nun; an austere priest; a topless macho guitarist; and a spray-tanned bodybuilder. Highly stylized, made up, and costumed, Machciński’s immense, endlessly inventive range of characters flits seamlessly between social classes, genders, sexualities, and creeds—and at times extends to other ethnicities.

“Pseudomorphism might make some think that these images are inappropriate, but this logic of appearances—which is also at the root of racial prejudices—is profoundly misled,” explain Christian Berst and Adriana Bustamante, the managing director of christian berst art brut.

Their thoughts align with the art historian Anke Kempkes, who argues in an essay titled “The Changing Man” that Machciński’s “conspicuous use of different ‘coloured’ faces is a practice that expresses his socio-political alignment with, and deep, running empathy for, the subaltern position in society.” Machciński’s photographs of himself with darkened skin could be seen not as straightforward stereotypes of different ethnicities, according to Kempkes, but as subversive appropriations of the “power mechanism of colonial representation, as well as of social discrimination.” She identifies this approach as being “subtly interwoven with the artist’s own narrative.”



Tomasz Machciński, *Untitled*, 1968, Black and white analog photograph printed on baryta paper, 3 1/8 x 2 in. (8 x 5 cm), Courtesy Ricco/Maresca and christian berst art brut

Although Machciński's myriad impersonations demonstrate a clear creative intent, which was also stated by the artist during his lifetime, he has until now been a relatively marginalized art brut figure within the contemporary art world. His extraordinary body of work only began to be recognized at the end of his life, with a film screening at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 2018, a first major retrospective presented at the Manggha Museum in Krakow in 2021, and an acclaimed solo show by christian berst art brut at Paris Photo the same year.

By contrast, Tom Wilkins never intended to exhibit his photographs in public. Little is known about this American artist-by-accident. His cache of 900 polaroids of women actors on a grainy television screen, apparently taken from his sofa between 1978 and 1982, was discovered by chance after his death. The French curator Sebastian Girard purchased them unseen at an auction. Wilkins's polaroids were meticulously captioned and organized into albums labeled *My TV Girls*. At Independent, the images will be displayed in grids of nine, mimicking the feeling of opening the pages of his private albums. Berst argues that this method, similar to Machciński's ordering of his self-portraits, "generates a sense of togetherness that responds to a common desire of staging their production."



Tom Wilkins, *My TV Girls* #099, 1981, Grid of nine SX-70 Polaroids, 18 1/8 x 13 3/8 in. (46 x 39 cm), Courtesy Ricco/Maresca and christian berst art brut

Yet it is not known why Wilkins photographed these celluloid stars acting in different films and TV shows—Linda Gray as Sue Ellen Ewing in *Dallas*, Farrah Fawcett as Jill Munroe in *Charlie's Angels*, Joyce DeWitt as Janet Wood in *Three's Company*. Blurred and distant, the polaroids are portraits of portraits, images of actors playing roles as filtered through a screen, evoking a certain kind of longing and dislocation. Wilkins tends to capture the moments the women appear in states of undress, and his handwritten captions reference their underwear and breasts, adding an undeniable tone of eroticism.

A single self-portrait was found among the collection, in which Wilkins appears in an unbuttoned shirt and bra, his face hidden by the camera. Did he want to emulate the women who obsessed him? Does this single image turn his voyeurism into a study for his own transformation? These questions will never be answered, since Wilkins never spoke of why he made the photographs. He died in 2007 in Boston, and he seems to have lived in isolation, with no known friends or family. It is entirely up to the viewer to interpret the real motivation behind Wilkins's image-making.

Still, there are intriguing parallels between these two artists. They shared a fascination with western constructs of identity disseminated through the prevalent media of their era, television and cinema, and particularly with the female icons of the screen. Berst and Bustamante point to Wilkins's "manic and methodical" catalog of the women on his TV as a document of the "construction of the feminine genre and social role, as much as it reveals the extreme degree of passion one can put into the building of its own identity." With a theatrical sense of identity play, Machciński's self-portraits similarly convey a deep-rooted sense of seeking. His reconstructions tirelessly take down every kind of modern stereotype, often wearing maniacal expressions and forced, superficial smiles that leave an uneasy imprint on the viewer's mind.

"Artistic practices of both this magnitude and coherence are rare," Berst and Bustamante reflect, adding that "the fact that these creations have long been kept secret, at the margin of what is commonly shared, paradoxically becomes a way of revealing something about human nature." Buffeted by their positions as outsiders existing on the periphery of society, Wilkins and Machciński gained a sharpened view of the universal, serving a deft blow to the grinding maw of social norms, censorship, and repression.



Tom Wilkins, *Me Wearing 38B Beige Playtex Beautiful Ones Lace Bra*, 1981, SX-70 Polaroid, 4 1/4 x 3 1/2 in. (10.8 x 8.9 cm), Courtesy Ricco/Maresca and christian berst art brut

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Learn more about christian berst art brut and Ricco/Maresca's presentation of Tomasz Machciński and Tom Wilkins at Independent 2024.

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