

# Joanna Piotrowska's Unsettling Photography Forcefully Confronts Hidden Violence



BY ALEX GREENBERGER  November 30, 2020 3:16pm

In Joanna Piotrowska's strange and sometimes disturbing photography, individuals are often arranged in positions that appear uncannily familiar. They push at each others faces, as though locked in combat, or they are slung around or over one another, in tableaux that can feel intimate or slightly violent, depending on the setting. Her stark black-and-white pictures needle at the subconscious, drawing up unexpected associations having to do with the bizarre power dynamics that course everyday interactions, in particular the ones that take place in the home.

Piotrowska's photography has proven captivating, not only in her home country of Poland, where it was recently the subject of an exhibition at the Zacheta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, but also far beyond. Not yet 40 years old, Piotrowska's work has been included in the Museum of Modern Art's prestigious "New Photography" exhibition series and the Berlin Biennale; she has also shot images for Prada and exhibited at Tate Britain in London. Last month, the London-based artist made headlines when she sold editions of one of her photographs to benefit women's rights organizations aiding in the fight against an abortion ban in Poland.



Joanna Piotrowska, Untitled, 2019.  
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To hear more about Piotrowska's photography, ARTnews interviewed the artist by email. The conversation follows below.

*ARTnews: Much of your work has been concerned with domestic spaces and the tensions that pervade them. What interests you about homes and the like?*

Joanna Piotrowska: Domestic space is an incredibly rich and complex microcosm. We can examine domestic spaces from many different perspectives: through the prism of economy, philosophy, phenomenology, labor, and many others. There has been endless writing on the home environment and all its facets, yet our homes are continually changing, as we do. They are extensions of our ever changing selves and bodies, making them a source of endless stories. Politics and history reside not only in a private home's architecture, carpets, furnishings, and objects, but also within family relationships and hierarchies, games, gestures, and everyday situations. I like to look into domestic life and interiors to [consider] seemingly familiar gestures or activities and present them in a context that challenges our assumptions about these places and interpersonal experiences.

*Many of your images have featured models who appear to be confronting one another. You have stated that you are often dealing with vulnerability in your work. What draws you to that concept?*

I'm interested in relationships, and to be vulnerable is a necessary part of forming relationships. It is through our vulnerability that we can see others—and that we can be seen. I think in some ways, through my works, I'm trying to search for what it means to connect, to be authentic, and to feel safe in relation to another person. A birthplace for all of those is often vulnerability. Unfortunately, many of today's societies thrive on inequality and archaic power structures where vulnerability is perceived as weakness.

*In your series "Frowst," you consider the way that body gestures and positions can be telling about the way that families function. How did you go about making this series, and to what extent are the positions in it staged?*



Joanna Piotrowska, *A most gentle touch*, 2019.  
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I came across [the therapeutic method] Family Constellation when my sister was studying psychology and we had Bert Hellinger's books at home. Family Constellations were relatively common in Poland and Hellinger, the founder of the method, would sometimes even run sessions himself. Firstly, it was really interesting to discover a therapy, which does not rely fully on verbal expression. Secondly, I found the method fascinating to observe—it feels a bit like theatre. It involves stepping into a role with a great deal of authentic, strong emotions expressed on a “stage.” There is a bit of manipulation (in my understanding) and lots of ambiguous body language decoded by the therapist. The method is a combination of some elements of shamanism, psychology and therapist's intuition. It shows how strongly and directly we are connected to the history of past generations and how bigger social and political problems are reflected in personal family scenarios.

I'm not really a believer in this particular therapy, but I believe our bodies are carriers of socio-political experience, and I think that the traditional nuclear family unit reproduces wider structures of oppression and power. This can have a devastating effect on individuals, especially within Catholic society, which presents another layer of rotten relationships.

My works inspired by Family Constellation are entirely staged, with the same movements sometimes repeated before the camera many times. That element of artifice of staging simple and sometimes quite intimate moments combines well with the authenticity of domestic spaces and the very real family members I work with. I believe this combination of staged and real largely contributes to the uncanny atmospheres I portray.

*You recently donated funds gained through the sales of prints of one your photographs to women's rights organizations in Poland. How do your photographs engage issues associated with the position of women in society?*

Most of my work contains allusions to inequality and a surrounding discomfort with it. However, the project which most directly reflects my interest in the position of women in society is the one inspired by the body language taken from self-defense manuals. In these works we can see women in a physical struggle with something invisible and potentially impossible to name or capture, something which is so common for systemic racism or violence. I was very disturbed by the prospects of a total abortion ban and deeply moved by the hundreds of thousands of women who marched in the streets for weeks. For the first couple days, I couldn't sleep and felt very angry. It was through conversations I had with Magdalena Komornicka, who curated my solo exhibition currently on view at Zacheta National Gallery, that the idea for the donation of a work emerged. We were both surprised and really happy that together along with others we could raise a significant sum of money to support one of the biggest feminist organizations in Poland.



Joanna Piotrowska, *Untitled*, 2014.  
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*Many of your works have been shot in black and white, which you have mentioned is a format more often reserved for documentation. What interests you in that respect? Why do you more often choose to shoot in black and white?*

I'm interested in the intersection of fiction and reality and the present and the past, and I think all those aspects somehow coexist in black-and-white photography aesthetics. The black-and-white image is more reduced and therefore I think better frames gesture, a critical quality for my practice. Everything is more distilled (abstracted) in black-and-white images—the bodies and the objects more easily merge into one another.

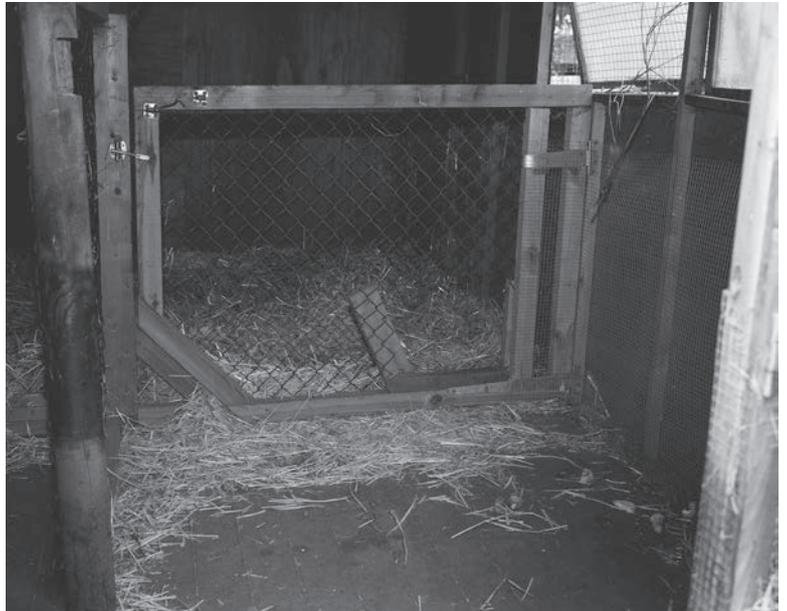
*What inspires your work as you are crafting your various series? Are you drawing on any sources as you work?*

Everyday human interactions or gestures inform a large part of my work. For example, the way in which I've been touched can register and be internally expanded as an idea. One work often leads to another, so a chain of these opens up into a series. For a number of years, I have been very interested in human-designed architecture for animals, so I spend a lot of time in zoos, both locally and in my travels. I began by documenting animal enclosures and at one point I noticed that many enclosures contain specific objects used for animal enrichment. Those objects became the focal point for a short film I later made. One of the objects I came across was a pair of elbow-length handmade leather gloves designed for handling animals. I photographed these gloves to reintroduce the element of touch from some of my previous work. So there is always a repetition of motifs and subjects which I can continually draw upon.

*For your "Shelters" series, you photographed makeshift homes in Lisbon, Rio de Janeiro, Warsaw, and London. Why did you make it a priority to shoot in several cities as opposed to just one? What were you thinking about when you made that series?*

I was thinking about shifting roles. The project is based on a game in which children play adults, yet in the images, we see adults playing a children's game. That shift from childhood to adulthood, from present to past, is also a touchstone in one of my earlier series in which I asked adults to repeat gestures taken from their childhood images.

In the act of building the hideout, the shelter, there is an innocence and a playfulness that characterizes this sort of children's game. However, when taken out from its youthful context and played by adults, unexpected qualities come to the foreground: the seriousness of seeking physical and emotional comfort, problems of migration and homelessness, as well as notions of accumulation of goods and materialism. These hand-assembled hideouts seem to be perfectly sufficient for a child's game—or even their life—but look dangerously unstable and fragile when inhabited by an adult. There is also an aspect of utopia in a home built within a home—as if the seeking of emotional or physical safety or material comfort was never fully satisfying. It was important for me to perform the game of building a shelter in various places so it has a more universal character and reveals an innate human vulnerability that transcends place.



Joanna Piotrowska, Enclosure XXVI, 2019.  
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