

# FAMILY ALBUM

Everyone who once scrolled through old family photographs must have imagined the destinies of people depicted on them. From the family history, a lot has been passed down about some people, less about the others, and some were simply forgotten. And so, we project our own ideas and experiences into the characters on graying photographic paper. From the expressions and poses of the people displayed on the photographs, we try to determine how they lived, what they felt, and how their contemporaries perceived them. In this way, we are able to create whole parallel family histories and compare them with our own reality.

It was the fascination by an intertwined web of family relationships that became the basis for the Family Album. The artist Zuzana Pustaiova has been making it for seven years. She picks up archive photographs of her ancestors from family albums and makes reproductions which she further enhances artistically. Her editing is deliberately decorative, matching the visual form of the original. We might think that the laces, color stickers, safety matches, feathers, yarns, and square millimeter papers, that all of that she uses only for decoration, however we couldn't be more wrong. A closer inspection reveals that the photographs are not without thought. Deliberate planning preceded triggering the shutter button – the person being photographed must have decided how to dress, what pose and expression to assume, in what environment they want to be photographed. These decisions predetermined (albeit unknowingly) the societal role of the subject – how they want to be seen by others as well as how their photographic appearance reflects their position within the family.

The artist problematizes and even challenges this characteristic stereotype. She turns the traditional roles upside down. See for yourself: a group portrait of men, leaning against neon plastic straws. A wedding pair, dancing across the galaxy. Soldiers, holding safety matches from the box with EU logo instead of rifles. Two hugging men, framed in laced hem. "Geometric" analysis of a toast. Colorful bees circling around a wine tasting man in a cellar. Portrait of a woman in a field, surrounded by pearls (these are actually small knots). A photograph of a military service soldier in front of a tank with a polka dot flag hanging out of the gun barrel. Or a portrait of a young woman accompanied by two pairs of cloned identical twins. No one was spared.

There's a sense of prickling, ironic humor in the way how the artist approaches her poor ancestors and relatives. But at the same time, this humor is sensitive, sincerely open and kind. The artist plays an absurd theatre here. Her enhancements make up a stage set while the people on the photographs are the actors. The spectators of the performance laugh, but when they leave, a disturbing sensation remains: in fact they have laughed at themselves.

Branislav Štěpánek

**Zuzana Pustaiová** (born 1990 in Levice, Slovakia) started her interest in visual arts with painting but soon switched to photography, which she studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava, Slovakia, and University of Applied Sciences in Bielefeld, Germany. Currently, she is completing her doctoral degree in Arts. She has received numerous awards in contemporary photography (1st Prize at the Rovinj Photodays 2018, finalist for the Lucie Foundation Scholarship in Los Angeles 2017, Honorable mention at Latitude Life APS in Italy 2019), and in 2018, she was named Slovak Photographer of the Year. She has exhibited internationally in Europe and Canada. Her first art book, based on the work *Faces of Family*, by Kehrer Verlag is currently underway, scheduled for publication in 2020. Pustaiová lives and works in Levice and in Bratislava.