

Franciska Legát

Melancholy of Freedom

Abstract

Franciska Legát's photographic practice investigates socially embedded narratives that shape both personal and generational identity. Her work draws on absurdity and subtle black humour as critical tools, allowing historical experience to be approached through human vulnerability and contradiction. Working primarily with staged photography, Legát adopts a documentary visual language that intentionally destabilizes the boundary between fiction and reality, encouraging viewers to question the reliability of memory and representation. In recent years, her artistic research has centered on the socialist past and its enduring psychological and cultural effects on her generation. In the series *Hellish Eden* (2021-2022), she reconstructs a past she did not directly experience but which nonetheless shaped her upbringing. Drawing from family stories and collective memory, the project presents fictional scenes that expose the paradoxical nature of Hungarian

socialism – simultaneously familiar and alien, oppressive and absurd. The constructed imagery reflects how inherited narratives function as fragmented, emotionally charged reconstructions rather than coherent histories. Her series *Different, Still the Same* (2022) turns toward the cyclical nature of history and the persistence of intergenerational trauma. Through atmospheres of isolation and emotional tension, the work conveys feelings of mistrust, loneliness, and latent despair. Legát's ongoing project *Melancholy of Freedom* (2023-present) addresses contemporary migration, focusing on Hungarian emigrants in Berlin. By combining staged and documentary strategies, the series frames emigration as an ambivalent state shaped by desire for freedom, experiences of loss, and the unresolved weight of post-socialist memory.

Key words

Absurdity. Fiction and Reality. Humour. Irony. Post-Socialist Country. Staged Photography. The Hungarian Communist Regime.



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Franciska Legát is primarily concerned with social issues that have a significant impact on her life. Absurdity and a kind of peculiar black humour play important roles in her works. This approach helps to make her subjects more human and allows viewers to look at the phenomena she presents from a new perspective. Her photos are staged, but by using an unusual documentary approach, her purpose is to blur the line between fiction and reality. In the last three years, in her photographic research, she has focused on the socialist past and its impact on her generation.

Her important artistic goal is reaching people who are not necessarily involved in art with her works, so she also planned her diploma installation for a public space to convey her thoughts to the widest possible audience. In her series *Hellish Eden* (2021-2022) she attempts to remember a time she hasn't lived in, yet which plays an important role in forming her identity and our current society. The title *Hellish Eden* refers to the duality and absurdity of the Hungarian communist regime during the 70s and 80s. Based on her parents' stories, Franciska captures fictional situations that could have been possible in the past, but which had never actually happened. Nowadays, especially in post-socialist countries, talking about the past with older generations is often taboo.

In her series *Different, Still the Same* (2022), Franciska reflects on the relationship between past and present, the continuous repetition of history and the mistakes of different generations. Dealing with the socialist past through both of her series, she highlights problems stemming from the past, but which also affect her generation. With her photos, she expresses such feelings as mistrust, hopelessness, and loneliness.

Her long-term project *Melancholy of Freedom* (2023-present) is a photo series about the ambivalent feelings of moving West from a post-socialist country. Although it was only a temporary stay, she also experienced these feelings to a lesser extent when she participated in the Erasmus scholarship program, first in the Netherlands and then in Germany.

The main characters of the project are families and individuals from different age groups, who left Hungary at different times and for different reasons to live in Berlin. Some of them escaped from Hungary during the communist regime, but the series also includes young adults who left due to the political and economic situation, or just to try their luck abroad. Her work contains both staged and documentary elements. By creating a fictional space inspired by the real-life stories and emotions of her subjects, she aims to portray how

past and present, geographical directions, and positive and negative memories intertwine, revealing that emigration for different reasons remains a relevant issue in post-socialist countries.

This series does not suggest that life is necessarily better abroad or that emigration is the only viable choice. Rather, through the experiences of others, it seeks to convey the many challenges such a decision entails – alongside the freedom and the potential for a higher standard of living. The title of the series reflects this ambivalence. In the photo series, Berlin appears as a symbolic scene: the city of freedom and a metaphor of the contrast between East and West, a Western city where old communist monuments in their new, constantly changing context are still visible.

Franciska began the series in 2023 during her Erasmus semester in Germany. A year later, it became her diploma project at the Photography MA program of the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design. Last year, as part of an internship, she travelled to Berlin and continued working on the series. The project so far includes both photographs and quotes from interviews conducted with the participants of the project. The final form of the completed work will be a photobook.

Hellish Eden (2021-2022)

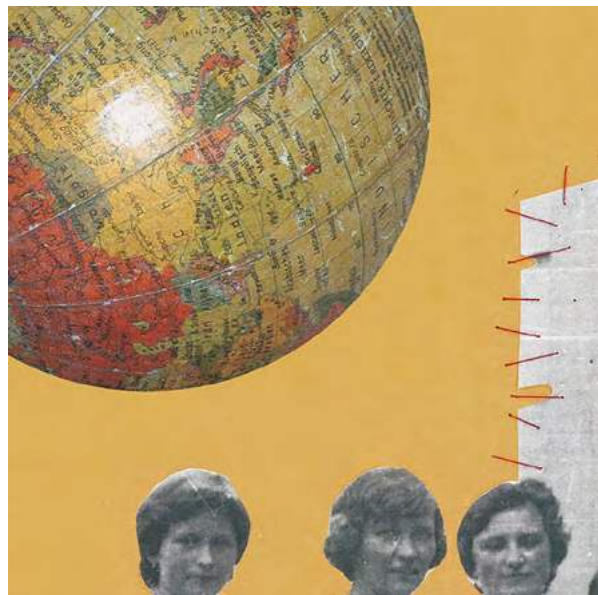
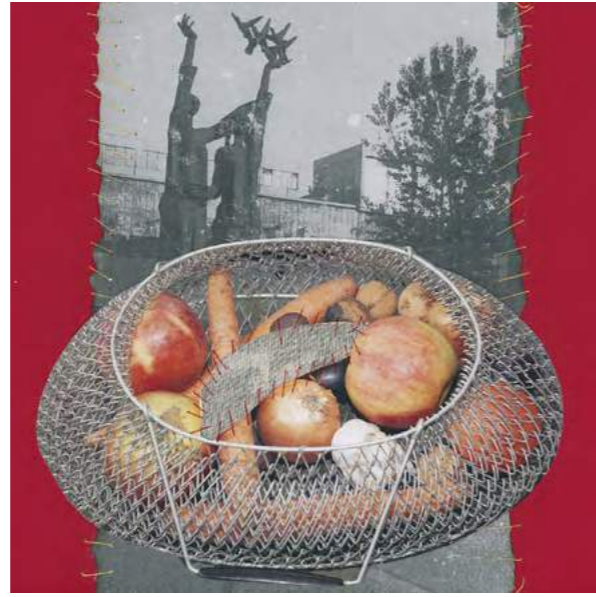








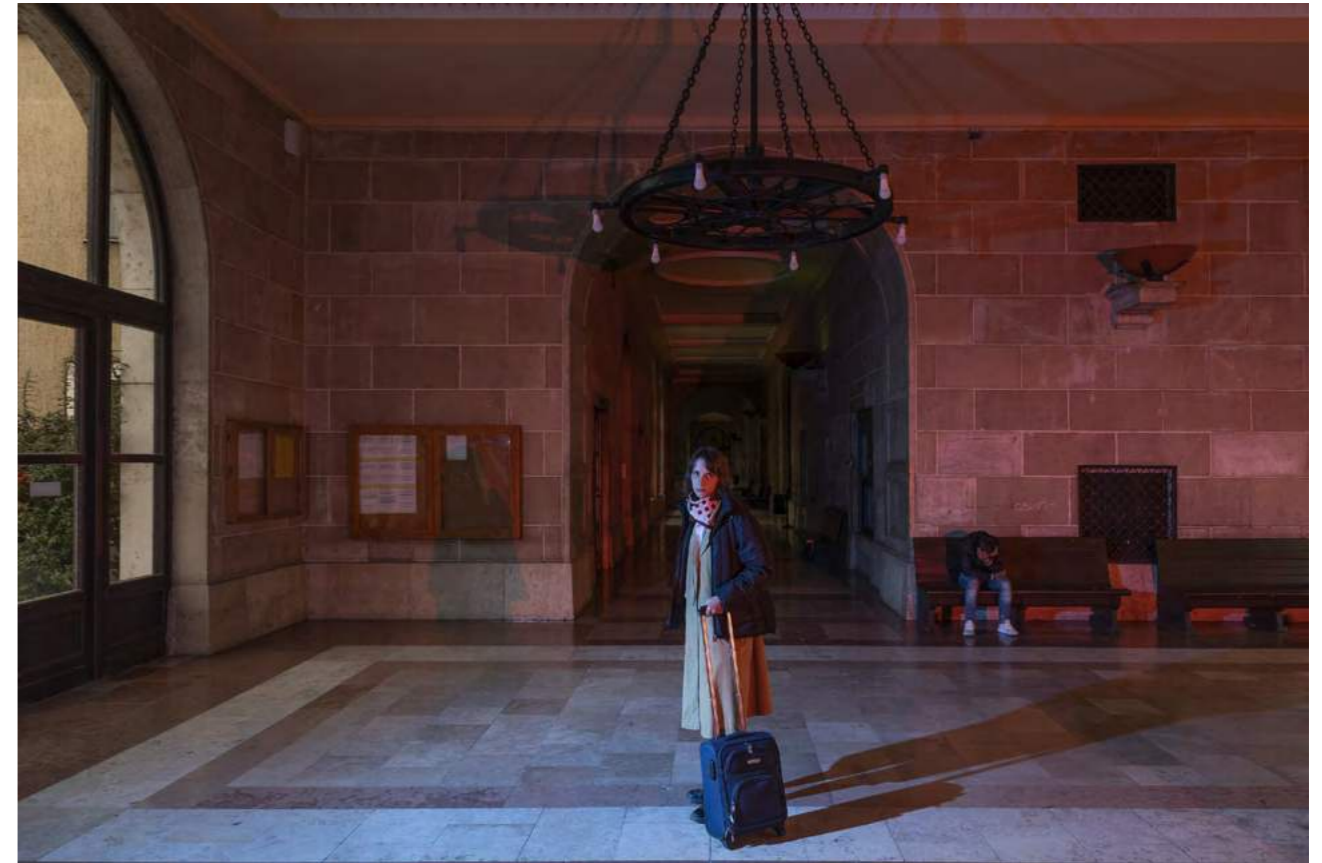




Different, Still the Same (2022)



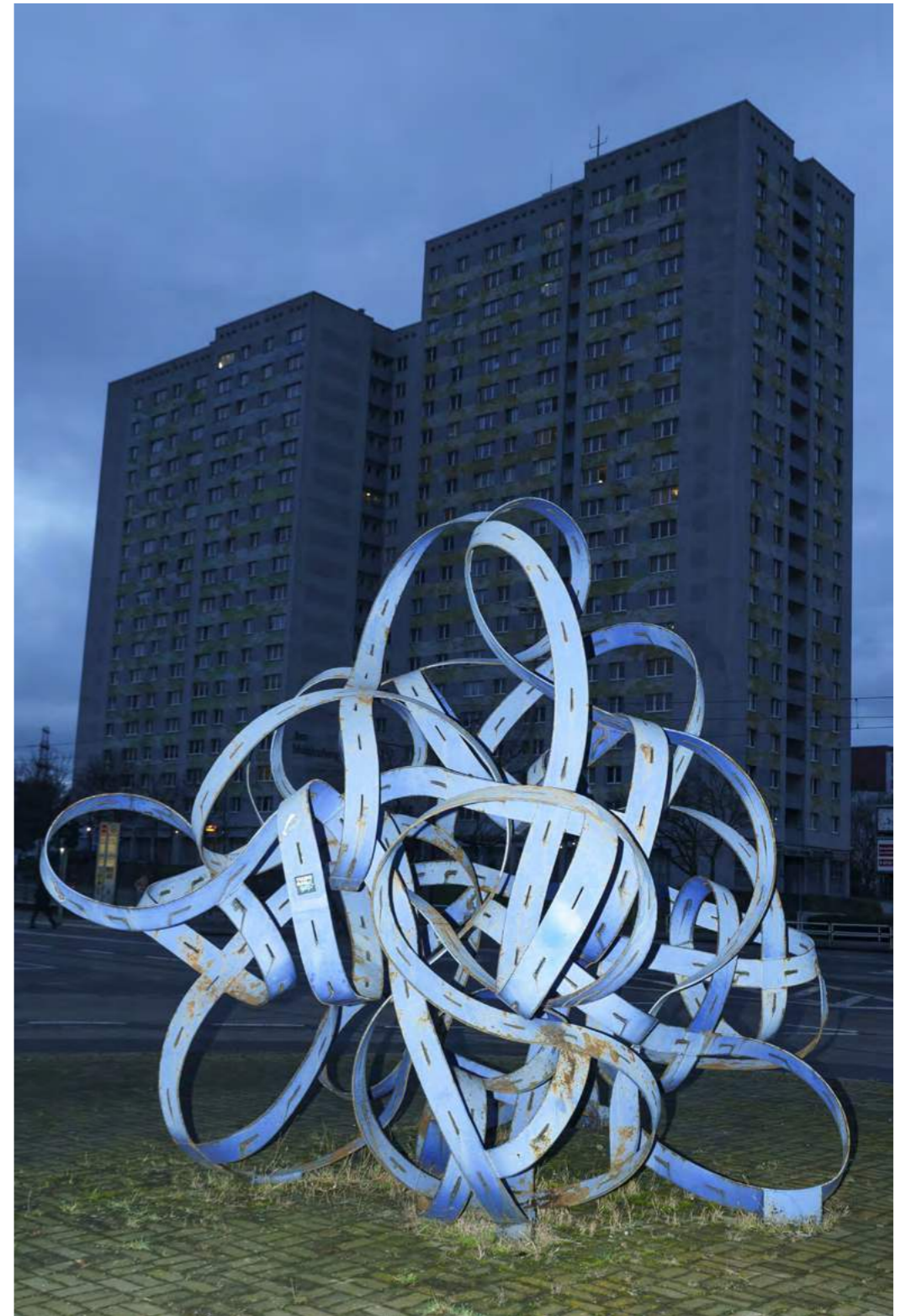




Melancholy of Freedom (2023-)















Franciska LEGÁT

(Budapest, Hungary, 1997)

Franciska Legát is a Budapest-based photographer. In 2024, she graduated from the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design from Master of Photography. She spent a semester in Germany at the HSBI Bielefeld and in the Netherlands at HKU, Utrecht. After finishing her studies she spent her traineeship in Berlin, working in the Bildband photo-book store, as an assistant while she was working on her ongoing photoseries, *Melancholy of Freedom*. Currently she studies as a Design and Visual Arts Teacher at the Moholy-Nagy University of Arts and Design.

Education

- since 2025** Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Design and Visual Arts Teacher MA, Budapest, HU
- 2021 - 2024** Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Photography MA, Budapest, HU
- 2018 - 2021** Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Photography BA, Budapest, HU
- 2017 - 2018** Art School of Buda, Photography, Budapest, HU
- 2013 - 2017** Közgazdasági Politechnikum High School, Budapest, HU

Grants and Scholarships

- 2025** Der Greif x Various Others - Bilder auf Reisen [Pictures on a Journey], Selected 2025, Pannónia Scholarship - Bildband, Berlin, DE
- 2023** Different Worlds 2023, 3rd Place, Ljubljana, SL
- 2023** Promenades Photographiques - PRIX MARK GROSSET-SAIF, Art Photography Prize, Blois, FR
- 2023** Your 501® Story - Levi's x PhotoVogue, Selected
- 2023** BPF Fresh Meat, Selected 2023, Budapest, HU
- 2023** Belgrade Photo New Talents, 2nd Place, Belgrade, RS
- 2023** Erasmus Scholarship, FH Bielefeld (2022/2023 summer semester), Bielefeld, DE
- 2023** Rotterdam Photo, "Freedom Redefined", Single Image Selection, Rotterdam, NL
- 2022** Paris Photo Carte Blanche Students, shortlist, Paris, FR
- 2022** BredaPhoto ITP, Selected, Breda, NL
- 2022** Erasmus Scholarship, HKU, (2019/2020 Spring semester), Utrecht, NL

Selected Exhibitions

- 2026** *Melancholy of Freedom*, solo pop-up exhibition, Neun Kelche, Berlin, DE

- 2025** *No Strings Attached*, group exhibition, Brody House, Budapest, HU
- 2024** *Upcycling TWO - MOME* Photography MA diploma exhibition, Capa Center, Budapest, HU
- 2024** *Exhibition of Presidents of Photography Societies from Ten Countries - Photo Beijing*, China Millennium Monument, Beijing, CN
- 2024** *Promenades Photographiques - La Cimaïse*, espace d'exposition de l'école d'Art de Blois, Blois, FR
- 2024** *PHOTO IS:RAEL - 11th International Photography Festival*, Enav Cultural Center & Gan Ofer, Tel Aviv, IL
- 2023** *A szabadság melankóliája [Melancholy of Freedom]*, solo exhibition, Foton Gallery, Budapest, HU
- 2023** *Fresh Meat - Budapest Photo Festival*, group exhibition, K6 Gallery, Budapest, HU
- 2023** *Belgrade Photo New Talents - Heritage House*, Belgrade, RS
- 2023** *Personal*, group exhibition, KVOST/EEP Berlin, KVOST Gallery, Berlin, DE
- 2022** *Freedom Redefined - Rotterdam Photo*, Willemsplein 85, Rotterdam, NL

- 2022** *Ember tervez [Man Proposes]*, group exhibition, MyMuseum Gallery, Budapest, HU
- 2022** *Oxitocin*, FFS new member exhibition, Foton Gallery, Budapest, HU
- 2022** *Theater of Dreams - BredaPhoto 10th Edition*, Backer & Rueb, Breda, NL
- 2022** *Vitamin-A - TOBE/ MOME* group exhibition, TOBE Gallery, Budapest, HU

Selected Publications and Interviews

Courrier International. (2024, March 23). *Portfolio. La photographe Franciska Legat réinvente le souvenir du communisme hongrois*. <https://www.courrierinternational.com/diaporama/portfolio-la-photographe-franciska-legat-reinvente-le-souvenir-du-communisme-hongrois>

See-zeen. (2023, August). *Franciska Legát*. <https://see-zeen.com/franciska-legat>

BROAD. (2022, May 13). *Franciska Legát - Hellish Eden*. <https://www.broad.community/blog/2022/5/13/franciska-legt-hellish-eden>

Membership

- 2022** FFS - Studio of Young Photographers, Budapest, HU

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