

Pavel Mára

Between Abstraction and Description

Abstract:

This presentation of works by the Czech photographer and teacher Pavel Mára (b. 1951) is based on a selection of four scholarly articles that were written about him (and are published here in their entirety or in part). Together with his biographical information and a brief overview of his exhibitions at home and abroad, the magazine provides information about Mára's activity as a creative photographer. The articles, by Anna Fárová (1989), Tomáš Pospěch (2012), Antonín Dufek (2015), and Radana Ulverová (2017), are arranged chronologically. They offer interpretations of his key series, which move between description and abstraction, which he began in the 1980s and has occasionally returned to in variations. The articles are accompanied by more than forty photographs, in black-and-white and in colour, most of which were made as triptychs. They provide a cross-section of the individual series, mostly portraits and nudes, indicating the importance of Mára's work in the contemporary Czech and international contexts.

Key words:

Contemporary Czech photography, Pavel Mára, portrait, nude, descriptive and abstract photography, large-format photography, conceptual photography, photographic series, Anna Fárová, Tomáš Pospěch, Antonín Dufek, Radana Ulverová.

PAVEL MÁRA:

PHOTOGRAPHS, 1988–89

Leading Czech commentators on fine arts and aesthetics write about the photographer Pavel Mára. They are attracted by his work, which, rather than being solely photography, is on the boundary of fine arts and what fine arts are concerned with. With his work, Mára raises new questions about abstract photography and its link to objective reality. His work consists of pictorial messages, often highly coded, in which the subject matter fades away, leaving only volumes, tones, and signs. We know that photography is tied to reality, and if Mára's pictures often seem not to depict anything and could be called abstract, they are still essentially concerned with their subject matter, though the latter may be concealed by a complicated creative process. The photographer's striving for excellence and his pedantic perfectionism lead him to the verge of unintelligibility, as in his Mechanical Still Lifes from the early 1980s. Though underpinned by reality, they have extracted the essence of shape, line, and colour. The titles also correspond to the nature of mechanical contemporary

civilization: Signals, Machines, Toys, Sheet Metal, though we sense a subtle vibration and concealed sensitivity behind the rigorously technical execution and the minimum of remaining signs. The layering of surfaces, the choice of colours, bringing thoughts and ideas to the verge of incommunicability make this a situation pregnant with anxious brilliance, gradually revealing far more than is obvious at first sight. Shapes have not been flattened out; they are alive in the vibration of structures and surfaces. The compositions are constantly renewed in new relations, symmetric and asymmetric. By losing their true scale, children's building blocks evoke a new notion of monumentality and recollections of unknown monuments.

Can photography be truly abstract if it works with its own means of expression and reality? After all, it is continuously tied to the subject matter, and simply working with it can provide the experience of it being non-figurative. A change in scale, an unusual angle of view, taking an object out of its context, a choice of artificial colours, can all help to move photography beyond the bounds of reality and create a new, parallel world. It is true that Mára's photographs speak to us in the language of the modern technical age, though not only by means of dependence on mechanical objects. That modernity actually consists in Mára's smoothness of vision, in which the eye glides over the photograph as if over the highly polished body of a car or the most luxurious

imported wrapping paper. Mára the photographer is elegant, and seems exotic in the midst of our everyday life. While we stagger around in feelings of past centuries, which are supported by everything around us, he seems like a visitor from another land on his way towards another era. He thus takes himself out of context, and becomes abstract by his stance, his way of thinking, and his perception of the visible. At times he seems to be somewhere between art and utility. It is easy to imagine how well his photographs could be used, but it is equally clear how decorative they are, something between a sophisticated work of art and an object of everyday use.

Anna Fárová (1989)

PAVEL MÁRA: USUALLY LESS

Pavel Mára graduated twice from the Film and Television School of Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU), Prague, in the 1970s, having been trained as a director of photography and then as a photographer. He has been teaching at the Institute of Creative Photography, Silesian University, Opava, for more than fifteen years. And yet, despite his being linked with such important photographic institutions, his work has taken place on the strange margins of the Czech scene. Since the 1970s, he has applied strategies and approaches from the world of advertising photography and has aroused great interest with his experiments with technology, large formats, and with what was then the exceptional use of colour photography, something

that almost never appeared outside the world of advertising. He has not shied away from the concreteness of colour or the technical difficulties connected with its use.

At a time when the most popular exhibition format for photographs was 30 × 40 cm paper, he was one of the few to follow the example of Čestmír Krátký and Jan Svoboda and use the largest format photographic paper available. Like these two artists, he elevated the photographic print to the status of a special artefact, and original photographs thereby once and for all became unique, irreplaceable by reproductions, and had to be seen in the studio or gallery in order to appreciate their true size and quality. From there, it was but a short step to the transition into space, to reliefs and sculptures made of photographs on zinc sheet metal (for example, Head of I. B., 1988) and photo enlargements on canvas, which were stretched on steel structures. By creating special installations already in the late 1980s, Mára became one of the few Czech artists (like Aleš Kuneš, who was among the first and most radical) to include the context of the location in their photos, well before the later generation of the 1990s and in contexts different from theirs.

Mára has developed his work in large thematically and technologically defined series, in which appears a fruitful dialogue developed over time and across the various individual series. His interest in abstracting detail out of reality is visible throughout his work. His art is thus unusually uniform and

continuous even when he seems to have moved to completely different themes, for example, from nudes to machines, construction sets and signs, and from there back to the human face and body.

The black-and-white photographs of the Bodies series (1969) and the subsequent serigraphs, zinc and glass reliefs, and paintings on transparent film in the Torsos series (1983–85) significantly shaped the style of then popular 'graphism'. By filtering out details and cut-outs, he reduced human torsos to a few basic shapes and lines. In the next large series, Mechanical Still Lifes (1976–84), he was discovering the artistic values of various metal and plastic objects. In their depiction, he achieved almost abstract geometric forms by radical reduction to elemental lines, surfaces, colours, and gleams.

In the early 1980s, Mára returned to depiction of the human body. This interest resulted mainly in the Figures series, which was gradually developed in several sets of photographs between 1986 and 1990: Portraits (1988–89), Veils (1989) and Madonnas '90. His approach to the body, matter-of-fact and free of eroticism, culminates here in studies working with backlighting and motion blur, in references to op art (Figures '87), and increasingly larger formats, until he gradually came to three-dimensional objects and installations. In the early 1990s, a striking shift occurred in Mára's work in the Triptychs series (1990–93). Here, he again not only pushes the boundaries of the huge formats

of his work, but also, indeed mainly, makes photography a conceptual art. As his element of expression, he transfers the traditional principle of balancing vertical lines (which is used in the technical photography of architecture) to the genres of the nude and the portrait. The larger-than-life-size figures and faces, photographed from below, straight on, and from above, are juxtaposed, while maintaining the parallelism of the verticals. The consistently rational construct and the minimal shift in three sequences causes an unusually suggestive shift in psychological expression and thus forms a meaning which originates not in the space of the photographic surfaces but in the narrow gap between the sequences. The rational construct is also evident in the second of Mára's distinctive series from the 1990s, Mechanical Corpuses (1997), which refers, and not only by its title, to the depiction of minimalist objective motifs in Mechanical Still Lifes. Like his earlier still lifes, Triptychs and Mechanical Corpuses from the 1990s are, among other things, an interesting contribution to thinking about colour photography. Colour is not borne by the subject matter but by light, and it directly serves to create expression. In contrast to his previous works, Mára, manipulating colour in his own special way, made Madonnas '99 in the late 1990s, a series of half-figures of naked female bodies, which, mainly in their gestures, make reference to the Virgin Mary. Applying a somewhat cool and detached 'technicist' treatment,

he was clearly not concerned with the spiritual charge of this Christian theme but rather with the contexts of current perceptions of woman.

Mára's new works, starting with the breakthrough Space in Space series (2002), also have their origins in the ideas of the preceding years. It is not only that here Mára has left the studio after many years, and concrete space appears in his photographs, but it is also, indeed mainly, that he has begun to explore the technology of digital photography, making it the second parallel theme of his work as he had previously done with analogue photography. In this connection, Lucia Lendelová Fišerová has written about the pixelated web of the digital image that the photographer caused to appear and about Mára's ability to make the medium itself take the initiative. In the following years, Mára created several series, in which he varied and further developed his earlier technological and visual experiments. The titles of the series, Black Corpuses: Family (2001), Triptychs (2005–06), Memory (2009), and Negative Heads (2010–11), attest to this tendency in which his experience with technological and specifically photographic innovations, colour, and the large format all comes together and is capitalized upon. He has in this way created an extensive multilayered system of allusions to his earlier work.

Tomáš Pospěch (2012)

PAVEL MÁRA: CONCEPTS, SHAPES AND COLOURS

Achieving sharply defined images is probably the leading principle in the oeuvre of Pavel Mára. His work is accompanied by perfectionism, the absolute mastery of the craft, and, mainly, a witty use of the medium of photography. The results are not uniform; they vary in particular by the degree of definiteness. Mára works in series, some of which admirably depict the organic and inorganic world as geometric forms. Rarely is one of his pictures the result of using a special lens. In other series, photographic description is defamiliarized by portraying people and things in unnatural colours and ultimately, at the opposite pole of his exploration of geometric shapes, there are works that are fascinating because of their verism, their detailed 'life-like' description of the world. The important thing is that the range between the two poles is not determined by the photographer's mood or decisions about the form of the picture. The appearance of Mára's works is perhaps always the result of the method he chooses to create the image. The concept, perhaps an experiment, always comes first; its possibilities are carried out in a series, with sometimes abstract, sometimes carefully recorded subject matter, depending on the nature of the process he has chosen. In this sense, it is conceptual work, starting from an analysis of the possibilities of the medium.

In the Memory series, from 2009, Mára again uses negative reversed colours. These works

have a unique look. Bluish naked bodies in a grey geometric space are linked together or combined only with some kind of yellow and purple hosepipe; everything is immaterial, wrapped in light, apparently transparent. Simply the colour harmony is unique and impressive. The main thing, however, is the bodies, photographed, if possible, in such a way as to achieve the maximum suppression of their materiality, together with the fact that they are on the floor. The models' figures, interactions, and gestures are dynamic, but not unambiguous; only sometimes do they evoke struggle. In his review, Aleš Kuneš pointed out that Mára may have been inspired by the classical statue of Laocoön and his sons struggling with serpents. The undefined space and the 'hovering' figures in a void, however, may also be allusions to a sacred space, as has sometimes been noted (not surprisingly, since Mára also made Madonnas and Veils), or another imaginary place or outer space. The tendency to monumentality, present in his work from the very beginning, has intensified in this set both materially (for example, the dimensions of the tetraptychs from the Memory series come to 420 × 280 cm in all), and also conceptually. The ambiguity of the depicted action refers to some place beyond this world, though not somewhere in the depths, but rather in the azure heights. The depicted bodies are almost pellucid, yet muscular, almost like Michelangelo's Last Judgement. They are photographs that are close to Czech figural

painting ranging from František Ronovský (1929–2006) to Mára's friend Ivan Bukovský (b. 1949). The photographer's work is just as impressive and of a similarly high quality, but it is exceptional in the techniques it employs. Mára has not gone the way of digital manipulations; he has remained a purist who discovers the technological possibilities of stylization while preserving the purity of the medium. Thanks to that, the result is also unique. We know that the depicted figures really were in the space and really were doing just what we see them doing; despite their dematerialized extraterrestrial colours, they are depicted in all their details as people like us.

The Faces series (2012–14) is a fascinating elaboration of Mára's work. Can there be anything more basic, more primary, more simple? The geometrically precise sections of faces, which are depicted here in their negative form (as in some of the previous works), this time appear as prints of 9 × 12 cm colour negatives in their original ochre colour of the film (together with its edges). The heads are youthful, perhaps even those of children; their sex is indeterminate. Their appearance is 'unfinished', just beginning to take shape, and the negative image augments this many times over. All in all, even the negative image can reasonably be understood as unfinished photography. The eyes are hidden behind closed lids. Are these, then, living or lifeless beings? The lifeless face loses something

of its appearance, and the negative image also is abstract. Though it is mysteriously inscribed in the image, the definiteness of the depicted person will not appear until the positive image is made from the negative print or enlargement. Nevertheless, in Mára's treatment, the series has a certain range in terms of the definiteness of the appearance. Statue-like heads appeal to the viewer's visual repertoire, and are able to evoke, for example, the portrayal of the Buddha, a death mask, a classical Greek statue. But some of them also have the indications of facial expressions that belong only to the living – for example, a smile; when they are perceived, the whole series comes to life. The negative images, moreover, radiate light, thereby linking them to the universe and, for many people, also linking them to the existence of the spiritual world. They are something like pre-pictures, apparitions, whose interpretation and realization we cannot be certain of. It is no coincidence that they attracted Mára's attention at a time when negative-positive technology had been superseded by digital photography. In the Faces series, the negative image plays a role in the realization of the artist's credo, which would be fair to describe as a search for the general characteristics of the reality we live in, for which he uses technology and the principles of objectivity. Mára is searching for what is behind vision, and he gives form to it. His interpretations, however, are not merely subjective; they are also

technically and technologically objective.

Mára's whole oeuvre is characterized by discovery. It fits into the context of contemporary postmodern culture also because it is executed only in installations, which are always made for a specific space. Only by staying in such a space can it provide a full experience and better understanding. It is important to see the original of each work, simply because of its size and textural values. Its reproduction provides only general information.

To discover the meaning of these works one must search at a general level. Mára remains true to his starting point in the technology of pure photography and in the world of ideas and feelings, which is based on the experience of human existence as the search for the meaning of being an individual in society and the universe. It is not a search that leads to an achievable aim; rather it is a troubled journey, the point of which is the journey itself. In Mára's conception, it is a certain struggle with heroic features. Although highly aestheticized, his pictures represent an unsettling counterpart to the complacent existence of consumer mass society.

Antonín Dufek (2015)

MATER

The semantic status of photographs has been one of the most disputed topics ever since Charles Sanders Peirce called them icons, indexes, and symbols. How, then, in this connection, should one interpret Pavel Mára's photographic series, Mater, six monumental canvases on which the artist has portrayed, larger-than-life, his mother as she currently appears?

The face has from time immemorial been a central subject of social attention and human interaction. It expresses emotions, but facial features also say something, together with facial expressions, about a wide range of social and psychological aspects. In Mater, great details of the face, stripped of its volume by showing only a section, evoke sovereign intimacy – not only between the artist and the sitter, but also between the son and the archetypal mother.

Mára has conceived the series as two complementary triptychs. In comparison with his colour portraits of young girls from the Faces set (2012–14), which in their reversed tonality radiate light (like Madonnas '99, exhibited at Expo 2000, in Hanover), these are mercilessly revealing black-and-white pictures of a mother. The eyes are lacklustre, the skin wrinkled, the lips closed tightly, as if she were looking at us from the depths of time. Yet we have already seen this naturalistic mode of depiction in Mára's work: recall, in particular, his large-format Triptych of K. M. (1992); the 'topographic' approach to a live model, however, also appears in the thematically

identical 'time-lapse' series Family: Triptychs (1991–2011). Counterpoint is, for that matter, characteristic of Pavel Mára. The oscillation between realism and abstraction, negative and positive, and colour and black-and-white is present in all his work.

Taking photographs with a large-format camera from several angles of view is a reflection of the artist's training in cinematography. Yet his photographs do not tell a story. They communicate by means of the image which, when reproduced, results in something like a synonymic set. The shifting of the horizontal and vertical lines, typical of architectural photography, is something Mára was applying to his photographs of people even before the wave of conceptual photography represented by Bernd and Hilla Becher had reached Bohemia. Nevertheless, there are many correlations here: Mára's Triptychs from 1990–92, and also his most recent series, Mater (2016), are as descriptive and technically precise as the Bechers' black-and-white photos of industrial buildings and landscapes, arranged in thematic series.

Radana Ulverová (2017)

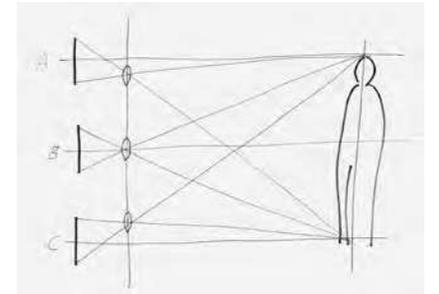
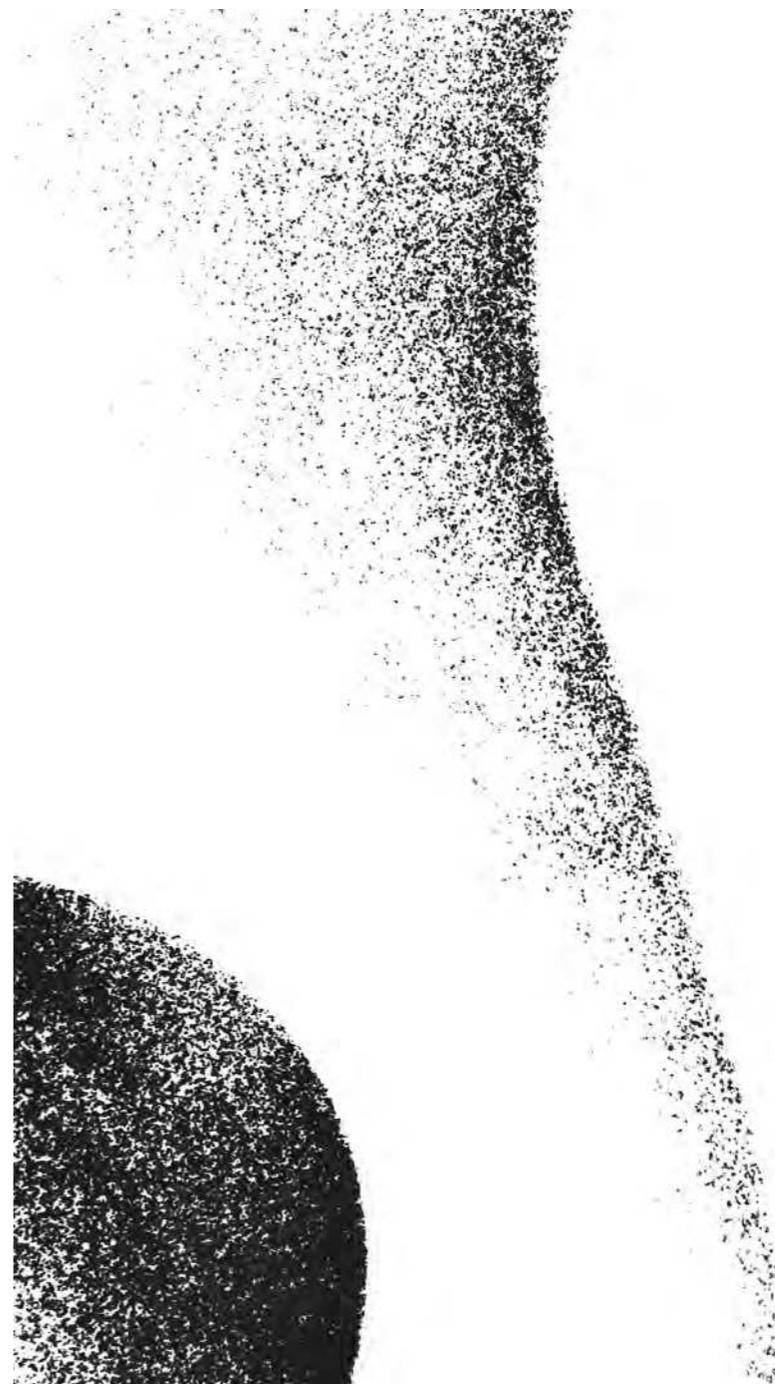


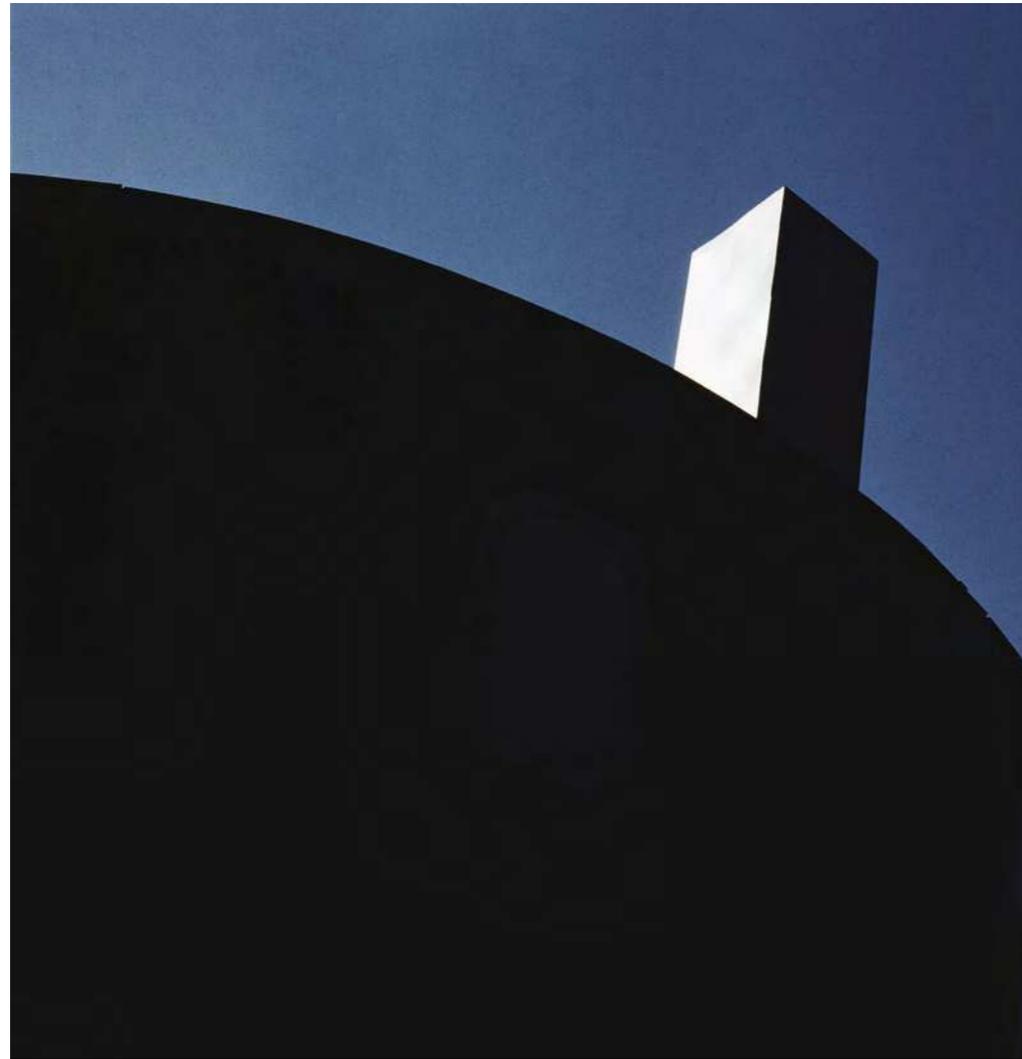
Diagram of the principle of shifting the standards of the large-format camera when photographing the Triptychs series: A = view from above, B = view from straight on, C = view from below, 1990s



Body I (Bodies), 1969



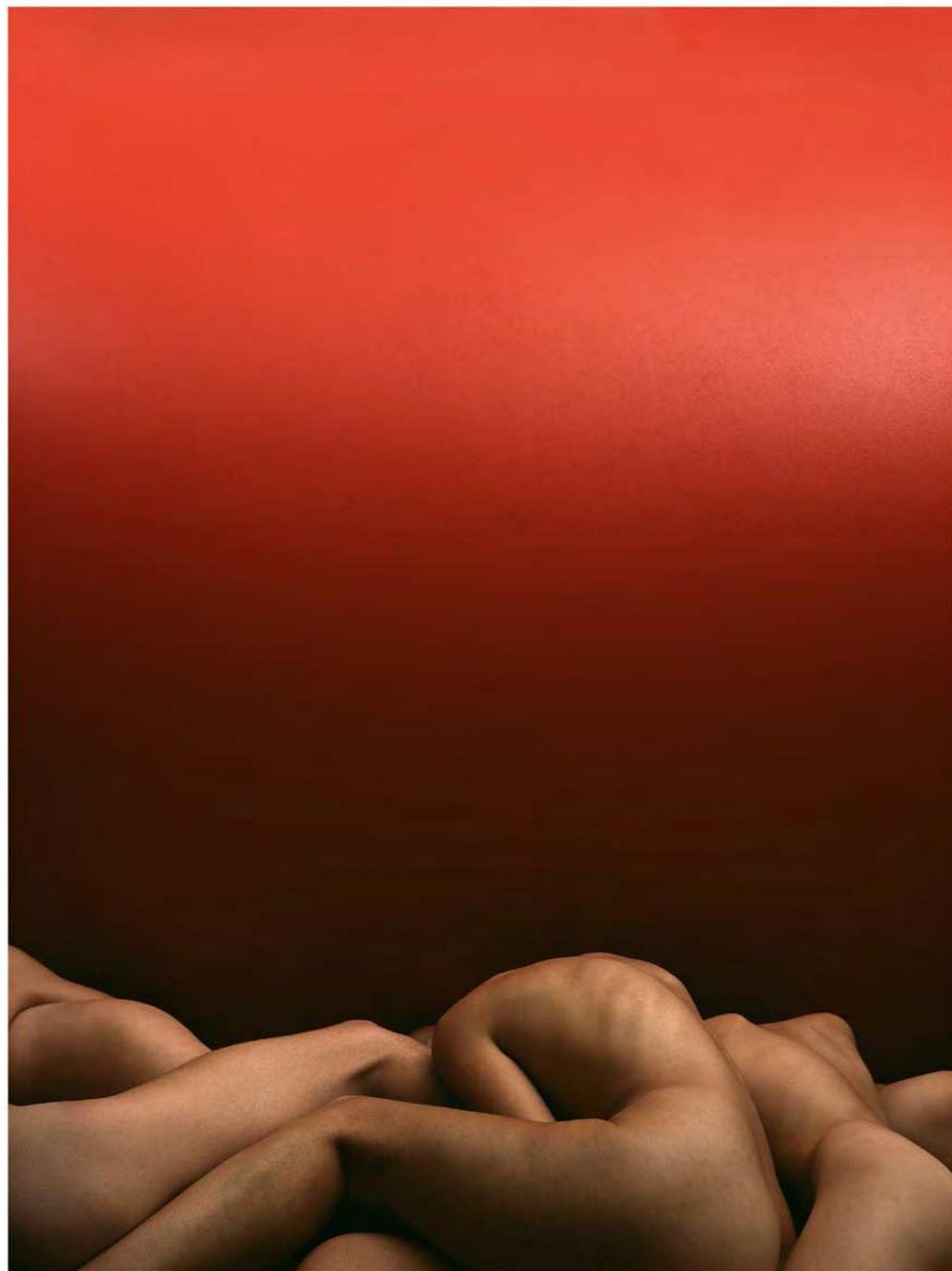
Body II (Bodies), 1969



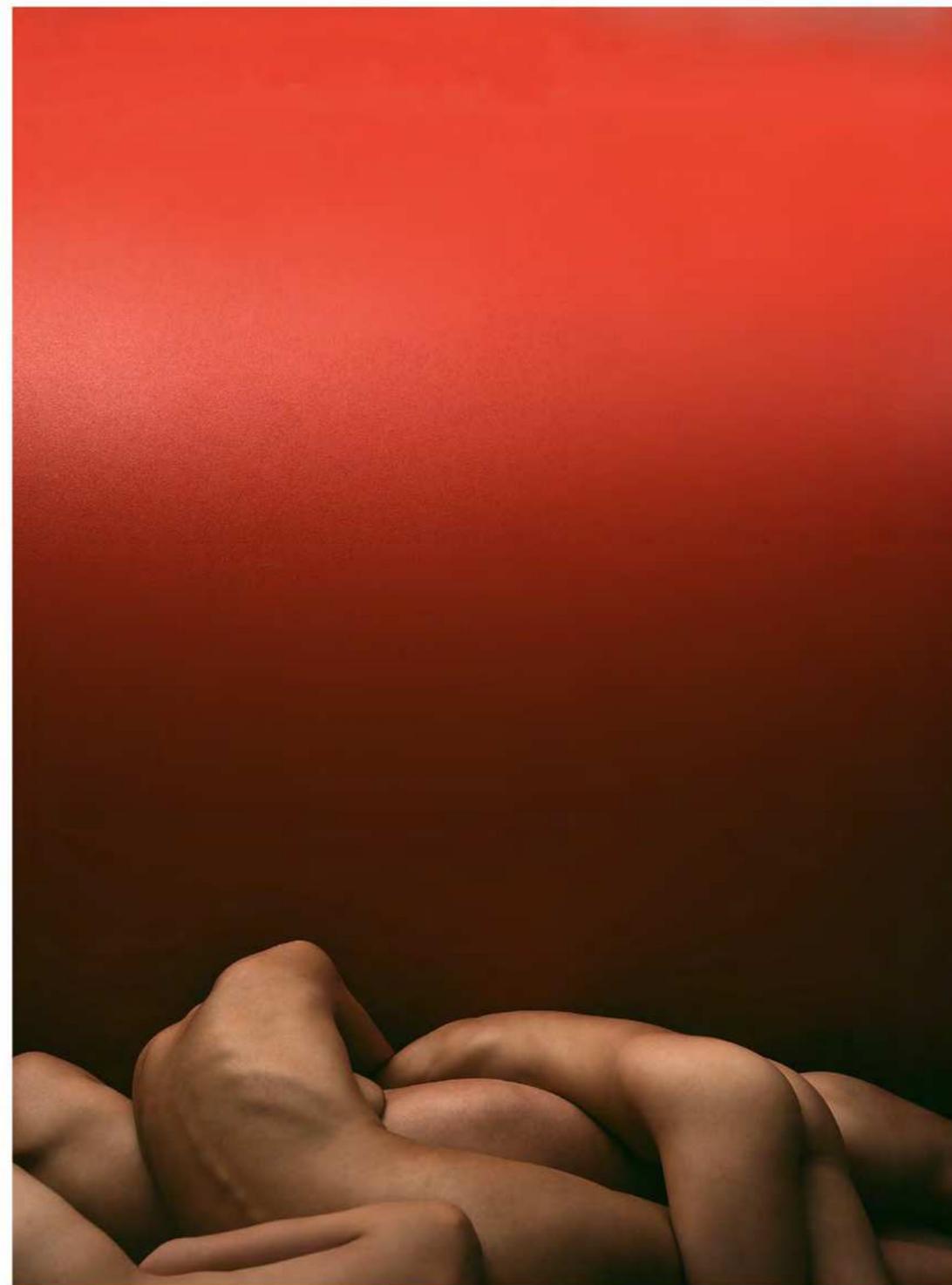
Black Cylinder (Mechanical Still Lifes, Machines), 1978



Construction Set VI (Mechanical Still Lifes, Toys), 1981



Corpus I (Corpuses), diptych, 1988





V. P. - Viktor Pivovarov I, II (Portraits), 1989





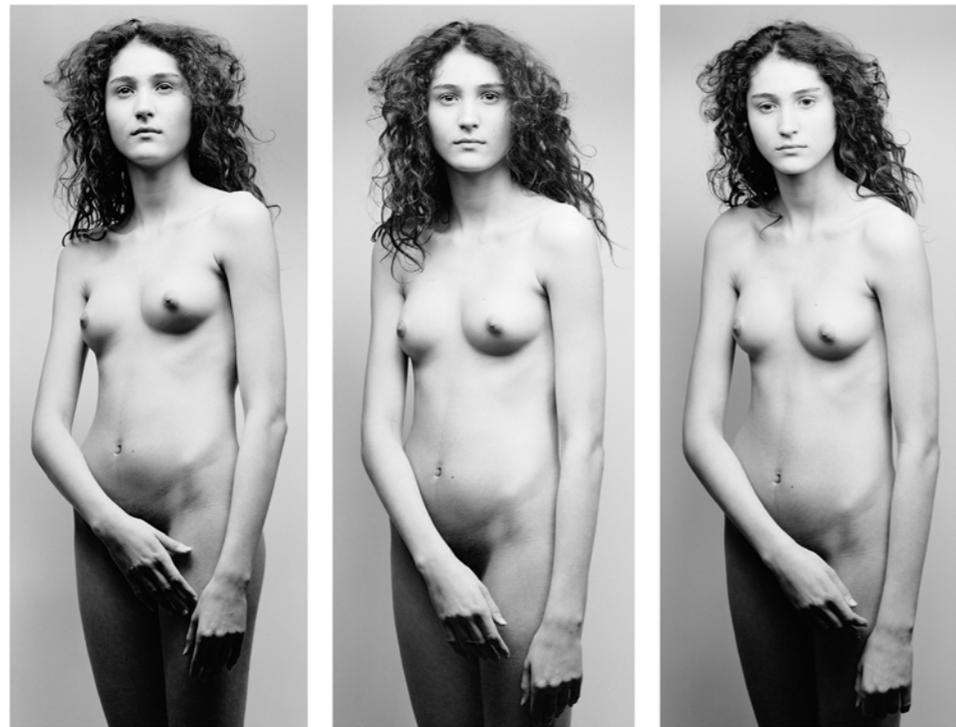
Veil I (Veils), 1989



Imago III (Imago), 1990



37 Photographers Na Chmelnici, group exhibition, Junior klub Na Chmelnici, Prague, 1989



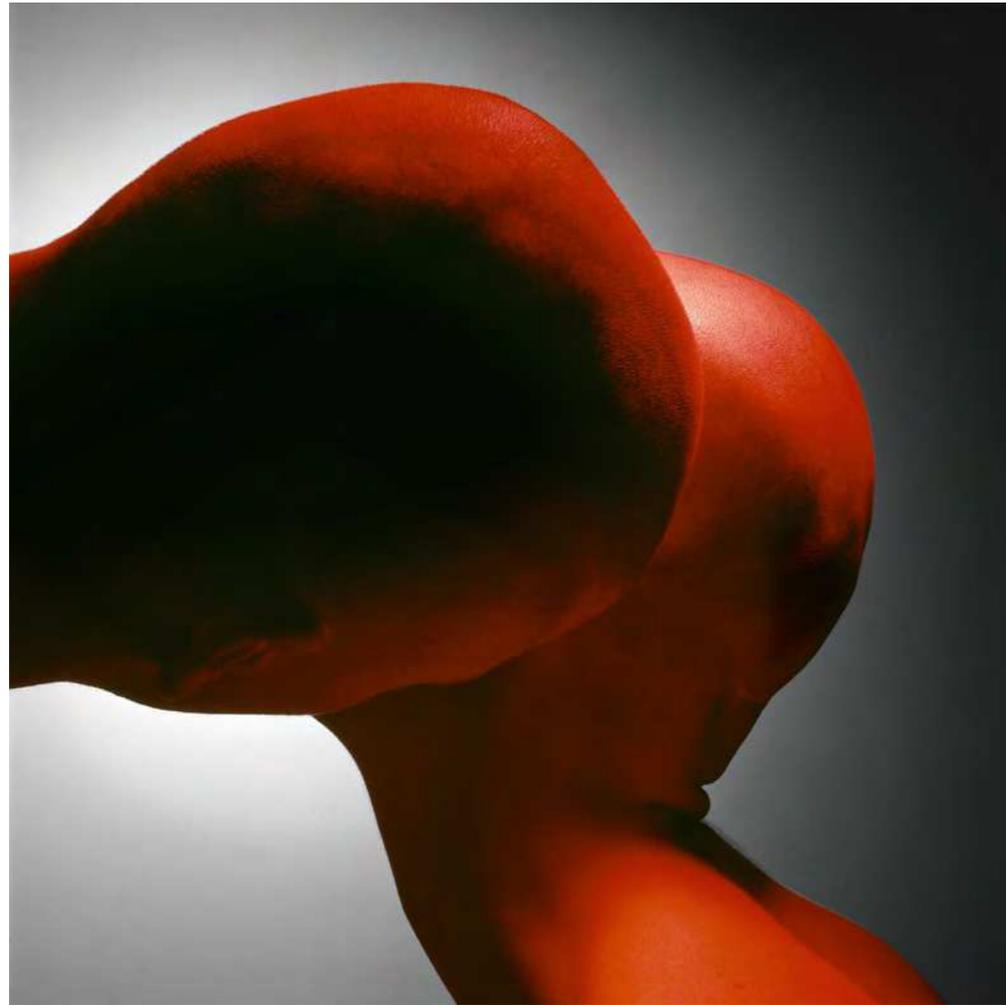
Triptych of Eve I (Triptychs), 1990



Triptych of K. M. (Triptychs), 1992



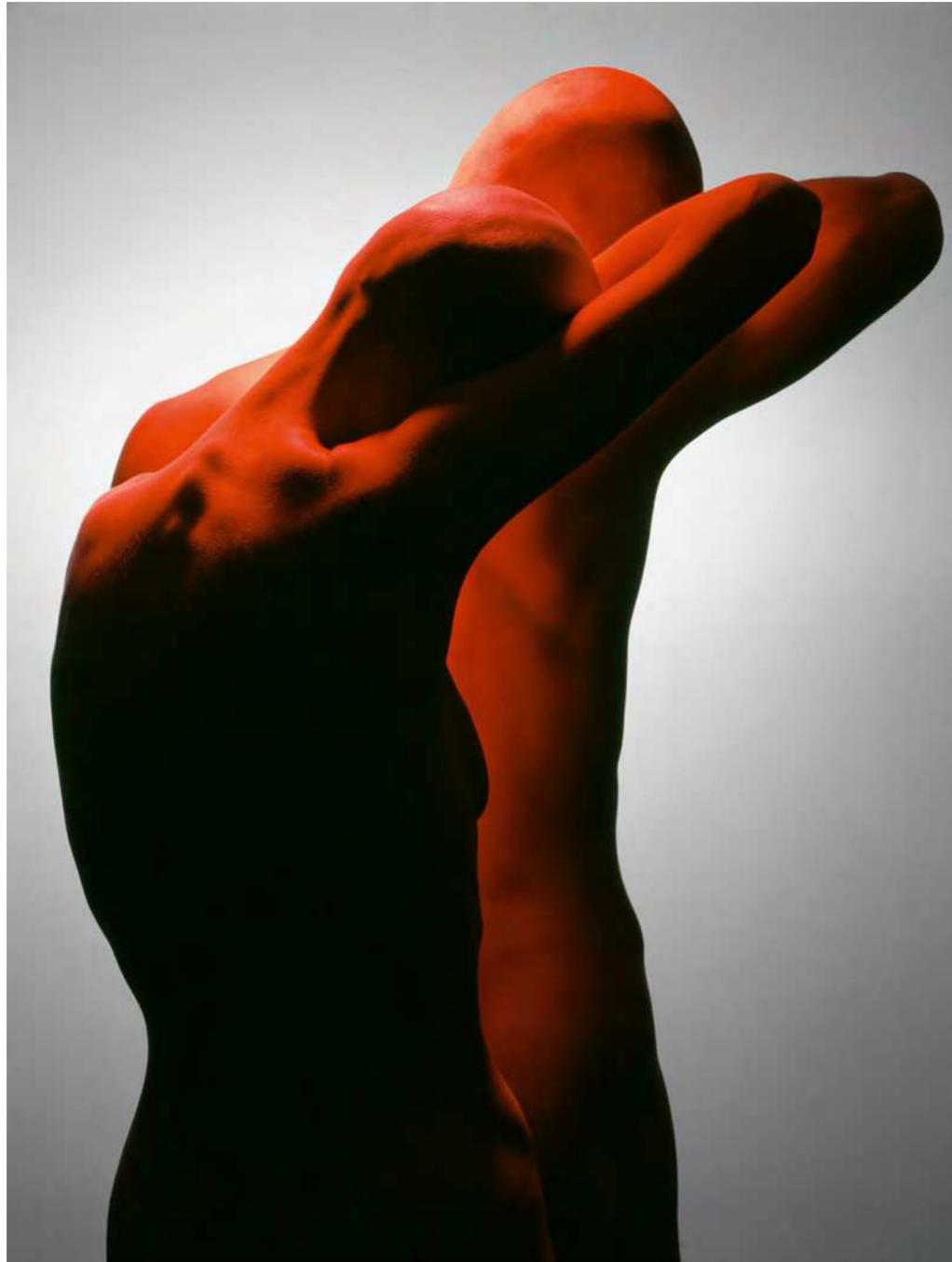
Funke's Kolín photo festival, group exhibition, Castle Brewery, Kolín, 1993



Two Heads I (Mechanical Corpuses), 1997



Two Heads II (Mechanical Corpuses), 1997



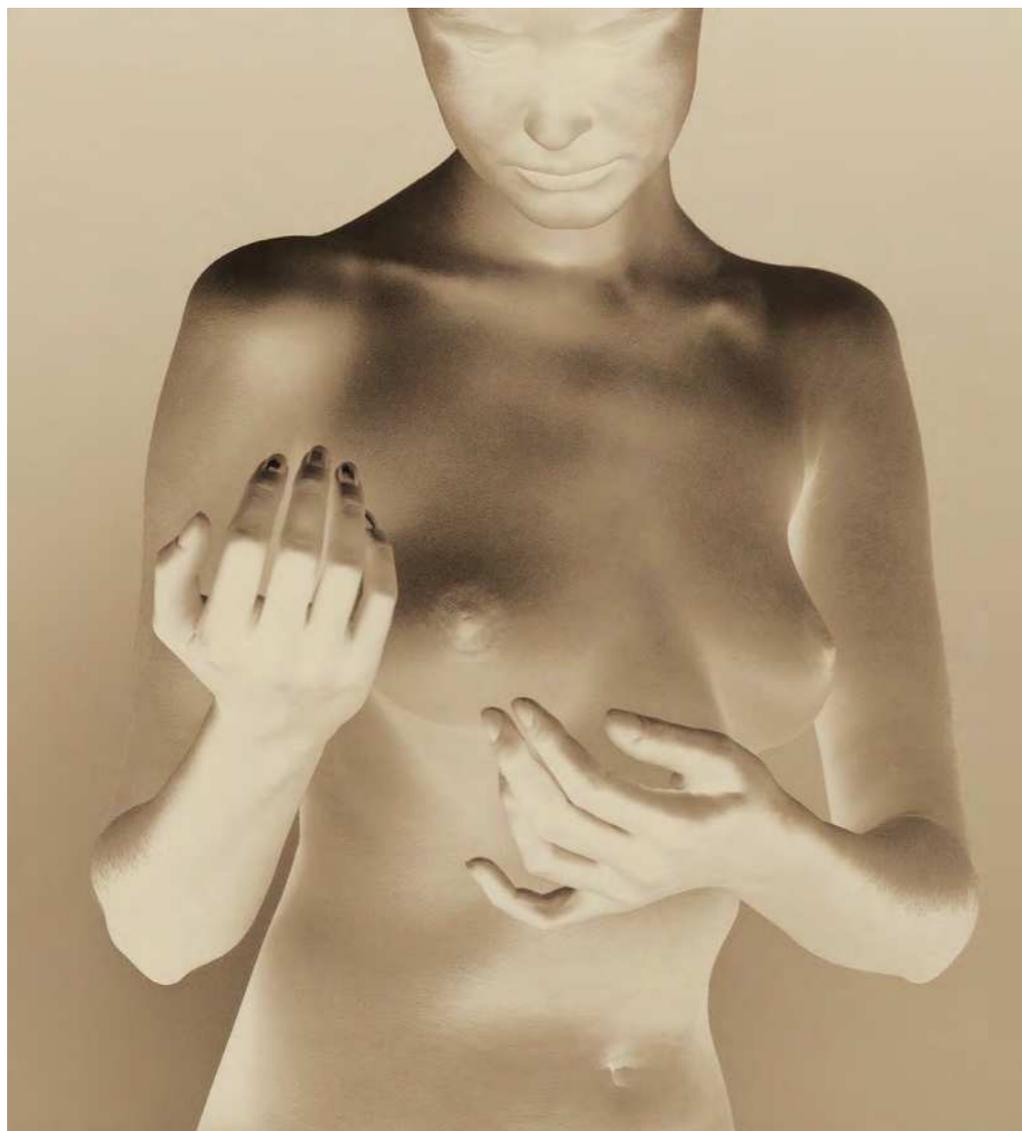
Embracing II (Mechanical Corpuses), 1997



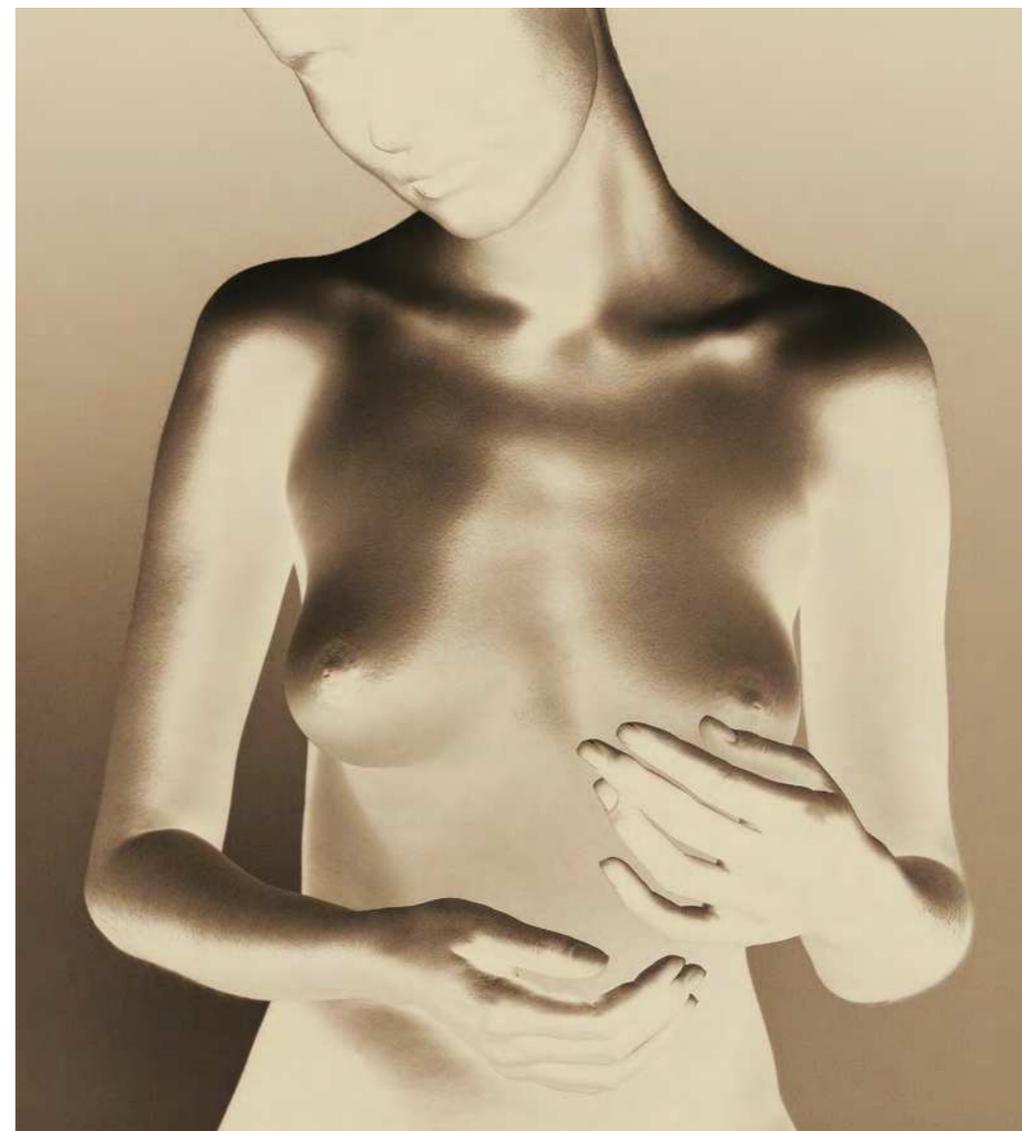
Embracing IV (Mechanical Corpuses), 1997



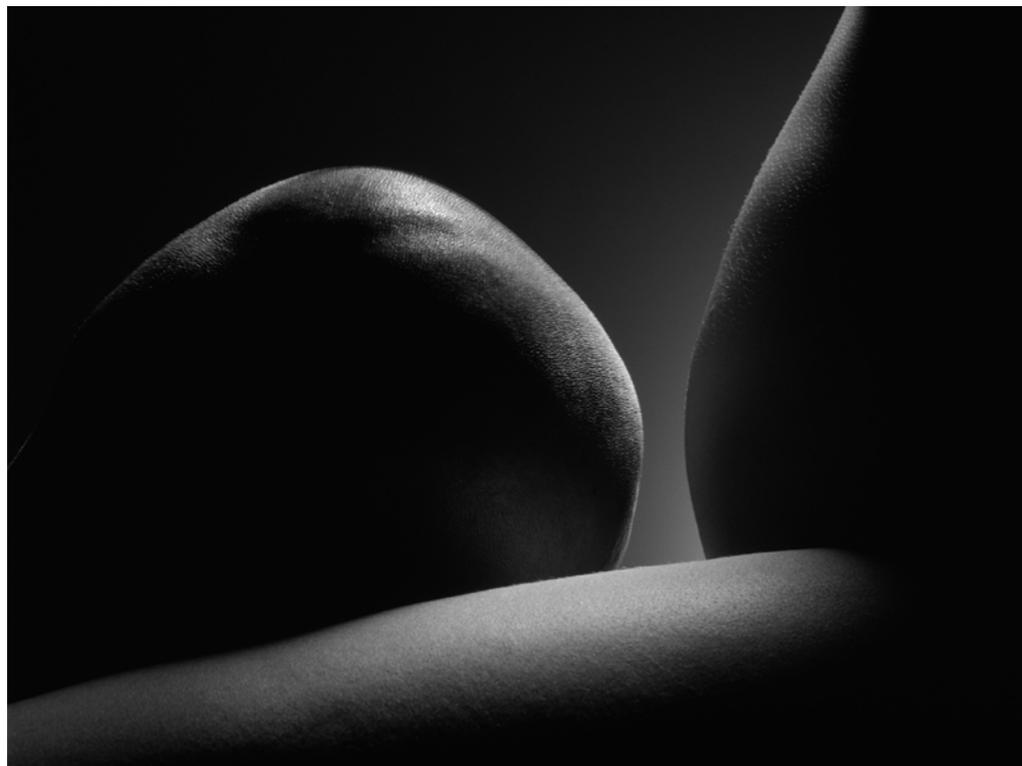
Corpuses and Figures, solo exhibition, Kolín synagogue, Kolín, 1998



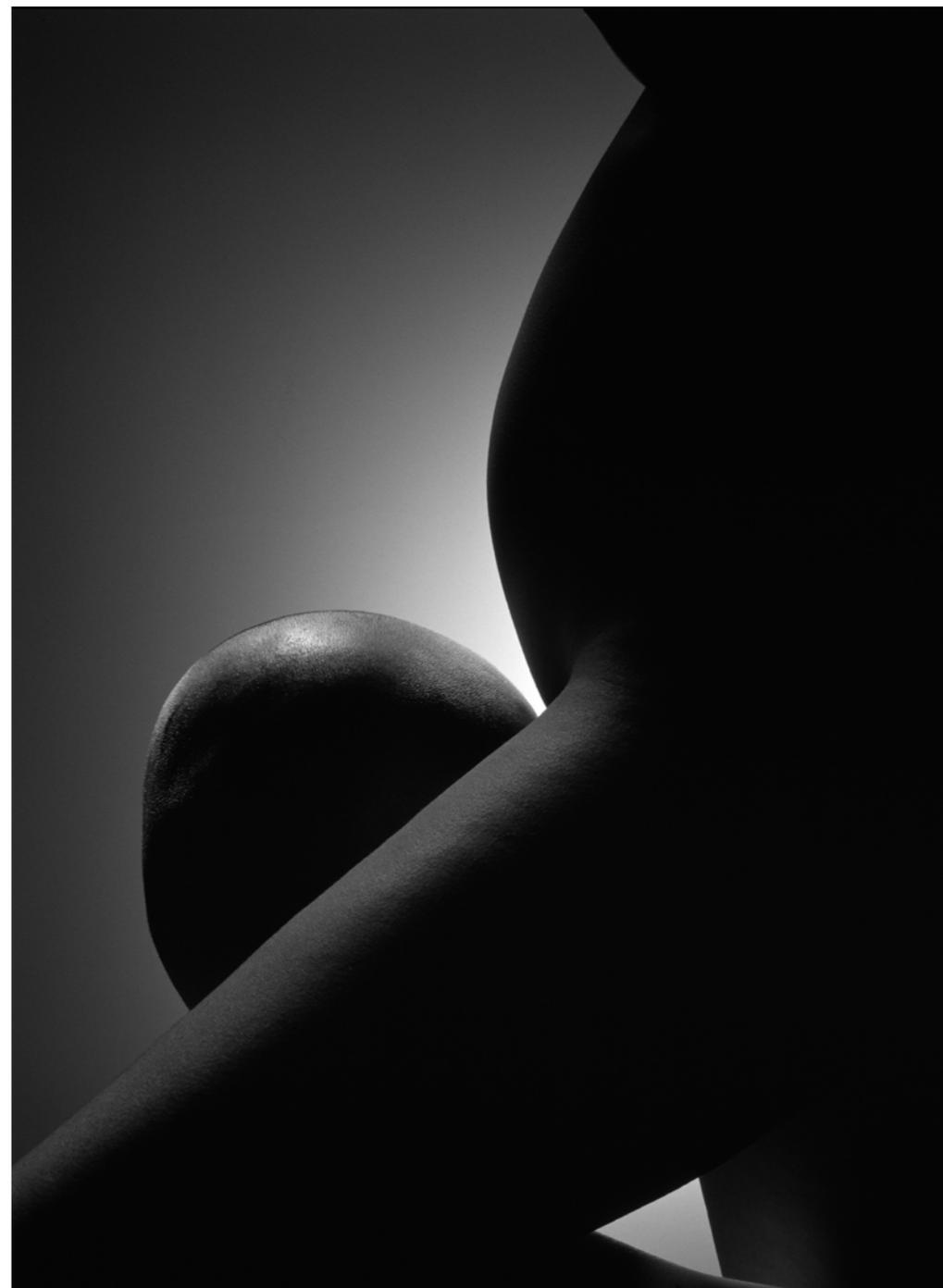
Madonna II (Madonnas '99), 1999



Madonna III (Madonnas '99), 1999



Family VI (Black Corpuses: Family), 2001



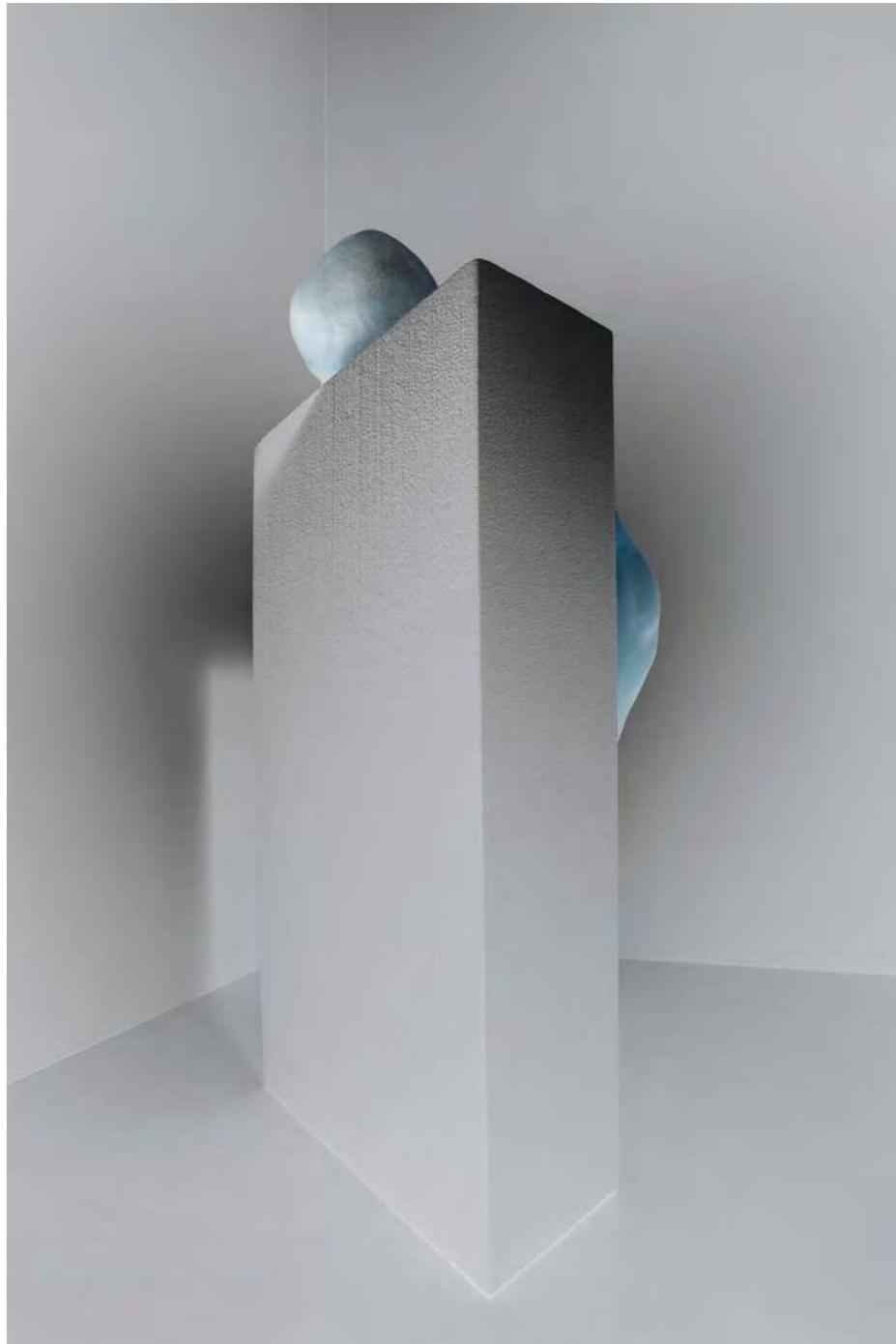
Family V (Black Corpuses: Family), 2001



Memory III (Memory), 2009



Memory II (Memory), 2009



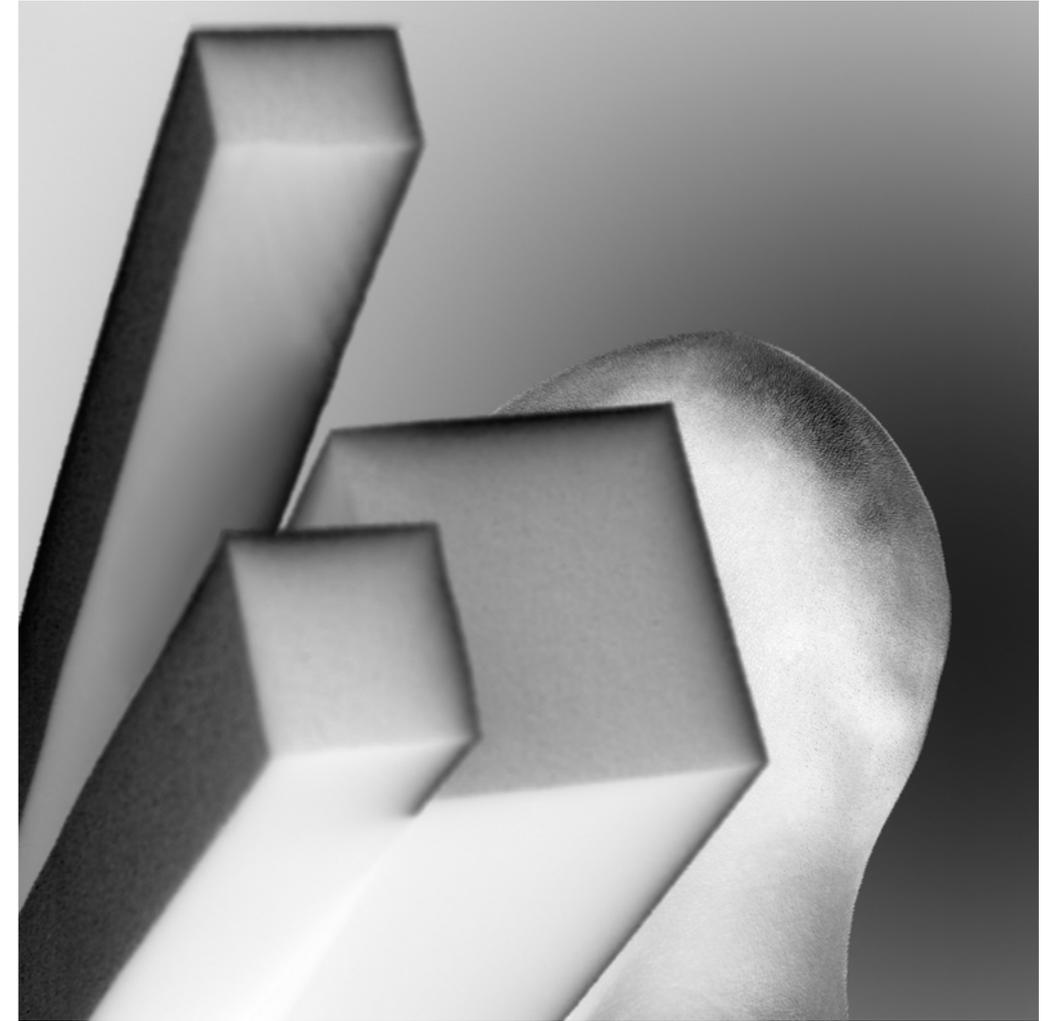
Memory XVI (Memory), 2009



Memory, solo exhibition, Kotelna Karlin Gallery, Prague, 2010



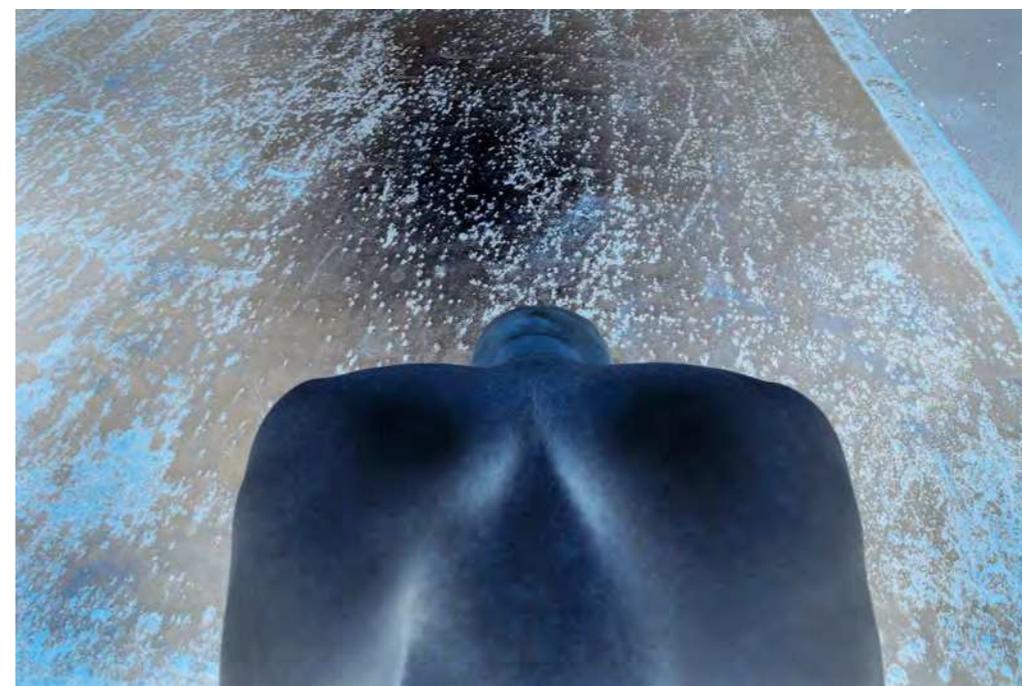
Negative Head I (Negative Heads '10), 2010



Negative Head III (Negative Heads '10), 2010



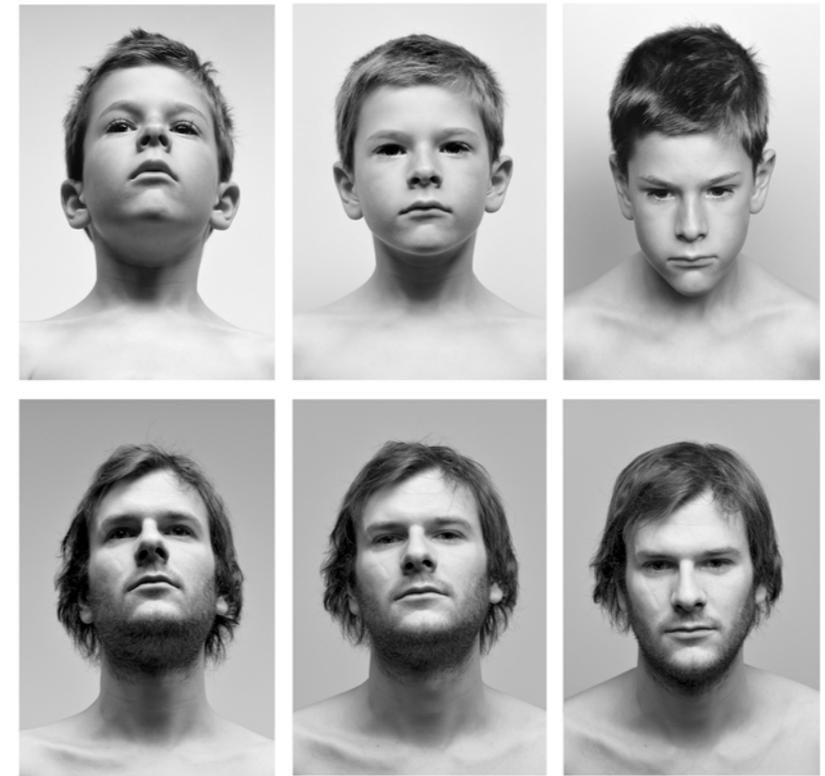
Negative Head VI (Negative Heads '11), 2010



Negative Head VII (Negative Heads '11), 2010



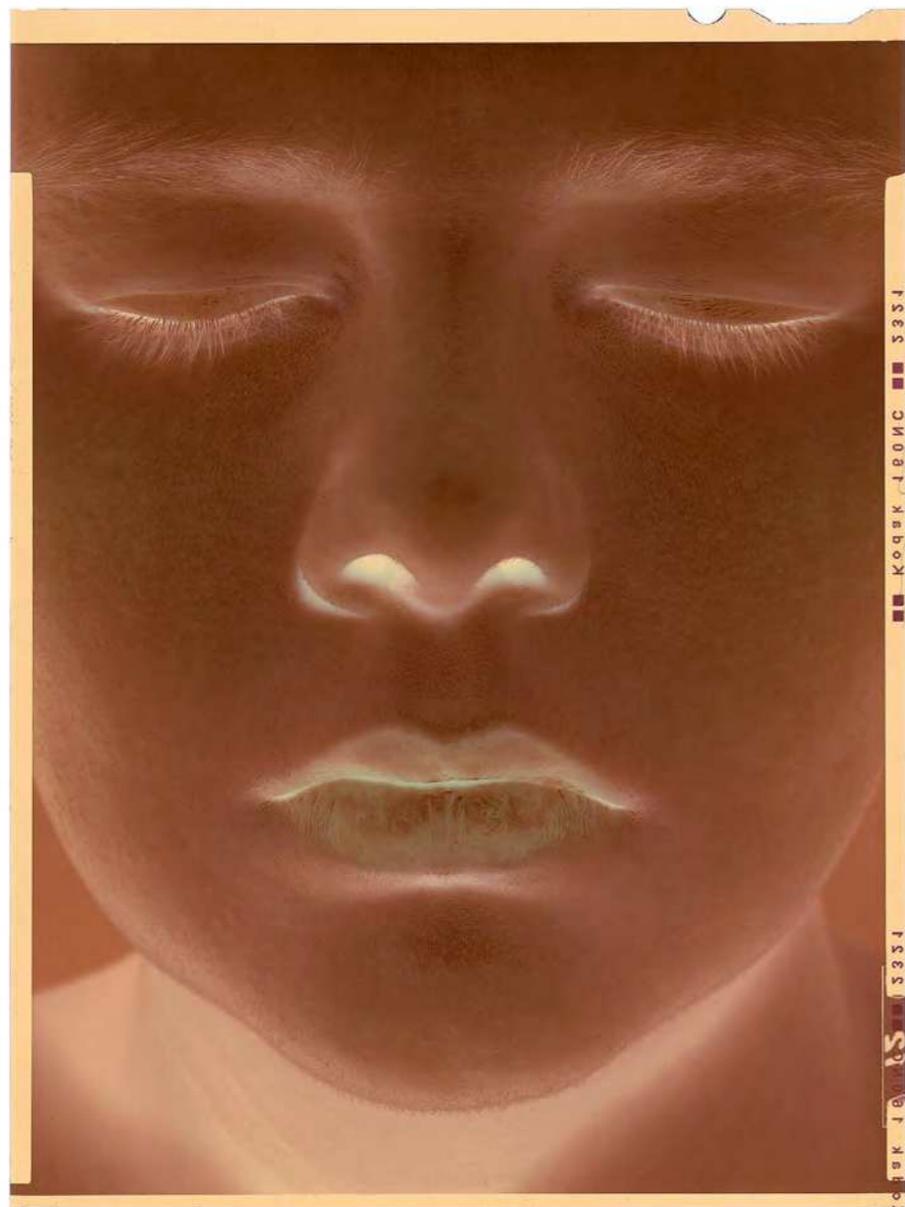
Mum (Family: Triptychs), 1991, 2011



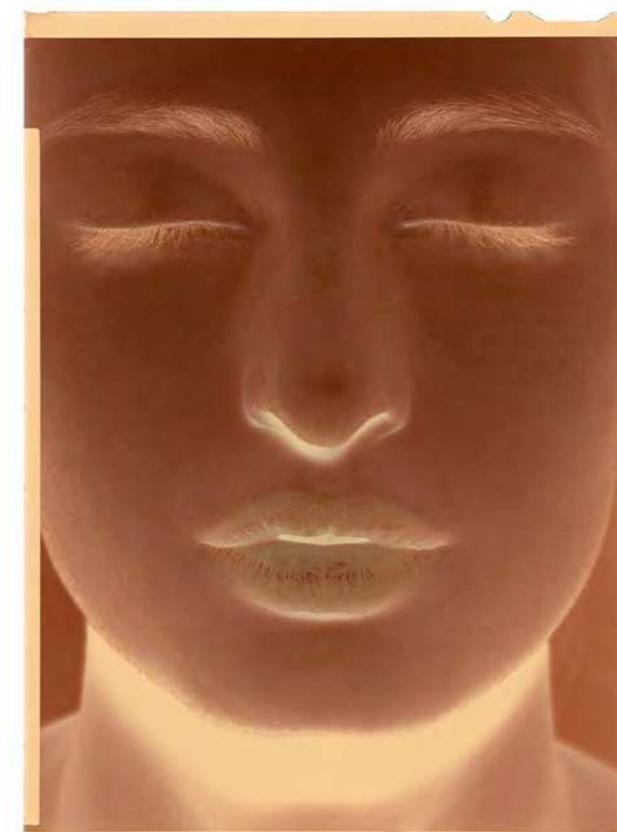
Son, Mikoláš, (Family: Triptychs), 1991, 2011



The Intimate Circle in Contemporary Czech Photography, group exhibition, City Gallery Prague, Municipal Library, Prague, 2013



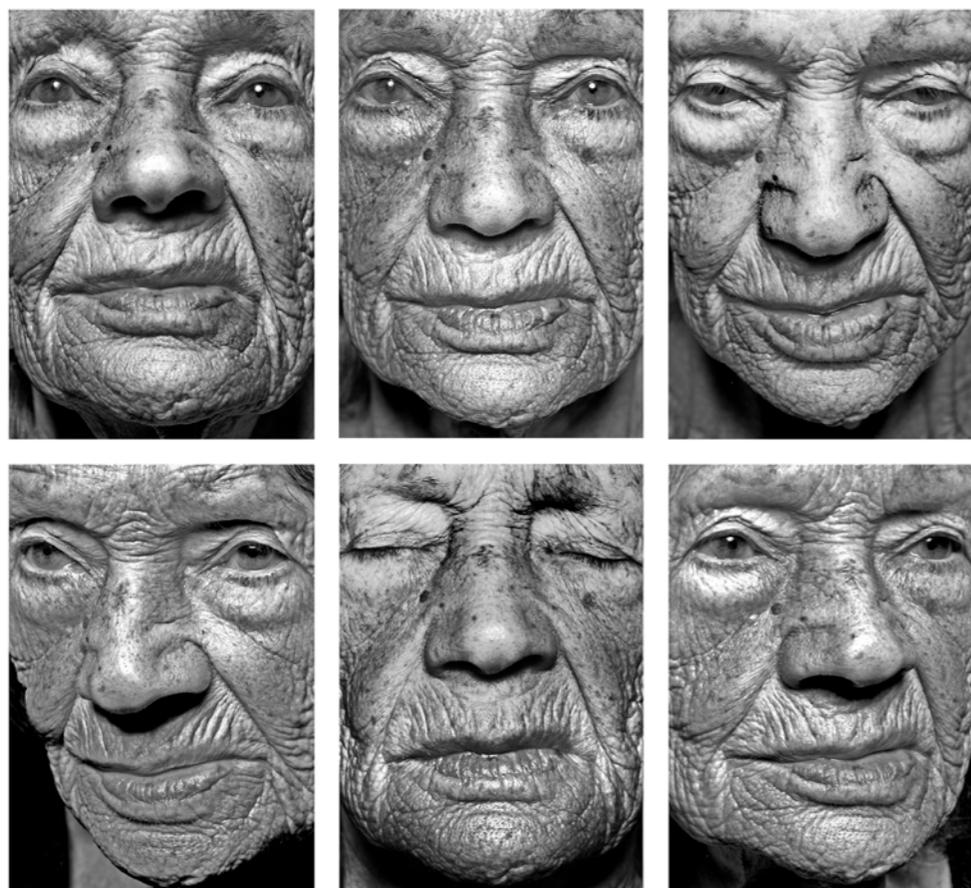
Face I (Faces), 2012



Face III (Faces), 2014



Faces, solo exhibition, New Libeň Synagogue at Palmovka, Prague, 2015



Mater I-VI (Mater), 2016



Mater, solo exhibition, Festival Fovember, Orthodox synagogue, Košice, 2016



Portrait of the Photographer,
Prague, 2018; Photo:
Radana Ulverová

Pavel MÁRA (*1951, Prague)

In his work, the photographer Pavel Mára is concerned mainly with the portrait and the nude. His realistic, often even 'descriptive', records of human figures and faces (including Triptychs and Mater) are a certain counterpart to his abstractly conceived series like Mechanical Still Lives, Corpuses, and Memory. His oeuvre includes more than thirty series, both in black-and-white and in colour. His first series, comprising abstract photographs, entitled Bodies, was made in 1969. Since then, he has had more than forty solo exhibitions and has participated in many prestigious group shows of Czech photography, both at home and abroad. At present, he teaches at the Institute of Creative Photography at Silesian University, Opava. He lives in Prague.

Training

- 1971-77** The Cinematic and Television Image, the Film and Television Academy of the Performing Arts (FAMU), Prague.
- 1977-80** Art Photography, FAMU, Prague.

Exhibitions (a selection)

- 2017** *At First Sight. A selection of Czech photography from the 20th and 21st centuries / The Intimate Circle in Contemporary Czech Photography.* Muzeum Śląska Opolskiego, Opole.
- 2016** *Pavel Mára: Mater. Festival Fovember,* Synagóga, Košice.
- 2015** *Pavel Mára: Retrospektiva.* Staroměstská radnice v Praze, Křížová chodba a Rytířský sál, Praha.
Landskrona Foto View: Czech Republic. Landskrona museum, Landskrona Foto, Landskrona.
- 2013** *Vnitřní okruh v současné české fotografii / The Intimate Circle in Contemporary Czech Photography,* Galerie hlavního města Prahy, Městská knihovna, Praha.
Pavel Mára. Corps accords, Galerie Délire en formation (Photo Saint-Germain-des-Prés), Paris.
Pavel Mára: Le corps objet, Centre tchèque (Photo Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris Photo), Paris.

- 2012** *Pavel Mára: Obyčejne menej / Usually Less,* Dom umenia (Mesiac fotografie), Bratislava.
- 2010** *Pavel Mára: Memory,* Kotelna Karlin Gallery, Praha
- 2009** *Tschechische Fotografie des 20. Jahrhunderts,* Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn.
- 2005** *The Nude in Czech Photography, 1960-2000,* Technopolis, Athens
- 2004** *Paris Photo,* Carrousel du Louvre, Paris
- 2002** *The Nude in Czech Photography, 1960-2000,* Manezh (Photobiennale 2002), Moskva
- 2000** *Expo 2000,* Czech Pavilion, Hannover
- 1999** *Czech Photography of the 1990s,* Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago
Pavel Mára: Mechanical Corpuses, The Eli Lemberger Museum of Photography (Czech Photography in the 20th Century), Tel-Hai Industrial Park
- 1998** *Certainty and Searching in Czech Photography of the 1990s,* Tschechisches Zentrum, Berlin.
- 1992-93** *What's New: Prague. Contemporary Photography from Czechoslovakia,* Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.
- 1992** *Écrans/Icônes,* Espace Art Brenne, Concrémiers.
Fotografia txecoslovaca contemporanea I, Centro Cultural de la Fundació La Caixa - Granollers & Vic (Primavera Fotográfica), Barcelona.
- 1991** *La photographie tchécoslovaque contemporaine. Absurdité de la réalité - Réalité de l'absurde,* Musées de la Cour d'Or, Caves Sainte-Croix - Hôtel de Ville, Metz.
La photographie tchécoslovaque contemporaine, Tutesall, Luxembourg.
Photographie tchécoslovaque contemporaine, L'Aubette, Strasbourg.
Tjekkoslovakisk samtidsfotografi, Museet for Fotokunst, Odense.
- 1990** *Tschechoslowakische Fotografie der Gegenwart,* Museum Ludwig, Köln.
Vision de l'homme. La jeune photographie, Galerie Municipale du Château-d'Eau, Toulouse.
Tchécoslovaquie à Arles, Palais de l'Archevêché, Arles.
L'année de l'Est, Palais de Beaulieu, Lausanne.
- 1989** *37 fotografů Na Chmelnici,* Junior klub Na Chmelnici, Praha
Recente Tsjechoslowaakse fotografie, De Nieuwe Kerk (Derde internationale fotomanifestatie FOTO - 89), Amsterdam.
- 1987** *FAMU Prague,* Fotografijos galerija, Kaunas.
- 1983** *Pavel Mára: Mechanická zátiší,* Městské kulturní středisko, Dobříš.

**Articles and books about the artist
(a selection)**

Macek, Václav (ed.). The History of European Photography, Volume III, 1970–2000. Bratislava: Central European House of Photography, Bratislava 2016.

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Bieleszová, Štěpánka – Birgus, Vladimír: Na pierwszy rzut oka. Wybór z czeskiej fotografii XX i XXI wieku. / At First Sight. A Selection of Czech Photographs from the 20th and 21st Centuries. Muzeum umění Olomouc, Olomouc 2016.

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**Collections holding his works
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Galerie Municipale du Château d'Eau, Toulouse
Galerie umění Karlovy Vary
Moravská galerie v Brně
Museum Ludwig, Köln
Muzeum umění Olomouc
Národní galerie v Praze
The Eli Lemberger Museum of Photography, Tel-Hai Industrial Park
Uměleckoprůmyslové muzeum v Praze

www.pavelmara.cz

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