

ACTING OUT

An interview with photographer Goran Turnšek about his project Jakob.

By Taco Hidde Bakker

In the mid 1990s Goran Turnšek moved to The Netherlands from Slovenia to study modern dance and choreography. When he graduated from the Theaterschool Amsterdam in 2000 he won the Philip Morris Dance Award for his final show, but despite his success, and although he'd built up his dancing career for more than a decade, he began to feel dissatisfied with it. In particular he was disenchanted with the fleeting nature of performance, so he turned to photography and its potential for preserving the moment.

Studying at the Amsterdam-based Fotoacademie from 2011-2015, he began to marry his love for image-making and dance, evolving an idiosyncratic style which can be seen in his project Jakob. Inspired by his late grandfather Jakob Emeršič, who was killed in a hunting accident in 1993, the project shows Turnšek re-enacting his grandfather's gestures in his former home; the book dummy helped him graduate with honours from the Fotoacademie last summer, and was nominated for the Unseen Dummy Award. Even so, for Turnšek, it's not just a photographic project. "I'm curious to whether the dance world would also be interested in this work," he says. "For me this is choreography too, except in the book format."

It's also more than an intellectual exercise, because Turnšek was close to his grandfather as a boy. "My grandfather had quite an influence on me at the time of his sudden death," he explains. "After his passing I was determined to escape into dance and art. I was very driven to move on. I had to win. Dance was already part of my life as I did ballroom dancing,

and my granddad was a tailor and made costumes like the tailcoats I needed for dancing. Funny enough though, he never saw me dance."

Turnšek was prompted to start making the images when his grandmother Maria died; moving into his grandparents' former home in Zabovci in Eastern Slovenia, he tried capture both the place and the memories it evoked. "I went back to photograph memories, as it were," he says. "I'm also interested in the smells of the place, how things feel like, such as fabrics, furniture or the floor. I played a lot in this environment as a child,

it left traces not only on my retina but in the fabric of my bodily experience as well."

In dance these physical memories can be expressed but only for a moment, photography can make a longer-lasting record, but it can only show the way things look. For him, the solution was to mix the two. "With dance one expresses everything through the body, but that body can store a lot of past experience," says Turnšek. "[But] to me dance is limited because you show something within a very short timeframe. Photography is a good medium to solve this problem."

Through the series we see Turnšek dressed in one of his grandfather's old suits, doing everyday tasks such as cleaning, gardening, decorating and getting ready for a hunt. There are eleven scenes in total, each recording a mini-sequence of shots, which give the photobook the feeling of a short novella. "Some photos show Jakob's absence, but others are much more staged," says Turnšek.

"It's important for me in the edit to show that the book's not about me, but more about me employing my body as instrument to imagine someone else, just like actors do in theater. Because I was – or still am – a dancer I payed a lot of attention to body language in these photos. Some of Jakob's movements are still clear in my memory."

Turnšek's face is left largely unseen, except for occasional glimpses sidelong or in the mirror. He relied on camera timers and cable releases to take the photographs from behind, sometimes getting his father to help him out. "I'm not identifiable in the photographs in which I perform the way Jakob stood or walked," he says. "I quickly dismissed the frontal photographs. It has to do with engagement too. When you could only see the protagonist from behind, you're not easily being drawn into the story. I thought it'd be important to arouse curiosity to who that person is."

For Turnšek this anonymity also implies a critique of dance, which focuses on the movements performers channel rather than their own personalities or ideas. "Dancers aren't the goal in a performance, rather a medium," he points out. "It's my personal struggle. Some dancers have no trouble at all with their trained dance bodies, but I have to move on with it. I've found a way to give my dance body a goal...so the project is also part research into the anonymity of the dance body in general."

"It's a different way of working, more about movement from the one pose to another," he continues. "There's no dancing here but the dynamics for

me were also in the working process – sometimes I'd run back and forth from pose to camera and back to the pose which then worked out differently."

Turnšek found the suit he wears hanging in Jakob's wardrobe; slightly too big and somewhat wrinkled. It hints at the impossibility of fully representing another. His memories of his grandfather are also fading, he adds, so while some of his gestures are well-remembered, others are interpretative or even improvised. "In the studio where Jakob worked I've tried to reproduce movements I'd still had stored in my memory," says Turnšek. "[But] sometimes movements arose spontaneously."

"Then there's the scene on the balcony – I almost fell off it as a baby and

my grandfather saved me but, because I was too young to remember it, it's a scene I only know through stories. I tried to imagine and re-enact how Jakob used his body to save me from falling down."

Turnšek jotted down many scenes he could play out and record, but quickly found he didn't want to shoot them all. "Each room has its own story," he says. "It's a big house with many rooms - more than eleven, but for my story it wasn't necessary to shoot a sequence for each of the rooms. My question was whether to make a Russian novel or rather a novella. I had chosen for the latter and the rhythm of one day became the thread for my book: getting dressed, drinking and eating, working in the garden, and so on..."

The house is now up for sale, hence Turnšek is thinking about returning to the idea to construct a sequence about his grandmother Maria before the premises will be sold. "I think I'd like to play my grandmother myself – in the vein of Cindy Sherman, or I'd ask my cousin whose body is similar to my grandmother's," he says. "But I have to try out and discover if a book about Maria really will bring something extra to the story."

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