One Model, one photographer: Inside the Creative World of Nude Photography

Stanko Abadžić was born in Vukovar in 1952. When he was 15, his father gave him his first camera, a Smena 8. He became a member of the Borovo Photo Club, which organized his first joint and solo exhibitions in Vukovar and Borovo. He received his degree in German language and literature. After graduation he worked as a correspondent for *VJESNIK* and wrote travelogues from Tunisia, Malta, Turkey and other countries. From 1995 to 2002 he lived in the Czech Republic and worked as a freelance photographer. During that period he had a number of joint and solo exhibitions. The largest one was organized in Prague, in the JOSEF SUDEK Gallery, named after the famous Czech photographer. With the help of the Croatian Embassy in Prague, he published his first book of photographs, *In The Mirror of Life.*

Abadzcic`s next book, *In Absentia,* along with an exhibition with the same title in the Mimara Museum in 2003, marked his return to Croatian photography. Exhibitions followed in many Croatian towns: Osijek, Rijeka, Novigrad, Split, Zagreb, Dubrovnik, Karlovac and Daruvar.

He has won many awards for his work.

In 2010 he was an artist in residence at the Cite International des Arts in Paris. In the same year his Paris works, entitled *Paris – Sketches for a Portrait of the City*, were exhibited in the Glyptotheque of Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb.

He has had solo exhibitions in sixteen European countries, Argentina, Japan, Russia and United States. His photographs can be found in many collections in Europe, Croatia, Czech Republic and America. Several Croatian publishers have used his photographs on the covers of their books. Stanko Abadžić is a member of the Croatian Association of Artists. He lives and works in Zagreb.

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HM: Stanko, Please tell us about growing up in Croatia.

SA: I was born and raised in Vukovar, a city in Croatia that, as you may know, was one of the first and hardest-hit places when the war in the former Yugoslavia broke out in 1991. That city carries deep scars, and it shaped my early life in powerful ways.

HM: And was it in Vukovar that you first got into photography?

SA: Yes, that's where it all began. I joined the local photo club called Borovo. I was still in high school—so probably 16 or 17 years old at the time. That club was my first real encounter with photography as a serious pursuit, and I fell in love with it immediately.

HM: What drew you to photography?

SA: It's a long story—and one deeply shaped by war and displacement. When the war began, I made the decision not to take part in the violence. Instead, my family and I fled to Germany. It was 1991, and we spent the next four years there, living under a constant state of uncertainty.

HM: What kind of uncertainty?

SA: In Germany, we had a special kind of temporary residency called "Duldung." It wasn't a visa or permanent status—it just meant that the authorities allowed us to stay, but with the condition that we had to renew it every three months. At any time, we could be told to leave. Every visit to the immigration office brought new anxiety, because we didn't know if we would be forced back to Croatia, where war was still raging there.

HM: That must have been an incredibly difficult time.

SA: It was. I wasn't making any art back then. I was too focused on survival, on taking care of my family. The pressure was enormous—psychologically, emotionally. I only took a few family photos during that period. There simply wasn't the mental space for creative work.

HM: And after those four years?

SA: Eventually, Germany told us we had to leave. There's a legal rule: after four years of Duldung, you can apply for permanent residency—and they didn't want that. So they issued a letter telling us where and when we had to go.

We made the decision to move to Prague, in the Czech Republic. And that decision changed everything.

HM: How so?

SA: Prague gave me a second life. I enrolled at the university and began studying German Language and Literature. At first, I worked as a teacher of German. One day, while my students were writing, I stood by the window and saw a couple kissing gently in a park nearby. That moment hit me deeply. It was so tender, so full of life. And I thought: *What am I doing in this classroom? Life is happening out there.*

I knew then that I had to leave my job and return to photography—even though I had no backup plan. It was an emotional decision, but also a very clear one.

HM: So you left teaching right then?

SA: Yes, I gave notice that same day and finished the school year, but I knew I couldn't continue. I didn't have another job lined up. I just trusted the feeling. Soon after, I found a job with a company called Super Poster. They asked me to take documentary photos of 20 billboards around Prague—both day and night shots.

HM: That sounds like a turning point.

SA: Absolutely. I finished the job in just three days. I sent the photos in, and I was paid the same salary I earned as a teacher—but now I had 27 days each month free. That freedom allowed me to really explore the city with my camera. I walked, observed, and photographed. For the first time in years, I felt in control of my life and purpose. I knew then: photography is my path.

HM: And this led to your first exhibition?

SA: Yes, my first real breakthrough was an exhibition at the Josef Sudek Gallery, which was a huge honor—it's named after one of the great Czech photographers. That show led to gallery representation, print sales, and eventually, my first book *In the Mirror of Life*. I printed 400 copies and either sold or gifted them all. It gave me the confidence to print 1,000 more.

HM: How did the second edition do?

SA: Very well. Prague has a strong year-round tourism scene, and I sold the entire edition within a year—each copy for 10 German marks. I earned 10,000 marks that year just from the book sales. That was the moment I realized I could actually make a living from photography.

HM: And then came your entry into the American market?

SA: Yes. After seven years in Prague, I returned to Croatia, to the island of Krk. One day while browsing online, I came across a gallery in the U.S. called Vintage Works, which specialized in classic photography—exactly my kind of work.

I reached out to the gallery director, Alex Novak. He surprised me by saying, “Stanko, I already have two of your photographs.” He named them: *On the Beach* and *All My Apples*. I was shocked—I had no idea they had ended up in America!

HM: How did your photos get there?

SA: They were originally bought by a Czech gallerist, Dr. Yuliya Asmaninska. She must have taken them to photo fairs in the U.S. and sold them to Alex. Once I confirmed the provenance, I asked him if he'd like to see more. He said, "Of course!" That was the beginning of our collaboration.

Alex bought 16 more prints outright and took another 16 on commission. Later, I was introduced to Catherine Couturier Gallery in Houston. Between these two galleries, plus my books and workshops, I now live entirely from my photography.

HM: Do you still work with those galleries today?

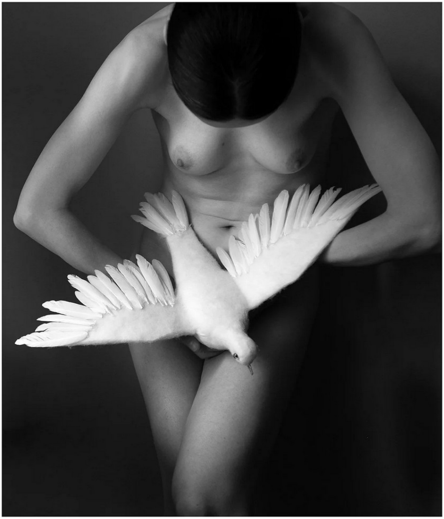
SA: Yes, I do. Both Vintage Works and Catherine Couturier Gallery continue to represent me, and they've been incredibly supportive. They introduced my work to American collectors and institutions. It's a relationship built on trust and shared appreciation for classic photography.

HM: That's an extraordinary journey—from war-torn Vukovar to Prague, and now to galleries in America. Do you ever look back and reflect on it?

SA: All the time. I often think that had it not been for the war, for the pain and uncertainty, I might never have discovered the depth of my need to observe life, to document it. Photography became my survival, my witness, and ultimately, my voice.

HM: And what kind of work do you do, Stanko? I'm curious—your range sounds quite diverse.

SA: Yes, you're right. I actually focus on two main types of photography: street photography and nudes. Both are very different in their approach and emotion, but I find inspiration in each.



HM: Let me ask—among your works, which photograph has been the most popular in the American market?

SA: Ah, that's actually a special story. The most successful image I've ever sold in the U.S. is a nude I shot in Prague. It was one of the first nudes I made after moving to the Czech Republic. I had an agreement with the galleries to produce a limited edition—just 25 prints of that particular image. It sold out completely.

HM: That's impressive. What do you think made that particular image resonate so strongly?

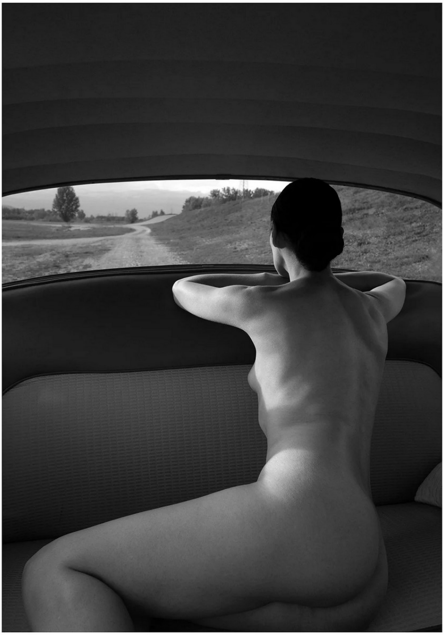
SA: It's quite a melancholic portrait of a woman in front of a mirror. There's a quiet vulnerability in her expression, and something timeless about the light and composition. When the edition of 25 sold out, I felt a little sad that I couldn't offer it anymore. So, I decided to do a variation. I returned to the same setting with the same model and asked her to pose in the same way, but this time, I made her smile. It changed everything. That slight shift in emotion created a completely different energy in the image.

HM: That's fascinating—almost like a diptych in spirit, even if sold separately.

SA: Exactly. I sent the new photograph to my galleries—at the time I was working with four, including one in Switzerland, another in New Mexico, and of course Catherine Couturier and Alex Novak. Three of the galleries agreed to represent the new photo, even though it was very similar in composition. They felt it conveyed a distinct feeling—joy, contentment—and they titled it *Happiness*. We released another edition of 25 prints. That also sold out. So, in total, this model and this scene have been sold 50 times: 25 in the original melancholic version, and 25 in the smiling version.

HM: That's extraordinary. Not many photographers can say they've sold out two full editions of such closely related images. Would you say the nude has become your signature theme?

SA: I think so, yes. There's something timeless and emotionally honest in the nude form. It's not just about the body—it's about light, mood, vulnerability, intimacy, and storytelling without words. And yes, these two photographs of the same woman—melancholy and joy—are probably my best-known works.



HM: When I look at your photographs, especially the nudes, there's something very distinct—a certain quietness, an elegance. It almost feels like you're part of what I'd call the *Prague School of Photography*. Would you agree?

SA: Absolutely. That's a very astute observation. I lived in Prague for seven years, and those years shaped my visual language profoundly. I immersed myself in the photographic culture there—visiting every exhibition, studying the Czech masters. I was especially drawn to Czech avant-garde photography. Photographers like František Drtikol, Jaroslav Rössler, and of course, Josef Sudek—they left a deep impression on me.

HM: Ah, Sudek! His poetic use of light and stillness is unforgettable.

SA: Yes, Sudek's influence runs deep in my work. His ability to convey emotion through shadows and still life has inspired my own compositions, especially in my more introspective nudes. Even though I've traveled far from Vukovar, and then Germany, and now Prague—those photographic roots remain strong.

HM: You mentioned earlier how transformative your time in Prague was. Can we go back to that moment? How did the city shape you as an artist?

SA: Absolutely. Those seven years in Prague were the most influential period of my life. From the very first day I arrived from Germany, I knew I had found the right place—for life and for photography. The pace of life was slower, more human. In Germany, everything was work and sleep—no space for creative thought. But in Prague, I received permanent residency, and I still have that status today. Not having to go to the police station every three months gave me a sense of freedom I had never known before. That freedom allowed me to breathe, to observe, to create.

HM: It sounds like the emotional contrast between your family's hardship and the life you found in Prague shaped your vision.

SA: Exactly. While my parents were still in war-torn Vukovar, I was walking the poetic streets of Prague. Photography became the way I balanced the horror of the war with the calm and beauty of my new life. There was an emotional tension inside me—between destruction and hope—and photography was the only way I could process that. Many of the galleries that show my work today still prefer the photos I took in Prague. There's a certain emotion and intimacy in those images that, I think, reflect that inner conflict.

HM: And yet it wasn't nude photography that you started with. How did you transition from street and emotional documentary work to nudes?

SA: It happened almost by accident. I took a photo—my first nude in Prague—of a woman in front of a mirror. It was a quiet, melancholic moment. That image ended up winning an award at Czech Press Photo. I had never shot nudes before. That success gave me the courage to explore the genre more seriously. From that point on, nude photography became a major part of my work. I've since published four books of nudes, and most of those images were made in collaboration with one model.

HM: Just one model? That's quite rare.

SA: Yes, just one. And it's been a very special collaboration. To create four books with a single person requires an enormous amount of creativity, trust, and reinvention. We constantly changed the ambience, the lighting, the setting—even her hairstyle and clothing—to keep things fresh. But what never changed was the emotional intimacy and trust between us.

HM: What made her different from the models you worked with before?

SA: Before her, I worked with paid models. And when someone is paid, the interaction is always limited by time—they're checking their watch. It becomes transactional. But with her, it's a real partnership. We've known each other for years. There's mutual respect. We decide together which photos to release or exhibit. She's not performing; she's participating. That makes a huge difference, both in the experience and in the resulting images.

HM: Are you still working with her today?

SA: Yes, absolutely. In fact, I'm opening a major exhibition in Zagreb on August 26th, featuring 40 large-format nude photos—all of her. The prints are big—one meter by one-and-a-half meters. She's now 40 years old, but she looks much younger. And her presence, her emotional range, has only deepened over time.

I've always believed that nude photography can be elegant and emotional—not vulgar or exploitative. Unfortunately, many images today cross that line into kitsch. My aim is always aesthetic. I use only natural light—no studios, no artificial lighting. I travel to locations to find the right light, the right setting. The result, I hope, is something timeless and intimate.

HM: It certainly is. There's a purity to your work that's very rare. Tell me, how do you keep the collaboration with your model so strong over time?

SA: Trust. That's everything. We both made a commitment—she only poses for me, and I only photograph her. We've traveled together, created together, edited together. She knows what we're doing is art. That gives her confidence. And she enjoys the process. When someone enjoys being photographed, it shows in the image.

HM: Do you ever think about working with a new model to explore something different?

SA: No. I made a vow to her and to myself. There's still so much we can do together. Each new shoot brings something unexpected. The relationship itself continues to evolve—and that's what keeps the work alive. It's not about the novelty of a new face. It's about the depth of connection and what that allows us to express.

HM: Stanko, you've worked closely with many young photographers over the years. What advice would you give to someone who's just starting out?

SA: First and foremost, they must believe in themselves. That's the beginning of everything. If you don't believe in what you're doing, no one else will. Photography is not a hobby—it's a way of life. So my advice is: be fully committed. You have to be 100% dedicated to the work, to the process. Without that level of focus, there is no chance of success.

Also, and this is important—there are no guarantees. Even if you give everything, it still doesn't mean you will "make it." In my own case, luck also played a role. I was fortunate to be discovered by Alex Novak from the Jiri Jaskmanicky gallery. That was a turning point. He introduced my work to the American market, and now my photos are represented in the U.S.

But I'll tell you this: if I had to start again today, I think it would be much harder. The world is flooded with talented photographers, all looking for a place in galleries. There simply aren't enough galleries to support them all.

I once recommended seven Croatian photographers to Alex Novak. He said to me, “Stanko, no. I don't want to have a hundred photographers on my site. I prefer to work with ten—ten that I know personally, ten whose work I truly understand and believe in.” And I think he's right. A gallery should represent artists it really supports, not just accumulate names. It's about quality, not quantity.

So for young photographers, my advice is: build your voice, stay focused, and be patient. It's a long road, and it's not just about talent. It's also about timing, relationships, and yes—sometimes, luck.

If you want to support Stanko's new book " 100 Photographs" - €60 before printing; your name will be published in the book and you will get a signed copy.

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Stanko Abadžić

100 PHOTOGRAPHS

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