

A woman stands poolside, arms crossed against her chest; perhaps cold after a swim. Captured in soft focus her legs dissolve into nothingness. Unbeknownst to her, she is one of thousands of women unwittingly captured through the lens of late Czech photographer Miroslav Tichý. From the 1960s until 1985 the reclusive photographer took up to one hundred photographs like this a day in his home town of Kyjov in the Czech Republic.

Tichý originally trained as a painter at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague but quit following the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948, when artists were forced to paint in the Socialist style. Following a period of compulsory military service, Tichý returned to Kyjov and began taking photographs. Adopting the guise of a self-styled vagabond (expressed physically in his deliberately unkempt state) he lingered near bus stops, parks and swimming pools looking for subjects and was on occasion arrested for peeping and loitering – but this didn't stop him. When Tichý was banned from a local pool, he simply developed his own telephoto lens so that he could continue to photograph unsuspecting female bathers.

Tichý's subjects rarely engage with the photographer – they are typically oblivious to his presence. Often their gazes are averted completely, or only parts of their bodies are included in the frame. In one image, Tichý zooms in on an unknown woman's abdomen as she reclines on a towel. The focus of the image is, unequivocally, the woman's bikini-clad crotch. Its importance is emphasised by a crude outline penned by Tichý that traces the edges of the garment, emphasising the threshold to what lies beneath.

As well as using available technologies, Tichý also made his own makeshift cameras. Fashioned out of cardboard tubes, tin cans, dress elastic, old camera parts and sealed with asphalt to keep the light out they are remarkable objects in their own right. The resulting photographs are often dramatically over or under exposed and routinely unfocused and distorted. This was in part achieved through the artist's deliberate modification of his camera lenses that were scratched with sandpaper or soiled with a blend of toothpaste and cigarette ash to achieve the desired effect. Tichý's images were self-printed too, and sometimes crudely framed and decorated. On occasion he pasted his prints onto paper to stop them from curling and he wasn't averse to cutting the photographs themselves to create a more favourable composition. All of these imperfections were

important. "The flaws are part of it" Tichý said. "That's the poetry. To achieve that, first of all you need a bad camera."ⁱ

Given his obsessive approach to photographing what is so surprising about Tichý's process is what happened to the images after printing – they were simply cast aside; strewn on the floor or accumulating in piles around his home. Over time they were damaged by dirt, insects, dust. Tichý only ever made one of each image and never titled, catalogued, sold or exhibited his work. For years his photographs remained in obscurity until former neighbour and family friend Roman Buxbaum suggested that they try to conserve the prints and began collecting and promoting Tichý's work in the early 1980s.

'Success' came to Tichý late in his life. His work remained largely unknown until the late curator Harald Szeemann included a collection of Tichý's photographs in the 2004 Biennial of Contemporary Art in Seville. Szeemann compared Tichý's work to the photorealist paintings of Gerhard Richter and elevated him from 'outsider' to contemporary artist. An award at the Rencontres d'Arles and exhibitions at Kunsthaus Zurich, the Centre Pompidou and the International Centre of Photography in New York City followed, with his works acquired by numerous collections. But Tichý attended none of these exhibitions, and in 2011 died in the village he was born in at the age of 85. Tichý was content to exist on the periphery; to look, and to indulge his own fantasies. The artist resolutely created work for himself alone.

Serena Bentley

ⁱ Miroslav Tichý, from an interview recorded with Roman Buxbaum. *Miroslav Tichý: Tarzan Retired*. DVD, Roman Buxbaum, 2007.