

FRIEZE

The Mysterious Selfies of Monsieur Bascoulard

A series of extraordinary self-portraits taken in rural France over three decades prompt questions around gender, identity and biography

BY PHILIP MYALL IN ONE TAKES | 20 SEP 18



Self-portrait of Marcel Bascoulard, 1944



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What first caught my attention was a photograph taken in 1944. A handsome young man addresses me confidently through the camera. The image is black and white but the dress he's wearing - floor-length, full-skirted, with a satin sheen - is clearly striped in bright hoops of colour. Its style is more 19th century than mid-20th; the setting a country lane in the sunshine. Earlier in the year, this same young man had adopted a more conventionally photogenic pose, leaning back and gazing away from the camera, like a female movie-star in a publicity still. That time he was safely indoors, in what looks to be an unstaged corner of a photographic studio.

These two images are amongst the earliest of a series of self-portraits Marcel Bascoulard made compulsively until his death (in 1978 at the age of 64), in or around the town of

Bourges, in central France. During war-time occupation, Bascoulard was arrested at least twice by Nazi soldiers, only to be released without charge; accounts suggest they may have been unnerved by his strangeness, a prominent aspect of which was his seeming indifference to them. Bascoulard lived always on his own idiosyncratic terms, apparently unconcerned with the opinion of others.

Though the subject of these two photographs, Bascoulard is also their maker; the camera is his own (though a friend is operating it for him), and the intentions likewise. Six months elapsed between them being taken and Bascoulard's sense of what he wants these images to address, and how, appears to have evolved. While his stance in the earlier picture is self-consciously feminine - a performance, in a private space - the later photograph is unapologetically of a man in a dress, out in the countryside for all the world to see. He seems more concerned now with straightforwardly recording a moment than with conforming to an established (gendered) aesthetic. 'This is me, in this dress,' Bascoulard seems to be saying. And nothing more.

This approach - directly addressing the camera, devoid of posturing - was to prove characteristic. Though the costumes change over the decades (Bascoulard designed them himself and had them made) the form of the photographs doesn't, suggesting that, while something is being developed, something else is stuck in reiteration, both seeking and resisting resolution. Denying himself money and possessions, Bascoulard lived as a *clochard* - a vagrant - in a succession of slum lodgings or improvised shacks (the last of which was a rusting lorry-cab in the corner of a field), never washing or changing his clothes. In this way he spent his whole life in the one small community, known to everyone while remaining insistently alone.

He had trained as an artist and been exhibited once, in Paris. Known for his landscape drawings - which, at their best, are vital with the commonplace - he chose to sell only the most conventional: souvenir pictures of the town's cathedral and mediaeval streets. He showed his photographic self-portraits to his friends, some of whom still live in the area. 'Monsieur Bascoulard' they call him reverently, even lovingly, as they explain to me that he only dressed up for the camera. According to an official report of an incident in 1952, when he was arrested for walking the streets in the 'wrong' kind of clothing, he told the police: 'It's an artistic necessity.' He was seeking to avoid charges, but in the process provided his one explicit statement as to what he considered the photographs to be: Art.



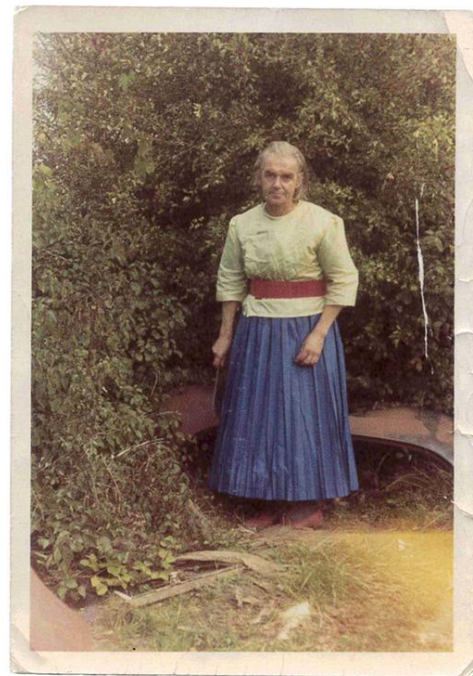
Marcel Bascoulard, *Sans titre*, 23 janvier 1958, 1958, gelatin silver print, 11 x 8 cm. Courtesy: Pinault Collection © Galerie Christophe Gaillard



Self-portrait of Marcel Bascoulard, 1959

They fall into three distinct phases. In the first, made during the 1940s, the youthfully lean and bright-eyed Bascoulard is radiantly self-assured, dressed as his grandmother might have been when she was his age and on her way to a party.

In the second (from the 1950s to '60s), a more matronly Bascouard continues to emulate an earlier generation: a middle-aged schoolteacher; a shopkeeper; a spinster aunt. Dutiful domestic service is evoked by aprons, sometimes worn incongruously over satin. While these images celebrate the mundane respectability of pre-war small-town life, the man who made them lived in squalor and stench. Looking at us quizzically, a piece of mirror always in hand - reading variously as a fan, a book or a machete - he is in his 40s now and bulking up. A bourgeois housewife prize-fighter.



Self-portrait of Marcel Bascouard, 1972

Self-portrait of Marcel Bascouard, c. late-1960s

Often, in this middle phase of the photographs, he seems too tightly wrapped - a chrysalis - and in the final phase (which takes us into the 1970s) emerges as a massive gravity-bound butterfly. He had always liked materials with a sheen and now it's vinyl, the folds of which take on increasingly structural forms (sometimes as stiff and as gleaming as samurai armour). And the man himself? He looks a little doubtful at times, or a little impatient, his head and shoulders often dipping in a kind of curtsey. Is it a supplication? Or is he poised to go in for the kill? He has the battered and embattled look of a boxer.



Self-portrait of Marcel Basculard, c. early 1970s

In one picture (it's undated but looks to be from his final years) he's wearing a simple white smock, standing in an interior doorway. The wallpaper is unprecedented; it feels like someone's home rather than a studio. I have the surprising sense of another person's presence (he's always seemed alone before, even though someone was operating the camera), and this suggests a narrative. It's as if he's asked a question and awaits our answer: it might be whether we want a cup of tea. I don't think it's whether we want a fuck: Basculard's self-portraits are resolutely asexual. 'There's nothing to be afraid of,' he seems to be saying, 'however transgressive this might appear.' In 1932, when Basculard was 19, his mother shot his father dead. She spent the rest of her life in a

lunatic asylum. Does the paradoxically reassuring atmosphere of these images mask an intimation that women may not necessarily be as benign as convention suggests, or men necessarily as dangerous?

In the final photographs the juxtaposition of an undisguisedly male person with clothing conventionally regarded as female has evolved so that both the person and the costume seem imbued with a mix of masculine and feminine qualities. (Unless this is to observe only how we all, in ageing, tend to reassume the androgyny of adolescence.)

Bascouard struggled to emerge from a traumatic childhood into a singular adulthood. In making these images is he seeking to ameliorate a sense of discomfort or to examine it? Is he trying to reconcile his mother and his father, or the masculine and feminine aspects of himself? And if so, does he succeed? In the early images his presentation to the camera seems a victory in itself, but the later ones are increasingly shadowed by a sense that the weariness of compulsion has overtaken the energy from which compulsion springs.

That his mother killed his father suggests a couple overly preoccupied with one another and unlikely to have much time for their children. Ultimately, for me, these mysterious self-portraits read as images of self-sufficiency. 'I am all I need in one,' he seems to be saying, 'You offer nothing. I only want you to see. To know I'm here. And not to forget.'

It didn't end well. Like his father, Bascouard was murdered. A young man - one of a number of troubled local youths Bascouard had been seeking to help - confessed and was convicted. But none of the people I've spoken to, who were in Bourges at the time, believe he was the killer.

The murder tends to be what Bascoulard was remembered for. No estate remains. When a monograph was published in 2014, his drawings were meticulously annotated as artworks while his photographs, though well represented, were included more as an aspect of his biography. That's how I first came to see them, joining the growing number of people to fall for their curious charisma.

Patrick Martinat's Bascoulard. Dessinateur virtuose, clochard magnifique, femme inventée (Bascoulard. Virtuoso designer, Magnificent Tramp, Invented Woman) was published by Les Cahiers Dessinés in 2014. Monsieur Bascoulard by Bernard Capo was published by BulleBerry éditions in 2013. 'Un autre monde: Marcel Bascoulard' was held at Galerie Christophe Gaillard, Paris, France in 2016. Several Bascoulard images from the Pinault Collection are included in the exhibition 'Dancing with Myself' at the Punta Della Dogana, Venice, Italy, until 16 December 2018.