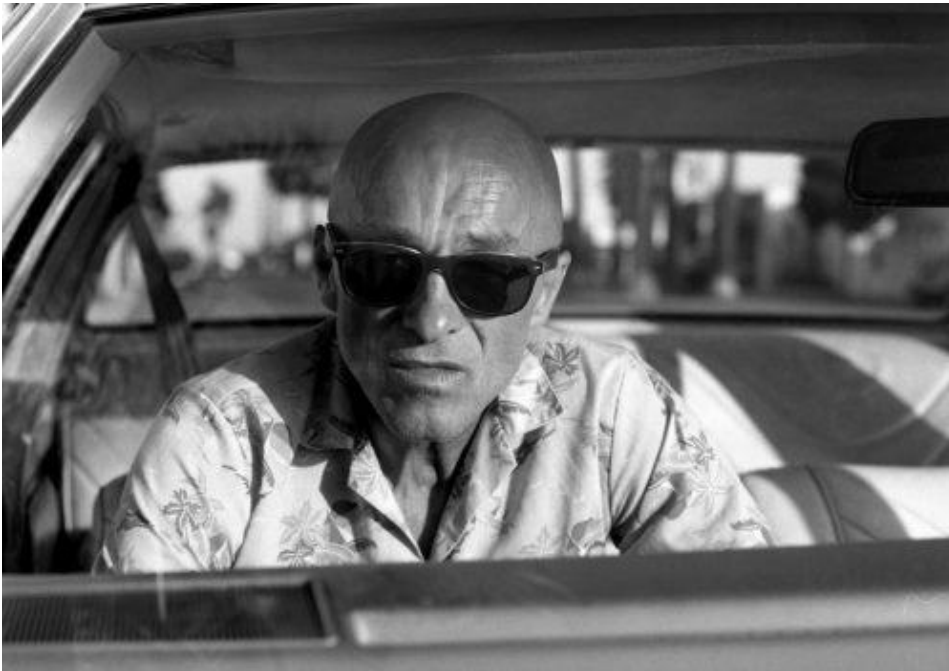


## What's new, Miron Zownir? Interview by Nadine Dinter

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Nadine Dinter

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**Miron Zownir** is an absolute force of nature. Once you meet him and see his work, you'll never forget it. The way he captures the world around him, how he seems drawn to environments, situations, and people that others tend to avoid or at least ignore or oversee, goes beyond mere admiration. Whether of New York, Moscow, Berlin – or recently in Istanbul – his photographs make you feel the places they depict when viewing them.

I met Zownir many years ago through my work for Bene Taschen's gallery, and I have been a big fan of his work ever since. For his latest series, show, and book release, we sat down together and spoke about what's new.

**Nadine Dinter:** Your latest exhibition is called *Istanbul*. What does Istanbul mean to you?

**Miron Zownir:** In 1976, I hitchhiked from Berlin to Istanbul. Back then, the city was still a haven for heroin junkies from all over the world. It was less crowded, less cosmopolitan, less sophisticated, and more suspicious of strangers. My overall impression was that it was a sleeping giant just awakening to the forceful economic and technological demands

of a modern city.

More than 40 years later, it seems to have surpassed many western metropolises in a dynamic but ruthless process of gentrification.

**After dedicating an entire series to the cities of New York, Moscow, and Berlin, why did you choose Istanbul?**

**MZ:** Following a failed coup in 2016, Erdogan severely restricted democratic freedoms and civil rights. Tensions over democracy, migration, illegal oil drilling, and the country's military intervention in Syria made Turkey a destabilizing threat to the world. At the end of 2019, relations between the EU and Turkey were at a low point. Western tourists became rare. I had been collaborating with several alternative magazines at that time and heard through one of my contacts there that it would reasonably be safe to visit Istanbul. I booked a flight, rented a cheap hotel in Taksim, and explored the city.

I chose Istanbul for many reasons: my memories from the 1970s, the fact that Istanbul had become a kind of city non grata, and accounts from my friends that suggested adventures I had to experience. It may be overcrowded, segregated, and polluted, and the economic pressure to survive is immense. However, with its location at the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus, its magic light, lively ethnic neighborhoods, historical monuments, and skyscrapers, it is still one of the most exciting cities in the world.

**Your photographs are striking with their depiction of intense contrasts, and you don't shy away from unpleasant situations or people. How do you approach your subjects?**

**MZ:** My first approach is always discreet, with the intention of photographing unrecognized. Sometimes it is necessary to communicate, and sometimes the interaction develops into another situation, according to the positive or negative chemistry between me and the person I photograph. In street photography, you have to be bold and daring but nevertheless respectful, smooth, polite, and selective. You've got to have good intuition, familiarity with your surroundings, and knowledge of both human nature and your own limitations. My aim is always to get an authentic picture. Even if people are reacting to me, interfering, or posing, I hunt for that one magic moment.

**For this series, you used your favorite film, Tri-X, which you have used since the 1970s. Why did you decide to shoot analogue? What kind of camera do you usually use?**

**MZ:** I started out with analogue, got used to it, and never felt the need to change. There are advantages to digital photography but definitely not in terms of quality. It might be similar to the difference between film and video, but maybe I'm wrong. A good digital photo is still a good photo.

I used to work with Nikon cameras. For the last ten years, I have exclusively used Contax.

**How do you prepare for a photo project? Do you visit the place first, check out the streets, note down places you later want to shoot, and then return another time to take the photographs? How did you proceed with your latest series on Istanbul?**

**MZ:** In the '70s and '80s, when I was photographing in Berlin, London, and New York City,

I started out in the neighborhoods I was living in. Being familiar with the surroundings, I knew where to go and ventured from there to the hot spots I found especially interesting. But street photography is unpredictable. You always have to be ready for any challenge, and sometimes you have to change your pattern or areas you prefer.

When I went to Moscow, Bucharest, Kyiv, and Istanbul, I was venturing into very unfamiliar cities. In that case, I communicated with people and got as much inside information as possible. Sometimes I also used other sources of information.

Nevertheless, once I start out in a city, I adapt very fast to its pace, dynamics, and idiosyncrasies. After a while, I know where to go – depending more on intuition than on any prefabricated strategy.

**What's next on your agenda? Do you have any other shows or projects, etc. planned?**

**MZ:** As far as shows go, I currently have a retrospective going on at the Lithuanian Photographers Association in Klaipeda, Lithuania. I was just featured at Art Budapest by Galerie Koppelman, and at Paris Photo and Art Cologne by Galerie Bene Taschen. After my Istanbul exhibition in December, I have two major shows in prospect.

**What are other cities you would like to check out with your camera in the future?**

**MZ:** What I would *like* to do and what I might be *able* to do are not exactly identical. I would be very interested in Mexico City, Tokyo, Rio, or any major North American city. Or exploring one country as a whole.

**In your Istanbul series, we see people and places that probably don't appear on the tourist maps, which tourists would never see. Why did you choose those places over more pleasant motifs?**

**MZ:** I cannot deny the unpleasant realities that others might block out in order to feel comfortable, happy, or entertained. I'm not envious of those considered beautiful, rich, or famous. But those attributes or achievements have never been my goal. I prefer to focus on people and situations beyond mainstream media hype, phony lies, acceptable codes of behavior, or middle-class norms. What interests me are the wastelands, ruins, and desolate places that are as gloomy as the outlook of our future.

**Do you think that taking those photographs in color would change the mood the viewer experiences when looking at your works?**

**MZ:** Definitely: colors are more obtrusive, directing our attention to the strongest details and providing more information. Black & white is more subtle, dreamlike, poetic, and reflective.

**What's your advice to photographers who want to be as gutsy as yourself?**

**MZ:** If you are gutsy, you don't need my advice!

**For more information, please visit: <https://www.mironzownir.com/> and check out Miron's IG account @miron\_zownir**

**The exhibition “Istanbul” by Miron Zownir will be on view from 9 December 2022 – 18 March 2023 at the Cologne-based Bene Taschen Gallery.**  
**<https://www.benetaschen.com/>**