

contemporary visual arts



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whatever happened to Paris?
PLUS HORROR, AMNESIA AND INTIMATE CONFESSIONS

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Artists as diverse as Lisa Yuskavage, Rita Ackermann, Larry Clark, Sally Mann, Jock Sturges and Nicky Hoberman have explored the erotic body of the child in their work. Given our confusion over the sexuality of children, Anna Burns argues that it's time to reassess the use of the image of the child in the visual arts, avoiding the media hysteria surrounding the subject.

Children and Sexuality



in the Visual Arts

'Usually the amateur is defined as an immature state of the artist: someone who cannot – or will not – achieve the mastery of a profession. But in the field of photographic practice, it is the amateur, on the contrary, who is the assumption of the professional: for it is he who stands closer to the noeme of photography.'

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Rather than seeing the eroticised child as a focus for sexual perversion or a symptom of a late twentieth-century power struggle between the sexes, we should regard the body of the child as a *tabula rasa* onto which both men and women can project their social fears and find an unrestrictive expressive outlet. The child becomes the perfect focus because it is yet to develop self-consciously and acts as a diversion from the realisation that our social structure is fragmenting. The child has a status similar to that of Roland Barthes' amateur photographer. Being less mindful of the effects of the camera, the child is open and less self-conscious. There is a natural, unrestrained sexuality in children which has become the continuing fascination of artists such as Sally Mann, Larry Clark and Jock Sturges. These photographers try to capture the uninhibited eroticism of the child, the human at its 'zero degree'. This effort, and therefore the artist, is never quite fulfilled, as the models constantly outgrow their initial appeal.

LARRY CLARK, from the *KIDS* portfolio, 1995, 15 c-prints, edition of 25, each print signed and numbered, 39 x 46.2 cm.
Courtesy: Luhring Augustine, New York



left: NICKY HOBERMAN, *Mermaid II*, 1997, oil on canvas, 152 x 244 cm. Courtesy: Entwistle, London

opposite: RITA ACKERMANN, *Now I'm Gonna Take a Vacation*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 147 x 228 cm. Courtesy: Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Although it is used to try to control or freeze time, the photograph acts as a fold or link which inevitably carries time in a natural progression to the next moment. The act of photography undeniably captures a moment. Yet its net effect is to demonstrate that time has passed since that moment. In this sense the photograph is a recorded link between time before the moment of the photograph and time thereafter. The need to photograph and freeze the sexual development of the child has the effect of producing a link between innocence and sexual awareness. In other words, the photograph acts as a *neutre*. In Roland Barthes' and Louis Marin's understanding of the term, a *neutre* effects a never-ending play on oppositional space between the sexual and non-sexual. Barthes writes that a *neutre* is 'not an average of active and passive; rather it is a back and forth, an amoral oscillation – in short one might say, the converse of antinomy'.¹ The photograph dresses sexually a sexually undeveloped being, therefore creating a constantly shifting and ambiguous ground. The girl is made into a sexual fetish object although this is simultaneously negated because she does not have the physical maturity to be such an object. Just as the age of consent laws confuse the public, so, too, does the sexualisation of children in photographs. Who does and who does not have a sexuality?

When studying the photographs of Jock Sturges and Sally Mann, it becomes apparent that their sexual content lies beyond the boundaries of the image itself. Their sexuality lies instead in the knowledge that this moment

occurred (the Latin, *noeme*, that-has-been) while the artist was present. This knowledge gives the viewer food for speculation as to the circumstances and atmosphere which allowed the photograph to be taken. In turn this speculation creates a tension which the viewer reads as sexual.

Mann's eldest daughter is photographed in *Night Blooming Cereus* (1988), her head cropped, her chest the focus and her nipples covered by two large flowers hanging around her neck. Her breasts are not yet developed but Mann still covers them. In covering something which is not there Mann makes the image immediately titillating. The presence of Mann can be felt in the contradictory intimacy and the composition of the image. The title, although named after the flowers, also refers to Mann's daughter who, it implies, is of the same nature: overnight she will blossom from immaturity and innocence into sexual maturity.

It is worth considering the work of Japanese photographer Nobuyoshi Araki with Barthes' *neutre* in mind. Araki uses the medium in a contrary fashion to artists like Sally Mann or Larry Clark. His photographs are used to disempower women, to turn women into children. The role play at work within the photographs leaves no space for the imagination to wander, and no edge over which it is dangerous or perverse to push his models. Araki's personal history is well-publicised. We are aware that the women in the photographs are not children, and that there is a waiting list of them willing to be ceremoniously punished and photographed. We are also informed that he has sexual relationships with most of his models. The women are already sexually mature – therefore there is no *neutre* – and so no aura is created around the photograph, leaving the final image blatant and banal.

The photographing of children is an action through which the artist tries to capture a human at its most lifelike, prior to an awareness of mortality. To explain further, the artist is striving to create or reproduce life and so chooses a child as the subject in an effort to freeze her at a point in time, well before physical decline and death. However, this need to negate death only enhances our awareness of it.

In his photographic journals *Teenage Lust* and *Tulsa*, Larry Clark pushes the contest with death still further. His photographs record children proving their immortality in a series of events in which they are recorded taking drugs, cutting themselves and having sex. Clark creates a photographic world of omnipotent children where morality and any rule or social code is purposely overridden. He records the child's lack of restraint or fear, its freedom from the adult order of existence. The photograph is then used as a distraction from self-consciousness and the social fears that have not yet developed in his subjects.

death of the moment

If it is true to say that the artist's ultimate reason for existence is to immortalise him or herself somehow, it is also fair to point out that, at first glance, the use of photography as medium and child as subject is the perfect formula through which to achieve this. As I have mentioned, the child is captured in a photograph as an example of human life prior to the signs of deterioration.

The photograph is used as an attempt to negate time and sexual maturation, and can be recognised as a symptom of thanatophobia – the intense fear of death. Ironically the photograph does not act as a separation of the binary opposites youth and death, but as proof that time is passing. In Carol Mavor's words, 'every photograph indicates the death of a moment, the passage of time, the fact that we are all that much closer to our own deaths'.² Paradoxically this attempt to immortalise youth is made by shifting the mortality onto a material which is as vulnerable to 'death' and deterioration as the body – namely paper.



below: NOBUYOSHI ARAKI, *Untitled*, 1990, photograph. Courtesy: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, Cologne

opposite: LISA YUSKAVAGE, *Rorschach Blot*, 1995, oil on linen, 213 x 182.8 cm. Courtesy: Christopher Grimes Gallery, California



duration as experience

If one now considers painters who work from the child subject – such as Lisa Yuskavage, Rita Ackermann and Nicky Hoberman – it is interesting to find that their work operates in a contrary fashion to the photograph. The need to freeze time, which is intrinsic to the photographer's work, no longer applies. The painting cannot act as an instant recording of youth but actually acts contrary to this by enforcing the passage of time.

The use of paint as a medium connects to Henri Bergson's theory of experience and time. Bergson claims that the condition for real experience is duration. Rather than trying to bypass time like the photographer, the painter must endure it. The artist is no longer trying to freeze a moment. Instead the medium of paint and the time taken to produce the image is used as a means of portraying personal experience.

While they are used to create an image which portrays a condensed period of existence, the scenes depicted in these paintings, especially those of Rita Ackermann, are fairly extreme. Lisa Yuskavage and Nicky Hoberman both distort the body to depict a speeded-up physical development of the female form. These painters use the medium in an effort to subvert the use of this subject. The gaze of the childish face gives the viewer difficulties in distinguishing between innocence and experience.

Yet the physical distortions and violent iconography presented in the paintings make it very difficult for the viewer to appropriate them to his or her own sexual agenda. This is enhanced by the medium, which we are aware does not allow a direct replica of life. Ackermann deconstructs the surface of the canvas, immediately making the viewer aware that it is a painting. Again, both Yuskavage and Hoberman use one-colour backgrounds, so the figures float in a synthesised space which highlights the painterly and constructed quality of the image.

It is interesting to note that of the two media it is the less 'real' which succeeds in deconstructing the fantasy of childhood. Real experience, which is intrinsic to the creation of paintings by Hoberman, Yuskavage and Ackermann, is of secondary importance to the photographer. Instead the photograph is used as an editing facility, allowing the artist to control the order and context in which a situation occurs. The photograph, as Barthes points out, 'actually blocks memory [and] quickly becomes a counter-memory'.³ Mann

and Clark use the photograph as a means of rearranging their memories of youth. As the title of Clark's latest photographic journal suggests, it is an effort to create *The Perfect Childhood*.

reproduction

The photograph, although used to arrest the sexual development of the child, carries its own means of reproduction. This, like the child subject, gives the photograph a sense of autoeroticism – an ability to satisfy and reproduce itself. Painting cannot do this. As a result the painting is always an original, the photograph disposable and interchangeable like the child within it.



The use of both a sexually overt image and paint by a woman causes a double subversion – a reclamation of child sexuality and of this historically male medium.

By using the taboo of child sexuality as the subject for painting, artists such as Yuskavage and Ackermann are encouraging it to be seen in everyday visual culture (and away from photography's associations with pornography and explicitness). Through this method of appropriation the painters break down the aura that surrounds the subject, ridding it of eroticism. Fetishisation is not possible because instead of the artist acting as voyeur – as in photography – she becomes part of the image, and therefore her view is from within the painting outwards.

Artists such as Rita Ackermann, Lisa Yuskavage and Nicky Hoberman have all been using little girls as the basis for their work. Rather than rejecting the image as a male sexual fantasy, they have embraced it in an effort to subvert the message that it presents, no longer keeping it in the domain of the illicit. The use of both a sexually overt image and paint by a woman causes a double

subversion – a reclamation of child sexuality and of this historically male medium.

In both photography and painting the image of the child is used either to negate or subvert social fears. The child acts as a *tabula rasa* on which artists are able to impose an idea, be it the fear of death, conscious sexuality, or the transient structure of late twentieth-century society.

1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage, London, 1993

2 Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1995

3 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, op. cit.

Nobuyoshi Araki: *Tokyo Lucky Hole* is published in paperback by Taschen at £16.95

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