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■ Petty Crimes: Contemporary Images of Childhood Play

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From the notion of getting in touch with one's inner child to the array of cross-generational consumer products available, distinctions between adults, adolescents and children are less clear cut today than 50 years ago. At least this is one of the current myths being promulgated in the media. Therefore, it is no surprise that in 'Petty Crimes: Contemporary Images of Childhood Play', while some of the 15 artists included explore personal memories of childhood play, others interrogate the media myth of cross-generational infantilism.

Some of the latter work induces an uneasy sense of responsibility in the viewer. Robin Lowe's paintings feature children whose facial expressions and postures are unnervingly inappropriate, at least in terms of the romantic legacy of the innocent child. The girl on the beach who occupies the whole picture frame in his *Lil' Ms Mercury*, 1997, crouches with one foot buried in the sand, eyes slanted teasingly towards the viewer like a page three pin-up. She can be all too easily dismissed as suffering from the Lolita syndrome, but that would be to ignore the questioning of the viewer's gaze implicit in her provocative posture. However, the accusatory tone of this, and Lowe's other painting on show, *TV Blue*, 1996, made turning away all too easy.

By contrast, the discomfort produced by Rineke Dijkstra's two photographs, part of a new commission by the Laing, is less moralistic. Dijkstra's images, while confrontational, depict adolescent bodies, whose expression of identity via the language of the media is as liberating as it is entrapping. The girls in *Vicky, Lynsey, & Adele*, *Portland High School Newcastle*, 18 Feb 2000, 2000, all wear that leveller of individuality, the school uniform, but each girl expresses defiant traces of her identity by means of accessories such as earrings, make-up etc. Dijkstra's teenagers are represented from their point of view rather than from an adult's, as in Lowe's work or in

Kenny Hunter's *Four Children*, 1998, a set of four grey plastic busts of children's heads on hardboard plinths. The heads, twice human scale and identifiable as contemporary by their necklines, the ubiquitous parka, the zipped polo etc, are reminiscent of Greek classical statuary or Soviet monuments. In fact the allusion to both is telling as both idealise the human form. Freud maintained that children are monuments to parental ideals which is why they want them to be perfect. Hunter's busts are monuments to the perfect child, serious and uncannily deathlike, all childish exuberance arrested in the smooth surface of Airfix model plastic.

Secretly though, parents want their children to be a bit naughty as children's pranks reawaken an adult's dormant sense of being carefree. One group of Sebastian Kusenberg's photographs, selected from the artist's book *Playing Life*, depict children romping about in a swimming pool. The other group of photographs, three black and white images, each depict an adult posing with wooden toy cows. The catalogue implies that the two groups of images are to be read as contrasting the uninhibited joy of the children with the awkwardness of the adults. However, I found the pool series rather nondescript, a bit like holiday brochure shots, while the black and white series, on its own count, is much more interesting.

More personal aspects of childhood play are explored in Richard Woods' *18 Choppers*, 1997, a sculptural mass of 18 differently sized bikes customised to look like Choppers, an item that topped many Christmas lists in the 1970s. Referring to peer pressure, the piece evokes the childhood play of a past era rather than the contemporary where mobile phones have replaced the Chopper as the desirable Christmas stocking filler. The ins and outs of gadgetry are explored by a lot of the 'boys' in the show. Jeremy Dickinson's realistically crafted small paintings of toy vehicles in varying arrangements on a white background speak of the childhood obsession with collecting objects in series. The vehicles are rusted but their careful rendering restores psychological intensity to these now discarded objects. Graham Fagen's and Gary Perkins' gadgets are more sinister. Fagen photographs the domestic objects he used as weapons in his

childhood, while Perkins' *In God's eyes all things are made equal*, 2000, a commission by the Laing, uses abandoned war toys as source material for a mini budget disaster movie, although the formula of handmade model and monitor is much less convincing here than in Perkins' earlier surveillance camera series.

The girls in 'Petty Crimes' are less nostalgic. In Maria Marshall's video piece, *Jackanory*, 1998, a voiceover of the artist reading a story from *Winnie the Pooh* accompanies grainy found footage of a police car chasing a young joy rider on a motorway. The combination of Eeyore wondering about the end of the world and the denouement of the chase in an horrific crash with the joyrider being thrown from the car in the impact, raises questions of what occurs between the fantasies of the nursery and the pursuit of games in the real world that may end in death. *Jackanory* is not a moralistic piece though. On repeated viewings, the timer detailing the mph of the chase becomes mesmerising in its own right. Jo Lansley & Helen Bendon's series of photographs and video works feature the artists dressed as pubescent girls engaging in disturbing, ritualistic play. Props and unusual camera angles distort the girlish bodies in these sadistic domestic scenarios. What saves Lansley & Bendon's photographs from being mere stylisations of possible domestic trauma is the bizarre humour at work and the fact that the images stage relationships between the two protagonists. This, perhaps, prevents an image like *Wish*, 1997, a close-up of the tights-covered pubic areas of the protagonists, from being purely an essay in voyeurism.

Wendy McMurdo and Mat Collishaw focus on magical moments with macabre undertones. McMurdo's photographs of children in museums or at music practice have been digitally altered to remove key details, thereby giving an understated weirdness to the ordinary. Collishaw's *Duty Free Spirits*, 1997, an installation based on the nursery rhyme 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' highlights the entanglement of innocence with cruelty in childhood arcadia. Play as part of the necessary separation of the child from the mother is overtly signposted in Terry Hoff's installation, *Cornered*, 1997, a myriad of pastel

coloured paintings shaped like thought bubbles, one of which bears the illustrative inscription 'mo__er'.

Accusations of being illustrative could never be made to Susan Phillips' installation, *Susan, Barbara, Joan and Sarah: A Song, A Part*, 1997. Childhood play is referenced in this piece neither by potentially fetishistic images of children and adolescents nor by staged childhood regressions. The installation consists of four monitors placed at intervals around the gallery, one featuring Phillips herself, the others, each of her three sisters. Each sister in different times and locations was asked to sing 'Swiftly Flowing Elba', a song they used to sing in the round as children. The video tapes and the audio tapes are separate and edited out of synch, a factor which, in combination with the sculptural dimensions of the haunting melody, contributes to the sense of loss evoked by the work. After singing her part, unexpected waves of emotion register on each of the sisters' faces, the singing having reawakened memories of the childhood they shared together. This is incredibly moving and extends beyond the personal. Whatever one can say about the formative seductions of the media, they do not determine the only games we played to get here. Petty crime and the contemporary recede to the background as the lost past of childhood play, like the repressed, always returns and catches us unawares. ■

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