



Deborah Paauwe *Playtime* 1999 type C print
75 x 75cm Courtesy Greenaway Art Gallery,
Adelaide and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Telling Tales

THE CHILD IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Margaret Moore

THE PORTRAYAL OF CHILDREN in art cannot escape the spectrum of responses that images of children elicit in any other medium. The diversity and intensity of responses may be exacerbated because the image-making is so deliberate and so intended. For artists and curators alike to embark upon representations of children is knowingly to enter treacherous territory. They are both burdened and armed with the knowledge of the manipulative and revelational potential of their medium, and the sensitivity of child as subject. Theoretical and pictorial strategies to incite reflection, memory, drama or veracity via childhood are volatile when unleashed for public scrutiny.

It is this consciousness of the terrain that brings such potency and poetry to the exhibition *Telling Tales*, a Monash University Museum of Art touring exhibition at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. Through the accumulation of images this exhibition succeeds in provoking myriad contradictory emotional and rational channels of acceptance and analysis.

What may at first seem a sentimental or innocuous premise transforms into something more complex and unerring.

It is customary to be startled by encountering a view of a child in the context of other imagery in a newsreel or exhibition. Such is the case, for example, when confronting in the touring Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective the portrait of a small girl seated frontally, undressed except for underwear, or the image of the fleeing, napalmed Vietnamese girl within the reams of newsprint war documentation. One image commissioned and the other captured, yet each endures as evidence of childhood experience redolent with the vicissitudes of humanity. In confronting a group of works related to childhood as in *Telling Tales*, the resonances of meaning are expanded through the confining of focus. *Telling Tales* achieves this without moralising and without dogma.

The exhibition navigates a journey of psychological interrogation and offers an appraisal of photographic invention. It is challenging to reconcile the pre-pubescent girls staged by Bill Henson

with those staged by Deborah Paauwe, or the declared recollections of Tracey Moffatt, with the implied relationships suggested by Ronnie Van Hout, or the studio finesse of Polixeni Papapetrou with the air-filled randomness of Nicola Loder, or the interventionist approach to family snapshots employed by both Di Barrett and Mark McDean. Although formally contrasting, the conceptual approaches and visual allusions of each artist's work are enriched by being presented together. Henson and Paauwe each combine artifice and credibility to achieve heightened reality. Moffatt cuts to the core of the insidious impact of family relations in her constructed tableaux while Van Hout conveys familial tensions without definition. The intimate charms of the child are monumentalised by the seductive exquisiteness of Papapetrou's prints while Loder allows the honesty of flaws to filter her filmic recording.

Yet this is only one cursory summation of the effects of looking at these artists together. There are many other boundaries to transgress. The abject and the beautiful, the beguiling and the obvious, the innocent and the conspiratorial are all at play. Just as the sub-texts, innuendo and discomforts are magnified so too are the joys, the reveries and the illuminations. The catalogue essay by Anne Marsh honours the breadth and fertility of ideas and references contained within this exhibition providing a critical adjunct to it. It also appraises equivalently the work of each of the eleven artists presented.

Telling Tales is a fitting title, the schoolyard vernacular being effectively exploited. None of the children in these images can hide from your gaze – their tales, though not certain or definitive, are nonetheless there for the telling and the taking.

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