A NOSTALGIA FOR THE PRESENT

NICOLA LODER 1996

Nicola Loder
Child 1-175
A Nostalgia for the Present

We stare across the empty gallery space at a silent, ghostly group of children crowding across a long and stately wall of photographs. One hundred and seventy five photographs in a dense but broad mosaic, in five rows each of thirty-five. Each image a pale grey close-up of a child's face; every one in the same uniform 56 X 66 cm format. The rigour and sheer scale of the grid is imposing, stern, unyielding. It herds these youngsters into a cramped and unhappy assembly, but they strain against their rank and file order by exercising those tactics of disengagement and disdain familiar to anyone who gets on the wrong side of a child: direct but blank stares; obstinate daydreaming; listless pre-occupation with faraway thoughts; haughtiness and inapproachability; petulant sneers and sweet aloofness. And, despite their pallor and their regimentation, the children jostle and glance energetically about, darting looks up high and capriciously around like swirling cupids flirting on a Baroque ceiling. It is an ambiguous scene, this barricade of children that seems to have materialised out of thin air: where do they come from and what is the purpose of this gathering?

The ambiguity and mystery in Nicola Loder's immense photographic portrait gallery of children is a measure of the success of the work. While avoiding any facile sentimentality about juvenile innocence, Loder does not relinquish the Romanticism that has - for the last two centuries acknowledged and celebrated the seductive wiles and foxy charm of the child. Her portrayal of these children is a homage to untainted love, to unmannered conduct and untutored expression; and to that extent it is an idealisation. But it is not uncomplicated or naive. The camera is consistently below its subject, looking upward in veneration; and these children are all photographed in heroic isolation against the sky, larger than life and detached from family or any other social structure. Their wide-eyes and soft features are the unmistakable traces of an angelic countenance, and yet they also have the unkempt attitudes and predatory moods of feral creatures capable of mischief and deceit. One could say that the antithesis of these features is a common enough characteristic of the Romantic perception of childhood: wildness and an unearthly vulnerability, experience and innocence fused in a being that has yet to learn of social obligation and responsibility. We will always see this figure in retrospect, in a nostalgia that recognises its imminent doom. For this Romantic child to have a life it must grow up into our world and lose its value to us. To idolise the child is to take its life from it by condemning it to a "Neverland" of ageless, eventless and insignificant pastimes: the impossible fate of Peter Pan and the Lost Boys.

Trying to see such a familiar figure in the work involves peering through a strange obstacle; one that Loder invents through her photographic technique, and which distorts this fairytale romance in a unique way. She chooses to use anold but not quite antique medium format camera (an Agfa Isolette II) without a tripod and without a light metre, and somust make educated guesses at the focus, exposure setting and shutter speed. If she is going to err, she will prefer to overexpose the shot, and so many of the photos end up being shot at long exposures with a wide aperture. Inevitably, most of the images will soften into blurred mid-greys; in some cases they will be almost completely bleached out. This degree of randomness in the shooting is exaggerated in the printing process. The sheer volume of the prints Loder repeatedly sets herself as targets (eight hundred and twenty eight for one, earlier, exhibition!) forces her to make complicated darkroom decisions rapidly and intuitively. There is no time for the dedication required of the 'fine print' tradition, for repeated 'test strips'; she must produce these prints almost at the rate of a supermarket photo processor. This tactic is not simply an excuse to avoid the discipline that assures print quality. She will not use the darkroom to correct the bias of the negative; in fact at the enlarger she will embellish the errors of the shot. In the final print the child's face looks suspended in an indeterminate, watery, shallow space, obscured by the dust and smears left on the negative's plastic sleeve from its handling. The light in the photograph spoils, turning into a cool, weak, dilute residue. The child seems pressed up against a thin pale membrane, like a caul or a dirty window. Their features blur and recede to become foetus-like. Divided off from the world of living adults, each has the substance of a ghost.

Loder has chosen to photograph children that she knows well, pausing in the midst of play outdoors at the after-school centre at which she works. Portrait photography of children, certainly when outside a studio, is as challenging an assignment as photographing wild animals. Why would Loder make her task even harder; so hard that it would seem - according to common expectations - destined for failure? Evidently, the artist is interested in something more than the identifiable portrait of her sitter. She wants to record the abduction of that face by a perverse genie that haunts the storehouse of her photography. And that storehouse is given palpable form in the monumental grid arrangement of the installation. The artist has built a false wall especially for the exhibition, almost twenty metres long and three and half metres high. The framed prints are packed so tightly together that we can only see a thin strip of this wall at the outer perimeter of the grid. As a singular presence en masse, this photographic suite does not just hang from a structure. It forges one of its own. It is both the focus of the space and also an architectural partition within it. Loder admits that what becomes fascinating as a result of such an arrangement is the abstraction of the imagery. The portraits dissolve into a thin, lateral space that appears to spread infinitely outward, created by the pattern of grey tones. It is as if we were looking, in a hugely magnified detail, at the grain of another, immense, image that is illegible because we cannot step back far enough from it. Equally, the abutment of the wooden frames creates a screen effect, much like a great panelled window. At this scale - our own physical scale - we can regain the imagery of the children, rescuing them from the abstraction of the grid, by gazing out through this window. But we then see them as condensations of that cold light: as aliens slowly swimming through murk up to the glass walls of a tank, or as a spooky celestial host hovering just on the other side of life.

The drama that this work of art represents - a struggle between order and accident, between regulation and animation - is one that the work itself undergoes. When trying to interpret this strange scenery of childhood we affect the destiny of its inhabitants. Each of the photographs has the generic anonymity and passive formality of police identity shots. They have the rough finish of swiftly processed images on plastic ID cards, such as drivers' licences. The regularity and stock intimacy of their poses suggest the conventions required for passport photos. But the casualness and slightly awkward intimacy of the compositional structure are reminiscent of photobooth portraits. And one can't help but feel that, despite these being patently the faces of contemporary children, their images seem old, with a pathos that comes from either over-use or neglect. The prints look as if they have been assembled from an amateur album that has been left out in the sunlight too long: bleached from too much display, weathered away by loving or longing gazes. But at the same time they could be from a grim bureaucratic welfare file that has sat undisturbed, although stamped at some indeterminable moment in its history as 'under review'. Or that they might be an inventory or register of missing persons, whose dossiers have long since been filed and forgotten as "unsolved". The fading of their images indicates, in this case, not exposure but confinement; they are disappearing from view because they are no longer looked at or no longer remembered.

This is a complex and even contradictory experience. Up close, we enact a love that has absorbed these children to a degree of almost vampiric consumption, that wants to protect and also possess them. Yet, with a subtle shift of scale we see these faces arrayed as if they were shadowy specimens in a sad or ominous archive. Or we see them as incomprehensibly odd, fantastic inhabitants of another world teasingly close but inaccessible. At a distance we see a mob of kids corralled and partitioned by a supervisory social order that demands regimentation, clarity and objectivity. We also sense. however, that there is an opacity in the eyes of these children which denies that order. A restless inner force gives the children's shifting gazes an almost conspiratorial solidarity, as if this were not just a gathering but a gang, marshalling itself spontaneously like a children's crusade. This community of children is an awesome phenomenon: it is overwhelming, it is unavoidable, it is demanding, even threatening. Yet at the same time, it is evasive and hallucinatory. Just as we cannot easily decipher the expressions on these children's faces or what the obscure purpose of their community might be, we also cannot pin down the sentiments - our own conflicting sentiments - that wrestle over custody of their images.

Edward Colless April 1996.

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