

Nicola Loder

"CHILD 1-75: A NOSTALGIA FOR THE PRESENT"
STOP 22, MELBOURNE
APRIL 18 TO MAY 5, 1996

Fitzroy Street, one of those locations that display urban society in all its variation, seemed an appropriate backdrop for Nicola Loder's exhibition "Child 1-175: A Nostalgia for the Present." On a Saturday morning, when the gentrifiers and junkies mingle there, the fates might look upon this small corner of Melbourne with some pride.

Inside Stop 22, a former railway station that lies just off the main strip, Loder had created a wall of photographic portraits of children from the nearby St Kilda Park Primary School. The title of the exhibition suggested a playful disrespect for the logic of time. Contradictory reactions to this work



demonstrated how that logic can be undermined by the fallibility of memory and a tendency toward sentimentality, for "Child 1-175" was a disarmingly subtle investigation that went far beyond its significant achievement as a portrait cycle.

What struck me immediately about this project was an overwhelming optimism, a confidence in human possibility – I was therefore surprised to learn that many others had read into the exhibition a sense of foreboding. The children in Loder's portraits will inherit levels of life-expectancy, healthcare, material wealth and opportunity unimaginable only generations ago. They will, of course, inherit a lot more besides, and will play out their own versions of the dramas that have recurred throughout history. Perhaps it is part of the con-

temporary condition to take our advantages for granted while prophesying gloom.

Loder's subjects undermined the myth that childhood comprises the 'best years of our lives.' Her strong character portraits suggested levels of knowledge, torment, ritual, self-possession, humor and pathos that often go unacknowledged by adults. These aggressively forward-focused youngsters appeared to be looking already to a future outside the confines of childhood. Nostalgia for childhood was combatted by the low vantage point, which framed the children's faces against an open sky, their gazes cast out, above and past the viewer. By subjugating technique and concentrating on each face, Loder emphasized the individuality of her subjects. Defining each cell of her grid with a distinct tonal range – created by erratic exposure as much as by varying atmospheric conditions – Loder was able to harness the chemical

simplicity of the photographic process to provide structure and solidity to the work while isolating its parts.

This exhibit required a little effort. The introduction of color would have added an unnecessary and distracting element to its conceptual schema, so the viewer had to work through the conventions of popular monochrome forms – the implicit threat conveyed in film noir, forensic photography and photojournalism – in order to engage with these images. Perhaps it was another influence that encouraged some viewers to a pessimistic reading: the gridded black-and-white photographic portrait series popularized by artists such as Christian Boltanski, which, using the anonymity of found portraits or archival photographs, high-

lights the ongoing struggle to define ourselves as individuals within the mass structures of society. The onus was on the audience not to slot Loder's exhibition into that established interpretive framework but to address the portrait images directly.

The artist clearly understood that the strength of the formal grid could undermine a project such as this. Constructing a grid upon a section of wall is, after all, something of a trope; this device looks so good itself, achieving the spatial complexity of



Child 1-75, 1996, 175 framed black and white photographs, each 22 x 27 in., on 11.5 x 65 ft. wall.

installation while maintaining the gravity of self containment, that it can overwhelm a work. Loder's grid, instead, created the wall. It became part of the architecture of the space, not reliant on it. The impact of Loder's physical construction was therefore two-fold: Its scale was ambitious and inspiring without being bombastic (qualities common to the best large art pieces) and it cleverly avoided the cliché of the unique museum art object.

But despite this degree of formal sophistication, it was the penetrating insights into adult perceptions of childhood that really set this exhibition apart. I was reminded of Steve Martin's character, Gil, in the movie *Parenthood*, who is haunted by the possible futures of his son Kevin. The desire to know our children's fates and construct their influences accordingly owes as much

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to our own adult insecurities as to our protective impulses. By creating such powerful images of individual children, Nicola Loder challenged her viewers to confront these insecurities. And by grouping 175 such images together, she created a metaphor for the elaborate and restrictive social structure of childhood, within which each individual must find a place.

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