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Child as Other: The Crisis of Representing Childhood

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University

by
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Bachelor of Arts, Bates College, 1995
Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Film, 2014

Director: Justin James Reed
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Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2014

For my mother

Acknowledgments:

My husband Andrew Charles Schoeneman and our sons,
Wendell James Schoeneman and River Joseph Schoeneman

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*...and with deepest gratitude to all of the children I have worked with and continue to work with
still.*

Table of Contents

1. Abstract
2. Text
3. Images
4. Bibliography

Abstract

CHILD AS OTHER: THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTING CHILDHOOD

By Cynthia Henebry, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Film at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Director: Justin James Reed, Assistant Professor, Photography and Film

This thesis explores my own work in the context of historical and contemporary representations of children. Because the child's experience is essentially unknowable to the adult, issues of control that are always at play between photographer and subject are highlighted when an adult is the photographer and a child is the subject. This is evident when we examine and compare the photographs of children that have so far existed as well as the contexts in which they were made. While I believe that complete resolution of these issues is all but impossible, my work and research is motivated by a belief in the importance of asking the questions nonetheless.

Neither my father nor my mother knew/ the names of the trees/ where I was born/ Were there trees in those places/ where my father and my mother were born/ and in that time did/ my father and my mother see them/ and when they said yes it meant/ they did not remember/ What were they I asked what were they/ but both my father and my mother/ said they never knew¹

“What's done to children, they will do to society.”²

For the last couple of years, I have been engaged in a photographic investigation of the relationship between external chaos and conflict and the internal life of the child. Although in many ways the point of origin for this work is the stress and challenge that exists in the adult world, the photographs and the process of making them are focused squarely on the child's experience. My own autobiography informs this way of working, and impacts the choices I make about the children I work with as well as decisions about how to depict them as well as how to let them depict themselves. The collaborative aspects of this process are conceptually significant, and point to my interest in the grey area between the children and me, then and now, truth and metaphor. I am interested in conveying a sensibility and a point of view rather than the truth of any one child or family system, knitting together elements of perspective, time, authorship and scene. Both the research and experiential aspects of making the work explore the idea that the child is fundamentally “Other” to the adult, and attempt to articulate the consequences of this fundamental and universal disconnect.

Children's Otherness plays out significantly in photographic images, as by and large

¹ Merwin, W.S., “Native Trees.”

² Menninger, Karl A., from *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*.

adults portray children, rather than the other way around. As a result, and because my primary subjects are children, the majority of research I have done explores historic and contemporary representations of childhood, as well as their relationship to shifting cultural norms. Among other things, what this history demonstrates is the inability adults have to see children clearly, or to understand in any meaningful way the realities of their existence, which is both physically and existentially so different than our own. Consequently, their representation is often used to stand in for the cultural values of the day and remains caught up in extremes. Our thinking about children, and images of children, also remains caught up in extremes. On the one hand, we have a deep investment in the way children are seen and have enacted laws to control such images;³ on the other, this subject matter (like the subjects) is easily dismissed as insignificant or “childish,” and research in the field in no way matches up with the amount of images of children that exist. More than with any other subject, perhaps, our thinking around photographs of children demonstrates the confusion that persists about the line between reality and depiction.

The way that we think about children, and how we construct images of them, has always been a bellwether for larger shifts in societal norms. Ever since the middle of the 18th century, when depictions of them as beings distinct from adults began to emerge, images of children have been laden with adult projections, fantasies and anxieties. Prior to this time, childhood was not actually recognized as a particular stage or state of being, and children in paintings from this era are portrayed as smaller versions of adults. Whether due to harsh living conditions, high infant mortality rates, or the influence of the Christian belief in Original Sin, this earlier way of understanding human beings under the age of eighteen bears no resemblance to how we

³ "Child Pornography Law Enacted," The New York Times, May 21, 1984.
<http://www.nytimes.com/1984/05/22/us/child-pornography-law-enacted.html>.

understand and think about them now. The idea of childhood as a distinct stage of development emerged only in the mid-1700s, along with the rising incomes of the middle class and rising likelihood that children might actually reach maturity.⁴ Thus entered the idea and subsequent depiction of the Romantic innocent child.

The driving force behind most of the images of children from the Romantic era is nostalgia, and the point of view that childhood is a simple time, free of adult cares and worries. Children were portrayed as pure and innocent beings—empty vessels into which adult ideas about childhood could be filled, and to which commercial interests could easily be attached (fig. 1). Rather than providing any evidence of the child's actual existence, these depictions foreground the adult need to see children as well as childhood in an overly simplistic way. While the creation of these sorts of images began in the eighteenth century, this way of portraying children is in fact just as popular in commercial imagery today, and is used to promote the dominant messages of the culture at large, as well as reinforce the consumerist values of the American and European middle classes. In fact, images and beliefs about childhood that seem inevitable now have a very specific and traceable history and origination. The categories that existed then, such as child with pet, child with mother, child in costume—angel being a particularly popular one—all functioned in part to differentiate the child from adult, and all continue to persist. It is not hard to conjure up contemporary advertisements that depict such motifs (fig. 2-3), while studio photographers have been relying on the same tropes since at least the 1950s. Family photographers also unconsciously mimic many of these poses, adding multiple layers and pages to what is now a very long history of essentially seeing children as foreign beings and blank slates.

⁴ Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

After its advent in the 1820s, similarly sweet and innocent images of children predominated in the photographic arts. Two well-known photographers from this period, Julia Margaret Cameron and Charles Dodgson (better known as the author Lewis Carroll), both used children as their subjects, creating formal compositions that resembled the paintings that predated them in manner, tone and form. The aforementioned angel child and mother/child motifs are both commonly used in Cameron's case, and her photographs of the latter fall neatly into the context of historical religious paintings that depict the Madonna and child. It is worth noting that she made most of this work after her children were already grown.⁵ As a result, her gaze is a maternal one, but one which understands children and motherhood through a rear facing and certainly nostalgic lens—the perspective that furthers this cultural belief in ideal and romantic childhood.

Carroll was childless, but focused on children as his primary subjects as well, in particular the pre-adolescent daughter of family friends, Alice Lidell. The photographs he made of her evoke the tendencies of male painters and sculptors who had long been using the female form as inspiration and subject. In Carroll's case, there is an inverse relationship between how his photographs functioned at the time, and how they have subsequently been interpreted. Like Cameron's photographs, Carroll's work also proclaimed and romanticized the innocence of childhood. Yet the relationships he had with the children he photographed have been interpreted by art historians and critics to be anything but, and to our contemporary eyes the photographs appear to contain as much "knowing" as innocence.⁶ The full or even partial truth about the nature of the relationships that Carroll had with his subjects will likely never be known, but we

⁵ Judith Thurman, "Angels and Instincts," *New Yorker*, February 17, 2003, p. 192.

⁶ Jenny Woolf, "Lewis Carroll's Shifting Reputation," *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 2010. Accessed April 10, 2014. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/lewis-carrolls-shifting-reputation-9432378/>

do know that even in the best of circumstances, it is complicated. As artist Charlie White writes in his essay "Minor Threat" in the book *Words Without Pictures*, "an adult photographer exercises two forms of control simultaneously: that enacted by a photographer on a subject, and that enacted by an adult upon a minor."⁷ It is not hard to make the additional point that a male photographer working with a female child subject sets up an additional layer of complexity, and one which is not easily resolved by a society that wishes to protect its children from dangers that are by definition private and hidden in their very nature.

Although rarely noted, Cameron's images challenged some of the boundaries that Carroll has been accused of pushing as well, and one wonders if her status as a woman protected her from the kind of controversy that Carroll's reputation has suffered from. As art critic Judith Thurman writes in *The New Yorker*,

The sexual charge one feels in otherwise chaste portraits comes, I think, from her conflicting impulses to worship and to despoil. She made her virgins, unthinkably for the period, let down their hair, and she tousled the heads of her little angels to get rid of their "nursery primness," as one of them recalled; in the same way, she roughed up her old heroes and poetic swains.⁸

My own reading of both Carroll and Cameron's photography is that it falls in line with other work of the day, neither distinguishing itself as overtly predatory nor in seeing children as much more than objects or projections of innocence and beauty. In both cases, the problematic issues of photography with regard to a minor as subject are still strongly at play (fig. 4-5).

Though not their exclusive focus, other Pictorialist photographers such as Alfred Steiglitz, Gertrude Kasebier and Clarence H. White also used children as subjects in this idealized and aestheticized way. One photographer of this era stands out as an exception to this

⁷ Charlie White, "Minor Threat," *Words Without Pictures* (New York: Aperture, in coordination with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2010), pp. 178-187.

⁸ Thurman, Judith. "Angels and Instincts." *New Yorker*, February 17, 2003, p.192.

way of seeing children, perhaps unsurprisingly because his work stood in the realm of social documentary rather than art photography. Lewis Hine's photographs of child laborers in the early 1900s seem to come from an altogether different place than the work mentioned above—one that sees children as beings not so distinct from our selves, and at the very least as equally human and relatable. His photographs stand in contrast with most of the Pictorialists not just because of the way that he saw his subjects, but also due to the kinds of subjects he sought (fig. 6-7). In the catalog to the 2001 exhibition entitled "Priceless Children: American Photographs 1890-1925," art historian George Dimock writes:

In Pictorialist iconography children remained, for the most part, safely ensconced within the sumptuous, if often darkened, interior of the bourgeois home. When they ventured outdoors, it was invariably to bucolic nature or a carefully tended garden. Their principal activities consisted of being with their mothers, reading or just holding a book, or children's games.... To all of this, Hine's child labor photographs constituted a working class inversion.... More generally, the children were depicted as part of an adult, work a day world wherein little or no allowance was made for childhood as a separate sphere.⁹

Hine quit his teaching job to work exclusively for the newly formed National Child Labor Committee in 1907, believing strongly that photographic documentation of child labor would lead to its eradication. It took the economic crisis of the Depression, however, to result in child labor laws that remained permanent in 1938.¹⁰ Hine's process of photographing these working class children exclusively in such settings where, it could be argued, the environment dominates, makes a strong visual case against the practice of child labor. It could also be argued that by portraying the children only in this setting, Hine limits their expression as much as the Pictorialist photographers do. While they each represent different ways of seeing the child, both

⁹George Dimock and Lewis Wickes Hine, *Priceless Children: American Photographs, 1890-1925: Lewis Hine, F. Holland Day, Gertrude Käsebier, Clarence H. White, Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Edward Weston: Child Labor and the Pictorialist Ideal* (Greensboro, NC: Weatherspoon Art Museum, 2001), p. 12.

¹⁰"U.S. Department of Labor -- History -- Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938."
<http://www.dol.gov/dol/aboutdol/history/flsa1938.htm>.

show only the view of the photographer rather than allowing for the agency of the children themselves to come through.

Hine and other exceptions aside, this view of childhood as an innocent, pure and romantic state of being flourished more or less undisturbed in the photographic and other arts until the last quarter of the twentieth century, when photographers began working with previously unexplored subject matter in their domestic and private lives as well as the world at large. Sally Mann, Tierney Gearon, Nicholas Nixon, Anna Gaskell, Judith Joy Ross, and many others (primarily women) turned their cameras towards children (often their own), and showed another side of the child: wild, restless, violent, and sometimes even sexual, the ultimate taboo when it comes to how we think about the child. According to art historian Anne Higonnet, the representation of these other sides marks the entrance of the “knowing child” into contemporary art: world weary, wise, and adult-like in nature.¹¹ Perhaps predictably, many of these images caused outrage at first, and some were even banned in an effort to protect the children they depicted as well as any other children who might somehow have been harmed in the making or existence of the art. Nudity and the perceived sexuality of the child were (and are) largely at stake in the public discourse about these controversies, and foreground the extremes in thinking that we are prone to when it comes to photographs of children.

Children in commercial and mass media are increasingly sexualized in highly problematic and impactful ways, yet artists who choose to show these other sides of children are vilified and frequently accused of taking advantage of the children in question who, in many cases, happen to be their own. What is not clear is whether such sanctions actually protect children, or simply attempt to limit the ways in which they should be seen. Sexuality is not the only controversial issue at stake in contemporary (or historic) images of children, however, and

¹¹ Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*, p. 12.

from the beginning I have avoided making photographs that engage with this discourse for the reason that it dominates the discussion, and prevents other, more nuanced issues from becoming avenues of discovery. While the consequences of sexualizing children are perhaps more obvious, seeing children as objects or empty vessels for adult projections has its share of problems as well, and makes us prone to seeing children as beings not fully deserving of the respect and attention offered adults. While often present in the same kinds of images, objectification and sexualization are not the same thing, and representation of children falls into extremes and false paradoxes apart from the issue of sexuality. What these images have in common is a perspective that distances us from the children in them, allowing us to see them as alien, Other, and significant only as extensions of ourselves or as objects of beauty—all of which has the effect of stripping the child of any autonomy of their own.

Despite Higonnet's claim that Mann and other contemporary photographers' ways of seeing children are new, it is not hard to see the similarities between the images in Sally Mann's *Immediate Family* and Helen Van Meene's portraits of girls and the earlier Pictorialist photographs of girls from that time (fig. 8-9). In "Memory is the Primary Instrument, the Inexhaustible Nutrient Source, art historian Elisabeth Wesseling writes:

The pastoral setting of Mann's family photography, the pairing of children with animals, plants and flowers, the retrograde styling, the timeless rural surroundings, the nostalgic longing for one's own lost childhood, memory as the major source of artistic inspiration, the elegiac, mournful nature of adult representations of children and childhood, the sensuous and sensitive ways in which these children are attuned to their material, natural surroundings: how Romantic all of this is! In my view, the continuities between Mann's photographs and the Romantic paradigm of the innocent child outnumber the discontinuities by far....¹²

¹²Elisabeth Wesseling, " 'Memory Is the Primary Instrument, the Inexhaustible Nutrient Source:' Remediations of Literary Romanticism in Sally Mann's Family Photographs," *Arcadia - International Journal for Literary Studies* 46, no. 1 (2011), p.12.

It would appear that even though contemporary photographs of children may offer some new ways of looking, they (and we) are still bound by the limitations of ourselves as beholders, and by the fact that our views of childhood are by definition retrospective. So why is it we are so invested in seeing children in particular, and limited ways? What do they stand in for that makes representation of them so complicated? And how does our investment in this image limit or affect their self expression as well as our ability to accurately portray them? The feminist scholar and journalist Catharine Lumby asserts that our attempts to protect the child often lead to the problematizing of childhood as well as a narrowing of the range of its representation: "If we insist that children can only ever be objects of the adult gaze, then we ignore their subjecthood and, under the guise of protection, risk promoting discourses that privilege control."¹³

I am curious what exactly is it about children that allows for their representation to fall into these patterns? Or rather, what it is about us, and the way that we see them? I argue that the history of childhood representation bears a strong resemblance to the history of female representation, and the way that it is inextricably linked to societal norms and values about the way that women are seen as well as their categorization as “Other” to the men who have historically portrayed them. In *Women, Art and Society*, art historian Whitney Chadwick writes:

[Feminist scholars] have emphasized that since the “real” nature of male and female cannot be determined, we are left with representations of gender (understood as the socially created and historically specific difference between men and women).¹⁴

Although the “real” nature of men is of course unknowable to women as well, the power imbalance between the genders has set up a more problematic history with regard to

¹³ Catharine Lumby, “Ambiguity, Children, Representation and Sexuality,” *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 12 (December 2010), <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/5/>.

¹⁴ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (Londres: Thames & Hudson, 2012), p.11.

representations of women, who have also played a more significant role as subject. This is not limited to the male viewpoint anymore, however, as this way of seeing has become ingrained across Western culture at large (fig. 10). Women as well as men are the participants in such objectification and the use of the “male gaze,”¹⁵ as articulated by John Berger in his seminal work, *Ways of Seeing*:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.¹⁶

Similar to the divide between genders, the “real” nature of the child is unknown to the adult. The inverse is true, of course, though here as well the power imbalance is clear. So what then of children? Are they not vulnerable to an even greater degree of objectification and control in their status as “Other” to all but themselves? And who is there to push back in any significant way against the potentially oppressive force of what I will refer to as the “adult gaze”?

As a photographer, I am interested in understanding the limitations and restrictions that my adult gaze imposes on the photograph as well as my subjects, while simultaneously attempting to make pictures that move beyond the binaries and extremes that have so far existed. At the same time, I acknowledge that I bring my own paradoxes and binaries to the fore. I recognize that I am trying to make pictures about something that I posit cannot be bridged, which is the gap between the experiences of child and adult, and continually wonder at the significance of this. I am interested in the very real children before me, yet it is also true that I identify them because of their significance to me, which is by definition some kind of adult projection. What

¹⁵ The concept of the male gaze was first proposed by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” first published in *Screen*, 16 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

¹⁶ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, 2008, p. 47.

does this necessarily imperfect attempt represent for me, and for my subjects as well? All of the artists whose work I have investigated most closely explore the heightened tension between adult photographer and child subject. These artists articulate more questions than answers, and make attempts at traversing the grey areas encountered when trying to express the experiences of another, or to tell one's story through the visual representation of someone else. Distinctions between truth and fiction, past and present, setting and stage are slippery for all, and questions about authorship play a pivotal role.

Both Andrea Modica and Alessandra Sanguinetti have engaged in long term projects with their subjects—Sanguinetti with two cousins named Guillermina and Belinda in her native Argentina, and Modica with a girl named Barbara and her family and friends in a small town in upstate New York. Both projects rely upon a narrative that unfolds over time (both developed, or continue to develop, over periods of more than ten years), as well as investment and energy in relationships with their subjects. The resulting photographs' success occurs as a result of this investment, and the perceptive observations they make of the very real lives that these children are living out. At the same time, both Modica and Sanguinetti create alternative and fictional scenes and stories with their subjects—ones in which the children play complicit and active roles. In Sanguinetti's case, the project emerged almost by accident, and appears to have been led from the outset by the children rather than her. As Sanguinetti writes in the introduction to *Guille and Belinda and the Enigmatic Nature of their Dreams*:

Beli and Guille were always running, climbing, chasing chickens and rabbits. Sometimes I'd take their picture just so they'd leave me alone and stop scaring the animals away, but mostly I would shoo them out of the frame... I was indifferent to them until the Spring of 1999, when I found myself spending almost every day with them. They were nine and ten years old then, and one day, instead of asking them to move aside, I let them stay.¹⁷

¹⁷ Alessandra Sanguinetti, *The Adventures of Guille and Belinda and the Enigmatic Meaning of their Dreams* (Portland, OR: Nazraeli, 2010).

Scene and setting play a pivotal role in the photographs, depicting the external conditions that allow a structure and context for their internal dramas and dreams to play out. The work is about the process of growing up, and the ways in which childrens' relationships with their peers can be a sustaining force throughout. It also suggests the idea of an alternate reality or universe for the children—one that is ultimately unknowable to adults, and one that the children will have to leave behind as well (fig. 11-12).

Though arguably somewhat darker in content as well as form, Andrea Modica's work travels similar territory in terms of its sensibility, and it is apparent from the outset that the photographer is genuinely watching and allowing herself to be led by the children she photographs. Barbara, the primary character in *Treadwell*, begins as a young child, growing into early adulthood towards the end of the book. The situations that surround her and her friends and family (or rather, the characters that appear to be friends and neighbors; in practice many of the subjects are unrelated and unknown to one another) appear to be both economically as well as environmentally challenging, yet the photographs speak of more than just hardship. They are at once about her, and not her, and contain enough ambiguity to allow the viewer's as well as Modicas's own experience to enter the frame (fig. 13-15). As writer E. Annie Proulx says in the introduction:

For a decade Modica followed her subjects from one decayed farmhouse to another, photographing in an atmosphere of crowded rooms and generations of bad luck. The photographs are not some chronicle of despair, but caught moments in lives ruled by hard situations; there are possibilities of anything....¹⁸

Modica works exclusively with an 8x10 view camera, which necessitates a certain level of

¹⁸ E. Annie Proulx, "Introduction," in Andrea Modica, *Treadwell* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996), p. 10.

compliance from the subject or at least some degree of understanding about just what is occurring. In contrast with Susan Sontag's notion that photographers "collect" the world,¹⁹ the act of photographing with view cameras is completely transparent, and under the dark cloth, the photographer in fact becomes a spectacle themselves. This way of working changes the equation altogether, and encourages if not requires collaboration. As the photographer Judith Joy Ross says about her process, which is similar in many ways to Modica's:

The 8x10 camera is vital. I use it like a charm, like an attractant. I would not enjoy pointing a camera to a stranger. I would feel like I am doing something to them. With a view camera we are doing something together. Definitely together. I am fumbling around under a cloth over the camera and myself and the person is arranging themselves. We work together.²⁰

Photographs about children are always in some sense about the relationship to the adult who photographs them, but by ceding some control and involving and acknowledging the role of their subjects, both Sanguinetti and Modica begin to upend some of the traditions that have historically surrounded this subject matter. In both series, the photographs mark a liminal space, one in which we are not sure what is truth, fiction or metaphor, and wonder perhaps if they might be all. It may in fact be that the process of creating fictions that are a result of their shared imaginations allows for the truth of the real child to slip through. The acts of chance that can occur when there is slippage of control must certainly play a role as well.

The photographer and filmmaker Sharon Lockhart is another artist who challenges the boundaries between truth and fiction, and fine art and documentary styles. Lockhart's process creates an equivalency between the experiences of child and adult, simultaneously highlighting the significance of the children she works with as well as her own interest in the stories they have

¹⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), p.82.

²⁰ Judith Joy Ross, Interview with Anya Jasbar and Daniel Augscholl, *Ahorn Magazine*.
http://www.ahornmagazine.com/issue_8/interview_ross/interview_ross.html. (Accessed 2 February, 2014).

to tell. By embracing chance as well as allowing the children to question her authority not only as an adult but also as an artist, she allows them to share the stage and endows them with a tremendous amount of personal agency. The children's personalities, Lockhart's sensibilities, and their shared setting comes through in equal measure. As art critic and curator Kathy Halbreich explains in the introduction to *Pine Flat*:

Some mix of empathy and shared memory—between the artist and her model, between the viewer and the viewed—inevitably surfaces when one comes face to face with a child. This identification creates an unusually large projection screen on which to transmit the twists and turns of one's own story of maturation and allows it to overlap another's.²¹

The artist Wendy Ewald also pushes the boundaries of authorship, though only after following a long process that first began with handing her subjects a camera. Driven by a true curiosity in their experience and believing that children are the best portrayers of their own lives, Ewald has worked with children all over the world, giving them cameras and teaching what she calls “literacy through photography.”²² The process is as much about helping them to understand, explore, and gain some control over the worlds they are inhabiting as it is about enabling these discoveries to come into the world as art. Her own work is frequently exhibited alongside the childrens', and the viewer is left to guess whose pictures are whose. This keeps issues of authorship in the foreground as well as highlights the slippery nature of perspective.

All of the artists described above have discovered new methods of working with children that upends the objectification and Othering that has previously occurred. And certainly, their work does not stand alone. Other significant influences that stand easily in this category include the work of Mark Steinmetz, Vanessa Winship, and Jim Goldberg, whose groundbreaking

²¹ Sharon Lockhart, *Pine Flat* (Minneapolis: Charta, 2006), p. 125.

²² Wendy Ewald and Alexis Schwarzenbach, *Wendy Ewald, Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999* (Zurich: Scalo, 2000).

monograph *Raised by Wolves* incorporated his own writings with the writing of the teenagers he depicted, as well as their correspondence. The resulting book is as much about how the work was made as it is about the teenagers depicted within it.²³ I wonder, though, have these artists solved the problem of representing the child as Other, or have they simply found a way of clarifying the boundaries of the problem? Is it possible, in fact, to completely counter the power dynamic inherent to portraiture in general and to children in particular? As art critic, curator and historian Charlotte Cotton writes in *Words Without Pictures*:

Portraits of minors are complicated in part because, like all photographic portraits, they are uneasy evidence of the control that one person (the photographer) can have upon other people.... Regardless of the intent or retrospective claims of the photographer, at the heart of portraiture is the simple fact that the photographer has a better idea than the subject of what will be made apparent or what can be fashioned from the physical description of a human form in a photograph.²⁴

It is a tough question to answer, and therefore reasonable to understand why a photographer would choose to turn away from representation altogether. My own work stands somewhere in the middle of all of these questions, however, and I am as determined to keep asking them as I am to keep making pictures. While still very much in progress, I can articulate the trajectory this work has taken since graduate school began for me in the fall of 2012 to where it stands now.

For most of my life I have been in the habit of making photographs of the people that surround me, though I have long noticed that a certain kind of person draws me in. In the spring of 2012, I saw that two particular girls kept showing up in the pictures I was making of my sons and their friends. I wondered why this was the case, though it did not take long to see the physical resemblances between the girls and myself at their age. I noticed too that both of their

²³ Jim Goldberg and Philip Brookman, *Raised by Wolves* (Zurich: Scalo, 1995).

²⁴ Charlotte Cotton, *Words Without Pictures* (New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art in cooperation with Aperture, 2009), p. 198.

parents were divorced, and that this was in fact the age at which my parents had divorced. Like most children raised in the 1970s and 80s, this was a common enough experience that I normalized it, never having truly faced down the consequences of such a significant split. My project began then as a fairly simple autobiographical exploration into the developing identity of the divorced child. I started photographing children of divorce in each of the homes in which they lived as a way of understanding the relationship between the internal spaces of identity formation and the external realities of family fracture. The poles for these two lines of inquiry were Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Reverie* and Judith Wallerstein's *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*. Bachelard called the dreaming spaces of childhood "the original solitudes" by explaining:

Those original solitudes, the childhood solitudes, leave indelible marks on certain souls. Their entire life is sensitized for poetic reverie, for a reverie which knows the price of solitude. Childhood knows unhappiness through man. In solitude, it can relax its aches. When the human world leaves him in peace, he feels like the son of the cosmos. And thus, in his solitudes, from the moment he is master of his reveries, the child knows the happiness of dreaming which will later be the happiness of the poets.²⁵

I have been compelled for some time by Bachelard's phrase "certain souls," and posit that there are certain souls predisposed to this kind of dreaming and internal exploration. It seems possible to me that the children I am photographing are the certain kinds of souls of which he speaks, and that the experience of living in and between two homes enables this exploration. Initially, it seemed to me that my interest in these children had to do with the fracture in their lives—both external and internal. It was only after some months that it became clear to me that their (and my) search for wholeness and continuity is where the charge is. With all that changes in the transition from one home to another, I want to know what internal truth stays the same. What is

²⁵Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos*, new ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 99.

the seed of wisdom and internal knowledge that keeps the sense of self intact, and through what process does the child access this? I am interested in the idea that conflict and duality in the external world can encourage the child to seek out unity in their inner life.

Children of divorce do not have a monopoly on duality and conflict, however, and it was clear to me from the beginning that the construct of photographing in divorced homes was just that: a way to engage with something else I am interested in, which I believe is the moment of stillness and reflection that happens in reverie. Divorce and familial fracture just happens to be the point of entry. I have this in common with the children I photograph, and this allows me a certain kind of access and intimacy that I am not sure we would otherwise share. This allows me to photograph psychological spaces that are normally private, to "disappear" from the frame, as it were, though of course my presence and ability to notice the charged but still moment is what makes the picture occur in the first place. In fact this witnessing is a significant part of my process, and I believe it is for the children as well. If all goes well, there are many layers of "noticing" that happen in these images: the original moment of reverie, which I will call my own, my memories of that time (which are essentially lost), the childrens' moments of reverie, my noticing of that with the camera, and ultimately the viewer's experience with the image, which I hope culminates in a reflection on their own experiences of this kind of psychological space.

I originally photographed girls that look similar to one another, wanting to foreground the emotion and experience being portrayed, and to decrease the importance of any one individual or their particular biography. I hoped for the multiplicity of girls to stand in for the multiplicity of selves, and the ways that those selves come together to form the whole. Although it was originally the autobiographical nature of the work that led me to choose such visually similar subjects, I looked to Kelli Connell and Roni Horn's work as examples of photographers working

in a similar vein. As Connell says in her artist statement:

The importance of these images lies in the representation of interior dilemmas portrayed as an external object—a photograph. Through these images the audience is presented with “constructed realities”. I am interested in not only what the subject matter says about myself, but also what the viewers response to these images says about their own identities and social constructs.²⁶

It has taken me some time to understand and acknowledge my role as author in the scenes that I am portraying, and the photographs serve as a marker of my process and progression. If the work is situated on a continuum between Self and Other, the earliest photographs I made in this project are closer to projections of myself, functioning as self portraiture as much as anything else. The further along I have gotten, the greater my interest in the Other, and an understanding and description of the space between the two. This led to my academic research into the landmine of problems that exist when it comes to the representation of children by adults.

Ultimately, the questions I am interested in are both metaphysical as well as psychological. What is the connection between the dreaming spaces of childhood and the adult looking backwards toward this time? At the threshold of middle age, I stand at the crossroads of two perspectives I can neither fully understand nor bridge: that of the child—my childhood, and my children’s, as well as the children I photograph—and that of my mother, dead now just over a year. She had not yet died when I began this investigation, and her absence and my subsequent reflection on that is significant to the directions this journey has taken. Following the first year of work, the photographs began describing the conflict and chaos as much as the reverie, and the children I have chosen to depict include boys as well as girls, most of whom do not share a physical resemblance to me at all.

Last summer I began focusing most of my energies on one family, consisting of three

²⁶ From the website of Kelli Connell: <http://kelliconnell.com/information/statement/>.

boys and one girl, whose family structure and life exhibits more chaos than reverie, and they have continued to hold my interest to this day. On the face of it, this family has very little in common with the one in which I was raised, yet there are emotional tones that resonate and drive the pictures forward. I am interested in creating photographs that depend upon the realities of the children involved, but a resulting narrative that does not, and that functions as a hybrid of their perspectives and mine. This semester I decided to hand the cable release over to the children, partly in order in order to blur the authorship of the photographs, but also because I was curious about whether they would choose to portray themselves in a different way. When the cable release can be seen, the photograph foregrounds depiction as a subject, though in fact the children have been making similar pictures to the ones I was making of them. In an interview on *The Great Leap Sideways*, Mark Steinmetz best describes how I see this kind of photography interacting with the world:

I'm most interested in a straight photograph (i.e., it looks like the world) that "works" but just how it works is elusive.... What interests me is the quality of intelligence/feeling that a photographer can get across in his or her work—an intelligence that perhaps springs from a deep and private interior place and then joins in collaboration with the outer world as if by magic.²⁷

I would like to think that I share this kind of feeling with the children that I identify as subjects, and that the photographs created from our time together demonstrate qualities of collaboration and listening as much as anything else. The troublesome issues with regard to photographer/subject and adult/minor are very much at play in the work, though it is only through the process of pushing forward that I can best understand how to resolve them, or if resolution is even part of the equation when photographing another, especially, perhaps, a child.

²⁷Mark Steinmetz, "A Kind of Communion: An Essay on and Interview with Mark Steinmetz," *The Great Leap Sideways*. http://www.thegreatleapsideways.com/?ha_exhibit=a-kind-of-communion-an-essay-on-and-interview-with-mark-steinmetz.



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Fig. 1: Wilcox, Jessie Smith. Ivory Soap ad. "Ivory Soap, 99% Pure." 1921. 6x9.5 in.



Fig. 2: Besni advertisement, 2008



Fig. 3: Fiat advertisement, 2013



Fig. 4 Julia Margaret Cameron, *Angel of the Nativity*, 1872. Albumen print, 327x243 mm.



Fig. 5: Charles Dodgson, *The Prettiest Doll in the World*, 1870. Albumen print, 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 5 $\frac{13}{16}$.



Fig. 6: Lewis Hine, *Glass factory worker*, 1911.



Fig. 7: Lewis Hine, *Spinner in cotton mill*, 1908.



Fig. 8: Sally Mann, *Punctus*, 1992. Gelatin silver print. 8x10 in.



Fig. 9: Helen Van Meene, *Untitled, #404*, 2013. C print. 16x16 in.



Fig. 10: Annie Leibovitz, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Vogue Magazine*, December, 2003.



Fig. 11: Alessandra Sanguinetti, *The Necklace*, 1999.



Fig. 12: Alessandra Sanguinetti, *Untitled*, 2004.



Fig. 13: Andrea Modica, *Untitled*, 1986.



Fig. 14: Andrea Modica, *Treadwell, NY*, 1986



Fig. 15: Andrea Modica, *Treadwell, NY*, 1986.



Fig. 16: Cynthia Henebry, *Lizzey in the classroom*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 32x40 in.



Fig. 17: Cynthia Henebry, *Scarlett and Troy at their mother's house*, 2012. Archival inkjet print.
32x40 in.



Fig. 16: Cynthia Henebry, *Bella and the dogs*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 32x40 in.



Fig. 17: Cynthia Henebry, *Lillian at her mother's house*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 40x50 in.



Fig. 18: Cynthia Henebry, *July 15, 1975*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 32x40 in.



Fig. 19: Cynthia Henebry, *Mavis in the backseat*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 40x50 in.



Fig. 20: Cynthia Henebry, *Marshall*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 40x50 in.



Fig. 21: Cynthia Henebry, *Marshall and Mason*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 28x35 in.



Fig. 22: Cynthia Henebry: *Lily*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 32x40 in.



Fig. 23: Cynthia Henebry, *Untitled (Searching for a sign)*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 32x40 in.



Fig. 24: Cynthia Henebry, *Mavis in the doorway*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 32x40 in.



Fig. 25: Cynthia Henebry, *Mavis' first self portrait*, 2014. Archival inkjet print. 28x35 in.



Fig. 26: Cynthia Henebry, *Kieran, self-portrait in the car*, 2014. Archival inkjet print. 32x40 in.



Fig. 27: Cynthia Henebry, *The Marriage Oaks*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. 28x35 in.

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