

Karin Geiger

Plush Toys and Poster Boys

Karin Geiger photographs adolescent girls. She photographs these girls attending classes. In their absence, she photographs their school interiors and bedrooms. Her subjects attend two different schools: one a public technical school, the other a private academy. The series of both colour and black and white photographs is entitled *Inbetween* (1995-97). Not wanting to succumb to a single method of documentation, Geiger uses 35 mm, medium and large format, as well as the variety of photographic genres each format makes possible. She takes colour snapshots, individual and group portraits, black and white documents and interiors: some appear to be subjective, others ostensibly objective; some prints are small, others large.

Leaving childhood and struggling towards adulthood, teenagers reside in a liminal space where they are fully constituted as neither child nor adult. Still living at home, high school girls perform multiple roles; conventionally they are good girls, daughters and students, but they can also be lovers, mothers, collectors, smokers, users, pool players, adoring fans and runaways. By choosing to photograph them Geiger represents a sub-culture rarely depicted in the field of contemporary art photography.

The artist's hybrid approach toward style and content marries the photographic traditions of Larry Clark and Nan Goldin with artists such as Hilla and Bernd Becher, Candida Höfer and Thomas Struth. To many her subject matter may appear trivial when compared to the serious photographic practices devoted to architecture, portraiture, interiors, constructed tableaux, dioramas and urban landscape. Yet Geiger incorporates these practices within her project, thereby complicating any simple reading of her work.

Geiger takes two distinctly different kinds of photographs in the schools: portraits and unoccupied interiors. With their repetition of desks, lockers, benches, doors, institutional colours and fluorescent lights, these interiors project the regular and regulating structures operating within these girls' lives. However, Geiger's portraits depict the girls as both conforming and acting out

within and beyond the institution's walls. The order of individual classrooms is disrupted by the awkward bodies of the students, during breaks the corridors become a tangle of legs and uniforms. Small snapshots capture the girls, in everyday dress, smoking together beyond the schoolyard. It was during these smoking sessions that the artist got to know some of the girls and eventually gained access to the private world of their bedrooms.

Geiger's intimate photographs of the girls' bedrooms represent their struggles towards adulthood. By pointing her camera into the corners of the rooms and including the ceiling within the frame, Geiger compresses the architecture and forces the display of their individual material lives. Each room becomes a barometer of social class, education, leisure, mainstream consumption and sexuality. Neatly arranged plush toys line shelves and rest comfortably on beds, a boombox sits on a bed, movie posters and poster boys adorn the walls, books sit on shelves along with designer perfumes and makeup kits. While the girls are absent from these photographs, their rooms portray them as collectors, and as producers of environments actively stating taste.

When seen together, each of these disparate images coheres to the others through the shared subject matter and author. Yet this semblance of coherence is fraught; the photographs tell only a partial story of these girl's lives, while simultaneously articulating, in the artist's words, "the camera's role as an instrument of construction." The "snapshot" used for the invitation displays the tension between these two modes of inquiry; the camera documents the girls, but is also positions them as the photographer's "camera-ready friends." This kind of tension is paradigmatic of the series as a whole.

As a photographer and an adult, Geiger responds to her subjects as both innocent and knowing: they smoke, but they also keep stuffed animals. In her representation of these contradictions and those of photographic practice itself, the artist maintains a critical distance within the project. *Inbetween* is as much a portrait of the discourse of photography, as it is of teenage girls today.

— Kitty Scott (September 1997)

The artist extends her thanks to the girls of Vancouver Technical Institute and The Little Flower Academy, and to their schools.

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