

## A subtle portrait of 'girl'

One of the characteristics of photography is its capacity to reveal worlds hidden or unknown to us. As a tool for recording, it helps us acknowledge and understand the world we inhabit: we know, for example, the configuration of far away pyramids and the valley-like surface textures of our skin when seen close up. A corollary to this, though, is that for all that photographs reveal, there is equally as much, if not more, that is hidden outside and beyond the frame: our picture of the world is limited to what is shown to us.

Vancouver artist Karin Geiger questions the limitations of knowledge, coming as it does largely from sources external to our own tangible experience, and challenges us to re-think how we construct our world view based on this received information. Ostensibly about the life of the school girl, Geiger's exhibition *Plush Toys and Poster Boys* is a complex and thoughtful meditation that, wisely, is slow to reveal its true concerns. With adolescent girls as the axis on which she spins many thematic dualities, Geiger creates photographs which interrupt our complacent acceptance of the world as we know it.

Despite the number and variety of images here, Geiger employs no single authoritative personal style. This subdued visual anarchy is a strategy that simultaneously elevates and makes more complex her discussion. By quoting many photographic genres, she creates a more fully developed and hence more subtle portrait of "girl." We are reminded in some of these photographs of the intimate and disturbing photographs of Larry Clark, the cultural critiques embodied in the impartial and phlegmatic architectural photos of Hilla and Bernd Becher, the gritty humanity expressed in the verite images of Eugene Atget, the wistful lyrical sentimentalism of Victorian portraiture, the "truthful" event photographs appearing in newspapers, and the nostalgic snapshots contained in our own photo albums.

### review

Karin Geiger: *Plush Toys and Poster Boys*

Dunlop Art Gallery

(Sherwood Village Branch)

Until April 26

#### Opinion

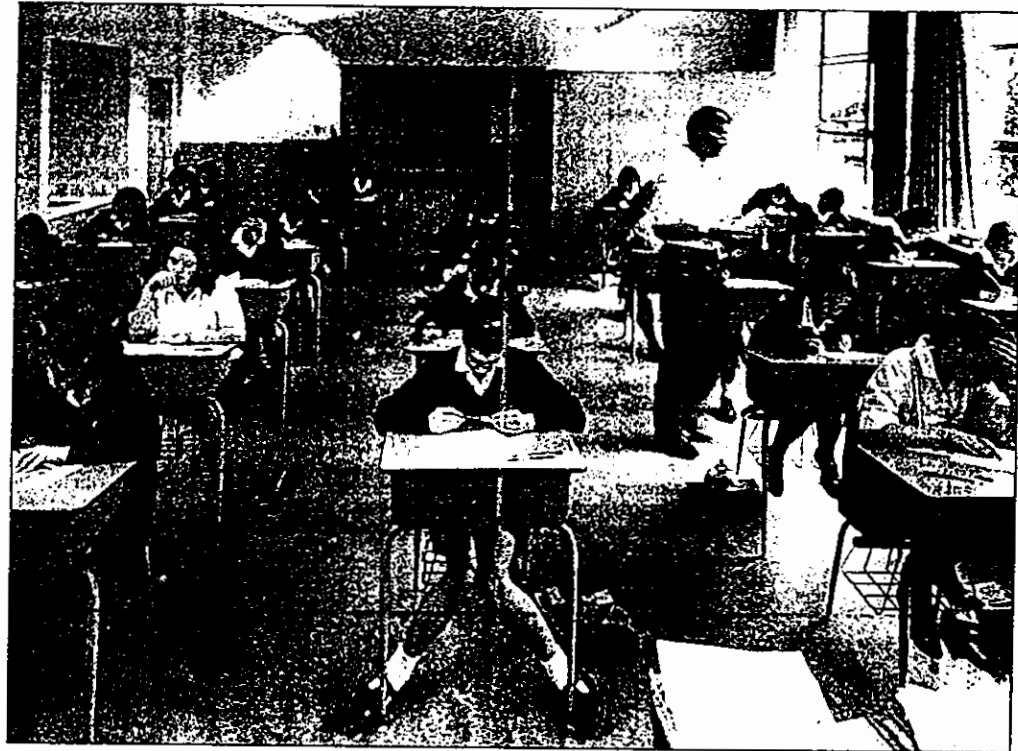
### At the Galleries



By Jack Anderson

Through this multiple-image, multiple-style strategy, Geiger develops a subtle discourse about photography and about individual identity: no one picture can contain the multi-valent complexity of any particular subject. Clearly prompted by an almost anthropological interest in these girls (and perhaps in her own adolescent background), she has focused her attention on a group holding only liminal, outsider status in terms of human affairs. The compound picture she creates of this powerless "subculture" of adolescent girls is full of contradictions. We see rich girls in school uniforms and middle-class girls in popular street costumes; girls studying assiduously and girls lolling curbside; girls reading books and girls smoking cigarettes. Here we perceive private etiquettes, covert sets of values, whispered languages.

Yet, despite these differentiating codes and signals, a kind of communal group think is revealed. To expand our understanding of these girls, Geiger turns to the private environment of their bedrooms. Unlike the



Karin Geiger: *Untitled*. From series "Inbetween" 1996

impersonal, dehumanizing and factory like school environment, this space within the home is where one can function autonomously and be "oneself." Yet these girls are curiously alike in their choice of the things with which they choose to identify: much of these rooms are filled with stuffed toys and posters of young male television, rock, and movie stars. The private fantasies and individuating thoughts which help establish self-identity are here revealed to be common, banal and mundane.

There is a fondness expressed for

these girls and a kind of pathos in this work. The many private things collected by these girls suggest conflict; they are both private toy-totems anchored in childhood fantasy and boy-centred images suggestive of a burgeoning adult sexuality. These girls are on a cusp: the awareness of an autonomous self is here just beginning.

In this rich exhibition, Geiger deconstructs the world of the adolescent girl as a means of examining and dissembling photography itself. Here, the camera is

no longer a tyrannical modernist tool which promotes an authoritarian point of view nor sways us to believe in the accuracy and veracity of the image; the world is a far more complex construct than any snap can impart.

We understand a thing by how it is presented to us. By omission, photographs, other popular media, and cultural institutions as well construct only a partial view of the world. These technically accomplished works address this problem in terms of real world subjects: no longer just this, these girls are this and that.

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