

Children of the damned?: Loretta Lux brings her computer-enhanced kids to New York

Loretta Lux makes pictures of children that are as charming as they are creepy—a sweet-and-sour combo that proves surprisingly hard to resist, even if you suspect the work is little more than kitsch of the most sophisticated and unnerving sort. Like Rineke Dijkstra crossed with Margaret Keane, Lux turns ordinary children into alluring aliens—icons

of innocence so tainted by experience (or maybe just curdled nostalgia) they already feel antique. Because the work is strangely unmoored in place or time—drifting off into the idyllic past while hinting at a vacuous, sci-fi future—it manages to conflate memory and dread, sweetness and blight, in a dreamscape whose specificity reads as utterly imaginary.

Maybe that's because it is. As with so much contemporary photography, nothing here is quite what it seems. Lux, 34, studied painting in Munich before switching to photography in 1999, but she actually works between the two media and generates the final results by computer. Her images are seamless amalgams of two different photographs—the figure and the background—that she enhances digitally with a program whose tools are probably closer to a retoucher's than a painter's but allow Lux to pursue her original training in a new form. The children, all the sons and daughters of friends, many of whom, Lux says, "remind me of my own childhood or the friends I had when I was little," are photographed against a white wall in a studio. Most of the settings, which include abandoned buildings, grassy fields, and a pebbly beach, begin as photos taken on travels throughout Europe. Whatever the original source, it's reworked in the computer until it has the sublime sheen of reality perfected, telling imperfection and all.

Compared to the elaborate manipulation involved in Jeff Wall's, Nick Knight's, or Yasumasa Morimura's work, Lux's computer-enhanced images are modest, and that's part of their appeal. With their solitary, doll-like figures and simple settings, they deliver an immediate hit of pleasure, but just as quickly undermine it. The longer you look at Lux's

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photos, the more uncomfortable you become. These lovely, grave children, with their porcelain skin and vintage clothing, are as hollow and idealized as automatons. Strangers in a strange land (whose model citizen might be Haley Joel Osment's helplessly anxious android in *A.I.*), they're all the more unsettling for being so familiar, so unassuming, and so lost.

Lux says that whatever changes she makes to the children's features are "as subtle as possible," but that the final images are in no way intended as portraits. "My pictures are not really about the children that I photograph. They're more like actors in a film. I think you can always recognize the children, but they are alienated from their real appearance and become more like metaphors." Lux,

LORETTA LUX
Yossi Milo Gallery
552 West 24th Street
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Loretta Lux: *The Wanderer* (2003)

whose memorably alliterative name was concocted on the occasion of her first exhibition in 2000 ("even my mother calls me Loretta now," she says), understands something about alienation and reinvention. But no matter how fragile and adrift her children appear, they have a weirdly powerful presence. Perhaps because they seem so self-contained, even when they recede into themselves, they command our gaze, if not necessarily our sympathy. Sympathy is too easy, too automatic where children are concerned. Lux's creatures are more independent; they'll suffer alone, and they'll survive.

According to Lux, the figure in two of the 21 photographs at Yossi Milo, a brown-haired

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girl who looks determined but vaguely forlorn in *Maria No. 1* and *Maria No. 2*, hasn't been at all manipulated. But she's no less a figment of the photographer's imagination. Although she never works from sketches, Lux says she has "a clear mental picture" of what she wants before she starts an image, and she chooses a model and backdrop accordingly. Like so many artists, she began with a subject close at hand, so her first photographs were self-portraits, and the one on her website (lorettalux.de) is compelling: a pale, pretty apparition of a woman with a dark Clara Bow bob staring out at us before a brilliantly moonlit sky. If the pictures of children she went on to make are, she says, "reminiscent of my own childhood without being autobiographical," they still work as covert self-portraits. In the course of "trying to re-create things from memory," Lux dresses some of her models in outfits from her own youth, lovingly preserved by her mother, or other period pieces, but "never the children's own clothes."

This nostalgic vision of a solitary childhood in a robotic never-never land has made Lux a collector's darling. Even before her first American solo show opened, many of the photographs had sold out their editions at prices ranging from \$7,500 to \$19,500 for the larger prints. Several weeks into its run, Milo has sold more than 400 prints. As a phenomenon, Lux can't compare with other German powerhouses like Gursky or Struth, but she's got a comfortable niche, and her eye for the uncanny and underaged should serve her well.