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THE MIDAS RETOUCH How Loretta Lux's eerie images made her millions

German artist Loretta Lux's unsettling photographs of other-worldly children can take three months to create. They have made her photography's new sensation and earned her millions of pounds – all at the age of 33. She talks to Louise Baring

'I use children as a metaphor for a lost paradise'

At the opening of the Paris Photo fair last November, a cluster of collectors were drawn to one of a series of lush, unsettling images of children by Loretta Lux, a 35-year-old German painter turned photographer. Entitled *The Rose Garden* (2001), it shows an impassive, digitally enhanced, doll-like little girl dressed in a vintage mini-dress standing carefully posed with her hands behind her back and an averted gaze. Lux's solo American debut at the Yossi Milo gallery in New York just a year ago prompted a slew of articles in art and photo magazines on both sides of the Atlantic, plus sales of more than 500 of her photographs (worth roughly \$5 million), most selling out their editions. She has now won America's ICP prize for art photography – previously awarded to Cindy Sherman and Lux's fellow German, Andreas Gursky.

Lux's minor sensation has taken years of meticulous planning: "I started this work in 1999, but I didn't want to share it until I was ready, which was when I met my dealer, Yossi Milo," she explains. Her eerily beautiful, self-contained creatures – aged between two and nine and placed in dream-like settings – have a calculated charm tinged with eroticism. The effect is, in part, thanks to Photoshop, a software programme introduced 16 years ago that allows artists to manipulate images in a vast number of ways. Thus Lux delicately distends the heads, eyes and limbs of her sitters, while lending a flawless, translucent quality to their skin – akin to the portraits by Velázquez and the 17th-century Italian mannerist painter Bronzino that she so admires.

Also, like these Old Masters, Lux would like her works to "transcend their subject". *Study of a Boy, No 1* – on the cover of New York magazine last April for a story on toddler therapy – has a weirdly powerful presence as he crouches down to touch the floor with his flat hand, facing the viewer with a chilly blue stare. *The Bride* depicts a childhood fantasy with a little girl wearing a white dress and tiara, while the reclining girl in *The Wanderer* (2003), set in an isolated, light-filled

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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND YOSSIMILO GALLERY/NEW YORK

landscape, is reminiscent of work by Balthus, famous for his paintings of very young girls in languid, suggestive poses. Yet, for one New York collector who bought the image: "It evokes a universal solitary quest out of a mere child."

With a precise vision of what she wants before she starts an image, Lux likes to control every aspect of her work. That, of course, includes her young subjects – all sons and daughters of friends – whom she dresses, whether they like it or not, in 1970s vintage clothing, including skirts and dresses kept by her mother from her own childhood: "I never allow them to wear their own clothes," she says. But then, as she points out, her photographs are not intended as portraits: "My work

isn't about these children," she explains. "You can recognise them, but they are alienated from their real appearance – I use them as a metaphor for innocence and a lost paradise."

Lux selects an image of a child from a hundred-odd taken over two or three sessions, "dropping" it into a separate computer file of backgrounds that she has painted or photographed during her travels around Europe – grassy fields, a country garden, a pebble beach, or abandoned buildings and interiors. She then crops and arranges her composition, removes extraneous details and alters the colours until they have attained her trademark pastel perfection.

"Her photographs mark the very

Cool formality: in *Self-Portrait* (2000), Loretta Lux presents herself as a grown-up version of the flawless children she creates

end of the German documentary tradition," claims Inka Graeve Ingelmann, curator of a major German photography show – including five images by Lux – opening in Tokyo this autumn under the aegis of the Goethe-Institut. She is referring to the rigorously thought-out, unembellished photographs free of sentiment or cliché characterised by Bernd and Hilla Becher and their pupils – including Thomas Struth, whose stunning large-scale photographs have dominated the contemporary art market in recent years.

Nevertheless, Lux's charming yet creepy compositions share a cool formality that belongs to that German tradition. The images are also, as Graeve Ingelmann points out, partly self-portraits. Indeed, her first photographs – taken when she started experimenting with the medium in 1999 – were just that. The self-portrait on her website (www.lorettalux.de), for example, is a powerful image of an immaculate, porcelain-faced woman with a raven bob in front of a moonlit sky – like a grown-up version of the flawless children she creates.

Critics like to point to Lux's yearning for an idealised childhood, while the photographer herself says she creates beautiful pictures because she is "suffering under the ugliness of this world". Not surprisingly, therefore, she has no sentimental memories of spending her childhood in former East Germany: "I deeply resent the fact of having grown up there," she says. "Being forced to pretend to be a little Communist was demeaning." Born in Dresden, she lived with her grandparents – her father left when she was young, while her mother worked as a secretary.

"My grandparents took me to museums and galleries in Dresden where we looked at Old Masters together," she recalls. "I had reproductions of Velázquez's *Infanta Margarita* and *Maria Theresa*, as well as a sketch by Rubens of his small son hanging in my room. I was also fascinated by the work of Caspar David Friedrich and the way he depicted the

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‘I never allow them to wear their own clothes. My work isn’t about these children. You can recognise them, but they are alienated from their real appearance.’

unfulfilled human longing to become one with nature.” Frustrated in her ambitions to become an artist in East Germany – unless, as she claims, “you were into propaganda art” – Lux counts herself lucky that the Wall came down when she was only 20. In 1990, she was accepted to study at the Academy of Visual Arts in Munich.

“Loretta Lux was quite unlike any student I’ve ever had,” recalls Professor Gerd Winner, who taught her until 1996. “It was as if she had no past – I could only just detect from a faint accent that she had come from East Germany. She held herself aloof from her fellow students, and her whole persona was very carefully calculated. She loved playing at being a beauty, and dressed like a model from the 1950s. At the same time, she had enormous energy and was very precise and disciplined in her working methods.”

Prof Winner politely refuses to reveal his former student’s real name, changed to the memorably alliterative Loretta Lux on the eve of her first exhibition – a modest group show in Germany 2000. Five years on, Lux has had major solo exhibitions in Munich, Amsterdam and New York, while her images are now in 20 public institutions listed on her website. But it was her first meeting with the enterprising Yossi Milo at a group show in Salamanca, Spain in 2003 that proved the turning point in her career.

These days, 80 per cent of Lux’s clients are American – including contemporary art enthusiast SI Newhouse, owner of Conde



Weirdly powerful: Loretta Lux’s *Study of a Boy, No 1* (2002) and *The Bride* (2003)



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Eerily beautiful: *The Rose Garden* (2001) by Loretta Lux. Influences on Lux’s work include Balthus (*Girl and Cat*, 1937, top right) and the Italian mannerist Bronzino (*Portrait of Don Garcia*, 1550, above right)

Nast. Unlike so many of her contemporaries, she does not favour giant-scale photographs, preferring instead a more intimate 12in by 12in (small) to 20in by 20in (large), pointing out that she doesn’t feel the need to blow up her images to attract more attention. Their smaller size also lends an intimacy that appeals to collectors in search of images they can hang at home.

Ranging from \$13,500 to \$19,500 in edition sizes of 20, it is Lux who fixes her prices, following detailed discussions with Yossi Milo. “An important factor is that I produce very little,” she argues. “The process is very

time-consuming – I spend about two or three months on each image. It’s much closer to painting than to conventional photography, even though the final product is a print.”

Meanwhile, having created a brand in the space of a year, Ms Lux has just moved from a fisherman’s cottage in Ireland to Monaco as a tax exile. Her success in part derives from her ability to evoke a fairy-tale like “otherness” through a clever – though manipulative – idealisation of childhood. In an image-dominated world, hungry dealers and collectors alike have found something that has an appeal all of its own.