

# portfolio

contemporary photography in britain #42 £10 \$25





Loretta Lux Karen Knorr David Bate Jeff Wall Garry Fabian Miller Alexa Wright  
Nobuyoshi Araki Sarah Dobai Diane Arbus Daniel Gustav Cramer Nina Mangalanayagam  
Oliver Parker Sarah Pickering Luke Stephenson Jane Fletcher Lucy Soutter Parveen Adams  
John Slyce Martin Barnes Simon Watney Amanda Hopkinson Mark Durden Val Williams

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Loretta Lux, *The Walk*, 2004

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## introduction



Loretta Lux, *The Rose Garden*, 2001

We are delighted to have the opportunity to feature the work of Loretta Lux in this issue. Jane Fletcher looks at the Victorian antecedents to Lux's photographs of children and discusses the effect of displacement which haunts these uncanny images.

Karen Knorr's new series, *Fables*, staged in the Carnavalet Museum in Paris, features classic animal characters and plays on the tension between nature and culture. We present David Bate's suite of photographs, *Bungled Memories*, inspired by the painting *The Broken Mirror* by Greuze, with a text by Parveen Adams. On the occasion of Jeff Wall's retrospective at London's Tate Modern, John Slyce discusses how the artist's work has been repositioned in line with changes in the status of the medium of photography. Garry Fabian Miller's latest series of works, exhibited under the title of *Becoming Magma*, are reproduced and discussed by Martin Barnes.

We feature Alexa Wright's photographs of opera singers which continues her work on identity; still photographs from Sarah Dobai's new film, entitled *Short Story Piece*; a discussion by Mark Durden of Diane Arbus's work in relation to her subversion of the traditions of portraiture and documentary photography; and a preview of Nobuyoshi Araki's retrospective, *Self-Life-Death* by Amanda Hopkinson.

This issue also announces and presents the work of the five winners of the 2005 Jerwood Photography Awards, the annual award open to recent graduates from visual arts degree courses in the UK. Val Williams discusses the work of the recipients - Daniel Gustav Cramer, Nina Mangalanayagam, Oliver Parker, Sarah Pickering and Luke Stephenson - and suggests that photographers constantly reinvent the circumstances which determine photography, and pose questions for us all.

Gloria Chalmers  
Editor

# Loretta Lux Spellbound

JANE FLETCHER



The Fish, 2003

*The myth of Alice, the girl child of unstable size, puzzling her way through a mysterious Wonderland, returns constantly in the imagery of little girls – not least because of its undertow of barely suppressed sexuality.*

Patricia Holland, *Picturing Children*<sup>1</sup>

More than one commentator has compared Loretta Lux's fascinating pictures of children to the nineteenth-century photographs by *Alice in Wonderland's* author, Lewis Carroll (aka Charles Dodgson). The comparison, I believe, is more pertinent to the original illustrations of 'Alice' by John Tenniel, than Carroll's photographs of the child who inspired the tales. Tenniel stretched her and shrunk her, as Lux digitally alters the proportions of her subjects' limbs and features. He took a child's body and made it strange. Yet, if we are searching for a Victorian antecedent to Lux's photographs of children, surely it has to be Henry Peach Robinson. Both Lux and Robinson studied painting prior to taking up photography, their training influencing the way they subsequently made photographs. Significantly, Robinson is best known for his combination prints: manipulated pictures made from more than one negative. His aim was to create visually coherent images. Instead, what often make his photographs oddly uneasy are the seemingly inevitable anomalies in perspective and proportion that work to disrupt the moral certitude of his genre scenes. Lux photographs her subjects against a plain studio wall, then digitally 'drops' them into a background selected from her own image-bank of scenes and settings. As with Robinson's photographs, her figures appear at odds with their surroundings, contributing to the general effect of displacement and alienation that haunts her images of children: a kind of uncanny.

Although the relationship between photography and the uncanny is well-rehearsed, it is nonetheless important. In the new

monograph of Lux's work (*Aperture* 2005), Francine Prose compares the child-subjects to dolls: 'If the children in these photos blinked, we feel we might hear their lids snap shut'.<sup>2</sup> The doll, of course, is the embodiment of the uncanny. It is through a reading of E. T. A. Hoffman's *The Sandman* that Freud chooses to locate and demonstrate uncanniness.<sup>3</sup> Freud is concerned with castration. For Helene Cixous, however, the doll evokes uncanniness because its artificial life signifies death.<sup>4</sup> That is, carefully-crafted automata or meticulously-modelled wax figures, plastic mannequins and china dolls can provoke intellectual uncertainty in the viewer by engendering doubt as to what is animate and what is not. Sally Mann achieves that kind of uncertainty in her photographs *Virginia in the Sun* (1985) and *The Wet Bed* (1987)<sup>5</sup>. Although you know her children must be alive, if you did not, they could be dead.

Disarming and unnerving, the children in Lux's photographs are like characters from fairy tales; not the cautionary tales of the nineteenth century, but something more grim and ambiguous. As if trapped in a spell, or silenced by the daylight, *The Drummer* (2004) is arrested in mid-movement. Boy or girl, the child's head is too big for the body, the eyes are too big for the face. The arched eyebrows are plucked with the precision of a beautician while the fine curly hair is baby-soft. Not only are the child's limbs and features distorted, there is no logic to the perspective in the image. The raised right hand and drumstick appear to protrude from the photograph. In contrast, what space is there between bench and wall for the child's body to squeeze? The drum is reflected in the varnished wooden surface. The child's elbows are not. I am left with the feeling that, should I turn away, this clockwork, wind-up, mechanical toy might start beating some ghastly staccato behind my back.

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The Drummer, 2004



Girl with Marbles, 2005  
Marianne, 2004 (*opposite*)







Study of a Boy 2, 2002

The Rose Garden, 2001 (*opposite*)



If *Alice* and the uncanny evoke 'an undertow of suppressed sexuality', the question begs: do Lux's images raise the spectre of child exploitation and 'inappropriate' adult desire? Lux photographs boys and girls, sometimes as young as two years old. They are the children of her friends. She places them in the public arena and allows the viewer to scrutinise their touched-up bodies: lustrous skins and delicate bruises; nicks and cuts on their legs and arms; enhanced eyelashes and freckles. Photography, by its nature, encourages one to stare; these highly-finished images invite the eye to slip and slide across their glossy surface. But, as Prose acknowledges 'our culture has identified staring at a child as a possible symptom of perversion'. The paedophile is the 'bogeyman' of contemporary society, and the crucial distinction between representations of children, the conditions of their production and the behaviour they induce is often lost in the outrage that the reality of child abuse rightly incites. It is, of course, impossible to anticipate what fragment of imagery might trigger desire, and how that desire might manifest itself.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the arrival of digital technology further emphasises the fact that any photograph is mediated and might have been manipulated – as Robinson's were 150 years ago. The umbilical cord linking the photograph to its referent has been well and truly breached. (Perhaps, because the paedophile is the bogeyman of contemporary society, digitally-manipulated images of children are deployed to deliberately resist accusations of prurient staring?) In the face of Lux's photographs, one is nevertheless compelled to ask: in whose drama are these children acting, and for whose benefit or pleasure? There is no conclusive answer. Significantly, what is violated in these seductive photographs is the ideal of Romantic childhood. Look at *Marianne* (2004) in the dirty blue mac that she shares with one of the girls in *The Walk* (2004). Her body language is defensive and her lips are shut, but her penetrating eyes arrest your wandering gaze. She encapsulates what Anne Higonet might call 'knowing childhood'. *Marianne* is one of those images that "call into question children's psychic and sexual innocence by attributing to them consciously active minds and bodies".<sup>7</sup>

Lux has emphasised that her photographs are not portraits of individual children. Rather, the figures act as metaphors, substitutes for something else. In the accompanying essay to Hellen van Meene's *Portraits* (Aperture, 2004) Kate Bush argues that there exists a "photographic tradition that subsumes the documentation of an individual to the dramatisation of an idea". She claims the genre includes work by Julia Margaret Cameron, Claude Cahun, Francesca Woodman and, of course, van Meene. But the two bodies of work – Lux's and van Meene's – could not be more different. Though both are carefully crafted, with the photographer-as-director choosing the setting and providing the wardrobe, van Meene's images "evoke the experience of puberty as one of physical and psychological restriction or frustration". Her photographs confront the viewer with the cringe-making corporeality of being trapped in a pubescent body: often chubby, spotty, and prone to sentimentality. Lux's children, by contrast, are truly otherworldly; the spawn of a new technology. Enchanted, rather than enchanting, these 'knowing children' know too much. (Surely this idea is signified in their over-sized heads?) If the notion of childhood innocence has long been contested, these changelings have instead become the bearers of adult fantasies and, perhaps, fears. Why else does the wide-eyed child in *Study of*

*a Boy 2* (2002) crouch like an incubus at the end of the bed: the embodiment of a nightmare or an evil spirit?

Lux was born in Dresden in 1969. (It is not something she celebrates: "being forced to be a little Communist was demeaning", she is quoted as having said.) If her photographs are influenced by the Old Masters in the city's museums and the reproductions on her bedroom wall, then the sartorial elegance of her sitters owes something to the 1970s. *Dorothea* (2001) looks like her head has been twisted 180 degrees. There is something bizarre about the yellow-tinged skin of her little bloated face: a hint of decay. In contrast, *The Rose Garden* (2001), is definitely rose-tinted; a whiff of nostalgia which almost mitigates the child's disturbingly adult pose and her murky, lugubrious eyes. What both these images demonstrate perfectly, however, is the continued influence of painting on Lux's photographs. Though the children may appear dislocated (in more ways than one), integrity of the image is achieved by the use of a limited palette: a painter's palette. Thus, the backdrops are regularly made up of the same colours as those in the vintage costumes. Or, perhaps, the inverse is true. Chameleon-style the children adapt, and adopt the colours of the environment in which they find themselves.

Not all of Lux's children have been made to resemble dolls or mannequins. It isn't immediately obvious how 'Lois' and 'Maria' have been altered (notwithstanding the 'fake' backdrop). Not all of her subjects are children, either. Indeed, it is troubling to think what the young man in *The Hunter* (2003) might signify, when set amongst these weird yet seemingly vulnerable little people. Armed with a gun and accompanied by a dog his presence is disturbingly inexplicable (or else too simplistically interpreted).

It is the *Girl with Marbles* that reminds me most of 'Alice'; that mixture of concentration and wonder in her face. The long tresses of Tenniel's illustrations has been tied up and turned into gold, the Alice-band replaced with plaits. The crisp, blue fabric of her full skirt hovers like a phantom above the flagstones, the elaborate bow seems to attach itself to her back. Her right hand is raised in a parody of shock and horror. The soles of her feet are touchingly and childishly clean and pink. The expression of the child is far from saccharine-sweet; beneath the heavy eyebrows, her glassy green eyes are transfixed, mesmerised by the marbles as if her destiny lies in the random way they have rolled apart and settled.

There is no doubting that Lux's images are compelling and seductive, although the longer one looks, the stranger they become. Digitally manipulated, these are not pictures of innocence, but imagined wonderlands, as apparently irrational and unpredictable as Carroll's own make-believe world. The sense of ambiguity that the pictures inspire makes them ciphers for the complexity of feelings about childhood and children that we, as adults, carry with us. Mirroring the way in which Lux dresses her models and fixes them in front of a background of her own choice, we clothe these figures in our own fantasies, and superimpose our narratives of childhood onto the backdrop which they provide.

1. Patricia Holland, *Picturing Children*, 2004, I B Tauris, p.178.

2. Loretta Lux: *Imaginary Portraits*, Photographs by Loretta Lux and essay by Francine Prose, 2005, Aperture, New York, p.9. (ISBN 1-931788-54-5).

3. S. Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *Art and Literature*, 1985, Penguin.

4. H. Cixous, 'Fictions and its Phantoms' in *New Literary History*, 1976, Vol 7 pp.525-48.

5. See *Immediate Family*, 1992, Phaidon.

6. In *Pictures of Innocence* (1998) Anne Higonet cites a study of institutionalised child-molesters that revealed "one of the most erotic stimuli they had encountered" was ... [a] suntan lotion ad illustrated with a picture of a dog pulling off a tanned girl's bathing suit from her pale bottom". p.192.

7. *ibid.*, p.12.



Dorothea, 2001