

The New York Times

Arts & Leisure

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2004



The Eerily Lovely Children Of the Photoshop Generation

By RICHARD B. WOODWARD

FOURTEEN years ago this month Adobe introduced Photoshop to the software market, a leap forward in graphic design that allowed any fool to cut, paste, shade and rearrange images with ease. One of the original "killer apps," this widely adopted program has also been widely abused. The temptation to play virtuoso riffs on the keyboard has led to countless pictures that aspire to be "futuristic" but reek of a moldy surrealism better done when scissors were cutting-edge. Photoshop may have been a boon to print advertising, but the compelling artworks it has facilitated have been scarce.

Loretta Lux, a 34-year-old German painter turned photographer, has realized that a light touch is sometimes the most effective technique for digital enhancement. With so many choices at her fingertips, she has opted for delicate, minute alterations. Walking through her show of children's portraits at the Yossi Milo Gallery in Chelsea, one continually wonders if the boys and girls in her studies are software simulations, and why and to what degree they might be at the mercy of the artist's hand.

In fact, Ms. Lux has carefully costumed and photographed her subjects and, after scanning the image, dropped the figures into a separately scanned background, often taken from one of her paintings. She erases irrelevant details — fireplaces, cats, toys — until



the children are settled in a neutral, dreamlike space.

An eerie result is children who seem willed into existence by Ms. Lux (her puppet master's strings are evident in the slightly distended heads and limbs and in the pastel tints) but who also have the air of self-created beings, a race of tiny Nordic monsters, spawned inside her computer but now genetically mutated and strug-

PHOTOGRAPHY



Yossi Milo Gallery

Loretta Lux's photographs of children include, clockwise from the far left, "The Wanderer" (2003), "Study of a Boy, No.1," and "Study of a Girl, No. 2" (both 2002).

gling with her for domination.

Ms. Lux often uses old-master paintings as sources. Traces of Botticelli and Raphael are apparent in the coifs and postures of several children, while the German Romantics Philipp Otto Runge and Casper David Friedrich stand behind some of her mystical atmospheric effects. The reclining girl in "The Wanderer" has been lifted from Balthus's "Mountain."

A less illustrious heritage is also discernible. One could just as easily detect in the children's big eyes and coy attitudes a sensibility inflected, ironically or not, by Hummel figurines; Japanese anime; the nymphets of Lewis Carroll, Henry Darger and Sally Mann; the campy painted photographs of Pierre and Gilles; the sculptures of Charles Ray; the paintings of John Currin; and the 1960 horror movie "Village of the Damned."

But most of all, Ms. Lux's doctored images belong to the tradition of commercial portrait photography. Such pictures, made in studios all over the world since the days of daguerreotypes, have used settings no less contrived than these — without the benefit of Photoshop. The Victorians favored plaster columns and tree trunks as props for their subjects, with woodland scenery sketched behind; studio photographers since the 50's have relied on sheets of mottled paper as the standard backdrop, with carpeted stairs as a perch.

Ms. Lux lights her children with too much care — she favors an even, shadowless glaze — for her work to be confused with a typical shopping-mall studio portrait. But she taps into the same nostalgic vein. Her wan, milky palette is reminiscent of the American commercial illustration of the 50's, a feminine color scheme that

Loretta Lux

*Yossi Milo, 552 West 24th Street.
Through Saturday.*

was applied to everything from postcards to baby books. Like greeting cards directed at grandmothers, Ms. Lux's candy-colored images try so hard to appeal that they appall. They are jokes about how hard we want to believe in this vision of childhood, and how easy it is to push our buttons.

The modest scale of the Ilfochrome prints reinforces Ms. Lux's connection to the vernacular baby portrait. She has produced them in two sizes: the smaller portraits are only 11¾ inches square, the larger ones 19½. Instead of forcing the viewer to submit to their power, the photographs beg for inspection. They seem designed as much for an office desk or mantel as for a gallery.

As she has pushed the work further toward narrative, as in "The Wanderer," "The Book" and "The Bride," she has fiddled less with Photoshop. These are the newest photographs in the show, and often the least successful. A certain amount of artifice is welcome when making art about beautiful children in idyllic scenarios. Without the tension between future and past, the fake and the real, her work can recede into sentimentality. But when Ms. Lux gets her subtle calibrations just right, she produces mesmerizing images of children who seem trapped between the 19th and 21st centuries, who don't exist except in the magical realm of art. □