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Girl with a Loaf of Bread, 2001. ©Loretta Lux

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The Bride, 2003 ©Loretta Lux. Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery.

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The Photography Show

AIPAD 2004

THE CHILDREN OF LORETTA LUX: ALONE, LIKE THE REST OF US

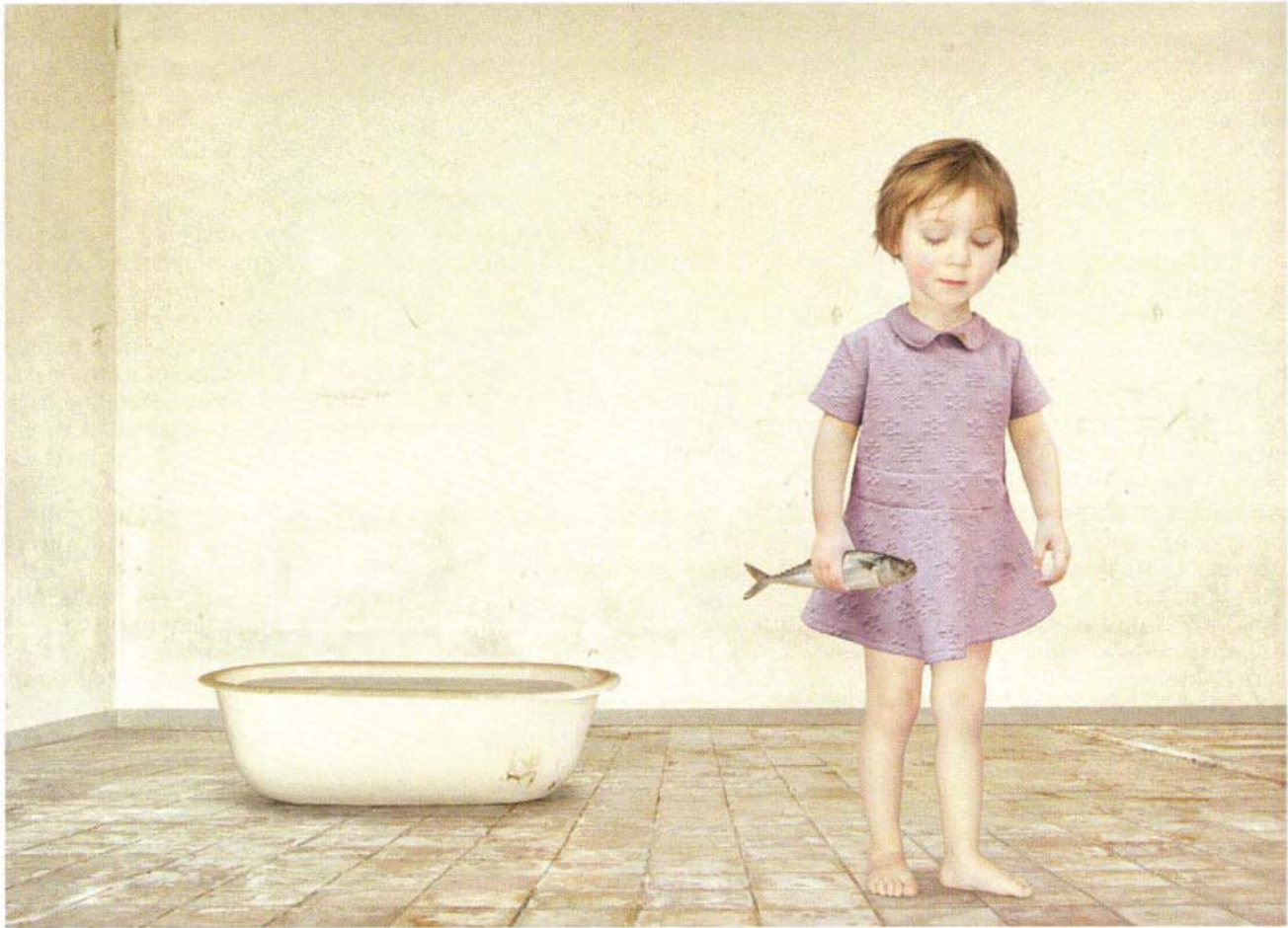
The first time I saw a Loretta Lux photograph was on a card announcing her Spring 2004 debut show at the Yossi Milo Gallery in Chelsea. So many cards arrive daily I seldom give any of them more than a glance, but hers called me back for an extended look. It was something about that unsmiling child and the precise elegance of the piece. It was minimalist, yet it spun narratives in my head. So did the serious little girl holding a loaf of bread under her arm (*Girl with a Loaf of Bread, 2001*, cover image, this issue), and the child holding a fish (*The Fish, 2001*, above.)

Born in Dresden, raised by grandparents who took her as a child to view the works of Old Masters in Dresden museums and galleries, and trained as a painter, 34-year-old Lux began photographing in 1999. She describes her portraits of children as "imaginary pictures dealing with the idea of childhood." The child who walked into her studio has been costumed, supplied with carefully chosen props, and Photoshopped into another entity, one that represents, as she says, an idea. She uses digital wizardry to marry her classic studio portrait with a different background she has painted or

photographed, enhancing the results to achieve her vision.

Unlike many who combine images digitally, Lux aspires to simplicity. Yet out of her minimalism and classical restraint come works that veer toward fiction, even poetry, sailing into realms where children inhabit territory recognizable to us as adults. The images prompt thought but invite identification. Though they fall within the genre of children's portraiture, they transcend their subject matter.

At the Yossi Milo booth at *The Photography Show* potential buyers clustered around the table of matted Lux prints, two of them already quite far along in deciding what to buy. Sales at the gallery had been strong, and the larger size (19 5/8 x 27 1/2 or 19 5/8 square inches, edition of seven, \$6500-\$9500) had already sold out. Milo discovered her work in *Ninos 2003*, a show of children's portraiture at the Centro de Art de Salamanca in Spain. In very little time he had become her exclusive U.S. dealer and arranged for her U.S. debut. The groundswell of interest was immediate, and Lux quickly established a niche for herself in the art world.



The Fish, 2001. ©Loretta Lux. Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery.

The atmosphere around the table was electric. Clearly, Lux is a rising star. One woman, a beginning collector, asked if she could take a walk for ten minutes and come back with her decision about buying a print that was the last in an edition (11¾x11¾-inches, edition of 20, \$1950-\$3900). Before she had gone two steps she came back and bought it. As of this writing, many editions have sold out.

What is fascinating are the varied adjectives critics use to describe Lux's children. In general, these suggest the dark, the sinister, the alien, or the grotesque. In the *New York Times*, (February 29, 2004) Richard B. Woodward calls them "eerily lovely" with "the air of self-created beings, a race of tiny Nordic monsters." Vince Aletti in the *Village Voice* (February 23, 2004) sees them as "children that are as charming as they are creepy," whom Lux "turns into alluring aliens." Diana Stoll in *Aperture* (February 22, 2004) calls them "changelings," who are "beautiful, extremely formal, and chilling." To Kate Salter of the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine* (February 22, 2004), the portraits are "gently surreal."

To me, Lux's children are beings adrift in the universe. They peer out at us or off into the distance. Either way they face the existential void, even in the midst of formality, prettily pastel surroundings, a purposeful gesture. They may carry sustenance or engage in ritual, but whatever they wear or do or undertake, they exist alone. Like you, and like me.

Lux may one day explore other ideas about childhood. But for now she has struck a chord with an honest, non-sentimental view of children that accords them their appropriate human grandeur and takes their very existence seriously.

Lux is out there too, now living in a small fishing village in Dublin. She works full time on her photography and should have her next show in about a year. Meanwhile, we caught up with her in cyberspace on March 6, 2004 for an online exchange.

Mary Ann Lynch: You changed your name when you had your first photography show in 2000. "Lux" = light. Why Loretta?

Loretta Lux: I picked two names that I liked—Loretta and Lux—and combined them.

MAL: Are your influences as much in the world of photography as in the world of painting, from which you come?

LL: I'm more influenced by paintings and the history of art.

MAL: Any literary influences?

LL: Fairy tales that I grew up with, by the Grimm Brothers.

MAL: Who are key influences?

LL: Botticelli, Goya, Velasquez, C.D. Friedrich, Runge, Balthus.

MAL: What got you started with this series?

LL: I actually started with a self portrait, then I photographed my nephew, Troll.

MAL: Where do you find the children?

LL: They are almost always children of friends.

MAL: You choose your props very carefully. Some seem to have religious connotations—the fish, the loaf of bread. How did you come upon the idea for *Girl with the Loaf of Bread*?

LL: I thought of Hansel and Gretel—the German fairy tale. But I was also aware of the religious connotation and liked it.

MAL: Did you photograph her holding any other props?

LL: No, but I photographed her again two years later with a book (*The Book*).

MAL: And how about the idea behind *The Fish*?

LL: When I was small my favorite toy was a yellow fish. I walked around with that fish in my hand all the time, as my mother told me. I like the religious connotation in this case too and the fact that fishes and water stand for the subconscious.

MAL: How many frames/exposures might you typically make during one photo session? And how many different configurations/positions of the person within the scene?

LL: Countless, I'd always shoot hundreds of pictures.

MAL: How long would you typically spend on each shoot?

LL: About two hours.

MAL: Do the children sometimes have ideas about how to stand, look, etc?

LL: Some do, especially the elder girls.

MAL: Your children are remarkably composed. Do they get restless?

LL: It depends on their age. If they get restless or fed up, I stop photographing anyway.

MAL: Your studio backdrop when you photograph the children is always just a white plain wall—is that correct?

LL: Mostly, yes.

MAL: But the final backdrops appearing in the finished portrait are those you create and then digitally merge with the studio portrait in the computer, correct? How are these backdrops made?

LL: I photograph them as well and sometimes paint on them.

MAL: In his *New York Times* review ("The Eerily Lovely Children of the Photoshop Generation," February 29, 2004) Richard B. Woodward says that the heads and limbs of your children get "slightly distended" in the Photoshop process. Is this so?

LL: Sometimes, but not always.

MAL: Do you strive for a physical change in their appearance?

LL: I change things like colors or proportions if I think it is good for the picture.

MAL: How long does it take to conceive, photograph, and then blend the various elements into the finished photograph?

LL: Two to three months for the entire composition. That's why I do only about five or six pictures a year.

MAL: What camera do you use? Always on a tripod? Lights?

LL: A digital camera. My partner does the lighting and all the technical things. I don't want to be bothered with it myself.

MAL: Did you experiment with different papers?

LL: A little. Finally I picked the best paper available, Ilfochrome. A laboratory in Germany does the printing.

MAL: Are you surprised at the public response to your work? If so, in what way or ways?

LL: On the one hand I was surprised to see people react to the work so strongly because the pictures were so personal to me. On the other hand I'm very happy about it because I apparently hit on something existential.

MAL: What will your next series be?

LL: I'm continuing with the children's portraits. I can't make any predictions at all.

Loretta Lux images can be seen at the websites, www.yossimilogallery.com. and lorrettalux.de. For further information contact Yossi Milo Gallery, 552 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011, 212-414-0370.

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