

ANGELA GROSSMANN'S *GANG OF THREE* (2010): IMAGERY THAT SPEAKS TO THE INNOCENCE OF CHILDHOOD BEING BOUGHT, SOLD, AND DISCARDED: DAMAGED

Allison Smith

Angela Grossmann's *Gang of Three* (2010) exposes a society whose boundaries between childhood and adulthood are blurred. The work included in her 2010 exhibition, from November 6th to November 28th, 2010, at Galerie d'Este in Montreal illustrates the womanly roles that have been adopted by young girls. In this paper, I consider a selection of Grossmann's works, the 1984 documentary *Streetwise*, by filmmaker Martin Bell, as well as examples from the media in an attempt to answer the question: "Where have all the children gone?"¹ I argue that the loss of childhood, from premature exposure to adult images, fosters the adultification of children and leads to the sexualization and eroticization of female children today.

The argument of this paper stems from Neil Postman's theory that he presented in his book, titled *The Disappearance of Childhood*. Postman contends that childhood, as we understand it today, is a socially constructed concept developed in the eighteenth century with the rise of literacy, when childhood became an ideal. Due to the clear distinction between child and adult, based on access to knowledge through literature, the Victorian era exemplifies this "high watermark of childhood"² when a child's innocence was idealized and guarded. Postman believes that starting in the 1950s, with the introduction of television and other visual media, the distinction between childhood and adulthood was made less apparent once again. I share with Postman his conviction that innocence is now being bought, sold, and discarded.

Angela Grossmann's imagery - specifically, but not limited to, the 2010 work *Gang of Three*, resonates with Neil Postman's perspective (fig. 1). The work, a collage measuring a hundred-and-fifty by ninety centimeters uses discarded photographs and acrylic paint on canvas to narrate the emotional world of young teen girls.³ Grossmann's *Alpha Girls* series, which began in 2004, engages with the coming-of-age theme of young girls.

Gang of Three depicts three young girls, their backs turned to the viewer. Monochrome photographs are collaged onto a cream canvas. Black, white, and gray paint is applied above and around the heads of the three girls, resembling a clouded sky. A large "I - O" is spray-painted in red below the feet of the girls. The first of the three girls, read from left to right, stands straight, with her hand positioned somewhere between her hip and her lower back. She wears a white shirt and printed short-shorts. Her long, lighter coloured hair, flows down her back. The second girl, caught in the middle, has her back mostly exposed. Her long dark curly hair rests on her shoulders, covering her upper torso. She wears dark short-shorts with a backless top. The final girl stands at the end of the row. Her body is positioned slightly towards the viewer. We see the side of her breast peeking through the armhole of her tank top. Her light hair, worn down, is shoulder length and hides her neck and the top of her shoulders. Like the two girls beside her, the short-shorts she wears are hardly distinguishable from underwear. Each girl stands precariously in her individual pair of "kitten heels," bare legs crossed at the ankle. The various tones of blacks, whites and grays exclude the fleshy colours of the skin, while still alluding to this veiling and unveiling of the girls' physicality. Sexuality, desire and eroticism are conveyed in this image through

the covering and uncovering of parts of the three young girl's bodies.

Jennifer Baumgardner, co-author of the feminist manual *Manifesto*, argues that when little girls don stiletto heels they are tapping into a spirit of "fierce, fun independence." They can convey messages of "girl power." But, we need to ask ourselves the question: Can we believe that young children would be aware of these subversive possibilities?⁴ I interpret the crossed legs and unsteadiness in the shoes the girls in *Gang of Three* adorn as producing a sense of unease and awkwardness, rather than a sense of confident "girl power." Their upper bodies, however, emanate confidence: backs straight, hands on hips, and heads close to each other as if they are sharing secrets and laughter. While I find this work speaks volumes on the adultification of young girls, there is also another connotation in this sexualization of young females. These young girls are mimicking the popular imagery they consume. As such, perhaps their appearance and interaction is only a playful performance in this early exploration of adult female identity.

What is disconcerting about the *Gang of Three* is that girls can be compared to the 14-year old Erin Blackwell, a child prostitute, who goes by the name Tiny, from Martin Bell's 1984 documentary *Streetwise* (fig. 2). *Streetwise* depicts the life of teenagers living on the streets of Seattle in the early 1980s. These "desperate" teenagers are either runaways or castaways. All of these children were thrown into the adult world too young. When Pat, Tiny's mother; an unemployed alcoholic, is interviewed to discuss her daughter's prostitution she seems unconcerned, labeling it a "phase."

One of the most powerful quotes from the documentary is delivered by Tiny: "I think that it is very strange that older men like little girls. Because they're perverts that is what they is. I mean, I like the money, but I don't like them." This quote makes tangible a world where men engage in sex with children. Canada's age of consent for sexual activity is 16 years. The age of consent is 18 years where the sexual activity, such as prostitution, is considered as an exploitation of the young person.

Streetwise is a disturbing film that comments on the extremes of living in economically disadvantaged and troubled families. The film is an example of the tragic reality of the adultification of young girls, making apparent the relationship between economic disadvantage and sexual exploitation of children. In Kathryn A. Kamp's article: "Where Have All the Children Gone?: The Archaeology of Childhood," she states: "childhood is the training ground, the time when skills and belief systems are learned, personality formed, and attitudes and values inculcated."⁵ With regards to the adultification of children I pose these two open-ended questions: What role does economic disadvantage have for Tiny? And, what role does the media have for the girls depicted in Grossmann's *Gang of Three*?

For Kamp, current images tend to portray childhood primarily as a time of play and learning. Even in the film *Streetwise* we see Tiny, with a group of girlfriends, laughing and having fun. Be it through the process of applying makeup in order to assert their femininity, and attract the males' gaze in order to "turn tricks." These girls are still practicing a form of play. Kamp argues that advertisements today de-emphasize children's economic contributions.⁶ Where are the images of the children who are forced into the work force at a young age, due to financial necessity? The documentary *Streetwise* depicts dire consequences of this situation, but outside of the western world the reality is that many young children work in order to maintain their family livelihood. Childhood, throughout the world, is slipping away, and can be viewed as something "too intangible."⁷ She continues on to say that, in regards to anthropology, the material traces children leave are minor and hard to interpret, or rather, they are too difficult to untangle from those of adults.⁸ In North American culture the phenomena labeled

“tweens,”⁹ “prosti-tots,” and “kinderwhores” are evidence of this.¹⁰

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ideas about girls and girlhood were generic categories. Girls of the lower classes still existed in a duality of being either a child or an adult, while girls of the middling class and higher had a third stage of “young lady.” It took another 200 years for the present day notion of tween to be developed and to fill the conceptual category of a time of transition between childhood and adolescence.¹¹ Titles such as prosti-tots, and kinderwhores¹² are applied to young girls today who are becoming involved in a sphere of fashion, image adulation, and activities that “encourage them to flirt with a decidedly grown-up eroticism and sexuality.”¹³ This new category of youth is straddling childhood and adolescence. This tween-oriented marketing treats young people like mature, independent consumers. “By treating youth like adults children are more susceptible to unhealthy messages about body image, sexuality, relationships and violence.”¹⁴

Tween is a marketing term used to describe preteens ages 9 to 14. Straddling childhood and adolescence a tween is a youth with a foot in both worlds.¹⁵ Tween fashion today adapts clothing associated with a woman's developed body - bustiers or the particularly notorious example of thong underwear - to an unformed shape. We need to ask ourselves: “What are the similarities and differences in the ideas of childhood being implied or contained in these garments?”¹⁶ Grossmann's 2006 work; *La Senza Girl I*, speaks volumes in the image portrayed (fig. 3). The title of this work stems from *La Senza Girl*; a tween take-off of the adult lingerie store called *La Senza*. Through the addition of “Girl” at the end of an adult lingerie store, and by providing garments such as lace-bras, bustiers and thongs to a teen and pre-teen market, there is a direct link to the sexualization of young girls.

This is a concern that Angela Grossmann speaks to directly in her *Alpha Girl* works. I met Grossmann at her vernissage at the Galerie d'Este, here in Montreal. I conducted an interview with her the following weekend. Among the many issues we discussed she explained to me how she began her *Alpha Girl* series. About six years ago, when her son was in his sixth or seventh grade, around age 13, she began to notice a shift in classroom dynamic. The girls in the class were going off in a much different direction, while the boys were remaining kids. The girls would come to class in “little tank tops” and other more revealing clothing. Their fashion was betraying them in certain ways, making them more provocative. Grossmann told me that she was both “fascinated and horrified.” She went on to say that these young girls are being “manipulated - [they have] all the signs, but no clue.” She is referring to the media giving these girls an abundance of images, without the information required to fully understand.

Grossmann brought to my attention a video that has been circulating on the Internet. This video depicts a group of seven-year-old girls doing a choreographed dance routine to Beyoncé's *Single Ladies*-copying the performer's music video (fig. 4). These girls are performing a dance routine, taught to them by adults, in front of an audience comprised of adults. Not only were the “sexy” moves the girls performed troubling, the reaction of the audience was even more so. This audience applauds them furiously, completely dazzled. These young girls are being conditioned to this “sexy” way of using their bodies, encouraged by their mothers and fathers.

On a Fox News broadcast an outraged mother was interviewed, and commented on the scandalous garments resembling those of prostitutes. The mothers of the performing children argued that the young children would wear less to swim at their public pool. Tween fashion today adapts clothing associated with a woman's developed body. What ideas of childhood are being implied or contained in

these garments? Why is there this sexualizing of young girls?¹⁷ Grossmann's work speaks strongly to this adopting of more adult fashion, to this mode of playing dress-up. Where once we dressed up in our mother's dresses and heels, today another type of dress has been adopted. Is this still in the form of play?

The objective of this paper was to argue that our culture is moving children too quickly into an adult-world. "Death of childhood" and "hurried childhood" seems to be coming true for western and westernized girls, as they have always been for the majority of girls in developing countries throughout the world.¹⁸ Young female children's innocence is slipping away. Artists such as Angela Grossmann are commenting on this changing definition of child and childhood. *Gang of Three* serves as remarkable evidence of this ever-changing identification of what it is to be a young girl. As an artist Grossmann watches, and responds to what she sees in her images. Many artists are commenting on these blurring boundaries between child and adult. Sally Mann plays with this imagery in her work, evidenced in *Jessie at 5*, from 1987 and her *Jessie at 8*, from 1990 - which shows her daughter Jessie in a very adult, confident, sexy pose (figs. 6 & 7). Natalka Husar plays with this imagery as well in her works: *Second Hand Bunny*, and *Edelweiss / Paradise* from 1998 - depicting young girls, presumably Ukrainian, adopting western fashions (figs. 8 & 9). Husar's more recent work from 2001; *Horseshoes and Waves* - portrays a stunning, yet worrisome, image of a young girl naked under a dark blanket, surrounded by white lace (fig. 10). This young girl looks seductively at the viewer, sucking on the middle finger of her right hand. This work seems to be hinting to the girl's purity. I believe that this innocence of childhood is now being bought, sold, and discarded: damaged. Angela Grossmann's work, while not the only example, speaks volumes - in a beautifully executed manner, about these changes that are occurring.

FIGURES



FIG. 1

Angela Grossmann. *Gang of Three*. 2009. Collage, mixed media on canvas.
150 x 90 centimeters. (Image: Galerie d'Este)



FIG. 2

Martin Bell. Video stills from *Streetwise*. 1984. Documentary.



FIG. 3
Angela Grossmann. *La Senza Girl*. 2006.



FIG. 4
“7 year old girls dance to Beyoncé’s *Single Ladies*.” Fox News. Video still.



FIG. 5
Angela Grossmann. *The Sculptor*. 2010.



FIG. 6
Sally Mann. *Jessie at 5*. 1987.



FIG. 7
Sally Mann. *Jessie at 8*. 1990.



FIG. 8
Nataalka Husar. *Second Hand Bunny*. 1998.



FIG. 9
Nataalka Husar. *Edelweiss / Paradise*. 1998.



FIG. 10
Nataalka Husar. *Horseshoes and Waves*. 2001.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Kathryn A. Kamp, "Where Have All the Children Gone?: The Archaeology of Childhood," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 8:1 (Mar. 2001): 1-34.
- ² Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).
- ³ Angela Grossman, "About," <www.angelagrossman.com>.
- ⁴ Gigi M. Durham, *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Overlook Press, 2008) 23.
- ⁵ Kamp, 2.
- ⁶ Kamp, 1.
- ⁷ Kamp, 2.
- ⁸ Kamp, 2.
- ⁹ Maïthé Levasseur, "Familiar with tweens? You should be..." *Réseau de veille en tourisme: The Quebec source for information on global trends in international tourism* (9 Feb. 2007).
- ¹⁰ Durham, 23.
- ¹¹ Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009) 12.
- ¹² Durham, 23.
- ¹³ Durham, 21.
- ¹⁴ Levasseur.
- ¹⁵ Levasseur.
- ¹⁶ Mitchell, 13.
- ¹⁷ Mitchell.
- ¹⁸ Mitchell, 14.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Durham, Gigi M. *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It*. New York: The Overlook Press, 2008.
- Grossman, Angela. "About." <www.angelagrossman.com>.
- Kamp, Kathryn A. "Where Have All the Children Gone?: The Archaeology of Childhood." *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 8:1 (Mar. 2001).
- Levasseur, Maïthé. "Familiar with tweens? You should be..." *Réseau de veille en tourisme: The Quebec source for information on global trends in international tourism*. (9 Feb. 2007).
- Mitchell, Claudia and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh. *Seven going on seventeen: tween studies in the culture of girlhood*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2009.
- Postman, Neil. *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.