



acp

childhood and the uncanny

changeling

australian centre for photography



ABOVE: Deborah Paaue
5:07am 2004 type C prints

RIGHT: Simen Johan
Untitled #86 2000



► associated with growing up that are glossed over in more traditional and sentimental imagery of the young. The works are made in collaboration with her daughter, Sheena, who is also the subject of the work. The works from the series *Seven* are concerned with her daughter's recurrent nightmares at that age. Seen starkly, but not clearly, they come from the dark, fearful place of the dreamer within the dream. When Sheena turned 14, mother and daughter began another series that explores both the familiar brooding discomfort of teenage and the parental unease at the 'voyeurism' the photographer felt as she watched her daughter mutating before her eyes.

The shadier side of the childish mind has traditionally found its most extreme expression in the netherworld of fairytales – think of the Brothers Grim or, more recently, the macabre stories of Roald Dahl. In *Dark Fables*, Deborah Paaue touches on this coexistence of beauty and evil in childhood fantasy. Each female figure wears a party frock and make-up. The painted

faces are stylised – part kindergarten, part Commedia dell'Arte, part cartoon bestiary. Some hint at the animalistic, some carry the chill pulchritude of a porcelain doll. The poses are deliberate and self-possessed. Knowing. How does this apparent self-awareness sit with our expectations of childhood innocence?

It's a question raised all the more forcefully in the work of Simen Johan. Arranged and digitally manipulated, his source material ranges from casual snapshots to photographs made on elaborately staged sets in the studio or on location. Work on a single image can take up to a month as the artist adds, subtracts, manipulates and re-photographs elements until he intuits the work to be complete. The children depicted in his images appear uncommonly imaginative and determined. At first, they seem engaged in ordinary play, but upon closer observation, their actions (which occur primarily at night and in solitude) take on the determined resolve of a bizarre ritual or deranged quest.

Perhaps such curious fantasies are a way of coming to terms with the much more real and pressing contradictions of the wider world in which they are growing up – caught between the aspirational messages of advertising and projected notions of childhood innocence. Michelle Sank's images show children beginning to navigate the adult world. Her subjects experiment with the poses and costume of maturity as they find new ways of interacting with the world around them in a physical sense, as well as in a social and psychological one. She explores the way children 'ape' their elders in terms of fashion and body language, and the first stirrings of narcissism which leads on from this.

But the pressure to live up to the expectations of others begins much earlier. Toni Wilkinson's photographs address the complex processes involved in the formation of personal identity. Each boy stands in a natural landscape wearing his school uniform and each image takes its title from the school motto, which

RIGHT: Toni Wilkinson
*Through Shadows and
 Images to Truth* 2004

FAR RIGHT:
 Michelle Sank from
Bye Bye Baby 2001

BOTTOM:
 Polixeni Papapetrou
*Olympia Wearing Her
 Grandmother's
 Jewellery* #2 2001



Perhaps such curious
 fantasies are a way of
 coming to terms with the
 much more real and pressing
 contradictions of the wider
 world in which they are
 growing up...

is sometimes light and up beat, sometimes ponderous and vulnerable – their expressions hint at the enormity of imagined futures. Through this simple juxtaposition of individual, landscape and maxim the artist suggests the challenges faced by children as they struggle to understand themselves in terms of the 'shared values' of the institution in which they find themselves.

Much more self-possessed are the portraits by Polixeni Papapetrou's of her daughter, Olympia. In recent years the artist's work has taken the game of dress-ups as its starting point and a number of distinct bodies of work have explored identity, the construction of gender and Lewis Carroll's feisty heroine Alice. Here, in a simpler and more intimate familial sequence, the mother photographs the daughter wearing the grandmother's jewellery – a cascading of resonant femininity, flirtation and self-awareness flowing down through the generations. Orchestrated by the child herself, the images display an unsettling interplay of ingenuousness and guile.





FAR LEFT: Loretta Lux
The Drummer 2004

LEFT: Donna Bailey *Fog* 2003

BELOW: Angela Blakely
lan, male 17 (detail) 2000

It is the sense that children may know more than they are letting on that animates the work of Loretta Lux. A former painter, she uses digital image manipulation with the lightest of touch. After carefully costuming and photographing her subject the negative is scanned into a computer. The artist then strips away all the surrounding detail, replacing it with an artificial background – often one of her own paintings. Drawing on classical painting, contemporary kitsch and the sugarcoated sentimentalism of the commercial studio portrait, the images sit uneasily between adult fantasies of childhood innocence and the sense that these are self-determinate individuals who will grow up to become adults with all the compromise that that can entail.

Outside of the two-dimensional constructs of mass media however, growing up is a more complex and uncertain undertaking as every family knows. For several years now, Donna Bailey has been documenting the lives of a group of adolescents on

the outskirts of Kangaroo Flat, Bendigo. Her earlier work focused on her teenage daughter, but here, she begins to follow the lives of the boys in her family and the close community in which they live. The pressures to appear tough, the intensity of emotion, the escape into fantasy weave into the homespun tapestry of their young lives. Younger siblings are to be protected but also offer solace. Push and pull. The family becomes both springboard and sanctuary.

Throughout this exhibition, sometimes surfacing, often submerged, is the insidious thrall of anxiety. The often-turbulent negotiation of external expectation and internal desire, of imperfect love and commoditised sentiment, of the real and the idealised finds its most extreme and tragic resolution in the act of self-destruction.

Angela Blakely's digital prints record the painfully ordinary sites of teenage suicide. The photographs present a flat, frontal view of the everyday. The words are concise and factual. Together, image and text channel the intense emotions that lead to, and are

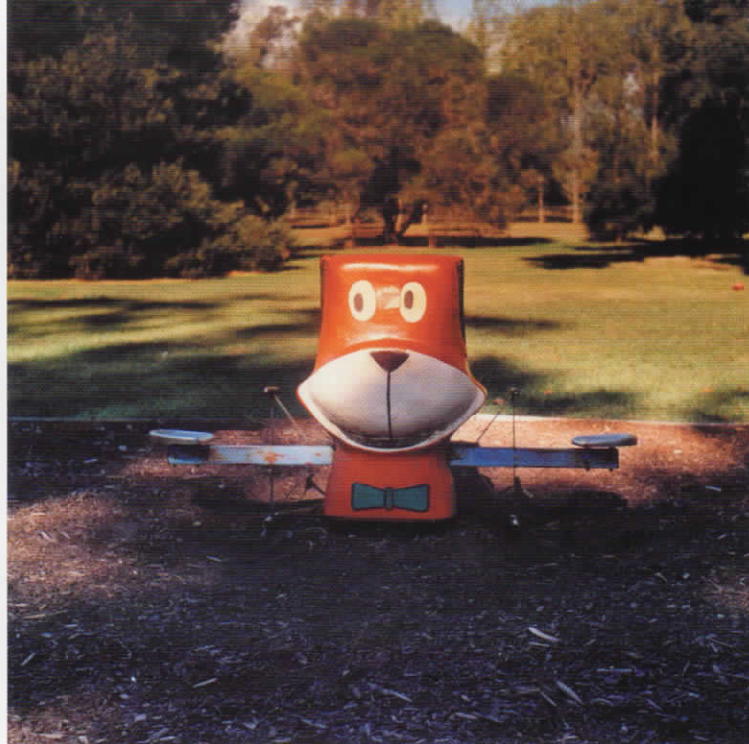
the legacy of, each tragically momentous event. Eschewing the melodramatic, the very restraint of these images renders them so poignant – reminding us of the enormity of everyday tragedy.

A sense of the uncanny, as defined by Sigmund Freud, arises when a thing appears to exhibit qualities that are not associated with it – a doll that appears to be human, for example. The effect is heightened by the inability to be certain one way or the other. So it is with many of the images in this exhibition – where they unsettle and disturb they mark out the points at which our adult notions of childhood fail to align with the actual life of the child.

Images of
childhood beguile
but they can also
disturb, especially
when they imply
the adult yet
to come.

And adolescence, the period of metamorphosis, can be a strange and troubling time. This exhibition considers the charm and the anxiety that cohabit in photographs of children and images that explore the transition to adulthood.

The participating artists address the child-adult interface from a range of perspectives – adolescent fashion, infant sexuality, the changing nature of play and the ultimate desperation of teenage suicide. Through the bittersweet of an uncanny beauty, *Changeling* raises challenging questions about our current attitudes to images of children in an adult world.



LEFT: Glenn Sloggett
Huckleberry Hound 2001

BOTTOM LEFT: Julie Sundberg
Seven #3 1996



We begin our journey through childhood in the deserted playgrounds of Glenn Sloggett's down-at-heel suburbia. Worn and unused the seesaws and rides stand silent; their fey painted grins forever caught in rigor. Scratched paint leaves Yogi crying, toys stuck rudely onto sharp sticks suggest the fetish of voodoo. The place of childhood becomes a place of failed hopes and abandoned dreams. Even as we try to crystallise the essence of childhood in the machinery of play, it evaporates leaving only the empty husk of our own adult fantasies.

William Ropp's portraits are made in darkness. The camera shutter is opened and, using a fifty-year-old Czech-made torch, he literally paints the image onto the film as he moves the beam of light across his subject. He does not direct his sitters, but simply asks that they do not move too much while the 'dance of light' is in progress. As a result, the subjects do not look out at the viewer but into the darkness and back into themselves.

Such introspection can quickly find itself at odds with the notion many adults wish to maintain of the mind of the child as a simple, emotionally transparent tabula rasa. Julie Sundberg's images address the anxieties ►

changeling

childhood and the uncanny

Glenn Sloggett (b: 1964) lives Melbourne
Playgrounds 1998–2004 type C prints
Glenn Sloggett is represented by Stills Gallery, Sydney

William Ropp (b: 1960) lives France
Children 2001–2004 toned gelatin silver prints

Deborah Paauwe (b: 1972) lives Adelaide
Dark Fables 2004 type C prints and *Small Hours* 2004 type C prints
Deborah Paauwe is represented by Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide;
Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

Julie Sundberg (b: 1950) lives Sydney
Seven 1996 and *Fourteen* 2003 type C prints

Michelle Sank (b: 1953) lives UK
Bye Bye Baby 2001–2003 type C prints
Michelle Sank is represented by the Photographer's Gallery Print
Room, London

Toni Wilkinson (b: 1966) lives Perth
Schoolboys 2004 type C prints

Simen Johan (b: 1973) lives New York
Evidence of Things Unseen 2000–2003 type C prints
Simen Johan is represented by Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

Polixeni Papapetrou (b: 1960) lives Melbourne
Olympia Wearing Her Grandmother's Jewellery 2001
gelatin silver prints
Polixeni Papapetrou is represented by Stills Gallery, Sydney and Kalli Rolfe
Contemporary Art, Melbourne

Loretta Lux (b: 1969) lives Germany
Various Works 2001–2004 Ilfochrome prints
Loretta Lux is represented by Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

Donna Bailey (b: 1963) lives Bendigo
Four Works 2003–2004 type C prints

Angela Blakely (b: 1960) lives Brisbane
Death Sites 2000–2004 archival inkjet prints

Changeling is an Australian Centre for Photography
Touring Exhibition
Curator: Alasdair Foster

Catalogue © Australian Centre for Photography
Images © the artists
Text © Alasdair Foster

Design: Wideopen.net.au
Print: Pegasus Printing

Published October 2005 by
Australian Centre for Photography
257 Oxford Street
Paddington
NSW 2021 Australia
www.acp.au.com

COVER IMAGE: William Ropp *Laura* 2002

nsw arts
MINISTRY FOR THE

Australian Government

Australia
Council
for the Arts

Australian Government NSW Government
THE VISUAL ARTS AND CRAFT STRATEGY

www.caos.org.au
caos
Contemporary Arts Organisation of South Australia

Australian Centre for Photography is supported by the NSW Government through the NSW Ministry for the Arts, the Australia Council, the Australian Government's arts funding and advisory body, and the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments