

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Justine Kurland at Mitchell-Innes & Nash

There is always something a little too perfect, deliciously so, about Justine Kurland's high-keyed, large-format C-prints. In her most recent series, "Of Woman Born" (2005-06), tribes of nude young mothers and tots, gamboling in light-dappled glades and less hospitable swamps and canyons, are depicted with slightly hyperreal artificiality. In *Mama Baby, Ocean View*, a gaggle of youngish mothers, with attractive but refreshingly imperfect bodies, populate a foggy beach's sand and craggy boulders. Utterly absorbed with their pretty suckling, wading, scampering infants and toddlers, they look a little like Art Nouveau fairy sprites.

Operating within the "strangely perfect image" school of cinematically posed photography promoted at Yale by her teacher Gregory Crewdson, Kurland had her breakout in the now legendary 1999 exhibition "Another Girl, Another Planet," which included photographs by Katy Grannan, Dana Hoey and Malerie Marder. Kurland began with a striking series of group portraits of female adolescents: bands of tomboys kick-boxing; or hanging out by a swimming hole, as in a Thomas Eakins painting; or vandalizing an abandoned car.

Since then, she has made a specialty of sharply detailed color photographs of groups posed, often unclothed, in primordial settings, including nude utopians, male adventurers and costumed Renaissance Fair players. A sociologist at heart, she uses real-life subjects and sites. Yet she crafts polished final images that look fictional, tending toward the kind of nostalgic escapism associated with pre-Raphaelite painting—a quality shared by many of the communities she is drawn to.

In these 15 new Cibachromes, most 30 by 40 inches, it is as if the teenagers populating her first body of work have come of age. The subjects were scouted by Kurland at health-food stores and parks during a cross-country road trip with her one-year-old son. Kurland prints her own photographs, giving her richly colored tableaux a cool silvery cast and a crisp all-over focus. The nude women and tots in *Mama Baby, View into Gorge* are posed like Renaissance nymphs and cherubs, yet seem all too humanly vulnerable to the sharp-looking rocks and brackish pools around them.

In *Siskiyou Mountain Tea Party*, three naked women, looking inappropriately comfortable, are seated with their offspring on a precarious rocky perch, before a Caspar David Friedrich-like series of icy-blue peaks; a sinister-looking hound skulls in front of them.

Indirectly and perhaps unintentionally, Kurland's landscapes, with their vaginal gorges and amniotic-fluid-like water, sometimes make reference to the physicality of the female body and childbirth. In *Sleeping Mermaids* (a smaller work at 19 3/8 by 22 3/8 inches), two children are curled head to toe in a bed of seaweed, seemingly cast ashore by the tide. The rounded contour of the seaweed makes them look like putti in a tondo, or twins in a womb—a powerfully Arcadian vision. In a darker vein, *Expulsion* shows three nude Amazons, babes in arms, grimly picking their way through the devastation of a clearcut slope. Though "Of Woman Born" seems to represent a quest for harmonious refuge with nature, the subjects of these compelling, odd images in fact provide reminders that, even within the maternal embrace, there really is no escape from life's harshness.

—Carey Lovelace



Justine Kurland: *Siskiyou Mountain Tea Party*, 2006, C-print, 30 by 40 inches; at Mitchell-Innes & Nash.