

PHOTO BOOTH

IN JUSTINE KURLAND'S PHOTOGRAPHS, A MOTHER AND SON HIT THE ROAD

Some of the portraits in "This Train" have an Edenic quality to them, as if Kurland is asking: What if my kid and I were the only two people in the world?

By Naomi Fry
April 20, 2024



"Counting Boxcars in the Cajon Pass," 2010. Photographs by Justine Kurland

The American road-trip narrative is often marked by violence. In films such as Ridley Scott's "Thelma & Louise" (1991), Terrence Malick's "Badlands" (1973), and Oliver Stone's "Natural Born Killers" (1994), acts of brutality propel the subjects forward, their bonds both strengthened and tested as they flee from the law. Even when the protagonists' misdeeds are softer, forcing them to the road for more nebulous reasons—the lesbian affair that blossoms between the two women in Patricia Highsmith's novel "The Price of Salt" (1952); the psychedelic bacchanals of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters in Tom Wolfe's "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test" (1968)—their journeys are touched by disquiet.



"Go Dog Go," 2010.



"Hippy Stir Fry," 2009.

In Justine Kurland's "This Train," a work of photography collected in a handsome edition by mack, we arrive at the fact of violence obliquely. The suite of photographs, which Kurland made during months living on the road between 2005 and 2011, is split into two parallel bodies of work. In one, we encounter Kurland and her young son, Casper, as they traverse the U.S., mostly the West, in a van, stopping along the way in campsites and motels, forest clearings and desert brushland, gas stations and diners. In the other, we see images of landscapes, riven by trains, which Kurland captured during these same travels.



"Keddie Wye," 2007.

There's a lot of tenderness in Kurland's portraits of herself and Casper, who, throughout the book, grows from a diapered toddler into a kindergartner. In "Go Dog Go" (2010), the van is pictured with its back doors open to reveal the pair, both naked, on the mattress they appear to use for sleeping. Kurland is lying on her side, her head resting in her hand, gazing at Casper, who is seated with his back against her, leafing through a children's book. His feet are curled in childish concentration; soft sunlight dapples the scene. In "Dirty Dishes" (2009), Casper is resting on a rock at the edge of a river, while Kurland, who is washing a dish in the water with her pants rolled up, once again trains her eyes on her child. The two look to be in mid-conversation, and, although they aren't physically touching, their psychic connection is palpable. These portraits have an Edenic quality, as if Kurland is asking: What if my kid and I were the only two people in the world?



"Dirty Dishes," 2009.



"Culvert," 2007.



"Bloody Mouth," 2011.



"Baby Tooth," 2011.

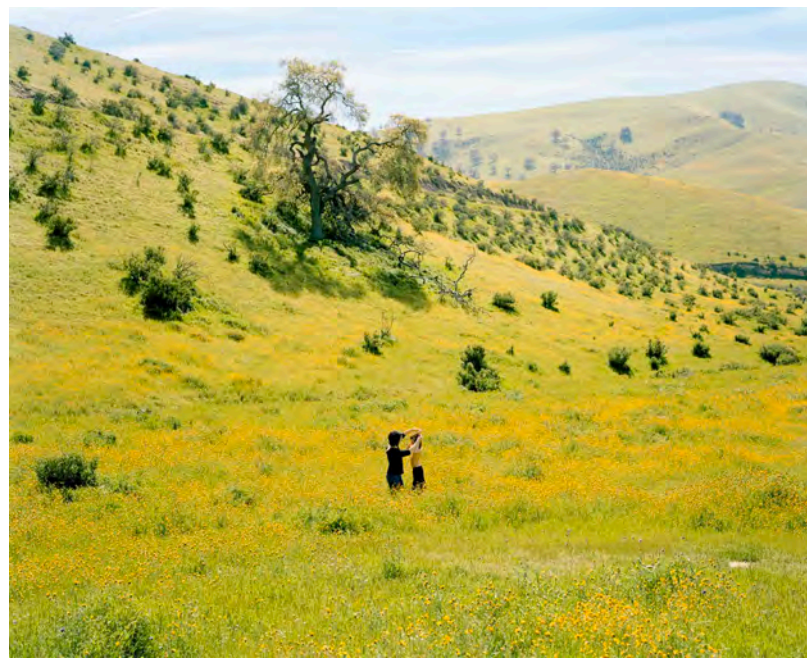
Yet this utopian vision of motherhood in the wilderness is a precarious one. In “Bloody Mouth” and “Baby Tooth” (both from 2011), which appear in the book sequentially, we first see Casper in tight closeup, his face tipped upward, his lips open to reveal a hint of the soft, vulnerable innards of his mouth. In the second picture, we see Casper’s dirty palm holding out a fallen tooth, which is punctuated by a dark hole. This hole echoes those that sometimes appear in the vistas against which Kurland and Casper enact their journey. In “Culvert” (2007), for instance, Casper peeks out from the gaping mouth of an enormous pipe situated beneath some train tracks. The hollow black abyss mars its surrounding landscape of woods and soil, lending the image a sense of menace.



“Somewhere in the Sierras,” 2008.



"Wind Blowing Through Columbia Gorge," 2008.



"California Wildflowers," 2009.



"UP 4955 and UP 5411 Sliding Down Mormon Rocks," 2009.

The pages of "This Train" are formatted as a concertina, one side of which is printed with Kurland's portraits of Casper and herself, and the other with the

unpeopled train images she took during their time on the road. In one of the essays accompanying the photographs, the academic Lily Cho estimates that building America's railroads cost thousands of Chinese laborers their lives. Kurland's images of trains traversing the American landscape—often snaking through breathtakingly beautiful vistas—hints at this kind of historical ruthlessness, but also suggests the toll that the industry has taken on the natural world. In “Keddie Wye” (2007), a railroad junction hovers in the fog over a forested terrain. The merging tracks form a V-shape that nearly chokes the shag of tall trees within it, strong-arming nature in a way that is both willful and, in its undulating curves, almost seductive. Although Kurland's pictures evince a critique of the brutality of modernity, they suggest, too, a grudging awe of it. What is the landscape of America if not a map of exactly this type of savagery? The shots of the mother-child duo work as a parallel to these concerns. In “Moffat Tunnel (Family Portrait)” (2008), the photographer, carrying Casper in her arms, walks along train tracks that emerge from the maw of a tunnel, as if trying to hurry away from a quickly encroaching darkness. The maternal embrace can't always guard against harsher impulses: neither those that exist in the world outside it, or that, perhaps, reside within it.



“Moffat Tunnel (Family Portrait),” 2008.

A photographer and her son spent six years traveling the American West

By Jacqui Palumbo, CNN

🕒 5 minute read · Published 8:32 AM EDT, Wed April 17, 2024



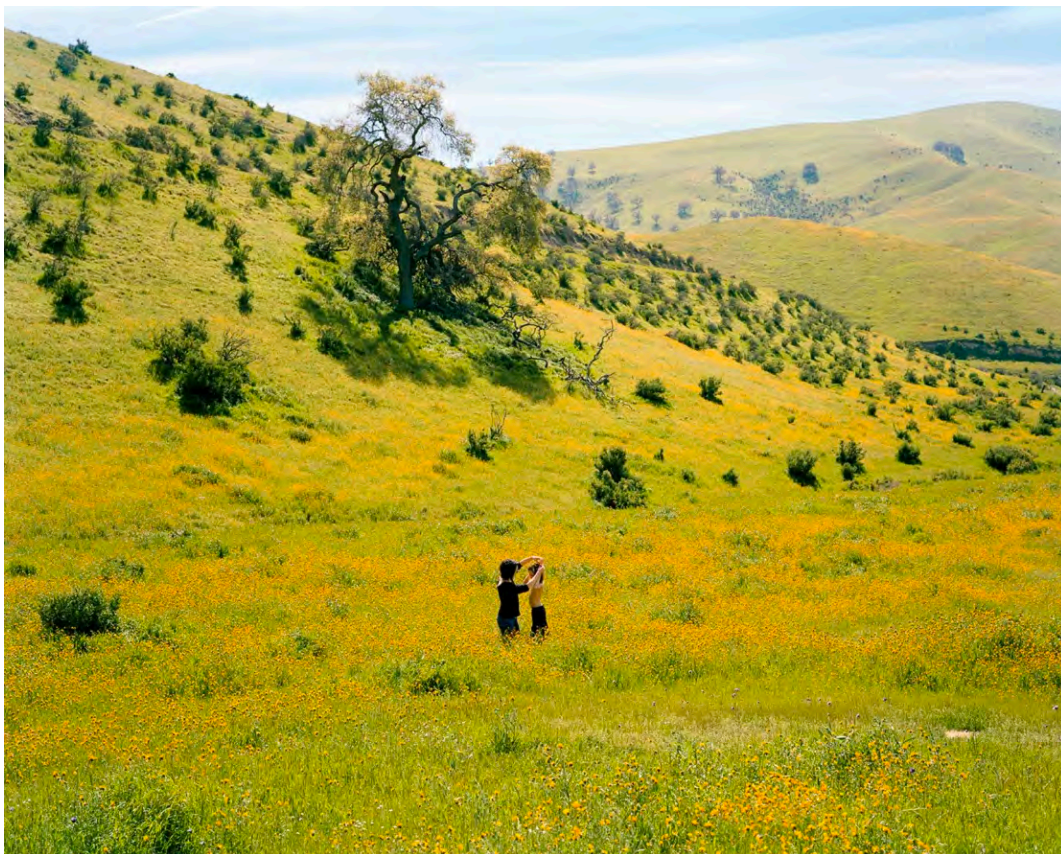
Kurland's nomadic photographs of her son Casper document the earliest years of his life. Justine Kurland

(CNN) — In Justine Kurland's photographs, shot across the American West, trains silently pass through the picture plane: Burnt red and yellow railroad cars emerge from tree-lined curves, bisect flat plains and disappear into the mouths of tunnels; weathered freight cars yoked together both dot the terrain and demarcate it. The

images are inherently steeped in history — the bloody, relentless westward expansion of a nascent country and, today, the vast but aging infrastructure of a world power.

But, from 2005-2011, the locomotives also represented a negotiation between Kurland and her young child, Casper, as he joined her on the road for up to eight months of the year from the time he was a baby. Living out of a van and a camping tent in parks and rural stopovers, Casper became fascinated by the rumbling approach of each train's procession. He often led her to the scenes in her photos, Kurland told CNN. In her images, his hair is often windblown, his gaze fixed on the blurred passing cars.

“Casper loved trains, and if I was going to schlep him on these road trips, it made sense that I would then incorporate trains into the photographs that I was making,” she said in a video call with CNN.



Kurland reconsiders what conventional family portraits look like, and who, historically, is considered an explorer of the West. Justine Kurland

For a long time, Kurland didn't show the work she had made as they traveled together, except for a handful of images of Casper in “Highway Kind,” her 2016 book that pieced

together multiple bodies of work she had shot on the road to better understand American mythologies.

Across her three-decade career, Kurland has frequently photographed people on the fringes of society, staging scenes of runaway girls and documenting communes, transient lifestyles and spiritual experiences. But she'd never shown portraits of herself, and for a long time the idea of presenting an entire monograph on her son seemed too "sentimental," she explained.

Though even at the time, she knew there "something significant enough about our life on the road that I needed to document," Kurland noted, "I just hid those photos away."

A nomadic family portrait

In the years since, however, Kurland has gained perspective on the resonance of their images and journeys together. It is rare to think of a traditional family unit as a nomadic mother and child, and rarer, still, to make family images that don't sit in nostalgia, or mark all the little triumphs of boyhood. Kurland and Casper are, instead, often solitary figures, even together, with their own inner lives. They set out West in a tradition mythologized by men, from explorers to photographers and writers.

"What's important in thinking about these pictures... is to (consider) what a family album could look like, that doesn't look like the way we think of motherhood," she said.



For many years, Kurland didn't show much of the work in "This Train," believing that portraits of motherhood would be read as "too sentimental." Justine Kurland



Casper previously appeared in a handful of images in "Highway Kind," Kurland's book published in 2016.
Justine Kurland

The photos that make up "[This Train](#)," newly-published by Mack Books, are presented as a duality. In the book, accordion-style pages pull out, following the pair's life on the road: On one side, Kurland prepares a meal at a fold-out table while Casper looks out over the firepit; Casper holds a hollowed lost tooth in palm of his hand. On the reverse, the series of trains weave in and out of the American landscape. Some were taken by Casper, in fact, clicking the shutter for his mom, as he and Kurland discussed in a [conversation](#) published in Aperture in 2016.

"Sometimes we would wait so long," Kurland told him of their patience for trains to appear. "Sometimes we would wait all day."

Embedded histories

Kurland calls the book "a love letter to Casper," who is now 19 years old, but also "an acknowledgement that his life wasn't so easy." Though for years he thought his life was normal — that other mothers at highway rest stops were photographers with their kids, too — he had a hard time adjusting to school when she enrolled him as a six-year-old, she said.

“There’s certain kinds of ideas of normalcy (in) family life that, when you divert... it makes things significantly more complicated,” Kurland said.



Casper became fascinated by trains, Kurland said, and he would often lead her to them. Justine Kurland



Kurland often photographs trains within the American landscape, winding in and out of it or disappearing into its vastness. Justine Kurland

Living off irregular paychecks, Kurland and Casper would sometimes have to “hunker down” at campsites until a deposit came through.

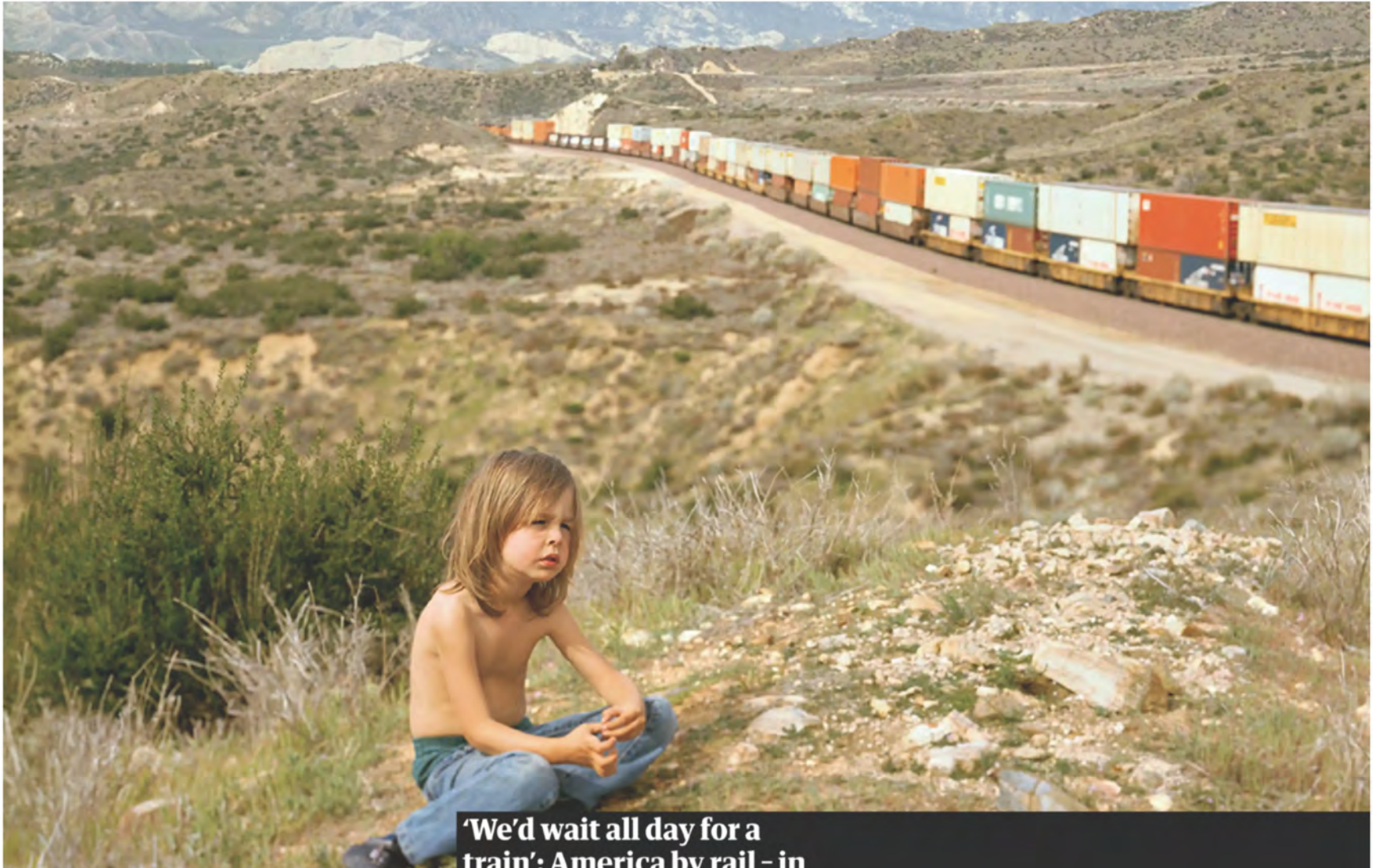
“There were really harrowing times on the road... we’d have to sleep in a garage, and I was making macaroni and cheese on a Bunsen burner for Casper because we had to wait until the mechanic had fixed my 10-year-old van with like 250,000 miles on it,” she said.

In 2008, when the recession hit, Kurland took a teaching job that provided a steadier income, and reduced her road trips to summer and winter breaks. Casper’s father had become more involved in his life by that point, she noted — and after he turned 11, Casper asked to stop traveling entirely.

As “This Train” details, as much as the book is about their relationship, there’s other darker narratives implicit in Kurland’s images. The rail system symbolizes the markings of colonial settlers on the land — the forced migration and demise of Indigenous populations, as well as the deaths of some 1,200 Chinese immigrants who laid the tracks, the latter of which the scholar Lily Cho addresses in an essay for the book. In that way, Kurland’s reverse images of lone trains have a spectral presence, tracing and retracing the same pathways of the dead who built them.

“If I’m pointing my camera at the trains because Casper loves them, I’m still also pointing at the history embedded in the landscape of those trains,” Kurland said. Fifteen years later, she explained, she looks at the images from a more “critical distance,” she explained, one that deeply considers the landscapes’ significance in US history.

Her interpretations — and those of viewers — will likely keep shifting, she acknowledges, just like any other photograph seen by different people over a period of time. “The thing that’s beautiful about every photograph is that they get to change,” she said. “They don’t have fixed meaning; no photograph does.”



▲ Counting Downers in the Capri Pass, 2010. Photograph: [kimberly/justine kurland](#) / Mack Books

'We'd wait all day for a train': America by rail - in pictures

Justine Kurland's images capture her unique life raising a child on the road - and offer up a joyous escape from the traditional family photo album

Tue 16 Apr 2024 02:00 EDT



Columbia River

In her new photobook, Justine Kurland presents an alternative narrative of contemporary American life drawn from road trips taken across the US between the years 2005 and 2010 with her young child Casper. Featuring a sequence of arresting large-format photographs, *The Train* re-appropriates a set of paradigms which retain a tenacious grip on contemporary American life: the nuclear family, the open road, the violence of expansion and the intractable force of the land itself. *The Train* by Justine Kurland is published by MACK.



Hippy Stir Fry, 2008

The book features two interwoven narratives. The first revolves around photographs of Kurland's child and herself, disorientated from the images of roads, trains, infrastructure and fellow travellers that Kurland was also making at the same time. The other thread involves Kurland's photographs of the railroads which traverse the American landscape. Deconstructing the familiar mythology of the railway as a pioneering symbol of modernity, these images observe the reality of the ways these routes carve and stain the landscape, leaving behind barren strips of sun-stained asphalt.



Days Inn, 2007

Revisiting these photographs, Kurland suggests a reading of them as an anti-history of family and travel, spending the conventional family album to tell a story of queer motherhood and image-making in step with Kurland's maternal line, for whom crossing the American landscape was a matter of dire necessity.



Wind Blowing Through
Columbia Gorge, 2008

Justine Kurland: "I had spent over a decade making photographs on road trips before my son Casper was born. I continued on the road for another decade thereafter. From age six months to six years old we lived out of a van for eight months of the year, and then every summer until he turned 11. I photographed many different subjects during that time, but when Casper's obsessional attention turned to trains, I decided to photograph them."



Empty Flat Cars, 2007

I would set my 4x5 camera up along the tracks, often along designated scenic views posted online by rail fans because of ingenious innovations: looping trains over mountain passes or tunneling through the rock. And then we would wait, sometimes all day, for a train to come through!



Violin and Legos, 2010

I made photographs of Casper while we waited for trains or of us together at campsites. This ritual bonded us. Friends warned me against photographing my child, and I knew it was a risky business. My teacher Laurie Simmons, a renowned photographer in her own right, had spoken to our class about her generation where artists had to pretend they hadn't had children to avoid the misogynistic cliché. Things have changed but not that much, motherhood as a female experience that is constituted by acts of nurture and care still make most people feel uncomfortable!



California Wild Flowers, 2009

'Family albums usually look the same: holiday dinners and birthday parties, children positioned in front of graced trees, or domestic settings that project class and stability through guises of normalcy drawn from scenes in television sitcoms. Where are the family albums of a queer single mother living on the road with her child? The only one I've ever seen is from my own childhood. My mother supported me and my siblings by travelling up and down the east coast to make a living selling crafts at Renaissance fairs.'



Georgetown Loop, 2009

'My photographs exist within and against traditions of road trip photography but I understood how to do this not because of Robert Frank, but because I had inherited certain types of knowledge from my mother: how to get by in a nomadic mode, how to build out a livable van and how to raise children as an extension of a family business. These pictures are dear to me not simply because it's me and my son, but because it asserts the legitimacy of non-normative family life and the possibility of freedom from those patriarchal constructs.'



**Byers Canyon Coal Cars,
2008**

"In photographing the trains I inadvertently captured the shadow side of the American west. The trains roll over unceded territories and sites of the genocide of indigenous people. Asian-American immigrants built the railroad but many died from unsafe working conditions, from disease and lack of medical care, and suicide brought on by the despair of their situation. The US government enacted The Chinese Exclusion act of 1882, which blocked them from citizenship. These facts were hard to reconcile with my child's unfeathered love of trains."



Go Dog Go, 2010

"Caiper learned to read from signs that lined the highway. Days Inn was a particular favourite maybe because the logo of a suit reclining on the horizon of letters situated language into the landscape he was so accustomed to. In this picture he's reading aloud from Go, Dog, Go, a book he favoured. We are naked because it was unobtainably hot but also because our openness from the world allowed us to embrace our brute animal existence."



Door Sill Train Track, 2008

Casper thought living in a van was normal - that other mothers loaded sheet film at highway rest stops, that other kids stacked rocks while their parents composed scenes. Often people thought we were homeless and offered us food or money. Parents would pull their children away from us in playgrounds. Casper was the constant focus of my attention and I struggled to find space to work.



Counting Boxcars in the Cajon Pass, 2010

So much has happened between now and then. Casper's transition off the road and back to a life where he could integrate with other children was not easy. My own ambivalence, despite the intensity of my love, in parenting did not help. Looking back at these pictures I see his resilience and the many ways he contributed to the work-pictures he gave to me or that were negotiated when he wasn't content to sit still for the camera. The result is a love letter to him, a souvenir of a boyhood long since lost. I am grateful for these times together.





Justine Kurland's Intimate New Book Captures Life on the Road With Her Son

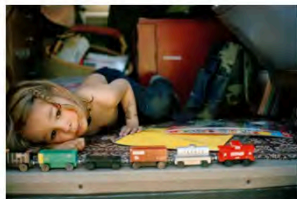
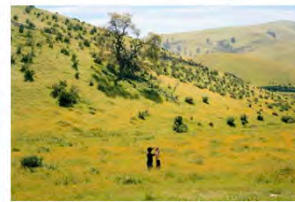
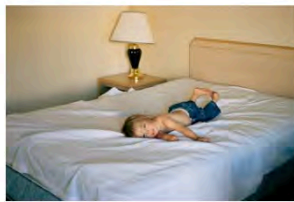
As *This Train* is published by Mack, the photographer behind *Girl Pictures* talks about road-tripping through America with her son, motherhood, and why “images don't have fixed meanings”

APRIL 15, 2024

TEXT Claire Marie Healy

LEAD IMAGE Justine Kurland, COUNTING BOXCARS IN THE CAJON PASS, 2010 From *This Train* (MACK, 2024). Courtesy of the artist and MACK

There is a universalising tendency to images of motherhood (believe me, one need only browse one's Instagram feed above a certain age to feel this). But though the idea of a mother is something society has conjured as neutral, unanswerable and benign, it is anything but. This peculiar charge to depictions of motherhood is something many artist-mothers come to understand, and perhaps wrestle with. Constance Debré – who writes the foreword for Justine Kurland's new photobook with Mack, *This Train* – has articulated it. Sifting through the experience of a custody case for a son in *Love Me Tender*, Debré writes, “If people want to believe that women have a connection to the Moon, to nature, a special instinct that forces them to cling to motherhood and give up everything else, that's their business. But I'm not interested. There's no such thing as a mother ... There's only love, which is completely different.” Motherhood, as Debré formulates it – as “status, an identity, a form of power, a lack of power, a position, dominated and dominant, victim and persecutor” – is inextricable from the Madonnas and cereal advertisements that have made up its visual representation through time.



GALLERY / 10 IMAGES

This Train by Justine Kurland

Just as she radically resituated girlhood in *Girl Pictures* – with its strikingly independent collections of off-grid teenage girls – Kurland does the same with motherhood in *This Train*. We see a long-haired boy, alone in the foreground, his only company a thread of boxcars in the primary colours of childhood, and capitalism; a dark-haired woman and the same little boy, in a field of gold-on-green wildflowers, too distant to tell if they are locked in a dance or a tussle.

“The book is really a love letter to my son,” says Kurland. “But at the same time, there’s all of this violence embedded in the landscape that’s built into that.” Presented in a tactile and weighty concertina form, the book’s fabrication creates two halves – or rather two faces – that reflect those dual narratives: one side the personal history, on the road with her son; the other a series of trains cutting through landscapes that seem to obfuscate the personal. As the alternate foreword to *This Train* by writer Lily Cho explores, such obfuscation exerts its own power: reflective of the America that only built such mighty routes off the back of the suffering and deaths of Chinese immigrant workers.

Though we might see him for the first time here, Justine’s son Casper has always been there: accompanying Kurland and her camera throughout the several-month-long road trips she took for her photography from 2005 to 2011. He was in *Of Woman Born*, for instance, her series of other mothers and other children staged among natural landscapes across the USA. And while notions of mothering are less evident in the extra-familial gangs of *Girl Pictures*, I still think of her as a kind of photographer-shepherd when I think about the making of those images. “I would scan the locations before I would find the girls,” she recalls. “So even then, there was always something about the landscape itself as holding stories and histories. But there’s also the way that a landscape presents itself as an allegory. It takes on a temporal sense, it can hold a figure; you can nestle up, or enter into it. Or the way it has a line that knits the foreground with the background. Going on these road trips, I was really attuned to that.”



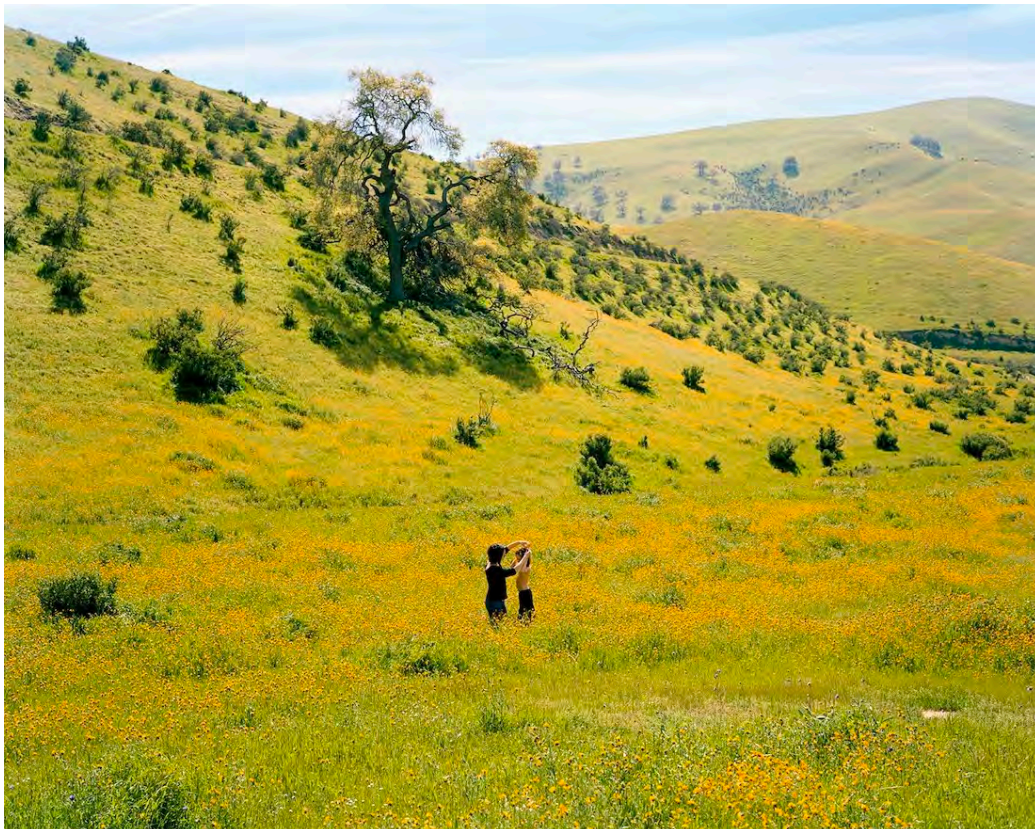
Justine Kurland, GO DOG GO, 2010 From *This Train* (MACK, 2024). Courtesy of the artist and MACK

If Casper and Justine are a pair held by a landscape in *This Train*, it is one that doesn't always feel like it is holding them in safety; but among the indifference of the great American plains, they seem to hold each other within it. When I connected with Kurland on Zoom to talk about *This Train*, she was in Joshua Tree, with unmistakable Californian light streaming through her window – some vastness to explore just outside the frame, which is how her photographs tend to feel.

Below, Justine Kurland talks about the making of *This Train* in her own words.

“When my son Casper was born, I didn’t know how to be a mother and continue working as an artist. I didn’t have a very good plan for that. I never thought, ‘Oh, I’m just going to bring my kid on the road.’ But what else was I going to do? My photography was how I was supporting us. Since he was six months old, we were on the road eight months of the year. We would come back for a couple of months in the spring, and a couple of months in the fall, but really, he grew up in a car seat.

“At some point, he got very excited about trains. A lot of the highways in America go by trains, and there are all of these railroad museums. He was fully obsessed: had to know everything about the track signage and the different types of engines. So I thought it was only fair if I was going to bring him on these road trips that I photograph the trains, too.



Justine Kurland, CALIFORNIA WILD FLOWERS, 2009 From *This Train* (MACK, 2024). Courtesy of the artist and MACK

“What’s interesting about that – and about photography generally – is the contingency that when you intend to photograph one thing, with one intention (I’m a single mom, my kid loves trains), I’m also at the same time photographing everything that goes with the trains. People talk about the trains as a first wave of the Anthropocene: this moment of the emergence of steam engines has the beginnings of climate change embedded within that. And the first landscape photographs of the United States were these government surveys. They were about laying the train tracks so that the settlements could push further and further west. So, there’s this whole history along the trains that is both a photo history and a settler colonial history involving the genocide of Indigenous people.

“Images don’t have fixed meanings. At the time, in this bubble with my kid, I would see the trains the way he saw the train, and there’s something (different) about looking at them now. It’s like milk cartons with a picture of a missing child at the side, using what was previously a family photo. In the same way, the same picture that’s this joyous moment of my kid’s childhood is also a moment of deep, dark American violence. That was the thinking behind the accordion book: that there’s always a shadow side. Like the stories a family will tell about itself, but there are always secrets.

“Constance [Debré], in her very French way of writing, says [in her foreword] that this is not a family album. I love that she wrote that. I do actually think it is a family album. But there’s a really interesting thing that she presses into it, about the difference between the autobiographical and the personal, right? Where the autobiographical is like the facts of the family album: this is my child, we’re in a state park, we’re in Montana. But I think the personal here is this affective emotional sense of what it is to be lost and alone in the world, and what it is to yearn for a sense of home that doesn’t exist, or yearn for a sense of family that doesn’t exist. I think of the personal as more of a shared emotional state, like the difference between a memoir and an autobiography.



Justine Kurland, DOOR SILL TRAIN TRACK, 2008 From *This Train* (MACK, 2024). Courtesy of the artist and MACK

“There’s really no difference between my life with Casper as a mother and my life with Casper as an artist. It’s an imposed binary – how could they be two different things if I’m just with him 24/7? How could he not permeate every part of my conscious psychic space? When I think about what connects all the bodies of work that I’ve ever made, it’s really about this idea of creating space for women and thinking about the ways that women are disempowered. And this has a lot to do with the idea of the ways that they’re isolated from each other. There’s something about the work that I was doing, that was thinking through whether there was a way to represent motherhood that could break free from the ideological ways that it’s weaponised against women.”

“When I was at Yale, in graduate school, Laurie Simmons was my teacher. And I remember her talking about how you had to pretend that you didn’t have children. You had to just never mention them. Think about all the things artists put themselves through: maybe we say their drug addictions make them better artists, or their world travels, or just the fact they are well-read. If in fact, raising a child is about this constant sense of empathy and nurture and ambivalence, and there are all of these ways that it pushes and pulls you: why wouldn’t child-rearing make you a better artist?”

This Train by Justine Kurland is published by Mack Books, and is out now.

BOMB

Justine Kurland Interviewed by Bean Gilsdorf

Collages for the Society for Cutting Up Men's Books (SCUMB).

Sep 27, 2023

[Interview](#)

[Art](#)



SHARE



Justine Kurland, *Nudes (Target)*, 2023, collage with razor, 49 × 47 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Higher Pictures Generation.

Justine Kurland is perhaps best known for her series *Girl Pictures*, a collection of staged photographs made between 1997 and 2002 in collaboration with young women across the country that show intimate scenes of solidarity and community. A few years later, she shifted her focus to pregnant women and mothers. From there, she turned her lens on men, exploring American masculinity through itinerants, trains, cars, and auto mechanics. In 2022, inspired by Valerie Solanas's radical feminist treatise, she published a collection of her recent collages in *SCUMB Manifesto* [Society for Cutting Up Men's Books], whose cover reads in part: "I, JUSTINE KURLAND, AM SCUMB. . . . I CALL FOR THE END OF THE GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF THE MALE CANON, ITS DADDY WORSHIP AND ITS MONOPOLY ON MEANING AND VALUE."

—Bean Gilsdorf

Bean Gilsdorf

When did you start making the collages?

Justine Kurland

It was the very beginning of 2019. I'd been thinking about the problem of the man photo books at my house that I was told to look at as a student and that had been in my bookcase for a really long time. Lynne Tillman had invited me to do a talk on Andy Warhol, and my only way to say yes was to do it through Valerie Solanas. I went into a deep dive, reading her writing and reading people who had written about her writing. I do this thing where I become the person I'm reading about, so I became Solanas—her satire and "take-no-prisoners" attitude—until I was like, I'm just going to cut up these men. The collages maybe don't look like an act of violence because they're very delicate, crafted, and thoughtful.

BG

If there's a hot-to-cold continuum, with cutting as violence on one end and an analytical dissection of the image on the other, where does this work exist for you?

JK

I guess I was thinking of the process more along the line of glue and repair. I'm cutting in the way I was socialized to cut, like cutting out paper dolls. I'm finding the characters that are already in the world, and I'm pulling them into *my* world with as little bruising and damage as possible. So even though I want to be someone who tears and rips —and there is a certain cathartic moment when I tear the pages out of the books—it's more like I'm scooping them up.

BG

So maybe the notion of emotion on one side and analysis on the other isn't really in operation?

JK

No, I do think it's in play. Where do you make the cut? I think that's analytic in a way; and even though I want the violence to be in play, there's actually very little. (*laughter*)



Justine Kurland, *Nudes (Bad Mommy)*, 2023, collage with razors, 36 x 53 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Higher Pictures Generation.

BG

Because the process is precise and slow? Do you think the physical action is what does or doesn't give it its relative emotionality?

JK

I think the idea of emotionality and violence is there in the sense of, I'm going to cut this. The violence is in the intention, and the analytic is in the performance. The same way if I were to say, "I love you," the tone of my voice can make it feel more authentic. You know, there's a man photography mode that I was trained in and can't unsee: large-format cameras, and money, and ownership that goes into creating images like Edward Burtynsky's disasters or Eugène Atget's trees. It's a very male point of view. But whether I'm cutting out bodies of women or trees, it's really just an act of being with what's pictured. In that moment, it's really like I'm cutting out all of the baggage that comes with that style of photography.

BG

Cutting as a way of being with reminds me of Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" and the attention she brings to bear upon her actions, whether that's making love or building a bookcase. She says, "In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness or those other supplied states of being, which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, and self-denial." Where does that fall for you in all of this?

JK

Deciding that I didn't need to be the steward of these men's books anymore and that I could turn them into something else was a moment of intense empowerment. I can talk about these books and wanting to cut them up, but I don't know if it's possible to erase the male gaze. I'm spending all this time reconfiguring women's bodies in a kind of reanimated orgy of female pleasure—the homoerotic pleasure of these bodies together. But have I actually erased their subjugation of being turned into a photograph? I don't know if that's possible to do.

Even as a queer woman, my sense of sexuality is so co-opted. So the collages are maybe the failure of reaching what Lorde talks about; but in trying to do it, I think it brings out the idea. The trying is worthwhile.

BG

Absolutely. Has repeatedly viewing these images over the last four years changed what comes up for you?

JK

That's a good question. The earlier collages were more explicit about the politics of the work, and four years later I'm in a different place with it. I spent so much time with that *Lee Friedlander: Nudes* book. I cut up my copy and my girlfriend's copy; then I started trading my *SCUMB Manifesto* for copies. I had around forty copies. I'd put all of the legs together, all the feet together. The earlier collages are more like putting bodies back together as bodies. But the more I've been handling them, the more I've been thinking about them in a formal way. With *Target*, for instance, I started mapping the parts tonally, being less reverent to what part of the body each piece was from and thinking about ways in which folds happen—as with crevices and vaginas—and how to create a sense of dimensionality again. At the beginning I would glue the entire piece down because I'm a very thorough person, very neat. Now I just put dots of glue and let the paper fold. I can't really say psychologically what has happened to me by cutting up women; it's different than, like, turning into a serial killer or something. (*laughter*) I have more ownership over it in thinking about how to create these shapes, what a feminist form could be, wondering if I can subvert an objective idea of viewing and the idea that photography is the truth.



Detail of Justine Kurland, *Nudes (Bad Mommy)*, 2023, collage with razors, 36 x 53 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Higher Pictures Generation.

BG

In your earlier photographs you were also gathering women and staging their bodies in space. Where are the overlaps between then and now?

JK

I'm like a sheep dog. I just want to bring more and more people together to create belonging and reinforce each other. With *Girl Pictures*, I wanted to be around women to foreground their experiences and insist that they mattered. I brought girls out into the woods to create a narrative. With the new works there is less

storytelling, but it's even more of that gathering together and literally a physical sense of support.

BG

Tell me about the inclusion of the razor blades.

JK

Bad Mommy was the first time I put a blade in a collage as a reference to artist Renate Bertlmann, who made breasts with blades and performed with the nipples from baby bottles on all of her fingers. I think it's Melanie Klein who talks about how the "good mommy" gives the breast, then "bad mommy" takes it away. Psychoanalytic tradition turns the woman into a sum of parts, right? I'm sourcing images where women's bodies are already cropped into parts; and in order to turn the photographs into something else, I'm continuing to cut, but it's because they are wounded and severed that they can actually form connections. There's something interesting about thinking about the blade itself as part of the story.

BG

As a material presence and not just a metaphorical presence.



Justine Kurland, *The Mind and the Hand (Circle Jerk)*, 2023, collage, 30 inches diameter. Courtesy of the artist and Higher Pictures Generation.

JK

When I made *Target* with a blade sticking straight out from the middle, I was like, This is not about a victim; this is something that is going to hurt you. But some of the collages are more of a visual pun. *Circle Jerk* is the first time I used men; it was made from *Lee Friedlander: The Mind and the Hand*, a six-volume set of portraits of his cronies: William Christenberry, Walker Evans, John Szarkowski, Garry Winogrand, William Eggleston, and Richard Benson. It was gifted to me by a friend who said, "This has to be cut." I really wanted the collage to be their bodies, but of course men don't photograph other men without their clothes on, so it's just hands and faces. Men are so handsy and thoughtful! I was laughing the whole time, and they're all Js for Justine. I was interested in writing my name on something to be like, It's mine. Part of making these collages is noticing that most often we're putting things together from the very things that would like to erase us. But you continue on, and you try to bring people with you. That's so important. We shape each other as we come together.

Justine Kurland is on view at Watershed Art & Ecology in Chicago until October 21.

Bean Gilsdorf is an artist and writer. Her projects have been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, and American Textile History Museum; her reviews and essays have been published in Artforum, Art in America, Open Space, and Frieze. She currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

[collage](#) [feminism](#) [sexism](#)



Paris Internationale 2022, Ginsberg Galleria.
PHOTO: MARGOT MONTIGNY

7 of the Best Gallery Booths at Paris Internationale 2022

The eighth edition of the contemporary art fair features Justine Kurland's collages and sculptural assemblages by Mara Wohnhaas

BY PAUL LASTER
OCTOBER 21, 2022

Hosting 60 contemporary art galleries from 26 countries, Paris Internationale, returns for its eighth edition of the fair at a new location, the former studio of French photographer Nadar and the site of the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874, in the second arrondissement of Paris.

A cross between the NADA Art Fair, which focuses on emerging artists, and the Spring Break Art Show, which prefers previously abandoned locations, Paris Internationale 2022, which runs through October 23, occupies four floors of a patched-wall structure with exposed skeletal beams that's been built-out with a free-flowing design, which brings the art and galleries into a fascinating dialogue with whatever is visibly nearby.



Paris Internationale 2022, Higher Pictures Generation.
PHOTO: MARGOT MONTIGNY

“The only way of survival for young galleries is to create a community, which is exactly what Paris Internationale has done. It presents very good galleries from around the world,” Belgian art collector Alain Servais shared with *Galerie* on opening day. Commenting further on the fair, Stefano Pirovano, director of *Conceptual Fine Arts*, a Milan-based publication, gallery and consulting agency and a media sponsor for the 2022 edition of the fair, told us, “Changing the venue every year stimulates creativity for the artists and galleries. It’s about keeping it contemporary rather than repeating the same thing.”

Highlighting works fresh from the studios, *Galerie* has selected the best presentations at the fair, ranging from solo shows of Justine Kurland’s collages made from cutting up other artists’ works and Mara Wohnhaas’ sculptural assemblages constructed with found objects to the pairing of Romane de Watteville and Chalisée Naamani, who have a shared aesthetic interest in fashion, and David L. Johnson and Kelsey Isaacs, who are drawn to the readymade devices and shiny consumer goods.



Justine Kurland, *Shadow and Light*, (2022) at Higher Pictures Generation.
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HIGHER PICTURES GENERATION, NEW YORK

1. Higher Pictures Generation, New York

In 1968 radical feminist and writer Valerie Solanas gained instant notoriety when she shot Andy Warhol for losing the script to her play *Up Your Ass*, but when her story was better known she became equally famous for writing and self-publishing the SCUM Manifesto in the year prior to the shooting. Taking the writer's SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) philosophy as her point of departure, artist Justine Kurland recently created the Society for Cutting Up Men's Books, which grants her license to re-author the published works of famous male photographers, such as William Eggleston, André Kertész and Boris Mikhailov, as her own photographic collages by cutting up and re-ordering the images in their celebrated books.

Presenting the solo exhibition "Justine Kurland, SCUMB Manifesto" at the fair, New York's Higher Pictures Generation offered a dozen new collages by the artist, including the striking piece *Shadow and Light*, which deconstructs British photographer Bill Brandt's iconic book of black-and-white pictures from a 2013 exhibition, which featured several of Bill Brandt's female nudes, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. According to the gallery, "Before making the work available to collectors Kurland offered to sell them to the original photographers. None of the men have taken her up on her offer."

Art Fairs

Paris Internationale Opens in a Historic Venue—Featuring Edgy, New Artistic Positions and Quite a Few Paris+ VIPs

"We're not just a young fair," said its director, adding that the fair team is "ambitious for the future."

Devorah Lauter, October 19, 2022



Temnikova and Kasela's booth. © Margot Montigny

The Paris Internationale art fair opened its doors to the public today, October 19, with one of its decidedly "most ambitious editions to date," according to show director Silvia Ammon. It also opened in what is now a very different art market landscape in Paris.

This year's edition, which includes 60 exhibitors from 26 countries, is running alongside the brand new Paris+ by Art Basel, which touched down in the French capital with its VIP opening today, October 20, after the French-owned art fair FIAC was ousted from its longtime October slot in the Grand Palais.

While Paris+ takes place nearby at the temporary location of the Grand Palais Éphémère (the historic palace is undergoing restoration), the annually roving Paris Internationale is being held this year at the gutted and beautifully lit former studio of the 19th century French photographer Nadar, which also happened to be the site of the first Impressionist Exhibition in 1874. The fair is open until October 23.

As the French capital teeters towards a total revival, Paris Internationale is also dusting itself off and revamping its advisory board. A key early appointment was announced this week: Michèle Sandoz, who worked for almost nine years as Art Basel's global head of VIP relations and strategy, has joined.



Paris Internationale team. © Margot Montigny

Ammon said other members of the board would soon be announced and that the art fair is continuing to develop and shift its image away from being seen as simply a hip alternative fair. "We're not just a young fair. We are numerous galleries, many of whom have existed for over 10 years now and who participate in the general sectors of large fairs," she said, adding it was

important for the fair “to affirm its multigenerational character.” Though the fair’s “intimate” size will be maintained, “we are ambitious for the future,” she said.

Such a sentiment has good reason: Paris Internationale was once considered a fresh perspective set against the older, more buttoned-up FIAC. Now, the emerging art fair has an eye-catching new Swiss neighbor. Both fair organizers expressed their on-going, collegial relationship with Artnet News.

Some longstanding participants in the 2022 edition include BQ in Berlin, who presented a must-see solo presentation by German artist Mara Wohnhaas, born in 1997. She performed an absurdist piece called *Another effort to blow it*, straining to be heard as she read a text she wrote over the deafening whirl of leaf blowers aimed at her head; the artist rushed to finish reading before the printed text was destroyed in a shredder.

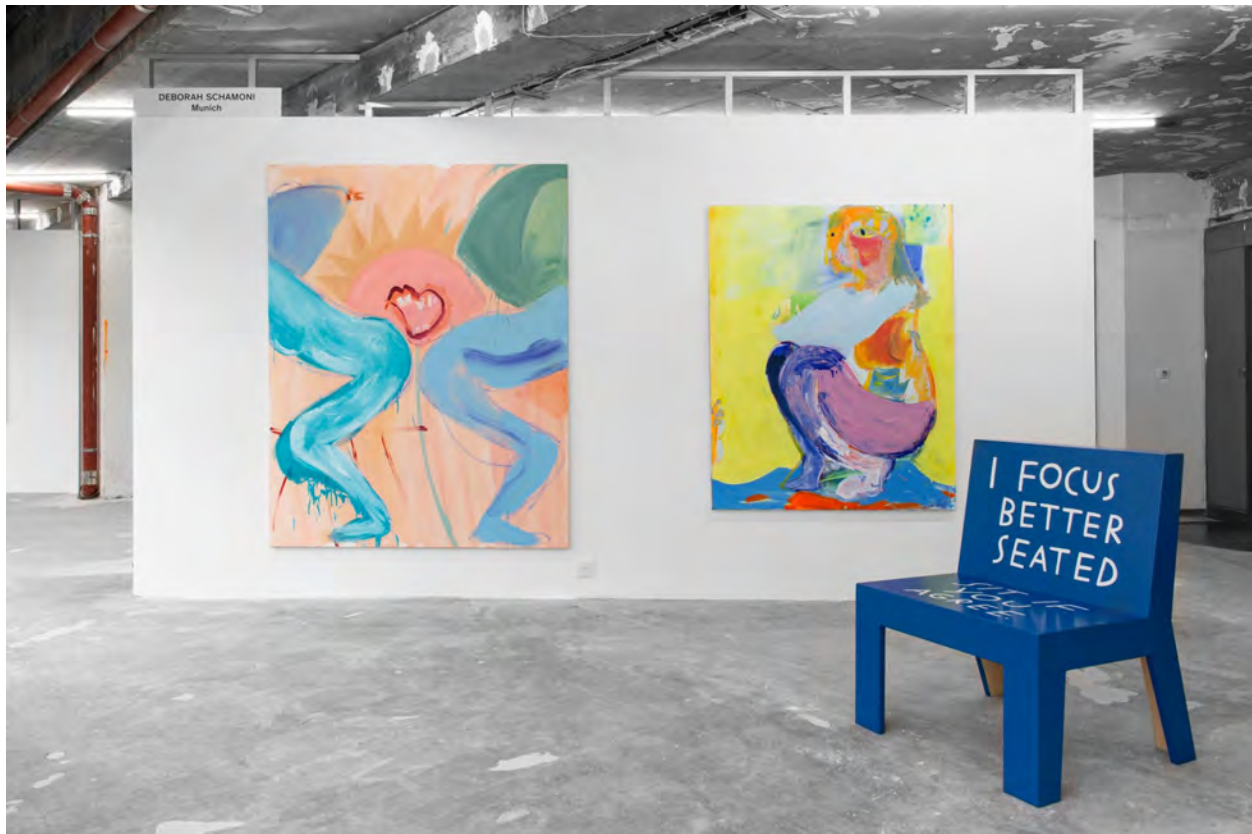


Mara Wohnhaas *Another Effort To Blow It* (2022). Courtesy BQ, Berlin. Photo Roman Maerz, Berlin

“It’s an effort that is doomed to fail,” she said of the performance work, which “deals with self-sabotage.” The objects and texts Wohnhaas creates for performances remain as sculptures after their use, and range from €4,000 to about €20,000 (\$3,914 to \$19,570). The gallery sold one work early in the day, and received a lot of curatorial interest.

At the new Theta gallery, based in New York, captivating ready-made sculptures by David L. Johnson consider how movement is restricted via elements added to public sites. Johnson removed metal spikes installed on public piping elements that prevent people from sitting down. Installed at the same level where he had found them, they appear like animal traps, or tools of strange torture with lines and composition that form their own, dark poetry. Priced under \$10,000, the gallery said they had already made some sales by the first day.

Pastel figurative works by young Turkish artist Gökhun Baltaci at Galeri Nev, from Ankara, sold out in the first 15 minutes of the fair, according to the gallery founder Deniz Artun, who was still processing the overwhelming response to the show, which included one institutional acquisition. With one impressive triptych on a free-standing wooden panel, Baltaci’s rich, layered pastel imagery is often autobiographical and draws on art history. Works were priced between €2,000 and €7000 (\$1,957 to \$6,852).



Deborah Schamoni © Margot Montigny

For something more rock and roll, Three Star Books, from Paris, featured Jonathan Monk's "Heavy Metal Paintings" series; the works were made by soaking heavy metal band T-shirts in Indian ink and throwing them onto canvases. Works cost around €9,000 (\$8,810).

Feminism was a recurring theme at the fair, as seen in a series of unglazed clay vulvas by Russian-Algerian artist Louisa Babari titled *Auto-référence* (2019) at Algiers's Rhizome gallery. Elsewhere, Justine Kurland's work at Higher Pictures Generation, also from New York, drew on the radical feminist Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto*. Kurland cut up images from photography books by historic, white male figures, and reconfigured them in hyper-detailed collages, many of which took vaginal form. "Before making the work available to collectors, Kurland offered to sell them to the original photographers. None of the men have taken her up on her offer," said the artistic statement.

The bustling preview day of the fair was a promising sign for its longevity in the face of transformations in the Paris scene. Guillaume Piens, director of Art Paris, who was spotted roaming the aisle, was positive about the new Paris fair scene. "Paris+ is very good for Paris Internationale," he said. "I saw the Basel crowd wandering the Paris Internationale fair alleys, and there were very good sales, so it's great." Indeed, the emerging art fair is listed on the VIP program for Paris+.

Ammon, director of Paris Internationale, is also optimistic, though she noted that "time will tell" what the real impact Paris+ will be. "Art Basel has understood Paris's potential, which is something which we perceived in 2015," she said. Ammon also hoped "Paris's strength will make more people want to collect art, to become interested in contemporary art. That's what we want to get moving: art in this city."

"Each fair brings a unique and complimentary offering and adds to the vibrancy of this week," Paris+ director and former co-director Paris Internationale Clément Delépine told Artnet News. He addressed what Marc Spiegler, Art Basel's global director, described as "initial fears" about the arrival of Art Basel in Paris, at the larger fair's press conference yesterday, October 18. "From the outset, it has been our desire to collaborate with the broader Parisian arts scene and its multiplicity of cultural actors, and that includes Paris Internationale," said Delépine. "It is important for a healthy art ecosystem to have platforms that sustain galleries at all levels of the market."

The 5 Best Booths at Paris Internationale



BY **SHANTI ESCALANTE-DE MATTEI**

October 18, 2022 12:00pm



The entrance of Paris Internationale.
SHANTI ESCALANTE-DE MATTEI/ARTNEWS

The art world was shaken when the longstanding Parisian art fair FIAC was booted from its space at the Grand Palais Éphémère to make space for Art Basel's new fair, Paris+. Meanwhile, Paris Internationale (sometimes stylized as Aaaahhh! Paris Internationale), a fair for emerging artists, still thrives.

In its eighth year, Internationale opened its first edition at 35 Boulevard des Capucines, the former studio of the 20th century photographer Nadar. It was also the site of the crucially

important Impressionist Exhibition in 1874, the first of its kind. The building now is sparse and industrial inside, but in a collaboration with the architects Christ & Gantenbein, the exhibition space was designed to generate an organic flow throughout the four floors of the fair, which hosted 59 galleries, 16 more than in past years.

Anastasia Krizanovska, gallery manager at the Paris based gallery Crèvecoeur, said that though the space was as large as the previous International space near the Bois de Boulogne, a sprawling park on the edge of Paris, the fair didn't feel cramped at all. "We have more galleries this year than before, but it really feels like everybody has the space to exhibit beautifully," Krizanovska told *ARTnews*.

Krizanovska also said that there was better communication between Internationale and Paris+ than there had been in years past with FIAC, which is not completely surprising given that the director of Paris+, Clément Delépine, once co-directed Internationale with its longtime director Silvia Ammon.

During the press preview, it was clear that Internationale was doing better than ever. Below is a selection of *ARTnews*' top five booths.

5 Justine Kurland at Higher Pictures Generation



Photo : Shanti Escalante-De Mattei/*ARTnews*

Valerie Solanas wrote *SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto* in 1967. A year later she shot Andy Warhol. Solanas's text has recently been of renewed interest, especially following Andrea Long Chu's manifesto *Females*, which explores Solanas' ideology. Photographer Justine Kurland, presented by the Brooklyn-based gallery Higher Pictures Generation, is the latest to take on Solanas' call. In her series "Society for Cutting Up Men's Books (SCUMB)", she created collages by cutting out images from her favorite art books that featured male photographers who have monopolized the field of photography.

The collages recall a moment of feminist rage that seems due for resurrection. The results are abstracted, fractal, and dense, a far cry from Kurland's photographic work, in which her subjects, typically wild young women and girls, were surrounded by a calm natural landscape.

The Washington Post

Over 100 straight white male photo books were cut up to make this book

by Kenneth Dickerman
August 8, 2022



'The Bike riders, 2019', from "SCUMB Manifesto" MACK, 2022. (Justine Kurland)

There can be no mistaking the message that photographer Justine Kurland is sending with her latest book, "[Scumb Manifesto](#)" (Mack, 2022). That's because she lays it all out on the cover, in bold all-caps letters.

Here's an excerpt:

"I, JUSTINE KURLAND, AM SCUMB. I THRIVE IN THE STAGNANT WASTE OF YOUR SELF-CONGRATULATORY BORING PHOTOGRAPHY. I BUBBLE UP, A RAW LIFE FORCE, MULTIPLYING FROM THE USELESS EXCREMENT OF YOUR MISOGYNYSTIC BOOKS. ... YOUR TIME IS OVER OFFICER HISTORIAN. I CALL FOR THE END OF THE GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF THE MALE CANON, IT'S DADDY WORSHIP AND ITS MONOPOLY ON MEANING AND VALUE."



"Think of England, 2021," from "Scumb Manifesto." (Justine Kurland)

Get the message? It's not very subtle or demur. Why should it be? And I imagine it ruffles a lot of feathers too, as it should. Whether you agree with what Kurland is doing with this book, it is important to examine one's heroes and, if need be, tear them down. I don't think that should be controversial at all.

It goes without saying that throughout the history of the world, there have always been people whose ideas and voices are given more weight and authority than others. That happens because of many things — war, patriarchy, economic status. Who's at the top of the heap? Who's at the bottom? The answer to that question is rarely fair.



“New York in Color, 2021,” from “Scumb Manifesto.” (Justine Kurland)
“White Churches of the Plains, 2019,” from “Scumb Manifesto.” (Justine Kurland)

I'm only pointing out the obvious when I say that life isn't really about being fair. Power isn't really spread out equally. And women, people of color and the poor have been on the raw side of the deal for too many years to count.

“Scumb Manifesto” is a series of collages that Kurland made from her personal library of photobooks. In fact, she purged her photo book collection in the act of making this work. She cut up the work of 150 straight white men who have monopolized the photographic canon.



“Hustlers, 2019,” from “Scumb Manifesto.” (Justine Kurland)

I have to confess that I can't identify most of the work that was used in the collages, probably because I'm more familiar with photojournalism than photography in general. That's not to say that photojournalism is any better in its own "canon." Nope, it's just as off-kilter and unbalanced.

There is a list of images at the end of the book. Sometimes its descriptions can identify the photographer's work that is being cut up — off the top of my head, I recognize Danny Lyon, Walker Evans, Brassai and Martin Parr. There are far more, of course. But it's almost beside the point. The book is about taking the overwhelmingly male canon and transforming it and thereby reclaiming it.

The title of Kurland's book plays off one of the first feminist texts written by [Valerie Solanas](#). It was titled "[Scum Manifesto](#)," and it essentially called for, as Kurland points out in an essay in her own book, "an end to men, and the power that seeks domination, exploitation and death, and the creation of a superior, all-female society."

Solanas is also known for shooting Andy Warhol. And according to Kurland, she did this because Warhol stole one of her plays.



"Monograph (Justine), 2020," from "Scumb Manifesto." (Justine Kurland)

In a world made up of hierarchies and unbalanced power structures, that really is no surprise — that a prominent person would steal what is not his to puff himself up.

This happens in countless ways every day. It is partly how people get ahead and stay there. So, whether you like Kurland's book doesn't really matter. It is a forceful and bold statement about reclaiming agency from a world that happily takes it away in the first place.

ArtReview

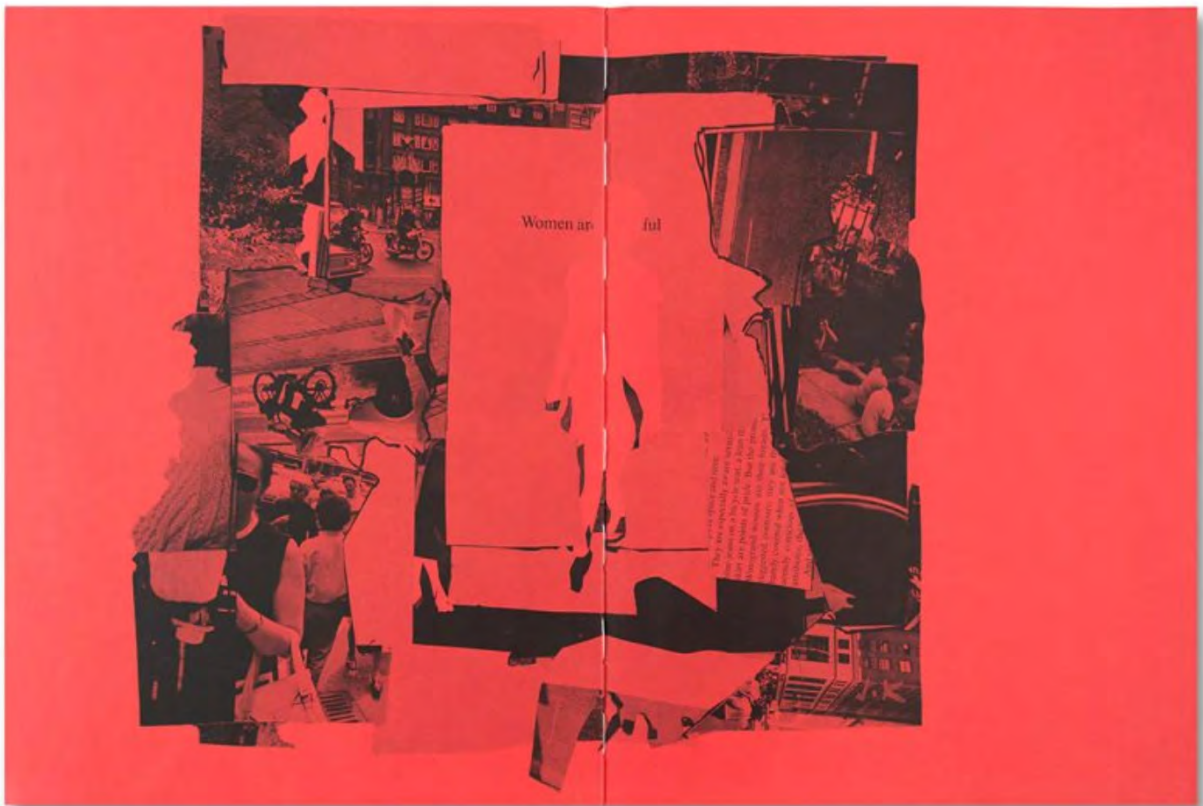
Justine Kurland Takes a Knife to the Male Artworld

Fi Churchman

[Book Reviews](#)

08 July 2022

ArtReview



A page from *SCUMB MANIFESTO*. Courtesy the artist and MACK

In *SCUMB MANIFESTO*, Justine Kurland recompiles her library of male photobooks by cutting their works beyond recognition into cathartic collages

On 3 June 1968 Valerie Solanas walked into The Factory and shot Andy Warhol for stealing the script to her play *Up Your Ass*. A year previously she had published *SCUM Manifesto*, a roiling declaration of men's uselessness, impotence and abject nature, and a damnation of the violence they perpetrate against

women (a damnation, too, of the ‘insecure, approval-seeking, pandering male-females’ and ‘Daddy’s Girls’). Solanas’s manifesto for the Society for Cutting Up Men concludes that the only reasonable action to take is to kill all men. Perhaps leave some for ‘breeding in a cow pasture’, but only until such a time as they can be replaced by machines.

After rereading this radical feminist text, photographer Justine Kurland took to her own library of photobooks, pulled out each one published by a male photographer, and proceeded to snip, slice and cut away at the photos. She recompiled these into a series of 116 collages, each arranged on either the inside or the outside of the now-empty, splayed-open book covers, many of which sport severed binding materials and other evidence of the violence done to them. Accompanying the photos are five texts (including one by Kurland), ranging in style from literary prose (Renee Gladman’s ‘We Were Cuts Cutting’) to more straightforward essays on the history and development of collages made by women (Marina Chao’s ‘Cunts with the Kitchen Knife: Notes on Feminist Collage and Torn Paper’).



A page from *SCUMB MANIFESTO*. Courtesy the artist and MACK

None of the male photographers’ names are mentioned; the only clues are in some of the collages’ titles (*Los Alamos Revisited*, *America by Car*, *The Animals*). Some of the sources are more instantly recognisable: the images of daily meals and monotony of wood-panelled rooms and tabletops indicates *American Surfaces*, while a row of Victorian portraits of young girls, each with their face cut out, is reminiscent of *Reflections in a Looking Glass*. But those photographers are cut out of *SCUMB*, like their photos are cut out, and then mashed back together into a nameless reconstituted mass of body parts, signs, landscapes, bits of ‘everyday life’. This is a work of catharsis, an exhale before the real work begins. But what is the real work? Solanas put it best: ‘Dropping out is not the answer; fucking-up is.’

SCUMB MANIFESTO: Society for Cutting Up Men’s Books by Justine Kurland. Mack, £60 (softcover)

HYPERALLERGIC

Books **Reviews**

Justine Kurland Cuts the Male Canon to Pieces

In *SCUMB Manifesto*, Kurland slices up her collection of photo books by men to create collages that subvert the male gaze.

By Julia Curl
July 14, 2022



Justine Kurland, “Nudes (Second Chance)” (2021),
all images from *SCUMB Manifesto* (courtesy the artist and MACK)

Justine Kurland’s *SCUMB Manifesto* is the photo book to end all photo books — literally. *SCUMB*, which stands for *Society for Cutting Up Men’s Books*, is Kurland’s homage to Valerie Solanas’s infamous, semi-satirical 1967 manifesto, which advocated for the destruction of the male sex. “I call for the end of the graphic representation of the male canon,” Kurland writes in bold-faced capitals on the book’s front cover: “Your time is over, officer historian.... I’m coming for you with a blade.”

As institutions, galleries, and art fairs work to correct art history’s lopsided canon with varying levels of sincerity, Kurland steps in and raises the stakes. *SCUMB Manifesto* reads like a dare: by speaking the taboo, embodying the fear in the back of every traditionalist’s mind, Kurland is daring you, the reader, to act — or react. Because the resistance to changing a predominantly white and male historical narrative often stems from one thing: the fear of replacement. The fear that that woman whose script you stole will come back with a gun, like Solanas did, and that history will forgive her the way it forgives men like William Burroughs. Kurland points the knife in the reader’s direction and asks: “Whose side are you on?”



Justine Kurland, “Cray at Chippewa Falls”(2021)

SCUMB Manifesto is a direct, violent challenge to the status quo. It is also a nuanced, exquisitely crafted work of art: coming just a year after her groundbreaking exhibition at Higher Pictures Generation, the book (published by MACK) catalogues Kurland’s methodical dissection of her own male-dominated library of photo books following a provocative conversation with her gallerist and partner, Kim Bourus. After excising the innards of each book, Kurland uses its inside cover as the canvas for a new collage, slicing and recontextualizing the photographer’s original images to form her own critique. Sparing not even the rarest and most fetishized of books, Kurland has killed her metaphorical darlings. Every time she finishes a collage, she offers to sell it to the photographer whose book it came from; so far, she’s been met with mixed responses.



Justine Kurland, “Nudes (Justine)” (2021)

More than 100 books are included in *SCUMB Manifesto*, an impressive number considering the detailed process of making each collage. Sometimes her cuts are painstakingly delicate, as in “Cray at Chippewa Falls”(2021), in which clusters of faces sprout from wires like flowers growing from a hill of hair. Other times they are rougher, angrier, like in the chain of female arms gripping legs that form the name “JUSTINE” in “Nudes (Justine)” (2021). Often, Kurland hits comical notes too, like a nipple dotting the “I” in Justine, or a man whose face has been transfigured into a crude chalk drawing of a phallus.

Speaking of phalluses, Kurland’s work contains certain repetitions, fixations of the male gaze; in her reimagining of Lee Friedlander’s 1976 photography book *The American Monument*, for example, the pointed monument to Major General Winfield Scott Hancock has grown a pair of balls. Female bodies, too, are frequent subjects of attention. One of the book’s starkest collages — which is also included as a standalone poster — is the cover image, “Nudes (Second Chance)”(2021). In it, the severed limbs and torsos of female bodies form a vortex around an outstretched palm, like a nightmarish rendition of Gustave Doré’s engraving “The Empyrean.” It feels claustrophobic and dehumanized, the psychic result of countless walls plastered with cutouts from *Playboy* and *Penthouse*.

To make a book by destroying books is a rather curious contradiction. *SCUMB Manifesto* seems to take this into account, however, by forgoing the traditional hardcover format. Its spine features raw, exposed binding, evoking the cut-up nature of the works inside. The title is printed on the spine with a roughness that evokes sharpies being scribbled across a wall; the cover’s orange letters, stamped on bright red paper, have the in-your-face punk edge of a DIY zine. The object *feels* like a manifesto.

Virginia Woolf famously wrote that “For most of history, Anonymous was a woman.” Kurland uses *SCUMB Manifesto* to flip that script: although she is cutting up books by history’s most famous male photographers, she does not cite them by name. Instead, each piece is given the name of the book it originated from, many of which may ring a bell to fans of photo history, but whose authors might not be immediately recollected: *The Americans*, *Paris by Night*, *Hustlers*, and so on. This

deliberate erasure helps to puncture the myth of the lone male artist. Kurland suggests that such “great men” of history were rather the beneficiaries of great networks and institutions of power that held them up for all to see. In response, the artist begins to construct her own society, assisted by the varied talents of Renee Gladman, Marina Chao, Catherine Lord, and Ariana Reines, whose essays contextualize the artist’s message in a literary, political, personal, and art historical framework. Ultimately, *SCUMB Manifesto* dreams of creating the same utopian world depicted in Kurland’s early *Girl Pictures* series, but with one provision added: *by any means necessary*.

SCUMB Manifesto by Justine Kurland (2022) is published by MACK and is available on Bookshop and in bookstores.

The Guardian

Snip it up and start again: the woman who's reworking the photography canon

Photographer Justine Kurland has sliced and collaged images from 150 renowned books by white male photographers from Brassai to Stephen Shore. She explains why

by Sean O'Hagan
April 23, 2022

Valerie Solanas is famous for two things: shooting [Andy Warhol](#) and writing the *SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto*, perhaps the most willfully outrageous radical feminist polemic. Initially self-published and sold by her on the streets of New York in 1967, it called upon “responsible, thrill-seeking females to overthrow the government... institute complete automation and eliminate the male sex”.

The book gained its initial notoriety after Solanas's attempted assassination of Warhol at his studio, the Factory, on 3 June 1968. Having handed herself in to the police hours after the shooting, she was charged with attempted murder, and later sentenced to three years for “reckless assault with intent to harm” after being diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. After her arrest, she reputedly told a reporter: “Read my manifesto and it will tell you what I am.”



Exhibit A, 2020.

Ever since, [Solanas, who died in 1988](#), has occupied a singular and complex place in the cultural landscape, her manifesto hailed by some feminist scholars as a visionary text and her story inspiring several plays and an acclaimed art film, *I Shot Andy Warhol*. Now comes a new book from 52-year-old American photographer Justine Kurland, best known for her 2020 series, *Girl Pictures*, portraying young women in the American wilds. Her intriguingly titled *SCUMB Manifesto* pays homage to the wildly transgressive spirit of Solanas, whom she describes in the book as “a revolutionary, a panhandler, prostitute and vagabond, insane, brilliant and very funny”.



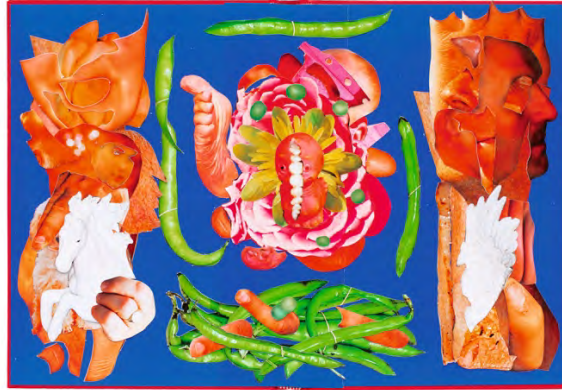
New York in Color, 2021.

SCUMB stands for Society for Cutting Up Men's Books, which is exactly what Kurland has done, dismembering and reconfiguring images from around 150 photobooks by white, male photographers. All of the books were from Kurland's own shelves. They include [Stephen Shore's *American Surfaces*](#), [William Eggleston's *Los Alamos*](#), Larry Clark's *Tulsa*, Martin Parr's *Think of England*, Alec Soth's *Sleeping By the Mississippi*, [Brassaï's *Paris By Night*](#) and, most famous of all, [Robert Frank's *The Americans*](#).

Each collage is named after the book that provided the raw material for it, but does not refer to the photographer in question. Before exhibiting 65 of the [SCUMB collages in a Brooklyn gallery last year](#), Kurland offered each of them to the individual photographers whose work she had cut up and reassembled. "I sent out emails saying, 'I've been making collages out of photobooks and here's yours'," she says, laughing over the phone from her studio in New York. Most of them did not respond. Of those who did, she tells me, [Tod Papageorge](#) said he was flattered, Stephen Shore offered to do a trade for a print and Jim Goldberg sent her a copy of his book *Raised By Wolves*, to use as raw material, but, she says, "some others had less of a sense of humour and were offended by the work".

This is hardly surprising given that her collages not only challenge the patriarchy but also raise issues around authorship and respect. "I'm not targeting anyone," she says. "It's about a system and structures of power, not individuals, though I have to say, some of these guys have been taking up too much room for too long."

She ended up selling the early collages for \$900 (£690) each, mostly to her students, though the Museum of Modern Art in New York also snapped up several. A selection, created from Lee Friedlander's series *Nudes* are currently on display at the Herald Gallery in London as part of [a group show, *Say Less*](#).



Think of England, 2021.

If *SCUMB Manifesto* is a gleefully provocative assault on photography's patriarchal history, it is also an act of wonderfully intricate creativity: the collages possess a vivid, often viscerally powerful life of their own. Kurland's style ranges from the playfully surreal – Parr's signature English character studies reconfigured as a *mélange* of artfully arranged limbs, vegetables, flowers and faces, to the coolly minimal – Friedlander's *America By Car* rendered as a Ballardian swirl of steering wheels.

I started out thinking it would be a punk act of destruction, but... it is a reparative act rather than a destructive one

Often, the original photographs have been so transformed that you may struggle, as I did, to identify the photographer whose images she has reworked. She upends Robert Adams's rigorously formal detachment and renders Brassai's nocturnal Paris unrecognisable by cutting up and rearranging details of his photographs – a cobbled street, a cafe tabletop, fabrics – as ominous monochrome geometric shapes.

Elsewhere, her subversion is more pointedly political. The female body, as fetishised by photographers such as [Helmut Newton](#) and Guy Bourdin, is rendered by turns sculptural, dreamlike and disturbing in works that float free of the voyeuristic male gaze while drawing attention to its voraciousness. The inclusion of renowned photographers such as Brassai and Frank will no doubt be considered an act of cultural vandalism by some but that, too, is part of Kurland's provocation.



Justine Kurland, photographed in 2018. Photograph: Naima Green

The angriest element of the book is the front cover, in which Kurland draws on Solanas's ferociously combative and accusatory prose style to stick it to the patriarchy. Over a blood red collage of writhing female nudes, she states: "I, Justine Kurland, am SCUMB. I thrive in the stagnant waste of your boring photography. I bubble up, a raw life force, multiplying from the useless excrement of your misogynistic books." Her screed ends with the mock-threatening line: "I'm coming for you with my blade." In its confrontational tone, it does promise more than it delivers given that, throughout, her scalpel is more a tool of intricate reconfiguration than violent dismemberment.



Los Alamos Revisited (Vol. 3), 2021.

"I started out thinking it would be a purely punk act of destruction, but really it's the most delicate, fussy medium," says Kurland, "I spent hours and hours making these meticulous, lacy cuts and then carefully putting them together. It's about the glue as well as the scissors. For me, it is a reparative act rather than a destructive one."

Kurland has been making photographs since she was 15. She studied at Yale in the late 1990s under Gregory Crewdson, a photographer known for his elaborately staged cinematic tableaux, one of which she reworks in her book. The collages are a dramatic shift in tone and approach from her previous work, which explored, and subverted, a certain kind of American frontier romanticism. Her book *Highway Kind* (2016) was made on a series of epic road trips she took across the country in a beat-up camper van, often with her young children in tow. *Girl Pictures* (2020) comprised images she made between 1997 and 2002, in which her young, rebellious female subjects appear to inhabit an almost utopian world of freedom in nature.

Kurland's shift from photography to collage was precipitated by a conjunction of events, personal and cultural: the death of her father, the seismic political and social upheavals of the past few years and a kind of moral reckoning with her own way of working. "In a way, my road trips bought into an enduring idea in American photography, which is that you go out into the world and bring the news back home," she says. "It felt like a holdover from the colonial impulse and I started to feel a little uncomfortable with that. I think that was when I started to feel really ambivalent about the way I was working."

While not as transgressive as other acts of creative defacement – the [Chapman brothers drawing clown heads on a rare edition of Goya etchings](#) springs immediately to mind – *SCUMB Manifesto* is certainly a well-aimed missive at what Kurland calls “the male photography canon and its monopoly on meaning and value”.

Photography is still, to a degree, a male-dominated medium, particularly as regards the often nerdy obsessive world of photobook collecting but, creatively, that monopoly is being challenged on many fronts, not least by an abundance of contemporary female photographers, curators and artist-activists. There is no doubt it has held sway for too long, though, with groundbreaking photographers such as [Berenice Abbott](#), [Gerda Taro](#) and [Germaine Krull](#), to name just three groundbreaking women, still not as celebrated as their male counterparts.



Earthly Bodies, 2021.

“The history of photography is filled with women,” as Kurland puts it, “so there is no excuse or justification for their exclusion.”

For now, she tells me, collage is a way to “explore the ambivalence” she feels about the medium in which she established her reputation. Will she go back to photography? “You never know,” she says. “It’s a big hot mess in my head and I haven’t really formulated it yet. I love photography, and photobooks have been a path towards what I do in my work, but when I realised that 99% of the ones in my collection were by straight, white males, it disturbed me. *SCUMB Manifesto* is not me saying, ‘Fuck all those photographers, they suck and they shouldn’t exist’. It’s more ambivalent than that. It’s angry and serious, but it’s also funny.” Not everyone, I suspect, is laughing.

SCUMB Manifesto by Justine Kurland is published by Mack (£60)

Photography

What does our obsession with taking pictures say about humanity?

Exhilarating New York exhibition 'A Trillion Sunsets' interrogates image overload

Ariella Budick FEBRUARY 24 2022

Receive free Photography updates

We'll send you a *myFT Daily Digest* email rounding up the latest Photography news every morning.

Sign up



'Album (Scrapbook)' (1933) by Hannah Höch © Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Fotografie und Architektur

A Trillion Sunsets, a disorienting, exhilarating, often delightful exhibition at the International Center of Photography in New York, opens with an image of image overload: a boy sprawled out amid hills and vales of glossy snapshots. In 2011, Erik Kessels printed out one entire day's worth of Flickr uploads, 350,000 photographs in all, and mounted them in an Amsterdam gallery. The project would have been inconceivably vaster had it also mined the rest of the social media universe. Kessel celebrates — or mourns? — the unabsorbable flood of colours, shapes, pets, faces, foods and landscapes that form our mediated visual experience.

Anxiety about this photo-cornucopia feels distinctly contemporary, but curator David Company reminds us that it has been with us for generations. With the advent of the Kodak Brownie in 1900, the masses gained the magical power to freeze time. Within a couple of decades, publications were crammed with news, fashion, advertising and celebrity photos, and commentators wondered whether civilisation could survive the flood. This show summons 100 years' worth of keen-eyed artists who have clipped magazines and scoured the internet looking for subliminal echoes and witty juxtapositions, finding meanings that lurk in patterns. This is not a show about the decisive moment, but about the revelatory repetition.

Among those who thrived on this muchness was the Berlin Dadaist, collagist and connoisseur of the grotesque Hannah Höch, best known for the barbarous bodies she built out of found imagery and finished with a glaze of bitter wit. Here, we see her private scrapbooks, in which she collected photos that struck her, organising them according to her idiosyncratic rules.



'Eleanor' (2021) by Justine Kurland © Higher Pictures Generation

On one page from 1933, she leads the eye clockwise from a team of wrestlers standing like a mountain range to a similarly geological-looking group of figures entirely swathed in burkas. We move on to a dozen women in bathing suits stretched out in a circle on the beach to form a human clock face. Flesh and veil, exhibitionism and reticence, timelessness and ticking seconds — these themes flicker across the page, linking images in a set of loose associations.

Strands of sense, even argument, start to emerge. Her eye was drawn to photos of bodies lying, dancing or swimming in fabulous collective geometries. She finds a resemblance between those formal assemblages of naked limbs and the structures of seed and root, but also an aerial view of Manhattan, with its tendril-like streets and modular blocks. Höch perceived a phenomenon that mathematicians later codified: complex patterns repeat at every scale, from the microscopic to the galactic — and humans are primed to see them. “I would like to show the world today as an ant sees it and tomorrow as the moon sees it,” she said.

Höch endowed these ant- and moon-eye views with a very human political cast. Troupes of identically clad dancers keep cropping up in her collection, a leitmotif that her fellow Berlin leftist, the critic Siegfried Kracauer, picked up on, too. Dancing girls, he wrote, were cogs in the gearworks of capitalism. “When they formed an undulating snake, they radiantly illustrated the virtues of the conveyor belt; when they tapped their feet in fast tempo, it sounded like business, business,” he wrote in 1931.



'Penny Picture Display, Savannah, Georgia' (1936) by Walker Evans © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Political subtexts run through *A Trillion Sunsets*, sometimes in disguise, sometimes only quasi-intentional. In 1936, Walker Evans walked past a photographer's studio in Savannah, Georgia, and noticed a grid of tiny portraits in the shop window. It's not clear what Evans saw in the display: a humanistic portrait of Depression-era America, a celebration of democracy, a wry comment on conformity or maybe all of the above. But, whether he meant it this way or not, it's also a record of how the Jim Crow south classified respectable society: clean-shaven white men with white shirt collars, put-together white women with white shawl collars, nice white children with sailor collars.

Evan's work, called "Penny Picture Display, Savannah", may well have been rattling around Robert Frank's mind in 1958 when he took his own photograph of photographs at Hubert's Dime Museum and Flea Circus on Times Square. Evans had been intrigued by a rigid matrix of sameness; Frank reacted to a more slapdash arrangement of people who made a living putting themselves on display, including the fire eater Leona Young, the armless guitarist Joan Whisnant and Alzoria "Turtle Girl" Green. Photo historians will pick out the portrait of Hezekiah Trambles (a black man who grimaced and grunted his way through his act as the "Jungle Creep") taken by Diane Arbus, another Hubert's habituée.



'Tattoo Parlor, 8th Avenue, New York City' (1958) by Robert Frank © Andrea Frank Foundation

Arbus grasped the kinship between these marginal folks and the kind of shiny conformists that Evans noticed. “Most people go through life dreading they’ll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma,” she said. “They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats.” Within a few years, individualism and eccentricity ruled the zeitgeist. It’s both fitting and ironic that Frank’s photo appeared on the cover of the Rolling Stones’ 1972 album *Exile on Main Street*, because by then rock ‘n’ roll was selling nonconformity to the masses.

The exhibition’s most exciting find is a selection of pages from the British magazine *Lilliput*. Founded in 1937 by the German refugee Stefan Lorant, *Lilliput* published playful pairings of photos that seemed to express something weirdly profound, if cryptic. A periwigged judge pouts across from an elaborately coiffed poodle, and it’s hard to say which one makes the other look more ridiculous. In another spread, a flock of uniformed schoolgirls is performing synchronised push-ups; on the opposite page, a mirroring flotilla of geese looks on encouragingly.



Lilliput magazine spreads in the exhibition 'A Trillion Sunsets: A Century of Image Overload' © John Halpern

There's a Kracauer-esque critique lurking in there somewhere: humans tend to think of themselves as irreproducible individuals, with private cravings and secret dreams, yet we willingly fall into the same anonymous formations as electrons, starlings and clouds. Maybe that's the exhibition's underlying credo: the world's photographic glut is really a record of patterned behaviour and it's all just data for corporations to monetise. Whatever you've thought, done or seen has already been thought, done or seen a billion times before, and will be a trillion times more.

To May 2, International Center of Photography, New York, icp.org

Follow [@ftweekend](https://twitter.com/ftweekend) on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.



Upper cuts

Artist Justine Kurland's collage series reanimates stale, 20th-century imagery to create dazzling new worlds. Author *Chris Kraus* draws parallels with her own creative process

ustine Kurland will probably always be best known for her *Girl Pictures* (1997-2002), a series of shockingly beautiful photos she staged with bands of teen girls at the edges of civilisation. Girls emerging out of a culvert and walking together into a meadow. Girls crouched around the metal skeleton of an abandoned, junked car. The photos evoke a dreamy utopian world of adventurous runaways who seem to have established a new, secret society that is – given the exurban presence of power lines, rail tracks and tunnels – not all that far from the ones they fled. Her subjects, who mostly appear to be otherwise well-behaved suburban white girls, seemed to share intimate psychic exchanges based upon rituals known only to them.

In an essay written years later, Kurland recalls cruising Manhattan high schools for potential collaborators and then driving carloads of girls to “a place where the landscape opens up – a place to plant a garden, build a home, picture a world”. *Girl Pictures* were, most of all, evocations of freedom. A quest for freedom, increasingly tempered by limits, has informed all of Kurland’s subsequent work.

When her son Casper was born in 2004, Kurland took the extraordinary measure of subletting her Manhattan apartment, buying a van and setting off on an epic road trip towards and through the American west. These travels would last nearly a decade. Often she photographed trains and the neo-hobo culture that’s grown up around the long container freight trains that snake across the rural heart of the US. But often she turned the camera back onto herself, capturing all the constrictions of #vanlife as well as its bucolic bliss.

She titled her 2009 show of these photographs after Woody Guthrie’s classic song “This Train is Bound for Glory”, but few could be more aware than Kurland of the ravages that years of deregulation and depopulation had wrought upon the rural US. Her “west” is a fragile place of poverty, freedom, glimpses of beauty and environmental collapse. A stunning 2008 image, “Untitled (Birds)”, depicts her four-year-old son observing a thick flock of crows alight over a field somewhere on the dry American prairie, near a clutch of interstate-adjacent motels. It’s an incredibly poignant image, as if beauty can always be snatched somewhere, even out of a landscape that, absent the child and the birds, is completely corporate-banal.

Kurland’s most recent work, *SCUMB Manifesto*, a collection comprising dozens of collages made by the artist between 2019-21, similarly proposes modes of resistance and freedom, escape and pleasure (SCUMB stands for “Society for Cutting Up Men’s Books”). But, this time, the flights are enacted by means of decomposition and recomposition. At home in New York, Kurland began questioning her old way of working, wondering if there wasn’t something deeply colonial about classical photography’s image-gathering forays into the world. She turned her attention instead to the rows of fat photo books on her shelves, which not surprisingly featured the work of mostly white, male photographers, such as Stephen Shore, William Eggleston, Larry Clark, Robert Frank, Martin Parr and Brassai. It occurred to her that, rather than add to classical photography’s proliferation of image and myth, she might reconfigure these images and arrive at something new, something she’d want to own. ▶



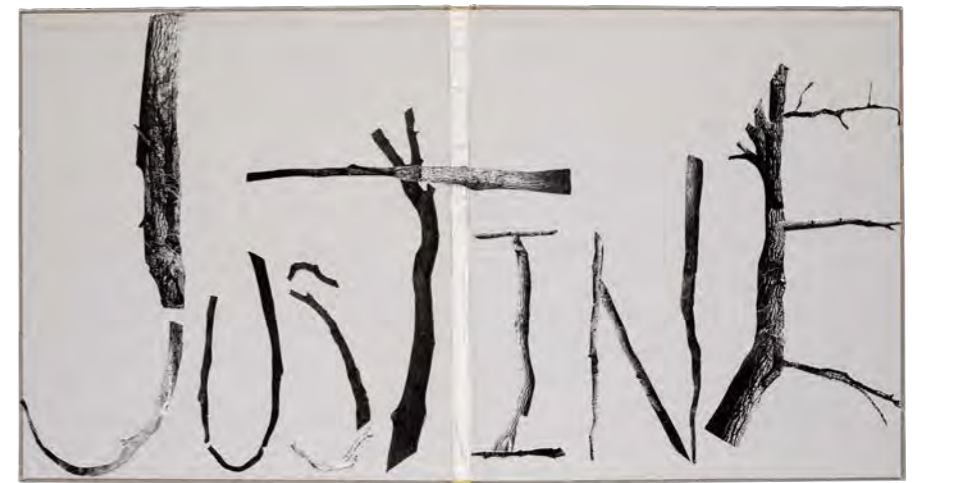
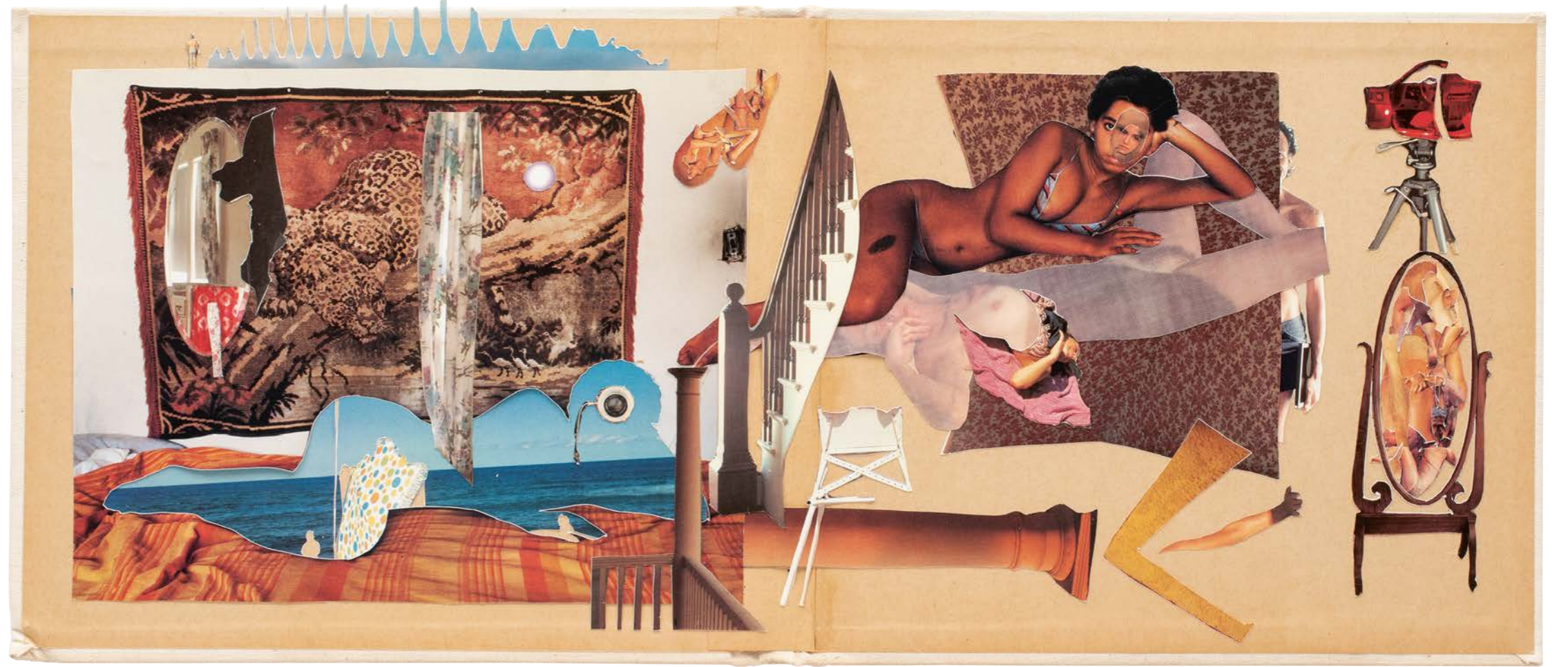
Kurland began wondering if there wasn't something deeply colonial about classical photography's image-gathering forays into the world

OPENING PAGES: 'WHAT WE BOUGHT: THE NEW WORLD', 2021, FROM 'SCUMB MANIFESTO'.

FACING PAGE: (ALL FROM 'GIRL PICTURES'): 'POISON IVY', 1999, 'SHIPWRECKED', 2000, AND 'CANDY TOSS', 2000. BELOW: 'AMERICAN PROSPECTS (WINDSHIELD)', 2021, FROM 'SCUMB MANIFESTO'



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT
(ALL PICTURES FROM
'SCUMB MANIFESTO'):
'CAPE LIGHT', 2021;
'COTTONWOODS
(JUSTINE)', 2020;
'EXHIBIT A', 2020;
A SHIMMER OF
POSSIBILITY (SLATE), 2021





'TWILIGHT', 2021, FROM 'SCUMB MANIFESTO'

◀ I was startled, at first, by how little these new pieces have in common with the rest of Kurland's work. Yet this discontinuity is what I admire most about her as an artist, this willingness to try the next thing, whatever it is, each thing so different from the last. I feel that way about writing too.

Kurland's work is as discontinuous as a human life, and this makes her seem, at least to me, more like a writer. While we compose narratives after the fact, real life is a series of impasses, surprises and chance connections. None of my books has followed in any logical way from the one before it: each book has to be lived, and then found. There are some long gaps between the books that I've published, because each time I finish a novel I feel that something essential needs to change before beginning the next one. Each book is its own world. The one I'm working on now loops back several years to a time when I was living part-time on the Iron Range of northern Minnesota. It reflects both events in my life and a series of shockingly violent crimes committed by young people under the influence of methamphetamine that affected many of the teenagers there.

Visual artists tend to work with fewer ideas than writers, sometimes elaborating a single concept or gesture across an entire career. While writers have themes that recur across their work - Kathy Acker reprises her father's abandonment over and over again; the French author Colette's dazzling body of work repeatedly returns to descriptions of the natural world - the scope of a book is more discrete than a work of visual art. Vanessa Beecroft's performances, carried out over two decades, are elaborations of the very first confrontation she staged between an art world audience and idealised partially clothed young girls. Since the late 1990s, the artist Henry Taylor's prodigious body of work has centred around depictions of family history and portraits of people he knows. But to me, Kurland's work reflects an *evolution* of consciousness, and following it means being led down a new, open road.

All Kurland's photographs prior to *SCUMB Manifesto*, both documentary and staged, are triumphs of composition. The position of the camera, the

decisions about what to allow inside the frame, give her works weight. So it seemed like a very radical move to abandon the cinematic illusion her photographs weave, and instead manipulate all of these fragments of visual culture to conjure the secret messages pulsing just under the surface of things.

Because that's what collage has always done best. More than a celebration of the uncanny, collage succeeds most brilliantly when it rips out an image's subtext and thrusts it into the viewer's face. At the Beat Hotel in the late 1950s, Brion Gysin and William S Burroughs folded newspaper pages into themselves to reveal secret, subliminal messages contained in the news. Boris Lurie's 1959 "Railroad" collage, the juxtaposition of a pin-up girl ripped out of a soft-porn magazine and glued on top of a railcar of Holocaust corpses, still has the power to shock, because Lurie was right: the amnesiac lull of postwar consumerist culture had supplanted all memory of very recent atrocities with lightning speed.

Kurland's *SCUMB Manifesto* is a word play on radical feminist Valerie Solanas's 1967 *SCUM [Society for Cutting Up Men] Manifesto*, an impassioned rant against all that comprised the American then-status quo. In her essay that concludes the book, Kurland describes her youthful fascination with Warhol superstar Edie Sedgwick, a contemporary of Solanas's who, coincidentally, ended up in the same state hospital for the criminally insane. And weren't Solanas's rage and Sedgwick's despair just opposite ends of a spectrum of responses to a deeply patriarchal culture that excluded them?

Written and self-published a year before she shot Andy Warhol, Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* would become an ur-text of second wave feminism, even though the feminist movement could never fully embrace it. To Solanas, *SCUM* wasn't merely a matter of gender. "The conflict," she wrote, "is not between females and males, but between SCUM - dominant, secure, self-confident,

nasty, violent, selfish, independent, proud, thrill-seeking, free-wheeling arrogant females... and nice, passive, accepting, 'cultivated', polite, dignified, subdued, dependent, scared, mindless, insecure, approval-seeking Daddy's Girls..."

Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* wasn't so much a feminist text as an exorcism. While Kurland began her project thinking that cutting things up would be a supreme act of revenge and destruction, she soon found that the recomposition of all these men's images would become a reparative work.

Kurland's collages are incredibly varied. They range from spare and elegant shimmering black-and-white compositions reminiscent of early Dada to troubling *mélanges* of mid-century American suburbia. In "Cottonwoods (Justine)", she spells her name out in repurposed tree branches, just as one of the girls featured in *Girl Pictures* might have done. Pillaging works made by Guy Bourdin and Helmut Newton, Kurland reconfigures their nude female bodies into ecstatic and pulsating machines made of flesh. The viewer dives into an illusion of infinite dimensions. Sometimes, though, pleasure is all on the surface: simple, flat pieces whose very few elements combine into startling juxtapositions. "Exhibit A" is a brilliant concoction of diamond tiaras, lambs' heads, stripper legs, trained seals and silicone tits.

Kurland's collages are incredibly accomplished. At their best, they reanimate the stale imagery of 20th-century film and media culture into amazing new worlds. In "Twilight", animals emerge from the darkness as spirits that haunt and survey domestic interiors ripped from old horror films.

Kurland's *SCUMB* collages propose a new kind of escape, piercing the seductive allure of classical photography's images to reveal the repressive systems that they support. Although, for now, Kurland has stopped photography's "colonial" pursuit and capture of images, her pursuit of freedom remains fierce. **FT**

© Chris Kraus 2022. Kraus is the author of novels including "I Love Dick" and the biography "After Kathy Acker". Justine Kurland's "SCUMB Manifesto" is published by Mack

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

Still Independent, and Still Exceptional

Let your fall re-entry begin at the Independent Art Fair in Manhattan, which features painting, photography and the pioneers of net art.

By Martha Schwendener

September 10, 2021



Image: Justine Kurland, *Choreograph*, 2021, collage (hardcover), 9 1/4 x 24 inches.

Justine Kurland at Higher Pictures Generation

Justine Kurland is known for her dreamy, enigmatic photographs of girls and women — and later, people occupying quiet evocative landscapes. Here, she has dismantled her library of photography books and made collages that are often funny and provocative. Given that the canon of photography — like painting — was filled with many white men photographing women’s bodies, she has literally reconfigured the canon. In one collage, the name “Lorena” is spelled out: that is, Lorena Bobbitt who cut off her husband’s penis, if you need the association with women, scissors, and patriarchy spelled out for you.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/09/arts/design/independent-art-fair-cipriani.html>

ARTFORUM

Summer 2021



Justine Kurland, *Twilight*, 2021, collage, 9 3/4 x 24 3/4".

Justine Kurland

HIGHER PICTURES GENERATION

Justine Kurland's latest exhibition "SCUMB Manifesto" found her swerving for the first time from photography to a more plastic medium and a loosely conceptual framework, yet with her usual mode of expression still in mind. Kurland has taken up collage, but with a provocative and very specific set of raw materials: The artist culled her extensive photo-book library of its roughly 150 volumes by white men and went at them with an X-Acto. SCUMB (Society for Cutting Up Men's Books) is, obviously, a tribute to Valerie Solanas's hilarious, violent, and critically perspicacious *SCUM Manifesto* (1967). As a kind of coup de grâce, when showtime rolled around Kurland offered to sell each of the sixty-five artworks she'd completed to the man whose imagery she'd reconfigured. Not a single one took her up on the offer.

If Kurland had scripted that response herself, it could not have been more perfect. A geek-macho culture has pervaded photography throughout what one might call its classical postwar form—that is, the cargo-vest, it's-an-art, women-are-beautiful, put-us-in-MoMA, tenure-us-at-Yale form, with a champagne coupe of fashion sleaze on the side. Sure, the executor of, say, Roman Vishniac's estate may have been befuddled to receive Kurland's unexpected sales pitch. But half the artists are living, and many of them are, I would hazard, of Kurland's acquaintance. Come on, gentlemen. I know money is tight these days, but we all nearly just died in a pandemic. Can't you take a joke?

The collages make an impressive addition to Kurland's already exceptional oeuvre, with its explorations of girl- and womanhood, the American landscape, marginal characters, and dilapidated fantasies of freedom. The new works are skillful, versatile, and refreshingly analog—yes to the cut-and-paste of Jess or Linder, no to the aesthetics of Photoshop (in keeping with the artist's continuing dedication to film). The splayed, stripped-off covers from the mostly hardbound volumes—each one comprising the tome's full front, spine, and back—serve as grounds for the books' diced-up contents. The results show off a vibrant array of logics and styles. *Paris by Night*, 2020, for example, turns an image of a sinuous cobblestoned gutter on its side, making it the central arch of an elegant, mysterious composition that evokes a machinic form of Surrealism. *Think of England*, 2021, with its synthetic colors, canned goods, and bisected Pegasus, has a Pop feel, *pace* Richard Hamilton. *Hustlers*, 2019, and *Hustlers (Kate's Copy)*, 2021—made from Philip-Lorca diCorcia's portraits of sex workers—the subjects absent from their sidewalks and motel rooms, are intricate yet ghostly memento mori.

Despite the rigorous formalism on display, the exhibition does feature many moments of satire and critique. Take the ironically titled *Exhibit A*, 2020, which reconstitutes Guy Bourdin's work as a long splay of women's body parts, mostly legs, with a trained seal begging for a fish in the upper-right corner. *The Man, the Image, & the World*, 2020, riffs on the objectivist impulse, classifying clipped limbs, faces, and so on into columns bracketing a tondo of headless, suit-clad men who orbit a cadre of rifles. In *Nudes*, 2021, a welter of dissected female bodies spell out the artist's first name, with a nipple dotting the I. *Twilight*, 2021, rooted in a familiar suburban gothic, studs a thin landscape of clunky trees and lampposts with taxidermied fauna, while moody empty interiors lurk below in the universal psychic basement. Meanwhile, at center, a pregnant woman with a distended belly is just missed by the rays of an anxious moon.

In the end, "SCUMB Manifesto" made an incisive point about art history and history in general. The virtuous gallerygoer, the conscientious citizen, is trained to see what's in front of them in light of the past. But for an exhibition that, Solanas style, cuts an antique, patriarchal history down to size, how relevant should yesterday be? Kurland's staging of this conundrum, dismissing the male figures behind her images while consistently calling them to account, makes yet another incisive point: The past can't just vanish with a finger snap, but rather must be dealt with in a complex case-by-case way—preferably a gleeful one, and maybe involving a razor.

— Domenick Ammirati

BROOKLYN RAIL

Justine Kurland: *SCUMB Manifesto*

By Robert Slifkin

April 2021



Justine Kurland, *Los Alamos (3 volumes)*, 2021. Collage (hardcover), 26 x 12 3/4 inches each.
Courtesy Higher Pictures Generation.

ON VIEW

Higher Pictures Generation

SCUMB Manifesto

March 13 – May 1, 2021

Brooklyn

What is to be done with histories that are marked and marred by systems of oppression? While there is a growing movement for the removal of public monuments that have long served as emblems of white and male supremacy, the question of how to approach and appreciate what those old things textbooks once called “monuments of art history” is more problematic. Inside the museums, recontextualization rather than removal seems to be the order of the day, but it is not entirely clear if new juxtapositions are enough to engender new values from a canon that is fundamentally predicated on the objectification and the marginalization of women and people of color. Can artists who reject such values work their way out of these traditions without drawing upon institutions, innovations, and

iconography of the past which, to a certain extent, serve as indispensable conventions that ground an object's very identity as art?

This question runs through the 65 photocollages in Justine Kurland's show *SCUMB Manifesto*. Riffing on Valerie Solanas's 1967 feminist broadside announcing "the society for cutting up men" (SCUM), Kurland's project adds a silent B to indicate that, here, it is men's books that are being cut up. Kurland's collages can be seen as summoning the feminist utopia Solanas imagined, one in which the elimination of men would augur a more peaceful, creative, and empathic society. The untidy and oftentimes humorous world pictured in the works captures both the emancipatory madness and violent stridency of Solanas's radical vision, which notoriously led her to shoot Andy Warhol in 1968.



Justine Kurland, *Hustlers*, 2019. Collage (hardcover), 17 1/2 x 27 1/4 inches.
Courtesy Higher Pictures Generation.

Solanas reportedly told the police officer who she turned herself into that Warhol "had too much control in my life." It is likewise possible to see the male artists whose photobooks serve as both the source imagery and material support for Kurland's collages as similarly domineering forces that the artist seeks to subvert through an equally destructive, albeit aesthetically circumscribed, act. Kurland ransacked her collection of photobooks to create these collages, using the bindings of each volume as the surface upon which to glue various fragments, so that the dimension of each collage (with the exception of the floral vortex of pussies and leggy asses made from one of Lee Friedlander's books of nudes) are determined by the contours of the book from which the sources imagery is taken. In certain cases, the color of the boards and endpapers becomes a crucial aesthetic component, as in

the triptych of collages made from William Eggleston's *Los Alamos*, in which the exposed edges of each volume set the tone for the pieces constructed from the photographer's much-admired color images. In many of Kurland's collages, the book's spine, with its torn nubs of paper, takes on the corporeal connotations of its name, underscoring the numerous disjointed and damaged bodies that populate these works.



Justine Kurland, *American Monuments*, 2020. Collage (hardcover) 12 x 34 7/8 inches.
Courtesy Higher Pictures Generation.

Not surprisingly, women's bodies are a frequent subject and along with Friedlander, Edward Weston, Guy Bourdin, and, perhaps most expectedly, Helmut Newton all get the razor's treatment, pinpointing their apparent fascination with breasts, genitals, and female flesh more generally. Drawing upon the cut-up technique's capacity to reveal subterranean messages, Kurland exposes the manic fetishization of Alfred Stieglitz's focus on Georgia O'Keeffe's hands, and even less sexually charged material, like Chauncey Hare's, for example, shows its author to be something of a leg man. Likewise, many of the collages hit on stylistic clichés associated with each master—Robert Adams's meticulous architecture, Ralph Eugene Meatyard's masks, Stephen Shore's plates of food—and for viewers well versed in the history of the photobook part of the fun is trying to identify the artist through these fragmentary signs of authorial presence. (The titles of the collages only give the book's titles and not the names of their creators).

Turning mass produced books into unique artworks, Kurland's act of iconoclasm doesn't have the same shock value as Jake and Dinos Chapman's puerile amendments to Goya's *Disasters of War*. Yet it is hard to not recognize Kurland's engagement with the escalating market for photobooks as collectable objects in their own right. While it appears that the artist's library tends toward reprints rather than first editions, many of the destroyed books are nonetheless quite expensive. For instance, Philip-Lorca diCorcia's *Hustlers*, of which two copies were plundered by Kurland, goes for around \$450 these days—which it should be noted is only half of the listed price for Kurland's collage!



Justine Kurland, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 2020. Collage (hardcover), 14 1/4 x 22 1/4 inches.
Courtesy Higher Pictures Generation.

From Hannah Höch's jampacked nightmares of Weimar culture to the trenchant exposé of the domestication of militarization in Martha Rosler's series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (c. 1967–72), photo collage has long served as a formidable means of feminist critique. Kurland's collages, with their cyborgian figures and surreal juxtapositions, invoke these avant-garde precedents as well as more vernacular—and notably female-centered—traditions like Victorian photo collage. In this regard, Kurland's *SCUMB Manifesto* expands upon her previous works that have recalibrated the decidedly masculinist traditions of the photographic road trip, depicting the childcare that figures like Friedlander and Robert Frank rarely showed, despite regularly traveling *en famille*. Likewise, the largely de-masculated world envisioned by these collages can be seen as darker pendants to the artist's earlier pictures of adolescent girls posed in scenes of fantastic wildness.

Coming in the wake of the #MeToo movement, when the scumminess of men can't be denied, Kurland's collages appear as both indictments and salvage attempts. Disposed in wild and allusive accretions, these fragments of past artistic mastery become, when arrayed on the flayed boards of their previous containers, something like an archeological dig, or, as in the case of *Passing Through Eden* (2020, from Tod Papageorge's book), a teetering garbage heap of history. This sense of a past in ruins is perhaps most vividly portrayed in the four grotesque conglomerations assembled out of Friedlander's *The American Monument*. As in so many of Kurland's collages, an animated, anarchic, even at times crude and gimmicky new world is brutally begotten from a past that is shown to be equally obscene and vicious—and, perhaps most crucially, precariously unstable.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2021/04/artseen/Justine-Kurland-SCUMB-Manifesto>



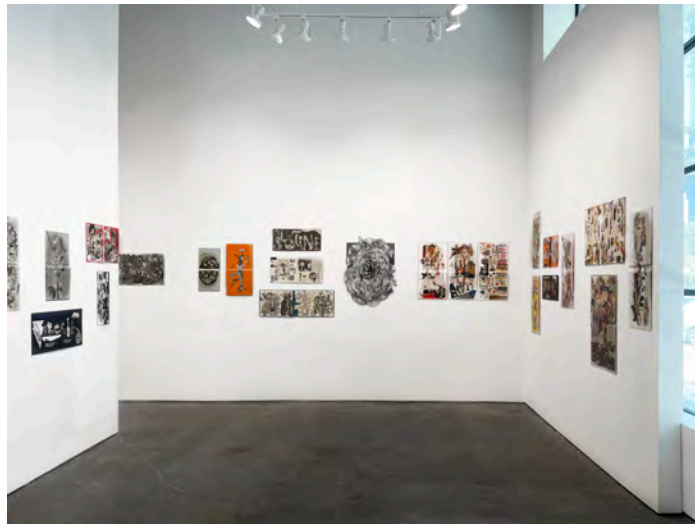
COLLECTOR
DAILY

Justine Kurland, SCUMB Manifesto

Higher Pictures Generation

By [Richard B. Woodward](#) / In [Galleries](#) / March 29, 2021

JTF (just the facts): A total of 68 photo-collages exhibited without frames on the four walls of the gallery as well as on both sides of the partition. Each work is unique and was constructed between 2019-2021 from a copy of a photography book (black-and-white and color) authored by a White male. Each book has been disassembled by Kurland, who has cut apart images on the pages and recombined them. The endpapers of the books serve as backgrounds for each collage while the covers determine the sizes, which range from roughly 18×8 to 32×25 inches. The checklist retains the title of the original book but has eliminated the name of photographer. Each photo-collage itself has also eliminated the original book title, and the name of the original photographer has been replaced by Kurland's signature. Twenty-five works are hung vertically; the rest horizontally. (Installation shots below.)



Accompanying the exhibition is a zine titled *The SCUMB Manifesto*, with 29 reproductions of photo-collages and another on the cover. Inside is an essay by Justine Kurland dated March 2019 and March 2021.

Comments/Context: The concept is simple, audacious, scathing, mean, unfair, brilliant: an update of Valerie Solanas' notorious *SCUM* (Society for Cutting Up Men) manifesto, the 1967 underground classic of radical feminist rage, this time reimagined as a personal protest against male cultural hegemony in the art world of photography—indeed as an evisceration of it.

Justine Kurland plays the vengeful goddess of creative destruction in this action, and she performs the role with ferocious gusto. Instead of Solanas' torrent of words, the photographer conjures whirlwinds of images that are intended to deliver a similar message. Choosing books of photographs by men from her private library, she has wielded her X-Acto knife and scissors on the contents, slicing up pages and recombining the severed pieces into collages that reflect her rejection of images that for too long have colonized her brain and the art world. As an homage to Solanas, she has titled her exorcism SCUMB (Society for Cutting Up Men's Books).

I expect Kurland's women friends and representatives greeted her idea with hoots of laughter, maybe even applause. (I laughed, too, when I read the press release, although more nervously.) Rehabilitating the name of the sexually abused but mentally unbalanced Solanas, best-known as the attempted assassin of Andy Warhol, is daring enough. To then go about shredding dozens of photography books—titles that presumably Kurland once treasured, including *Paris by Night* and *The Americans*, as well as books by former teachers and mentors—is riskier still. Not everyone is likely to be flattered having years or a lifetime of work physically ripped apart and in theory disparaged.

As a photographer, Kurland has been trained to discover pictures in the world, not to create them at the table, so she is venturing outside her comfort zone. Photo-collage belongs to that repertoire of techniques—solarization; negative-positive reversal; aerial, infrared, and pinhole photography; sepia printing; and the “fish-eye” lens—that can reliably produce a surrealistic effect. It's hard to make a bad photo-collage or a great one.

To make her task harder, she has followed a strict set of parameters. The physical book itself provides all of the content. No Photoshop, no darkroom manipulation, no extraneous material. The size of the cover determines the size of the collage, and the colored inside papers of the original serve as background. The vertical strip of the binding being incorporated into the rectangular format of the finished work, hung either vertically or horizontally, she is often confined to making diptychs. In an early iteration of the exhibition checklist, she included the names of the photographers. She later decided to delete them but to keep the title of the book that has been re-authored. The show offers no wall text that would explain Kurland's thoughts about any of these photographers so inspecting the walls becomes a guessing game about why a particular image or style has incurred her wrath.

Why Kurland has chosen some books and ignored others is also not clear. (In an email response to my question, she wrote: “I cut books from my personal library; books introduced through my education, through publishers or exhibitions; books

that exerted an influence and helped shape my language.”) She seems to have methodically surveyed her bookshelves, A to W, and decided to spare no White males—except Timothy O’Sullivan and Carleton Watkins so far. (“I will get to them,” she reassures me, “but they feel relatively benign so it’s not that urgent.”)

The press release provides further explanation for her purge. “Historical figures who have become the foundation of the history of photography, and their contemporary male heirs by primogeniture, have their pictures chopped up and reauthored by Kurland. The nature of collage—heterogeneous, pulled apart, shape shifting, disrupted, cyborg, fantasy—has long made it a feminist strategy in life and in art. Kurland’s is a restorative and loving ritual. Each collage is a reclamation of history; a dismemberment of the patriarchy; a gender inversion of the usual terms of possession; and a modest attempt at offsetting a life of income disparity.”

That’s a heavy load for a set of modest photo-collages to carry on their shoulders, and Kurland frequently stumbles. Some photographers invite a dismantling and a settling of scores. As soon as I learned of the project, I wondered if Lee Friedlander’s *Nudes* and Garry Winogrand’s *Women are Beautiful* would be in her sights and offer target rich environments. Sure enough, they do.

Other photographers pose problems if you are delivering a feminist critique and want to, say, deconstruct the male gaze. She opens the show with three books by Robert Adams: *White Churches of the Plains*, *From the Missouri West*, *To Call It Home Photographs of the American West*. None of her slashing revisions of his unassertive work—into fractured trees and buildings, decapitated steeples, a patch of isolated sandbanks, an amusement park ride—convey a spirit of anger or satire or fun, or much spirit at all. It’s as if her heart weren’t fully engaged in her demolition job. Adams has to be exterminated only because of what he represents—an honored place in her artistic upbringing—and not for anything egregious he has said or done or photographed that demeaned women. Similarly, her tearing apart of books by Atget, Karl Blossfeldt, William Eggleston, Robert Frank, John Gossage, Paul Graham, Chris Killip, William Klein, Martin Parr, Michael Schmidt, Alec Soth, and many others qualify as attacks on innocents whose only crime was to be White and male. What’s more, the crime scenes she has left for us to sift for clues aren’t that revealing about the victims.

Even when her designs are ingenious, as they often are, it’s not always clear what we are meant to conclude from them. Her isolation of pictorial elements in Larry Sultan’s *Katherine Avenue* bring out buried patterns in the three-book collection I hadn’t noticed before: the many shades of green in the decor of his parents’ home, and the pervasive drapes and valences. Sultan’s mother is here rendered headless while his father, seated on the bed, is turned into a blank silhouette, an apt commentary on his function in the photographer’s life. Elegant though the jumbled new perspective is, its insights into suburban life in America, or the role of women and men, are no more perceptive than the ones encoded—with more bite—in Sultan’s original photographs.

Kurland is best when distilling a book into a few telling images. Stephen Shore's *American Surfaces* is little more than plates of unappetizing road food and toilets, a hilariously crude but apt summary. Alfred Stieglitz's *Georgia O'Keeffe* consists of nothing but an overgrown jungle of bent wrists and hands and fingers intertwined. The black end papers of Brassai's *Paris by Night* turn out to be a perfect setting for Kurland's reinterpretation of the city as a monster with a gaping, toothy smile and serpentine appendages, similar to the female beast in the *Alien* series. It was cruel of Kurland to reduce Emmet Gowin's Aperture monograph on family life in rural Virginia to some bare female breasts and arms, a patch of curled hair, and a veined leaf. But it feels like an honest response to the book, to the nude pictures of Gowin's wife Edith that have stayed in Kurland's over many years and are the reason the book has been in her library.

There is an elegiac quality to these collages, as if she were saying goodbye to objects she once dearly loved and that now—due to her political-social convictions—can no longer live with. Most of us do not easily get rid of books, at least not ones that have been in our possession for years, and it appears that Kurland (b. 1969) is no different.

The emotional confusion in the work emerges most strongly in her revisions of Friedlander and Winogrand, two looming male figures from her early schooling in photography at SVA and Yale. Friedlander's *Nudes* was shocking when published in 1991 because his photographs of women's bodies were so graphically real, with far more body hair than most of us were used to comfortably looking at. Inspired by the artist Jay DeFeo's circular forms, Kurland has made a swirling storm of these bodies, a hurricane of naked women's breasts, arms, and legs, in the dark eye of which (hard to see) are tiny crotches of pubic hair. Ostensibly mocking Friedlander's intrusive stare, her version is actually more sanitized and decorative, easier to accept as a work of art than his sweaty and clinical orgy of photographic scrutiny. It wouldn't surprise me to see her x-rated baroque fantasy on the walls of the Whitney Biennial.

Her double-sided take on *Women is Beautiful* is even more complicated, the tweezers pieces put together like a delicate watch, with intricate negative and positive spaces, cut-out figures, patterning of dresses and blouses, and a white ghostly silhouette of a woman in the center. As much as Kurland wishes to be brutal to these men and their reportedly sexist photographs, her adherence to the craft of making things well won't allow her to be. Her remodeled Winogrand is the masterpiece of the show.

What's most puzzling about Kurland's attitude in the SCUMB project is that she wants us to take Valerie Solanas seriously, something I'm not sure her gallery does. The SCUM manifesto was published in 1967, the year of the "Summer of Love" and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band*. The press release captures the loopy utopian mood (and dated Austin Powers slang) of the time by quoting the book's opening lines: "SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men)...will eliminate through sabotage all aspects of society not relevant to women (everything), bring about a complete

female take-over, eliminate the male sex and begin to create a swinging, groovy, out-of-sight female world.”

Scholars debate whether Solanas’ text should be read as feminist or anarchist, and whether it is a visionary assault on patriarchy or a parody of Freud. So far as I know, she never cut up any men. In 1968 she used a handgun in shooting Warhol three times, missing twice. She also would have killed his lawyer Fred Hughes, too, had her gun not jammed. The only people who cut up anyone because of Solanas were the surgeons who saved Warhol’s life. Richard Avedon’s photograph of the Pop artist’s stitched up abdomen commemorates their diligent handiwork. Because the court diagnosed her to be a paranoid schizophrenic, Solanas received only a 3 year-sentence for attempted murder.

Kurland’s essay in the zine for the show could be read as an attempt to imitate the unhinged logic of Solanas. In it Kurland expresses sympathy for wives who kill their abusive husbands because it “challenges the notion that women are only ever the recipients of violence.” Along the way, she libels the sculptor Carl Andre (“probably” murdered his wife “although not convicted”) and the photographer Thomas Roma (an “unindicted” serial rapist) and claims that Warhol’s art is “compelling because it’s the result of a damaged psyche.”

The ambition of SCUMB—to remake the history of photography as her own and to liberate it in the name of all women—is an extension of Kurland’s desire to live in a matriarchal paradise, a wish expressed in her previous series *Girl Pictures* (1997–2002), and *Mama Babies* (2004–07). Her dismemberment of photography books by men is purely a symbolic act and isn’t harming anyone: she isn’t destroying actual photographs, only reproductions of them.

By ingesting their cannibalized parts, however, she may be granting men more power than they already possess. In Egyptian myth, after Osiris was cut into pieces by his wicked brother Set, it was Isis, wife of Osiris, who gathered up the severed parts of the body so that he could be returned to life. SCUMB has in a sense placed a higher value on the work of male photographers than on her own. The show has sold out. Is that because of her or them? Or because in the art economy, unique works are valued more highly than editioned ones? Photo-collage is the perfect vehicle for the conversion of the multiple into the one-of-a kind.

Kurland must have calculated that the personal costs of this work could be high and has boldly proceeded anyway. SCUMB threatens to damage, if not rupture completely, friendships with other photographers that Kurland has maintained for years. Books by three of Kurland’s teachers—Tod Papageorge, Joel Sternfeld, and Gregory Crewdson—have been vivisected. Which raises a slew of questions: If any of them feel insulted by what she has done to their photographs, are they being too sensitive? Can’t they take a joke? (To redirect a charge often leveled at feminists.) Or are they right to feel wounded because they finally understand how she has always felt about them as artists but didn’t dare admit it to their faces?

The press release states that before collectors could buy the collages, Kurland offered to sell them to the original photographers. “None of the men have taken her up on her offer.” The tone of this statement is odd. Are we supposed to be surprised—or indignant—that these humorless men have so far spurned her proposal? I’m not sure why anyone would be expected to buy back *his own work for hundreds of dollars* after it has been savaged by someone who has singled you out for attack only because of your gender and skin color.

The general motives behind the show are more invigorating than the particular expressions of it. It is thrilling to see an artist make a radical break with her past, as Kurland her here. She’s like a woman who feels she can no longer stand to be in a marriage and so instead of selling the house burns it to the ground.

What she has accomplished for herself by this gesture, though, is not as certain. It would be instructive to know what traits of each photographer Kurland found most objectionable—should no male be allowed to photograph a nude woman?—and how she intends to counteract their influence on her habits of seeing and working. As most art photography books in history have been—and may continue to be—authored by men, this could well be an ongoing and a lifelong project.

Collector’s POV: All works are unique and \$900. The show is sold out. Kurland is also represented by Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York ([here](#)). Her work has slowly begun to enter the secondary markets in the past few years, with prices ranging from roughly \$2000 to \$6000.

ARTFORUM

Print September 2018



Justine Kurland, *Bathroom*, 1997, C-print, 11 × 14".

Justine Kurland

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH | CHELSEA

A few years after Justine Kurland started shooting her “Girl Pictures,” 1997–2002, she was dubbed a “girl photographer.” Although the label feels limiting, if not downright misogynistic, Kurland artistically came of age in the 1990s, a decade that celebrated the more renegade aspects of female adolescence. The “Riot Grrrl Manifesto,” published in a zine put out by feminist punk band Bikini Kill in 1991, plainly stated the case for reclaiming the word: “BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak.”

At Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Kurland's series, exhibited for the first time in its entirety, was cinematic in spirit. The sixty-nine vintage C-prints hung in a single line around the gallery. The narrative opened with a photograph taken in the postindustrial landscape of New Haven, Connecticut, and continued across multiple road trips that Kurland took over the course of five years. In these staged images, her subjects absorb themselves in activities by and for each other, from drawing on one another's backs to killing small game. They could be plucked from sundry girl-centric films of the 1990s—think Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) or Gillian Armstrong's *Little Women* (1994). Wearing threadbare, slouchy clothes, sans makeup, and often with no men in sight, these girls “act” more often than “appear”—to reverse the terms of John Berger's famous phrase, “Men act and women appear.”

The teens enact closed loops of introspection. In *Clothes make the man, Desert scene*, 2001, two topless girls stare into a shard of mirror near an open suitcase strewn with clothes. Carefully composed with a tree at the center of the frame, the picture captures the young women from the back, with only a fraction of their faces visible to Kurland's lens. They play against the stereotype of the adolescent who seeks validation from an outside gaze.

Indeed, the artist's models do not pose seductively for the camera, though there's an undeniable charge of intimacy throughout. Sensuality is expressed through the ease Kurland's subjects have with their own naked bodies. In *Bathroom*, 1997, a trio of runaways takes a break in a public lavatory. A shirtless teen is pictured from behind as she stands in front of a mirror. She gazes at her friend, who is perched on the sink, holding a cigarette and a magazine. A third girl sprawls out on the floor in front of a pile of clothes. Unlike Ryan McGinley, to whom she is often compared, Kurland does not spectacularize eroticism. This photograph turns titillating nudity and illicit adventure into something more everyday.

In a pair of photographs from 1999, Kurland switches up gender dynamics, making young men the passive subject of female desire and brutality. In *Boy Torture: Two Headed Monster*, a couple of young women pin a young man to the ground in a wintry landscape. One of them tries to spit into his mouth. A third friend watches the scene unfold while playing on the thick branches of a leafless tree. Is she horrified or aroused? A wasp-waisted female in *Boy Torture: Love*, faces away from the viewer while taking off her shirt. She's near a river-bank, surrounded by other girls and a lone boy, whose eyes are covered by another girl's hands. In the background, likely squaring off with

Kurland's camera, a teen lies back to take in the scene. Her mien is impassive, but Kurland's composition is defiant—not every expression of female sexuality is safe for male consumption.

-Wendy Vogel

Justine Kurland

Johanna Fateman

The photo series *Girl Pictures* conjures a feminine dreamscape.



Justine Kurland, *The Wall*, 2000. C-print, 11 × 14 inches. © Justine Kurland. Image courtesy the artist.

...

The runaways of Justine Kurland's *Girl Pictures*, 1997–2002—feral teens living in moody, thrill-seeking packs at the gorgeous outskirts of civilization—bear a more than passing resemblance to the *Runaways*. It's as though the members of the legendary seventies girl band wandered away from their tour bus at a highway rest stop and just kept going. What would their raw rebellion and sexual self-possession look like offstage, without an audience, in the wild? Kurland answers with sixty-nine transfixing

photographs. For this exhibition, which marks the twentieth anniversary of the series (though a few of the works date slightly earlier), a full set of the vintage color prints, each eleven by fourteen inches, photo-album sized, encircles the gallery in a line.



Justine Kurland: Girl Pictures, 1997–2002, installation view. © Justine Kurland. Image courtesy the artist.

The Runaways’ taunting lead singer Cherie Currie—whose glam-punk persona, fucked-up real life, and tragic role opposite Jodie Foster in the white-suburban teen drama *Foxes* (1980) made her the quintessential, last-days-of-disco bad girl—particularly captivates the artist. In a moving essay (written this year and included in the show’s accompanying, limited-edition monograph), Kurland describes the intimacy of her *Girl Pictures* and how she understood her place in the midst of these staged, outdoor tableaux, via the fantasy premise of a picnic in the country with Currie. “I would show her my favorite tree to climb, braid her hair by a gently flowing river, and read aloud to her, my gaze occasionally drifting toward the horizon while she lazily plucked a blade of grass and tasted its sweet greenness. All the power chords we would ever need lay within reach, latent, coiled in wait.”

None of these images feature rock stars, though. For her initial experiments Kurland shot around Manhattan with a boyfriend’s fifteen-year-old daughter as her model, then graduated to total strangers. She would cruise for collaborators near high schools, she recalls, then drive a carload of girls to “a place where the landscape opens up—a place to plant a garden, build a home, picture a world.”



Justine Kurland, *The Sirens*, 1999. C-print, 11 × 14 inches. © Justine Kurland. Image courtesy the artist.

Meadows, creeks, swamps, desert vistas, and a burning forest are among the dramatic backdrops Kurland found as she began road-tripping across the country in 1997, following the westward path of brutal American expansion, enlisting local girls to stake their own claim, to transpose new adventures on the landscape. In these images, nature is not often pristine—fences, overpasses, and power lines underscore the runaways' dangerous proximity to what they've fled. In *The Sirens* (1999) we see, from a distance, a small figure pulling her comrade up a steep, rocky slope running alongside a desolate road, so they might disappear together into a forbidding expanse of rust-colored winter woods. Approaching headlights, though far off, lend a sense of scrambling urgency to their efforts. *Gibraltar* (2000) is another stunning wide shot: two girls, on a wild coast somewhere, climb a chain-link fence that abuts a formidable rock. One has tossed her backpack over the fence and her companion pushes her up. Pale sea fades into white sky behind them.



Justine Kurland, *Gibraltar*, 2000. C-print, 11 × 14 inches. © Justine Kurland. Image courtesy the artist.

These compositions serve as elegant foils to closer views of the teens, in which the intensity of their interactions and the complexity of their communal activities are rendered in detail. Mysterious politics are in play in *Boy Torture: Two Headed Monster* (1999), one of a handful of works in which the enemy appears. He's been dragged, on a chilly day, through tall dry grass to be pinned down on muddy ground by two girls. The apparent leader holds his arms down to spit in his face. It's an action shot—a blob of saliva hangs from her lips, as another girl, perhaps a little younger, watches intently over her shoulder. A third observes from some remove, leaning back in a low-hanging branch, long hair and a dark overcoat contributing to her witchy mystique. Maybe she's the leader, directing the action.



Justine Kurland, *Girls in Sand*, 2002. C-print, 11 × 14 inches. © Justine Kurland. Image courtesy the artist.

In other scenes, intrepid young delinquents have set up makeshift camps with tarps tied to trees, built fires, gone for swims, or set out on reconnaissance missions, dressed in tomboy uniforms of baggy pants or tattered overalls, dark hoodies, old hunting jackets, and army surplus garb. Or they mess around: *Girls in Sand* (2002) shows some twenty of them at the beach, paired off in states of semi-undress on a bright dune. In *Poison Ivy* (1999), young lovers (maybe) hide together in the lush reeds of a marsh, plucking black leeches from their bodies with focused, melancholic eroticism; and another couple occupies the foreground of the wryly titled *Feminine Hygiene* (2000). One girl seems to inspect the other's ear as they as they huddle languidly beside the sun-dappled water of a drainage ditch.



Justine Kurland, *Feminine Hygiene*, 2000. C-print, 11 × 14 inches. © Justine Kurland. Image courtesy the artist.

Currie appears behind them—or rather, her doppelgänger, circa 1975, does. Slender and slouchy, she stands brushing her teeth, wearing low-slung denim jeans and a faded t-shirt, a studded belt peeking out from beneath its hem. She’s an excruciatingly cool figure, invoking the menacing stance of the Runaways, and the protagonist of their anthem “Cherry Bomb” (Can’t stay at home, can’t stay at school . . .). She glowers beneath the thick fringe of her bleached, white-blond shag—the Bowie-inspired cut the teenage singer gave herself after she was raped by her twin sister’s boyfriend.

But Kurland doesn’t confront the real reasons girls run away, or describe what their lives are like when they do. Her photos instead depict a world of American countermyth, one populated by heroes with names like Sandy, Jackie, Lita, Joan, or Cherie instead of Huck and Holden. As a woman living out of her car, perverting the *verité* tradition of road-trip photography’s male canon day by day, she had one foot planted in that romantic realm. “Behind the camera, I was also somehow in front of it—one of them, a girl made strong by other girls,” she reflects. Her pictures of them appear as glorious establishing shots or pivotal moments in an epic of overlapping plotlines. And taken all together—a rare opportunity that this graceful installation affords—they offer a vivid daydream of widespread revolt and cooperation among girls, a vision as poignant and tantalizing as ever.

Johanna Fateman is a writer and owner of Seagull salon in New York. She is coeditor of *Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin*, forthcoming from Semiotext(e).

AnOther

Documenting Girlhood: Justine Kurland's Captivating Pictures, 20 Years On

– June 5, 2018 –

"I staged the girls as a standing army of teenaged runaways in resistance to patriarchal ideals," says Justine Kurland of her Girl Pictures, taken over 20 years spent on the road in the North American wilderness



Forest, 1998 © Justine Kurland

Text Tish Wrigley

The various faces of the North American wilderness are riven with iconography of romance, rebellion, escape and freedom. Here cowboys fought Indians, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid evaded justice, Henry David Thoreau lived in the woods, Jack Kerouac went on the road and Timothy Treadwell tried to understand grizzly bears. It's a profoundly masculine narrative, all John Wayne, Beat poets and Huckleberry Finn. But where are the girls?

Obviously there have been women on the road, running and rebelling just as hard as the boys. Photographer Justine Kurland was one of them. For 20 years, she went on many-month-long road trips across the United States in an old green van, exploring and taking pictures. She had a number of subjects, but between 1997 and 2002 she focused on the *Girl Pictures*, staging images inspired by teenage runaways, images redolent with modernity and myth.

“I staged the girls as a standing army of teenaged runaways in resistance to patriarchal ideals,” she says. “The girls in these photographs have gathered together in solidarity, claiming territory outside the margins of family and institutions.”



Two Girls at the Farm, 2002 © Justine Kurland

Kurland would scout evocative locations, often with links to the 19th-century Western frontier, and recruit her youthful subjects from local towns and schools. “I never knew where I would end up or whom I would find,” she says, “so it was impossible to predetermine the outcome. I allowed my narratives to unravel as I constructed them. I wanted the pictures to contain both my projection and the actuality of the situation.”

What is presented is an otherworldly version of female life in the wild, freed from the limits of patriarchal power. Boys are present only as victims – being tortured by nudity or overpowered by a “two-headed monster”. Otherwise, the world is female and made

up of pagan, primal and prosaic activities – girls carrying home deer carcasses, swimming in green lakes, curled up together in makeshift tents, playing, camping, burning, eating, lounging, climbing, dancing, exploring. In one, two figures “make happy” in an abandoned car, in another they eat ketchup sandwiches, in another they emerge like dungaree-clad conquerors from under a bridge. The titles add to the atmosphere – *The Sirens* clamber up a roadside bank, *The Guardian Angel* sits on a scrubby bank by a motorway, *Blood Sisters* lie entangled under a tarpaulin.



One Red, One Blue, 2001 © Justine Kurland

But while myth and legend are woven into the pictures, so too are grit and ugliness. A cluster of teenagers are “shipwrecked” in a burnt-out car; one climbs a blossom-soaked tree framed by a motorway and a looming industrial coastline; the girl in flight from a forest fire streaming smoke might genuinely be in peril. We understand these pictures are part invention, but the truths pile up – not least in the clothes. The ubiquitous hoodies, tank tops, baggy jeans, combat trousers, oversized shirts are too familiar to be a costume. These girls are not creations, they are creating versions of themselves, or even idealised versions of Kurland’s own girlhood.

She says, “I was interested in girls because of their potential becoming. I wanted to warn them away from adulthood, and retroactively to correct what I hadn’t been able to fix for myself – becoming complicit economically, culturally and politically.”

20 years on, an exhibition at Mitchell-Innes & Nash is the first presentation of the artist's complete first printing of the *Girl Pictures*. Politically and personally, they continue to resonate. Right now women have been forced into the streets to campaign for protection of their bodies and rights, and this spirit aligns with Kurland's adventuring runaways. "It's necessary to look at this work in the context of our current political situation, where human rights are under constant attack. The girls in my photographs have been marching for 20 years to build a world that is possible to live in."



Candy Toss, 2000 © Justine Kurland

For Kurland, she returns to her images as a newly stationary artist. Her green van was totalled a few years ago, effectively ending her life on the road. She has begun to explore her roots, while putting down new ones of her own. "In many ways, my road trips were about putting as much distance between me and myself as I could, about going as far away as my car could take me. I decided to go back to see what I was running from."

As for the girls themselves – "None of them live in girl collectives as I imagined. But dreams make way for other dreams. I like to think that no matter what, they sometimes look at the pictures and remember, however briefly, that they were once free."

aperture

Justine Kurland Reflects on Her Photographs of Teenage Girl Runaways

Between 1997 and 2002, the photographer portrayed teenage girls as rebels, offering a radical vision of community against the masculine myth of the American landscape.

Featured - July 14, 2020
By Justine Kurland



Justine Kurland, *Orchard*, 1998

The Runaways are everything that's great about teenage girls. The tough ones who never came to school because they were out too late the night before. It's true, there have always been as many girl punks as boys. The Runaways are as real as getting beat up after school.

—Lisa Fancher, album liner notes to *The Runaways*, 1976

I channeled the raw, angry energy of girl bands into my photographs of teenagers. It was as if I took Cherie Currie—The Runaways’ lead singer—on a picnic somewhere out in the country. I would show her my favorite tree to climb, braid her hair by a gently flowing river, and read aloud to her, my gaze occasionally drifting toward the horizon while she lazily plucked a blade of grass and tasted its sweet greenness. All the power chords we would ever need lay within reach, latent, coiled in wait. The intensity of our becoming funneled up vertically from where we sat.



Justine Kurland, *Pink Tree*, 1999

Alyssum was the first girl I photographed. At age fifteen, she had been sent to live with her father—a punitive measure for skipping school and smoking pot. I happened to be dating her father at the time, but I vastly preferred her company to his. After he left for work, we spent long conspiratorial mornings stretched under the air conditioner in his Midtown Manhattan condominium. Together we conceived a plan to shoot film stills starring Alyssum as a teenage runaway. I outfitted her in my own ratty clothes and brought her to the Port Authority Bus Terminal. The only surviving picture from the time shows her in a cherry tree by the West Side Highway. The branches seem too thin to support even her small weight; their cloud of petals offers little camouflage. She hovers pinkly between the river and the highway, two modes of travel that share a single vanishing point.



Justine Kurland, *Toys R Us*, 1998

I expanded the cast to include some college freshmen and eventually started trolling the streets around various high schools, cruising for genuine teenage collaborators. Looking back, it seems miraculous that so many of them were prepared to get into a stranger's car and be driven off to an out-of-the-way location. But then, being *a* teenage girl is nothing without the willingness and ability to posture as *the* teenage girl.

My original inspiration was the after-school TV special—those cautionary tales of teenage delinquency that unintentionally glamorize the transgression they're meant to condemn. The usually male protagonist doesn't belong to the world as he has inherited it. He fights alienation by striking out to find a world of his own. I think first of Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but I trace the teenage runaway story further back to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which in turn rubs against tales of early immigrants pushing violently westward. Like a game of telephone, each reiteration alters and distorts a fundamentally American myth of rebellion and conquest, emphasizing or erasing certain details as new social and historical contexts demand. At least my narratives were honest about what they were: fantasies of attachment and belonging that sharply diverged from the hardships experienced by so many actual teenage runaways.



Justine Kurland, *Golden Field*, 1998

My runaways built forts in idyllic forests and lived communally in a perpetual state of youthful bliss. I wanted to make the communion between girls visible, foregrounding their experiences as primary and irrefutable. I imagined a world in which acts of solidarity between girls would engender even more girls—they would multiply through the sheer force of togetherness and lay claim to a new territory. Their collective awakening would ignite and spread through suburbs and schoolyards, calling to clusters of girls camped on stoops and the hoods of cars, or aimlessly wandering the neighborhoods where they lived. Behind the camera, I was also somehow in front of it—one of them, a girl made strong by other girls.



Justine Kurland, *Kung Fu Fighters*, 1999

Lily was my dream of a teenage runaway; it was as if she walked out of a picture I had yet to make. She lived in Tribeca but dated boys only from Brooklyn, the kind that say “Waz good?” when they answer the phone. She would climb into my car slightly stoned, her legs weighed down by Rollerblades, making it difficult for her to pull them inside. Lily died some years later. At her memorial, her father told a story about pulling the car over to the side of the road and lecturing his kids not to fight while he drove. “As long as you live in my house and wear the clothes I buy you,” he recalled saying, “you will live by my rules.” Lily pulled her sundress off over her head, got out of the car, and walked naked down the country road.



Justine Kurland, *Puppy Love*, 1999

The first condition of freedom is the ability to move at will, and sometimes that means getting *into* a car rather than getting out of one. It's difficult to describe the joy of a carload of girls, going somewhere with the radio turned up and the windows rolled down. They sing along with the music, tell stories in rushed spurts, lounge across each other, swap shirts, scatter clothes all over the back seat, lick melted chocolate off their fingers, and stick their heads out the windows, hair whipping back and mouths expanding with air. At last we arrive at a view, a place where the landscape opens up—a place to plant a garden, build a home, picture a world. They spill out of the car along with candy wrappers and crushed soda cans, bounding into the frame, already becoming a photograph.



Justine Kurland, *Ship Wrecked*, 2000

The car itself was the invisible collaborator in these pictures. I spent more and more time in it, over greater and greater distances. I could find girls wherever I stopped, but they went home after we made photographs, while I kept driving. My road trips underscored the pictures I staged—the adventure of driving west a performance in itself. I cross the Mississippi and when I reach Kansas, the land starts buckling up through the waving grass. Colorado crests, jagged and crystalline. The valley rolls between the Sierra Nevada and the Coastal Ranges, velvet green in the spring and scratchy yellow the rest of the year. Finally, the Pacific. The waves change to blue and flatten against the horizon. I pull into a turnout on Highway 1 and get out of my car with the radio still blaring and the surf pounding ahead of me. I dance in the beams of my headlights, because I've traveled as far away from far away as the highways will take me. *Hello world! I'm your wild girl. I'm your ch- ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-cherry bomb!*

That was then. Revisiting these photographs now, twenty years later, I am confronted by a standing army of teenage runaway girls, deployed across the American landscape, at a time when they need each other more than ever. “So what,” they say, “we’re never coming back.”

This essay was originally published in *Justine Kurland: Girl Pictures* (Aperture, 2020).

All images courtesy the artist.

Books

Reviews

Weekend

Justine Kurland's Female Utopia

In *Girl Pictures*, the photographer presents a seductive fantasy of a world in which being a young woman is not cause for fear but a source of boundless freedom.



by Kate Silzer
October 3, 2020



Justine Kurland, "Daisy Chain" (2000) (all images from *Girl Pictures*, Aperture, 2020; © Justine Kurland)

When Justine Kurland first started staging photographs of girls play-acting as runaways and castoffs in the late 1990s, setting them loose in woods and beaches and highways to do what teenagers do, she had Holden and Huckleberry on the mind. She was activating an alluring yet flawed mythology of exploration and self-sufficiency, recasting it with girls as the protagonists for once. Her subjects are puckish adolescents at a precipice in their lives. They come in twos or threes or tens; they wear tank tops and baggy jeans, hair loose, sometimes shoeless, their very own band of lost girls fleeing from adulthood itself.



Justine Kurland, "Boy Torture: Two-Headed Monster" (1999)

Kurland's runaways usually materialize on the outskirts of society. "The Sirens" (1999), for example, captures a group of girls climbing a rocky hill on the side of the road, escaping into the syrupy glow of the setting sun. One holds out her hands to hoist another up as an oncoming car approaches in the distance. In "Boy Torture: Two-Headed Monster" (1999), two girls hold down a boy in the brush under an overpass and dangle a glob of spit over the infiltrator's face. The woods are deadened and beige, the bare trees framing the trio. Behind them, another girl nonchalantly watches the scene from her perch on a branch.

These images — taken between 1997 and 2002, and republished in the new volume ***Girl Pictures*** — are so rich with fable they require no narrativizing, but that doesn't make Rebecca Bengal's introductory words any less welcome. Bengal links the photos into a single, snaking story, as devil-may-care as the images themselves: "They were Pre-Raphaelite, postapocalyptic; they were punk, they were pastoral. But they didn't know any of this yet, not back then."

At the time, the notion of girls forging self-reliant communities constituted a strong feminist stance. Since then, we've begun to see more women occupying lead roles in art and media — roles with agency and spunk and personality, women who revolve around their own magnetic cores. The young adults in Kurland's images embody the unstoppable desire to leave from where they came, a desire the artist herself felt

growing up poor in upstate New York. In her teens, she moved to New York City to stay with extended family and attended the School of Visual Arts, followed by an M.F.A. at Yale. She travelled west in her van, stopping only to take photos before forging on. “I could find girls wherever I stopped,” she writes in an essay titled “Cherry Bomb” which closes the book, “but they went home after we made photographs, while I kept driving. My road trips underscored the pictures I staged — the adventure of driving west a performance in itself.”



Justine Kurland, “Shipwrecked” (2000)

Kurland has been compared to photographers like Petra Collins, who construct scenes of youthful angst bathed in moody, feminine lighting. But where Collins shows a contemporary anxiety drenched in irony and technological influence, Kurland’s girls are unencumbered by such self-consciousness. More often, Kurland’s work is traced back to Gregory Crewdson, one of her MFA professors at Yale, who also made a career from shooting atmospheric staged photographs. For a medium that often hinges on the patience and luck of catching a moment as it happens, staged photography gives an artist greater narrative control. Kurland, however, only orchestrated her photos up to a point, letting the girls express themselves in front of the lens. The resulting candor lends the photos believability.

Girl Pictures presents a seductive fantasy of a world in which being a young woman is not cause for fear but a source of boundless freedom and camaraderie. In “Cherry

Bomb,” Kurland writes, “At least my narratives were honest about what they were: fantasies of attachment and belonging that sharply diverged from the hardships experienced by so many actual teenage runaways.” Even the grittier images of the girls smoking, eating ketchup sandwiches, washing in public bathrooms, skirting the sides of highways, or crouching under bridges are, in their own way, romanticized. The images themselves are unquestionably beautiful, often softened by natural, late-afternoon light. By and large, the girls appear blissfully unbothered by the precarious situations in which they’ve found themselves.



Justine Kurland, "Poison Ivy" (1999)

In one particularly painterly image titled “Poison Ivy” (1999), two young girls sit in the tall grasses next to a pond. Their clothes and hair are still wet from swimming, and one wears purple goggles pushed up on her head. Gingerly they place leeches on their bodies, leaving behind red bruises on their pale skin. Despite the sinister presence of the leeches, the scene is suffused with a peaceful, impressionistic glow.

A story from Lauren Groff’s book *Florida* comes to mind. Two young girls are abandoned by their mother on an island, and left to fend for themselves. They are free, but not safe. They tell each other stories, swim in the water, eat cherry ChapStick, hide from snakes and monkeys and men. Eventually, they’re rescued and grow into adults. The older sister holds onto those “beautiful soft days” and, facing the darkness and danger of the adult world, when her sister marries a bad man, she

has the “ugly wish” that they “had stayed on the island all those years ago; that they’d slowly vanished into their hunger until they turned into sunlight and dust.” There is a melancholy beauty to this kind of longing, and a fabricated nostalgia that resonates with Kurland’s photos. It is not that the island was all good, but at least it was theirs for a while.



Justine Kurland, "Toys R Us" (1998)

The girls in Kurland’s photos are tough because they are together. They are hunters and fighters. They tie up dead animals, they traverse the woods and the plains, they make the world work for them. These are the faces of girls who do not need to smile on command, do not need to look at the camera at all — they have more important business to tend to. Sometimes that business looks like lounging in the wildflowers, playing the guitar, or curling up in embrace on the sandy edge of the ocean.

Girl Pictures is a variant on runaway boy stories, but while the relation exists, the comparison is not exact. In Kurland’s vision, tenderness imbues the interactions between girls. She depicts intimate friends and lovers banded together, rather than individuals lighting out for the territory. Though there are a few pictures of single subjects, even these, bound together in this book, feel part of a greater collective.

As with every fantasy, though, reality presses in from the edges. Implicit in any depiction of utopia is what is left out, the chasm between representation and reality. What about the girls fleeing from real danger, from places to which they can’t

return? What about broken glass and disaster? What about the men? The rain? The cold? The realist — and woman — in me imagines every wrong way this can go.

20 years later, one must wonder if and how *Girl Pictures* remains relevant. Today this kind of escape feels less likely than ever. Teenagers still run away, certainly, but the world they run into looks different. With cell phones and tracking, getting lost is a rarity and going off the grid is almost impossible. The utopian freedom envisioned in this work is a Transcendentalist notion of escape from civilization. But who is privy to this type of freedom? The girls in Kurland's images are overwhelmingly white, and when one audience member at the ICP event noted this, Kurland admitted she hadn't actively tried to make the work more diverse. "It's a weakness of the project," she said. Some of it she attributed to circumstance. "Most American cities are completely segregated through gentrification and redlining. And it was easier to navigate white communities as a white person," she wrote in an email. "I remember coming to a black community in Alabama and everyone said no," she added. "I finally got one girl to agree but her mother came with us. It was the only time I ever shot with a mother present. It's the last picture in the book. I put it there to signify that there's still a lot more work to be done." Though *Girl Pictures* strives towards a collective ideal, ultimately it presents a limited conception of feminism. Kurland said she hopes someone will pick up the baton and make it anew.

What would a contemporary version of "girl pictures" look like? For one, it might not include runaways at all. "I teach so I'm around a lot of young people and it seems their sense of themselves and their fantasies for themselves are very different," Kurland says in an email. "I think some of them are interested in [my photographs] as a time before they existed, the way I like french new wave," says Kurland. Perhaps this new generation is one finding agency in political engagement rather than escapism (Kurland referenced Greta Thunberg and the Parkland Kids as examples at her ICP talk).

Still, *Girl Pictures* retains a certain mythological charm along the lines of Peter Pan: Childhood idealism set in idyllic landscapes, offering a different kind of community and adventure, with different kinds of rules. In staging these photos, Kurland hoped to manifest a dream into being. "I wanted to make the communion between girls visible, foregrounding their experiences as primary and irrefutable," she wrote in

“Cherry Bomb.” If we are to learn something from these images, it is not that running away is the answer, rather that we could be the answer for one another. “I imagined a world in which acts of solidarity between girls would engender even more girls — they would multiply through the sheer force of togetherness and lay claim to new territory.” We can see in these images both the dismal outskirts of industry and the sparkling ravines, the girls they were and the ones who would take their places, the sunlight as well as the dust.

Girl Pictures by Justine Kurland is published by Aperture and is available online and at [your local indie bookstore](#).

© 2021 Hyperallergic Media, Inc..

Proudly powered by Newspaper by Automattic

VANITY FAIR



Candy Toss, 2000. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.

POINTS OF VIEW

Another Look at Justine Kurland's *Girl Pictures*

For years, the well-known photographer shot teenage girls in bucolic landscapes. When she found the photos again decades later, they had taken on a new valence.

BY ERIN VANDERHOOF

MAY 7, 2020

Around the time she started working on a 2018 gallery show for *Girl Pictures*, a set of gorgeous portraits of teenage girls at play, shot between 1997 and 2002, the photographer **Justine Kurland** did something that proved just how much she had changed in the past 20 years. Long associated with road trips and an Edenic view of the American West, Kurland sold her van and called it quits on the quasi-nomadic life that had fueled her art for years.



Poison Ivy, 1999.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.

“As an artist, you do one thing after another, after another, after another, and you end up on this trajectory,” Kurland said in a recent phone interview. “Somehow it’s detached from where you actually are, because the work itself took on a kind of form once I started working on these

road trips. I had to sell the van to stop doing that because driving is so fun, and I regret selling it every day.”

In an essay that accompanies Aperture’s new bound collection of the work, she calls that van, which she drove around in at the time of *Girl Pictures*, an invisible collaborator. “I could find girls wherever I stopped, but they went home after we made photographs, while I kept driving,” she wrote. “My road trips underscored the pictures I staged—the adventure of driving west a performance in itself.”



The Wall, 2000. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.



One Red, One Blue, 2000. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.

But as things changed around her—she identifies the election of **Donald Trump** as a moment where the meaning of her work shifted a bit—she stopped wanting to make that performance. She has since started new work she said is “all about looking inward and thinking about what I was running from.” She no longer feels an uncomplicated identification with her old yearning for the West. But that shift helped her see something new in the photographs, which depict teenage girls in natural or nondescript settings, casting them in the adventurous roles of runaways and fighters.



Daisy Chain, 2000. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.



Shipwrecked, 2000. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.

A few years ago, there was a yellow Kodak box on Kurland's wall labeled "girl pictures" on masking tape. Her partner, the gallerist **Kim Bourus**, urged her to take them down, but Kurland resisted. "In order to make new work, I divorce myself from the work that I made before," she said. "You have to let it go so that you can have the room psychically to move on." But she relented and the two combed through the work together. "It was very embarrassing to see them again. It was really through her eyes that I was able to really appreciate them again."

The photos had also begun to have lives of their own. "I author the pictures, but they belong as much to the girls who are in the pictures and the people who are the receivers of the images," she said. "Especially I think as time goes by there's more distance to let the pictures do their own work."



Boy Torture: Two-Headed Monster, 1999. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.



Snow Angels, 2000. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.

She licensed them for use on projects that reflect a spirit of unknowable teenage girls—for instance, the cover of French band M83’s 2003 album *Dead Cities, Red Seas & Lost Ghosts* and a 2009 rerelease of **Jeffrey Eugenides**’s *The Virgin Suicides*—which allowed them to become touchstones for a generation of artistic expression by girls.

Some of the girls Kurland documented became artists in their own right. At a Zoom event on Wednesday to celebrate the new book, **Rebecca Schiffman**, one of the girls who is now grown up, performed a song dedicated to the memory of another girl Kurland photographed, **Lily Wheelwright**, who died in 2007 at the age of 24. In our interview, Kurland quoted a few lyrics from Schiffman's song that resonated with her experience of Wheelwright as a magnetic girl. "It's a really beautiful song, and the lyrics are something like 'knowing you is living,'" she said.



Bathroom, 1997. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.



Golden Field, 1998. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.

During the event, Kurland and Schiffman discussed their memories about the road trips and close relationships that undergirded the *Girl Pictures* two decades ago. Kurland became genuinely close to her subjects, and Schiffman and Wheelwright even sublet Kurland's apartment for some time while she was out on the road.

Kurland asked Schiffman why she went on all the road trips as a 17-year-old. "You have a way of getting people to go along with you," she replied, and mentioned a more recent moment in their friendship when Kurland coaxed her into a spider-filled shed to take photographs.

At the time, Kurland thought of herself as creating fictional portrayals of teen runaways. But 20 years have proven that she was also inventing a community, and it became a true one through the force of her art and energy. A real quest structured *Girl Pictures*, and that reality might be why they've become such lasting emblems of teenage experience.



Girls Curled Up, 1997.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.

She no longer shoots that world anymore, and her new work—collages, intimate portraits, and a study of an abandoned factory in upstate New York—is a departure from many of the things that came before it. But she still sees the power of the worlds she documented and the scenes she created. “A lot of art and writing exists in that contradictory space where it’s impossible to be what you’re presuming to be. There’s no way there’s going to be a girl utopia or a teenage-girl-runaway commune in the woods,” she said. “It’s this impossibility, but to imagine it is to maybe get a little bit closer to it.”

Erin Vanderhoof is a staff writer at *Vanity Fair*.

ART SY

This Photographer Envisioned a Fierce Army of Girls, Forging Their Own Paths

By Alina Cohen May 23, 2018



Justine Kurland, *The Wall*, 2000. © Justine Kurland. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

Throughout her career, photographer Justine Kurland has trained her lens on divergent subjects both documentary and staged: young girls, nude mothers, men at auto body shops. Across her work, there's a muted sense of romance, of both

gritty desire and desperation. Kurland relishes gravel, fences, dead animals, cell phone towers, broken windows, and car engines. Now a mother herself, she's ultimately outgrown the label that once reductively described her young, female cohort who captured even younger women on rolls of film: "girl photographers."

Just over 20 years ago, Kurland began photographing young women both in tough, urban settings and more idyllic, secluded locales. The subjects in this series, simply titled "Girls," rest against one another outside a bleak Toys 'R' Us, sit beneath an underpass, roast an animal over an open flame, and gather along rivers or in wooded clearings. They torture boys, eat ice cream, and play cards. The 69 career-launching images, made between 1997 and 2002, are now on view all together for the first time (as vintage prints) at Mitchell Innes & Nash—they're only for sale as a complete set, transforming the individual images into a larger event.



Justine Kurland, *Bathroom*, 1997. © Justine Kurland. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

Kurland began the series when she was a graduate student at Yale, where she studied under Gregory Crewdson and Laurie Simmons. Her relationship with Simmons extended beyond the classroom: “I remember how thrilling it was to share cigarettes with her on the back staircase, to hear her talk about her work and break the no-smoking rule together,” Kurland tells *Artsy* via email. “Her attention repaired some of the confidence that had broken during my time in the program.” Simmons also introduced her to her babysitter, Lily. Kurland began photographing Lily and her friends in staged scenarios around what she calls “interstitial sections of Brooklyn.” Kurland gave them minimal direction, though her shots suggest that they’re runaways, both fierce and independent. Of all the

stereotypical roles a teenage girl could occupy, Kurland believed that this was the most hopeful—“there’s a potential to find a world in which they belong,” she explains.

In 1999, a year after Kurland graduated from Yale, Crewdson included her work in a group show at Van Doren Waxter, entitled “Another Girl, Another Planet.” All but one of the 12 exhibited artists were women, and most of the included work featured adolescent girls, simultaneously tough and vulnerable. Along with a few of her co-exhibitors, including Katy Grannan, Dana Hoey, and Malerie Marder (all fellow Yale grads), Kurland earned a reputation as a “girl photographer.”



Justine Kurland, *Making Happy*, 1998. © Justine Kurland. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

In one of the “Girls” photographs, *Making Happy* (1998), Kurland captures a rusty, beat-up car parked near barren trees and a graffiti-laden underpass. A Budweiser billboard looms in the background, while trash and leaves litter the nearby brush. Upon closer inspection, we see two entangled bodies in the back of the vehicle, ostensibly in the middle of “making happy.”

Indeed, a steady undercurrent of sex runs throughout the entire series. Shortly after completing the series, Kurland began dating women as well as men. “For the last three years I’ve been madly in love with a woman I feel lucky to call my partner,” she tells *Artsy*. “Looking back at the ‘Girl’ pictures it’s hard not to read the homoerotic subtext of these pictures as my optical unconscious.”

Kurland hopped continents in 2001, photographing girls again, but this time, across the New Zealand landscape. The settings there were more lush, the girls often clothed in school uniforms. She returned to the United States and spent the next 12 years on the road, traveling in a green Chevy Astro minivan. Her models were naked women or members of communes. The resulting images often depicted strange feminist utopias.



Justine Kurland, *Kung Fu Fighters*, 1999. © Justine Kurland. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

Then, in 2004, Kurland gave birth to a son. She named him Casper, inspired by the painter Caspar David Friedrich, who rendered one of art history's most famous wanderers, staring out at the fog. Reluctant to abandon her itinerant life, Kurland took her son on the road; sometimes, he even became her subject matter. She captured him in their van, lying on a picnic table, climbing a dusty ledge. Kurland recalls him telling her: "Mama, you're a photographer so you can go on road trips." Indeed, her work required a certain bohemian vagrancy, constant movement in order to capture—paradoxically—"stills." While the photographer's themes evolved beyond adventure-seeking youth, a certain wildness was still pervasive.

As Kurland adjusted to life as a new mother, she turned her lens on women undergoing the same life-altering experiences. In her series “Mama Baby” (2004–07), pregnant women and young mothers cavort nude in idyllic landscapes: on a misty beach, in a sunlit forest, in snowy mountains.

If Kurland’s van had been integral to her art practice, her son developed an affection for another kind of vehicle: trains. She recalls how, at two years old, his obsession led the pair to visit railroad museums and trespass on railroad property. Her series “This Train is Bound for Glory” (2007–11) captured boxcars and the vagrants who hitched rides on them across the open American landscape. Many of the photographs were shot from a long range, making them more about the scenic environment than the locomotives themselves.

Beginning in 2011, Kurland zoomed in. Her next series, “Sincere Auto Care” (2011–15), focused on cars and the mechanics who fixed them. Many of these shots offer granular detail. She highlights the musculature and tattoos that define a man’s body, or the precise inner workings of an engine. After all those years depicting women, Kurland’s son, in part, inspired her to turn her artistic vision toward American masculinity. She even titled one of these photographs *What Casper Might Look Like if He Grew Up to be a Junkie in Tacoma* (2013). Her concerns about children’s opportunities and expectations had become deeply personal.

An era, however, was ending. Around 2010, Kurland’s van was totaled. She enrolled Casper in elementary school. Even if her work isn’t autobiographical in the traditional sense, the

story she's written for herself has become a dreamy, though fraught, adventure tale. It ends—as many such narratives do—in her own backyard. Within the past few years, Kurland has turned toward her past. Now, she's shooting around her hometown of Fulton, New York. “The town’s economic depression underscored a psychological depression I felt growing up there,” she says. “In many ways, my road trips were about putting as much distance between Fulton and myself as I could. I decided to go back to see what I was running from.” In recent work, Kurland returns to more intimate sites, as well. She photographed her mother à la Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde*; her dead father’s artwork (he was a painter); and a series that involves strap-ons (including a self-portrait that shows her wearing one at an ex’s house).



Justine Kurland, *Broadway (Joy)*, 2001. © Justine Kurland. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

These later pictures meditate on many of the same themes evident, if more quietly, in “Girls”: sexuality; the intersection of mood and place; childhood. The series, though slightly tinged with a late-1990s grunge sensibility, is still haunting. Kurland confides that Lily—whom she photographed decades ago—died 10 years after she took her picture. Kurland found out while she was driving, her son sitting next to her in his carseat. She withholds the particulars of the tragedy, but tells *Artsy* that “for months afterward I would have panic flashes imagining the horrific last moments of her death. Had she been scared? Had she been in pain? I imagined her fighting to live. Out of pure narcissism I blamed myself for not saving her, that had after all been my mission with these pictures.”

Kurland stresses the importance of revisiting this work in our contemporary political climate. “I pictured a standing army of girls united in solidarity, outside the margins of home or institution, working together to build a community that foregrounded their experience as primary and irrefutable,” she says. “These photographs were a call to action, then as now.”

THE NEW YORKER

PHOTO BOOTH

THE LAWLESS ENERGY OF TEEN-AGE GIRLS

By Naomi Fry June 24, 2018



“Sunset Beach,” 2000.

Photographs by Justine Kurland / Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash

In recent years, on Instagram and in fashion magazines, a girl-centric aesthetic has taken hold. Young photographers such as [Petra Collins](#), Olivia Bee, and Mayan Toledano have been capturing the private rites and practices of adolescents—in school, at parties, on road trips, alone in their bedrooms. The style, pretty and wistful, straddles fashion, fine art, even reportage. We might see a shapely young arm raised to reveal a hint of armpit hair; dewy skin dappled by disco lights; girls huddled around a mirror, putting on makeup.

Someone unfamiliar with the photographs of Justine Kurland might assume that the sixty-nine images that compose her [“Girl Pictures,”](#) currently on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash gallery, were taken by one of Collins’s twentysomething peers. Kurland’s adolescents are messy-haired and free and lovely, smoking, hanging out in meadows or in parking lots, in forests or in playgrounds, enacting their own mysterious routines. But the images in “Girl Pictures” were shot between 1997 and 2002, and Kurland is part of an older generation of female artists who studied at Yale under Gregory Crewdson, another photographer known for his cinematic, highly staged pictures. Kurland, Dana Hoey, Katy Grannan, and Malerie Marder all achieved early

recognition after taking part in the 1999 group show “[Another Girl, Another Planet](#),” which anticipated our own era’s photography of the female gaze.



“Candy Toss,” 2000.

Like Collins, Kurland stages her tightly controlled compositions, but Kurland’s photographs are less dreamy, more menacing, charged with a feral sense of possibility. “I channeled the raw, angry energy of girl bands into my photographs of teenagers,” she writes in the monograph that accompanies the show. “All the power chords we would ever need lay within reach, latent, coiled in wait.” In one photograph, taken in 1999, a girl is kneeling in a tangle of weeds and wildflowers by the side of a road, her underpants rolled down to her knees, her arms holding back her skirt as she pees. Her face, turned downward, is lightly overlaid with blossoms of Queen Anne’s lace, the afternoon sunlight dappling her back and hair in a pacific, Vermeerian composition. Her squatting pose evokes a moment on the verge, a bird about to take flight; she is not just prey but huntress. In another image, two waifs explore a dark grove with the aid of a flashlight, their eyes wide with fear. And yet they keep on.



"Toys R Us," 1998.



“Bathroom,” 1997.

Danger is always just around the corner in Kurland’s work. But what is this danger, exactly? We are used to the teen-age girl who is constitutionally imperilled by virtue of her vulnerable, sexual body. And while there is a rich cultural history of the adolescent who is terrifyingly impervious to the rules of adults—from Kubrick’s futuristic “Clockwork Orange” Droogs to Larry Clark’s spaced-out skaters in “Kids”—such representations rarely put young women front and center. In this way, Kurland’s images of lawless girls, whose menace is a form of power, are almost utopian. In one picture, two girls practice kung fu in a field below an overpass. They are observed by a third girl, halter-topped, sitting on a rock and blowing a large, pink gum bubble. She might seem passive, but she is following closely, awaiting her turn to train in the girl militia. Kurland, like Ryan McGinley after her, took most of her photographs while road-tripping, driving west. Unlike McGinley, who travelled with a group of muses whom he photographed, Kurland’s expeditions were solitary, and her photographs, too, channel an independence of spirit rather than a group mentality. She scouted teens to

choreograph wherever she stopped, and the girls, she writes, “went home after we made photographs, while I kept driving.”



“Boy Torture: Love,” 1999.

I noticed that, in a number of photos, the teens handle dead animals: two girls carry the body of an elk tied to a stout stick across a creek; a group of mud-stained urchins prepares an armadillo for burial; a girl holds a dead bird by its neck as she trudges down the side of a highway. These girls are Huck Finns in Gap jeans and tank tops and ponytails, exploring an America both grimy and sublime, a country where, to survive, violence must be treated with nonchalance. In another image, three girls gather in front of what looks like a rest-stop-bathroom mirror. One is smoking and reading a magazine, the second casually shirtless, the third casually pantsless. Involved in their own world, they look at each other, uninterested in us. They are a coven in repose. Who knows what they’ll do once we turn our gaze away?

photograph

JUSTINE KURLAND: GIRL PICTURES, 1997-2002 AT MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

By Jean Dykstra



©Justine Kurland, *Bathers*, 1998. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

On view at [Mitchell-Innes & Nash](#) through June 29, this show of Justine Kurland's *Girl Pictures* (1997-2002) is well timed. It's the 20th anniversary of the first printing of the series, 69 staged photographs of adolescent girls living (apparently) off the grid. A lot has changed – and too much hasn't – since Kurland's photographs were included in the landmark show *Another Girl, Another Planet* in 1999, an exhibition that launched the careers of a number of the twelve artists included, Kurland among them. So it's worth considering the photographs in today's political context, a time when girls, as Representative Maxine Waters might say, are claiming their time.

Starting in New Haven, where she was finishing her graduate studies at Yale, Kurland drove across the country (with a stint in New Zealand) photographing adolescent girls in scenes that are part bucolic idyll, part *Lord of the Flies*. A gritty, outlaw narrative

connects scenes often photographed with the composition and soft light of 19th-century landscape paintings. (Kurland named her son Caspar, after all, for Caspar David Friedrich.) Three of the images have “Boy Torture” in in their titles, but unless the girls are tormenting one, boys seldom feature. Sex simmers under the surface, not to mention – and more importantly – self-sufficiency. These ad hoc communities of young women are precursors to Kurland’s series a few years later, *Of Woman Born*, pastoral photographs of naked mothers and their small naked children who seem just as self-reliant.



©Justine Kurland, *Armadillo Burial*, 2001. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

On view in its entirety, the series is on sale only as a complete set, a decision that has to do with Kurland’s market, certainly, but also with the fact that taken together, the photographs tell a more nuanced story than they do individually. The girls in her photographs somberly (and suspiciously) bury a dead armadillo, make out on the sand, hitchhike on a desolate road at night. But they also play hula hoop and braid each other’s hair and swim in a sun-dappled watering hole under a canopy of leafy green trees, paying no mind to the camera, and by default, the viewer. In the sweetly titled *Curtsey*, a girl pulls up her skirt to pee on the side of the road, amidst a crop of Queen Anne’s Lace and other flowering weeds that seem perfect metaphors for the girls themselves. They are sweet and fierce, tender and tough, and they’re either pretty or they’re not, but they’re certainly not pretty for you.

Girlhood Across America, Captured by One Photographer



"Poison Ivy," 1999 Justine Kurland/Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

By Jamie Sims
May 21, 2018

The photographer Justine Kurland didn't learn how to drive until she was 27, a year before she set off on a two-decade-long road trip. At the time, she was an M.F.A. candidate at Yale working on her now-iconic series "Girl Pictures" (1997-2002), staged portraits of adolescent girls cast as runaways wandering beneath highway overpasses and mucking around in roadside drainage ditches. At first she stayed close to home,

shooting in and around New Haven, Conn., but eventually she began traveling farther afield; she wanted her own process to reflect the stories her images told. “If the girls were running away,” she tells T, “then it made sense that I should, too.” From 1998 onward, Kurland crisscrossed the country shooting Huckleberry Finn-meets-riot grrrl vignettes — a gang of Ophelias paddling in a lake; a pair of girls carrying a slain deer through the woods; a trio scaling the burned-out shell of a car. Later, she moved on to other subjects, including hippies on communes and train-hopping drifters.

To mark the 20th anniversary of the project, this week the New York City gallery Mitchell-Innes & Nash will present the original “Girl Pictures” series in its entirety. The 69 images will also be reproduced in a limited-edition monograph with an essay by Kurland.

When she first showed the project, it drew comparisons to the fictional narratives created by male photographers like Jeff Wall and [Gregory Crewdson](#) — the latter was Kurland’s teacher at Yale. In 2018, though, “I think it’s necessary to look at this work in the context of our current political situation, where human rights are under constant attack,” she says.

The figures who inhabit Kurland’s photos appear fearless and free, but she also aimed to portray the nuances of these girls’ inner lives. She focused on specific gestures she associated with women: “For instance,” she explains, “in one picture, the girls play a guessing game where one traces a picture with her finger on the bare back of another, an act of sensual pleasure and communion.” In New York, there was Rebecca, “who had an OCD tick of walking so her knees kicked up, like a show pony.” And in Texas, “there were two girls who told me they were going to ‘get up out of there’ as soon as they could. They carried a sickly kitten around all day,” Kurland remembers. She is still in touch with many of her models. Thirteen-year-old Gaea from Virginia “crossed the river in front of her house on a rope, Tarzan style, wearing a feather boa and chunky high-heeled boots. Now she’s about to have her first baby,” she recalls.

A lot has changed for Kurland, herself, in the past 20 years — she became a mother to Casper in 2004, who joined her on the road until age 6, and she lost her father in 2013. Her father’s death “was a catalyst,” she says. “It suddenly seemed more important to be rooted and to look inward.” She sold her van in 2014 and now rarely ventures beyond upstate New York, where she was raised, or Virginia, where her mother lives. In a way, Kurland has come full circle. “For the first time,

I'm taking pictures in my own apartment," she says. "It sounds very Dorothy, very 'Wizard of Oz,' but, after all this time away, my new work is about coming home."

Justine Kurland's "Girl Pictures, 1997-2002" will be on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York City from May 24-June 29, miandn.com.

Justine Kurland

Words Rebecca Bengal



An excerpt from
So It Goes Magazine
Issue 11, April 2018

The girls were rebelling. The girls were acting out. The girls had run away from home, that much was clear. They were trying on a version of themselves that the world had thus far shown them was *boy*. Floating a raft down the Mississippi. Tucking smokes into the sleeve of a T-shirt. Having a rumble. Living off the land. Cowboys, sailors, pirates, hitchhikers, hobos, train hoppers, explorers, catchers in the rye, lords of the flies – you name it, all the dominion of boys. If you wanted a place in the narrative, you had to imagine yourself inside of it.

You went to the edges. The girls were reclaiming a landscape that had been left for dead. Hiking to the hillcrest where the gleaming heads of satellite dishes hovered over the ridge like strange suburban aliens. Loitering in the marsh down where the tugboats parked for the night. Ripping off the doors of the rusted, wheel-less sedans, those capitalist relics. The doors seriously just came off in your hand. A flattened Chevy became their fortress. They wore plain white tank tops and blue jeans and hoodies, scuffed and dirty; anachronistic outfits; they could be from any era, any time; they could be part of any story. In their imaginations they were Victorian collectors of fairies and butterflies. They were impulsive and dreamy. They were tough and wily; they were Mona of Agnès Varda's *Vagabond*, and Julia Margaret Cameron's Ophelia portraits, they were the lone chicks in *Over the Edge*. They were Pre-Raphaelite, post-apocalyptic. They were punk, they were pastoral.

They were mirrors of my own childhood, North Carolina, Appalachian foothills. My sister and our four best friends, two other sets of sisters, out in the woods, deep in a ravine. In a solemn trespass, we'd march single-file toward a hoop of light at the other end of the bridge tunnel, singing to hear the eerie echo of our voices bounce off its walls, mingle with the drip of river water; we built forts; suspended ourselves from trees; shed our clothes and jumped in the cold creek and lay on the rocks afterwards, to dry. The sky was murky, the blue haze of the mountains and the shapes of houses were faintly visible through the trees. Eight or so years later, when I first saw Justine Kurland's pictures of girls, I was still not much more than one myself. I looked closely. I saw us.

Justine Kurland was still in grad school when she began photographing her girls, posing them in school uniforms, or around the industrial buildings at Yale. Later, like any girl reader who'd grown up projecting herself in into the narrative of Huck Finn, she'd light out for the territory, taking her camera with her. She went into the woods and across browning fields and along disused paths, the kind of places where people tossed out tires and defunct machinery, but where, occasionally, cherry blossoms continue to bloom. "This is the world," she recalled once to *Artforum*, explaining how she'd direct her models. They were eleven, twelve, or they were teenagers. They made the pictures collaboratively. "You're running away, you live in trees, you eat nectar, you torture boys, and you're a little bit mean. And they get it. Girls acquire an understanding of the world before they're ready for it, and it conflicts with their uneasy feelings about themselves. I want to unravel that angst, to prop them up."

In 1999, some of the first girl pictures were featured in the exhibition *Another Girl, Another Planet* alongside Katy Grannan, Malerie Marder, Dana Hoey and Jenny Gage. The girls were the star of that show.

"Justine's pictures always were more mythological and dealt more directly with the landscape," Gregory Crewdson, Kurland's professor at Yale, who co-organised the show, told *Artnews* at the time. "They have a romantic quality, but they very much came out of a real place – her rootlessness and her restlessness." The gallerist Sylvia Wolf likened the girls to the seventeenth-century painter Nicolas Poussin, specifically to his painting of shepherds approaching a tomb in the pastoral wilderness: "Even in the glories of beautiful nature and exquisite light, there's something lurking in her work."

I first met Justine when she would come through Texas on her biannual cross-country trips. She parked her Chevy van behind my best friend's house and camped in it. There were sweet hand-sewn curtains in the windows, made by her mother; a captain's bed; little shelves with her books, her camera equipment; her clothes, her coffee. I thought it was a perfect existence: the artist nomad, the runaway girl grown up. It all harkened back to her own childhood, tagging along with her mom who worked the Renaissance faire circuit, selling clothes she made. Later, when Justine's son Casper was born, there was a place for him in the van too – "the mama van", he called it. As he grew, bending to his fierce independent will, her photographs would expand to follow his eye – trains and hobos, men and cars, panoramas of the American West.

I told her how much I liked the runaway girl pictures. At the time she had recently begun photographing utopian communes in America – an artistic response, in part to the rise of the military and the extreme right-wing reaction to terrorism that dominated the country then. She didn't see the girl pictures as political yet. I remember her saying she worried they were sort of fantasy pictures, these narratives she constructed. I think about that a lot now, in 2018. How a girl at the centre of a rebellious narrative was once considered a fantasy.

The girls crawled through a river tunnel as water rushed by and soaked their feet. They reach a forlorn ravine where, maybe, improbably live oaks still grew or a transplanted palm had accidentally managed to thrive. They squatted to piss in fields of Queen Anne's lace, they napped in apple orchards. One day they went to the beach where they made out with boys, with each other, whatever. They stayed there till the sun fell and the cold came on and then they figured out what to do next. Maybe they'd go home. Maybe they never would. Didn't people survive in the woods for, like, months? They'd grow tanned, leathery, wild. They'd drink from the creek. They'd bathe in swimming holes. They'd forage. They'd learn to hunt. One girl claimed she could skin a squirrel, her uncle had taught her. This girl, she knew things. She'd show you.

All images courtesy Mitchell Innes and Nash Gallery



#4 Ship Wreck, 2000



#14 Broadway, 2001



#12 Sand Dune, 2002



#6 *Making Happy*, 1998



#15 *The Wall*, 1999



#22 *Boy Torture, Love* 1999



#26 *The Bathers*, 1998



#27 *Curtsy*, 2000



#28 *The Orchard*, 1998