

The Museum of Modern Art

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WALL LABEL

As human photographic subjects children bear a potential for the ideal. Every child is a unique individual; unlike adults, however, children are relatively unpredictable and free from self-consciousness. They face the camera innocent of all but the present moment, and often with a startling purity of motive. In the varying degrees their eras prescribe both of these qualities can be found in all children's photographs, uniting the miniature adult-children of the past with their lustily independent contemporary counterparts.

The photographers, however, who face these young subjects are adults. Each person behind the camera owns a fixed set of beliefs - his own and his era's - about the nature of childhood, and he portrays his subjects accordingly. While mid-nineteenth-century photographers sought in their young subjects an absence of feeling, their children mirroring innocence and purity, today's photographers would discard the same posed, idealistic representations in favor of images that express the individual child and the photographer as well.

The photographs here, selected from the Museum's Collection, survey this changing concept of childhood in America and the development of photography as an artistic medium as well. The earliest photographs are of children who embody the Victorian ideals of their parents. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the use of photography as propaganda can be seen in the documentary work of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine,

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while concurrently we see the romantic, idealized views of the Photo-Secessionists. Photographs of children from the 1920s reflect the prevailing artistic concern with form, while the Farm Security Administration photographs of the 1930s revealed children as the eloquent embodiments of the plight of migrant workers, displaced families and other victims of the Depression.

In the 1940s Helen Levitt entered the fantasy world of children playing on the streets of New York and created from it a body of pictures that captures more of the nature of childhood than perhaps any. Her work reminds us of the separation between adults and children: adults generally present themselves in socially accepted ways with predictable handshakes, pats on the back, and quick false smiles, while children usually do not. They are just as likely to casually flop over, play dead, stand on one foot or run away. Their self-absorption eliminates their self-observation, revealing a type of self-direction and autonomy known only to those whose fantasies are central to their daily life: children, eccentrics, psychotics.

Post World War II photographs reveal increasingly individualistic and personal views of children. With a growing sophistication regarding the possibilities of their medium, photographers began making pictures of children that portrayed a new type of personal ambition and revealed new stylistic interests. Childhood as a complex psychological period and a new pictorial frankness about adolescent sexuality mark the photographs of children made within the past two decades.

Susan Kismaric
Associate Curator

This exhibition, sponsored by Springs Mills, Inc. and the National Endowment for the Arts, continues the Springs Mills Series on the Art of Photography.