

Julia Fullerton-Batten

Teenage Girls

Julia Fullerton-Batten's photographs have a calm yet disturbing presence. Their slick and accomplished surface veils many visual tensions. In spite of their seemingly simple and spontaneous appearance, she crafts her photographs with the same degree of precision and consideration for colour, composition, and expression as a painter constructing a painting. In fact, for Fullerton-Batten painting is very important, in particular the art of Eric Fischl, Edward Hopper, and Gerard Schlosser. The psychological tensions in her photographs are reminiscent of the ambiguous relationships between the figures in Fischl's works. She also admires Edward Hopper's urban scenes, with their simple, compositional rhythms and a pervading atmosphere of quietness and alienation. Fullerton-Batten has embraced these qualities in her distinctive style of photography. In recent years many of her images have won a great number of prestigious photographic awards. In the series of photographs taken over the last three years, she explores the unsettling dynamics of puberty, a formative but sometimes uneasy time between childhood and womanhood marked by change and a sense of anxious anticipation.

Most photographs show girls involved in leisurely activities mainly in their suburban environment: at home, in the garden, at the swimming pool, or at the beach. The girls seemed to be captured in the afternoon hours between their return from school and the arrival of their parents from work. Having the place for a few hours to themselves, unrestricted by either the discipline of their school day or by the domestic routine imposed on them by their parents they are unburdened and free to play and explore.

The girls are often alone, immersed in their own reality, living out their no longer child-like, but not yet adult life. Unlike many images of adolescent girls in art, these photographs do not heed the male view of the subject with its voyeuristic excitement at the girls' sexual awakening. Although, the sexual coming of age and the formation of gender identity plays a very important role at that age, Fullerton-Batten focuses on the deeper and less explored layers of adolescence. Her images convey an insider's view of the experience. Explored from the girls' perspective, the images are centred around its emotional dimension

revealing inner tensions that growing up involves. An atmosphere of stillness, waiting, and the unbearably lethargic flow of time as it is experienced during puberty pervades many of these images. By showing girls motionless and staring into space, absentminded, and daydreaming Fullerton-Batten emphasises the moment of suspension between childhood and adulthood. Their minds are often elsewhere, inhabiting a strange, dreamlike world, like the innocent yet romantic reality in the images of girls in long night dresses catching butterflies on a meadow or running along the seashore. The stillness, which often features in Fullerton-Batten's images, has many guises. In some photographs such as the one of the girl with the fishbowl, the model's relaxed pose and her quiet expression have a visually seductive, contemplative quality. Sometimes, however, stillness becomes uneasy and disturbing. The photograph of a girl immersed in a bath, gazing motionlessly upwards, conjures boredom, but also brings to mind teenage suicide. So does one of the most striking photographs of the series, showing a doll-like body of a girl sliding inertly from an armchair. Placing the girl on the periphery of the composition, rather than in its centre emphasises the peculiarity of the situation. The understated, cool colour range punctuated by the red of her lips and the packet of crisps adds to the unsettling mood of this work.

One of the strengths of Fullerton-Batten's work is that she explores teenage adolescence outside of the stereotypes of anticipated womanhood, budding sexuality, or teenage subculture. Her photographs show girls at their most private - often involved in bizarre, sometimes awkward rituals, reaching beyond the boundaries of socially accepted standards of behaviour. A fully dressed girl is immersed in a bathtub. A solitary girl is doing a handstand against a tree in the garden, her legs and underwear exposed by her skirt falling on her face. The themes of privacy, secrecy and strong friendships between girls, which at that age often supersede all other relationships runs throughout the series. Fullerton-Batten's carefully choreographed images, often show pairs of girls in matching outfits, emphasising a strong, sisterly bond between them. Moreover, the colour of the girls' shirts and dresses is reflected in their respective environments deepening the level of connection. The blue shirts of the two girls sitting on a bed with their faces turned away from the viewer blends with the blue walls of

the room amplifying the mood of intimacy and togetherness. Tall grass at the bottom of the image of girls in green school uniforms indicates a very low viewpoint, as if the viewer was spying on the girls sharing secrets.

The images tease the viewer with the promise of a story. On closer examination however, they reveal a multitude of possible readings. The photographer skilfully creates a hint of authenticity by implying a subtly observed narrative. However, what seems like an spontaneous, private situation is in fact a result of a precisely staged photographic production, often highly planned and prepared. Locations, costumes and models are carefully considered. In order to amplify the sense of visual and emotional awkwardness and alienation, she prefers to use non-professional models, believing that their natural, self-conscious demeanour brings to the image a certain tension and unease, qualities she strongly associates with growing up.

Fullerton-Batten's technical virtuosity allows her to use complex visual strategies that play on the viewer's habitual perception of the natural versus artificial. Her images combine a high degree of stylistic slickness with a sense of oddness resulting from the use of studio lighting in outdoor photographs. The photographer's preference of simple, but often unsettling compositional structure of the images and a striking sense of colour, sometimes enhanced in post-production further amplify their uncanny mood. With their mixture of the elements of the staged and the observed, strange and ordinary, awkward and accomplished, Fullerton-Batten's photographs of teenage girls provide a complex and profound insight into the emotional dynamics of female adolescence.

TEXT BY BASIA SOKOLOWSKA

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www.juliafullerton-batten.com
Courtesy: Eric Franck Fine Art, London
t +44 20 763 059 72

Represented by
Wendy Jackson, UK, www.wendyjackson.com
Valerie Hersleven, France, www.specialbookings.com
Daniela Wagner, Germany, www.danielawagner.com
Monaco Reps, USA, www.monacoreps.com









