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, hitchhikers, hobos, train hoppers, explorers, catchers in the eye, look of the flies—you name it, all the dominions of boys.

In 1999, some of the first girl pictures were featured in the exhibition for it, and it conflicts with their uneasy feelings about themselves. I looked closely. I saw us.

Justine Kurland was still in grad school when she began 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.

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.

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.

If you wanted a place in the narrative, you had to imagine yourself inside of it. If you went to the edges, the girls were reclaiming a landscape that had been left for dead. Hiking to the highest hill where the glowing heads of satellite dishes hovered over the ridge like strange suburban aliens. Listening in the mouth of the cave. The girls were the star of that show. Dana Hoey and Jenny Gage. Another Girl, Another Planet

The girls were the stars of that show. 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 trepang, 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 in walk, mingle with the drip of river water; we built forts, suspended ourselves from trees; shed our clothes and jumped in the cold creek; 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 into in the narrative of Huck Finn, she’d light out for the territories: She went into the woods 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.

Justine’s pictures always were more mythological and dealt more directly with the landscape; “Gregory Crewdson, Kurland’s professor at Yale, who co-organized the show, told Artemis at the time: ‘They have a romantic quality, but they very much come out of a real place—their rootlessness and their 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.”

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.

The girls crawled through a river tunnel as water rushed by and soaked their feet. They trashed a forlorn resident 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 lived off the land. Cowboys, sailors, hitchhikers, hobos, train hoppers, explorers, catchers in the eye, look of the flies—you name it, all the dominions of boys. They made the girls, posing them in school uniforms, or around the industrial buildings at Yale. Later, like any girl reader who’d grown up projecting herself into in the narrative of Huck Finn, she’d light out for the territories: She went into the woods 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.

The girls were pastoral. They were Pre-Raphaelite, post-apocalyptic. They were punk, they were pastoral. They were wily; they were Mona of Agnès Varda’s La Bagarre, and Julia Margaret Cameron’s Ophelia portraits, they were the lone chicks in Over the Edge. They were 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.”

The girls were the star of that show.
#6 Making Happy, 1998

#15 The Hill, 1999