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Picture this: Utopia

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Justine Kurland

Fine art photographer Justine Kurland is well-known for her dreamy images of women — care-free runaway adolescents, schoolgirls, mothers, and soon-to-be mothers, clothed and naked — captured in utopian American landscapes often cast in a gorgeous golden glow. Before the birth of her son, Casper, Kurland spent most of her time travelling across America in search of subjects to photograph, an approach she continues to this day.



Oneonta Gorge, Log Jammed Crevice. 2007.

C-print, edition of 6 plus 2 AP. 30 by 40 in. 76.2 by 101.6 cm © Justine Kurland, courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

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“My fifteen-year-old chose to quarantine with his father, rather than stay with me. I console myself with a set of justifications: his father has a nicer apartment; his father doesn’t hassle him about screen time, bedtime, or homework; his father is a better cook. But the rejection is real and inevitable, considering the primacy of our bond. Alone in my apartment this month, I am devastated by my premature and accidental barrenness, a childless mother in an unnatural inversion of the Bertha (Underwood) Morgan song ‘Motherless Child’.

“My series of photographs picturing mothers and children, *Of Woman Born*, takes its title from Adrienne Rich’s seminal book, in which she writes about the impossibility of motherhood and how its explicit subjugation to patriarchy precipitates a descent into domestic hell. I intended my photographs as a counter-response, an opening through which to imagine a way out. I wanted—and needed—to create a version of motherhood that was bearable.

“The mothers in my photographs live in a world without men, in maternal bliss, embracing the pleasures of an animal existence. But when I look at *Oneonta Gorge*, *Log Jammed Crevice*, I see Casper instead, balanced on my hip as I manoeuvre my camera on its tripod. He had made up a little chant, something like, ‘We photograph mama babies, we photograph mama babies, we photograph...’ and sang to me as I made pictures. The original utopian impulse of the work now bends toward the memory of that sound.”