

## HYPERALLERGIC

### 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.

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,

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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.”

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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

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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.