

T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

Girlhood Across America, Captured by One Photographer



“Poison Ivy,” 1999 Justine Kurland/Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

By Jamie Sims
May 21, 2018

The photographer Justine Kurland didn't learn how to drive until she was 27, a year before she set off on a two-decade-long road trip. At the time, she was an M.F.A. candidate at Yale working on her now-iconic series “Girl Pictures” (1997-2002), staged portraits of adolescent girls cast as runaways wandering beneath highway overpasses and mucking around in roadside drainage ditches. At first she stayed close to home,

shooting in and around New Haven, Conn., but eventually she began traveling farther afield; she wanted her own process to reflect the stories her images told. “If the girls were running away,” she tells T, “then it made sense that I should, too.” From 1998 onward, Kurland crisscrossed the country shooting Huckleberry Finn-meets-riot grrrl vignettes — a gang of Ophelias paddling in a lake; a pair of girls carrying a slain deer through the woods; a trio scaling the burned-out shell of a car. Later, she moved on to other subjects, including hippies on communes and train-hopping drifters.

To mark the 20th anniversary of the project, this week the New York City gallery Mitchell-Innes & Nash will present the original “Girl Pictures” series in its entirety. The 69 images will also be reproduced in a limited-edition monograph with an essay by Kurland.

When she first showed the project, it drew comparisons to the fictional narratives created by male photographers like Jeff Wall and [Gregory Crewdson](#) — the latter was Kurland’s teacher at Yale. In 2018, though, “I think it’s necessary to look at this work in the context of our current political situation, where human rights are under constant attack,” she says.

The figures who inhabit Kurland’s photos appear fearless and free, but she also aimed to portray the nuances of these girls’ inner lives. She focused on specific gestures she associated with women: “For instance,” she explains, “in one picture, the girls play a guessing game where one traces a picture with her finger on the bare back of another, an act of sensual pleasure and communion.” In New York, there was Rebecca, “who had an OCD tick of walking so her knees kicked up, like a show pony.” And in Texas, “there were two girls who told me they were going to ‘get up out of there’ as soon as they could. They carried a sickly kitten around all day,” Kurland remembers. She is still in touch with many of her models. Thirteen-year-old Gaea from Virginia “crossed the river in front of her house on a rope, Tarzan style, wearing a feather boa and chunky high-heeled boots. Now she’s about to have her first baby,” she recalls.

A lot has changed for Kurland, herself, in the past 20 years — she became a mother to Casper in 2004, who joined her on the road until age 6, and she lost her father in 2013. Her father’s death “was a catalyst,” she says. “It suddenly seemed more important to be rooted and to look inward.” She sold her van in 2014 and now rarely ventures beyond upstate New York, where she was raised, or Virginia, where her mother lives. In a way, Kurland has come full circle. “For the first time,

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I'm taking pictures in my own apartment," she says. "It sounds very Dorothy, very 'Wizard of Oz,' but, after all this time away, my new work is about coming home."

Justine Kurland's "Girl Pictures, 1997-2002" will be on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York City from May 24-June 29, miandn.com.