

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

VANITY FAIR



Candy Toss, 2000. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.

Another Look at Justine Kurland's *Girl Pictures*

For years, the well-known photographer shot teenage girls in bucolic landscapes. When she found the photos again decades later, they had taken on a new valence.

BY ERIN VANDERHOOF

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Around the time she started working on a 2018 gallery show for *Girl Pictures*, a set of gorgeous portraits of teenage girls at play, shot between 1997 and 2002, the photographer **Justine Kurland** did something that proved just how much she had changed in the past 20 years. Long associated with road trips and an Edenic view of the American West, Kurland sold her van and called it quits on the quasi-nomadic life that had fueled her art for years.



Poison Ivy, 1999. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.

“As an artist, you do one thing after another, after another, after another, and you end up on this trajectory,” Kurland said in a recent phone interview. “Somehow it’s detached from where you actually are, because the work itself took on a kind of form once I started working on these road trips. I had to sell the van to stop doing that because driving is so fun, and I regret selling it every day.”

In an essay that accompanies Aperture’s new bound collection of the work, she calls that van, which she drove around in at the time of *Girl Pictures*, an invisible collaborator. “I could find girls wherever I stopped, but they

went home after we made photographs, while I kept driving,” she wrote. “My road trips underscored the pictures I staged—the adventure of driving west a performance in itself.”



The Wall, 2000. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.



One Red, One Blue, 2000. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.

But as things changed around her—she identifies the election of **Donald Trump** as a moment where the meaning of her work shifted a bit—she stopped wanting to make that performance. She has since started new work she said is “all about looking inward and thinking about what I was running from.” She no longer feels an uncomplicated identification with her old yearning for the West. But that shift helped her see something new in the photographs, which depict teenage girls in natural or nondescript settings, casting them in the adventurous roles of runaways and fighters.

A few years ago, there was a yellow Kodak box on Kurland’s wall labeled “girl pictures” on masking tape. Her partner, the gallerist **Kim Bourus**, urged her to take them down, but Kurland resisted. “In order to make new work, I divorce myself from the work that I made before,” she said. “You have to let it go so that you can have the room psychically to move on.” But she relented and the two combed through the work together. “It was very embarrassing to see them again. It was really through her eyes that I was able to really appreciate them again.”

The photos had also begun to have lives of their own. “I author the pictures, but they belong as much to the girls who are in the pictures and the people who are the receivers of the images,” she said. “Especially I think as time goes by there’s more distance to let the pictures do their own work.”



Boy Torture: Two-Headed Monster, 1999. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.



Snow Angels, 2000. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.

She licensed them for use on projects that reflect a spirit of unknowable teenage girls—for instance, the cover of French band M83’s 2003 album *Dead Cities, Red Seas & Lost Ghosts* and a 2009 rerelease of **Jeffrey Eugenides**’s *The Virgin Suicides*—which allowed them to become touchstones for a generation of artistic expression by girls.

Some of the girls Kurland documented became artists in their own right. At a Zoom event on Wednesday to celebrate the new book, **Rebecca Schiffman**, one of the girls who is now grown up, performed a song dedicated to the memory of another girl Kurland photographed, **Lily Wheelwright**, who died in 2007 at the age of 24. In our interview, Kurland quoted a few lyrics from Schiffman’s song that resonated with her experience of Wheelwright as a magnetic girl. “It’s a really beautiful song, and the lyrics are something like ‘knowing you is living,’” she said.

During the event, Kurland and Schiffman discussed their memories about the road trips and close relationships that undergirded the *Girl Pictures* two decades ago. Kurland became genuinely close to her subjects, and Schiffman and Wheelwright even sublet Kurland’s apartment for some time while she was out on the road.

Kurland asked Schiffman why she went on all the road trips as a 17-year-old. “You have a way of getting people to go along with you,” she replied, and mentioned a more recent moment in their friendship when Kurland coaxed her into a spider-filled shed to take photographs.

At the time, Kurland thought of herself as creating fictional portrayals of teen runaways. But 20 years have proven that she was also inventing a community, and it became a true one through the force of her art and

energy. A real quest structured *Girl Pictures*, and that reality might be why they've become such lasting emblems of teenage experience.

She no longer shoots that world anymore, and her new work—collages, intimate portraits, and a study of an abandoned factory in upstate New York—is a departure from many of the things that came before it. But she still sees the power of the worlds she documented and the scenes she created. “A lot of art and writing exists in that contradictory space where it’s impossible to be what you’re presuming to be. There’s no way there’s going to be a girl utopia or a teenage-girl-runaway commune in the woods,” she said. “It’s this impossibility, but to imagine it is to maybe get a little bit closer to it.”



Girls Curled Up, 1997. PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTINE KURLAND.