

The big picture: America's wild young women



Shipwrecked, 2000. Photograph: Justine Kurland

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The myth of the American west meets the energy of riot grrrl in Justine Kurland's photographs of free-spirited teenage girls

In 1997, Justine Kurland, then a fine arts student at Yale University, went in search of teenage girls to photograph. At a time of increasing conformity and commercialised ideas of beauty, the girls she had in mind were free-spirited and wild-haired; making dens and hanging out in woods, messing about in rivers, smoking in parking lots, lost in languid afternoons, careless not only of the male gaze but any onlookers at all.

Kurland started out on her quest in New Haven's semi-industrial hinterland before travelling further afield over the next five years on a mazy road trip; if the girls were on the margins, then she would be too. She loosely choreographed the groups of teenagers that she found, but mostly invited the girls into a promising setting and let them do their thing. She took this photograph of four girls in an abandoned car in the millennium year, and called it *Shipwrecked*. The girls she chose invariably understood the idea of the pictures. "I can always spot people," she has said. "It's, like, really one of my superpowers. I can always tell which teenage girls would love living in the woods with their friends."

She sees her work – collected in a book, *Girl Pictures* – in the tradition of American landscape photography of the 19th century, which put young frontiersmen into natural settings as a way of propagandising the idea of the west, and a vision of liberty. Her utopian scenes recreated that idealised political fantasy, and recast it for 21st-century women: courageous and vivid and sisterly. In a monograph for an exhibition of the pictures, she wrote how she tried to channel the raw energy of riot grrrl bands of that time into her portraits. "All the power chords we would ever need lay within reach, latent, coiled in wait..."