



Justine Kurland

Words Rebecca Bengal

The girls were rebelling. The girls were acting out. The girls had run away from home, that much was clear. They were trying on a version of themselves that the world had thus far shown them was *boy*. Floating a raft down the Mississippi. Tucking smokes into the sleeve of a T-shirt. Having a rumble. Living off the land. Cowboys, sailors, pirates, hitchhikers, hobos, train hoppers, explorers, catchers in the rye, lords of the flies – you name it, all the dominion of boys. If you wanted a place in the narrative, you had to imagine yourself inside of it.

You went to the edges. The girls were reclaiming a landscape that had been left for dead. Hiking to the hillcrest where the gleaming heads of satellite dishes hovered over the ridge like strange suburban aliens. Loitering in the marsh down where the tugboats parked for the night. Ripping off the doors of the rusted, wheel-less sedans, those capitalist relics. The doors seriously just came off in your hand. A flattened Chevy became their fortress. They wore plain white tank tops and blue jeans and hoodies, scuffed and dirty; anachronistic outfits; they could be from any era, any time; they could be part of any story. In their imaginations they were Victorian collectors of fairies and butterflies. They were impulsive and dreamy. They were tough and wily; they were Mona of Agnès Varda's *Vagabond*, and Julia Margaret Cameron's Ophelia portraits, they were the lone chicks in *Over the Edge*. They were Pre-Raphaelite, post-apocalyptic. They were punk, they were pastoral.

They were mirrors of my own childhood, North Carolina, Appalachian foothills. My sister and our four best friends, two other sets of sisters, out in the woods, deep in a ravine. In a solemn trespass, we'd march single-file toward a hoop of light at the other end of the bridge tunnel, singing to hear the eerie echo of our voices bounce off its walls, mingle with the drip of river water; we built forts; suspended ourselves from trees; shed our clothes and jumped in the cold creek and lay on the rocks afterwards, to dry. The sky was murky, the blue haze of the mountains and the shapes of houses were faintly visible through the trees. Eight or so years later, when I first saw Justine Kurland's pictures of girls, I was still not much more than one myself. I looked closely. I saw us.

Justine Kurland was still in grad school when she began photographing her girls, posing them in school uniforms, or around the industrial buildings at Yale. Later, like any girl reader who'd grown up projecting herself in into the narrative of Huck Finn, she'd light out for the territory, taking her camera with her. She went into the woods and across browning fields and along disused paths, the kind of places where people tossed out tires and defunct machinery, but where, occasionally, cherry blossoms continue to bloom. "This is the world," she recalled once to *Artforum*, explaining how she'd direct her models. They were eleven, twelve, or they were teenagers. They made the pictures collaboratively. "You're running away, you live in trees, you eat nectar, you torture boys, and you're a little bit mean. And they get it. Girls acquire an understanding of the world before they're ready for it, and it conflicts with their uneasy feelings about themselves. I want to unravel that angst, to prop them up."

In 1999, some of the first girl pictures were featured in the exhibition *Another Girl, Another Planet* alongside Katy Grannan, Malerie Marder, Dana Hoey and Jenny Gage. The girls were the star of that show.

"Justine's pictures always were more mythological and dealt more directly with the landscape," Gregory Crewdson, Kurland's professor at Yale, who co-organised the show, told *Artnews* at the time. "They have a romantic quality, but they very much came out of a real place – her rootlessness and her restlessness." The gallerist Sylvia Wolf likened the girls to the seventeenth-century painter Nicolas Poussin, specifically to his painting of shepherds approaching a tomb in the pastoral wilderness: "Even in the glories of beautiful nature and exquisite light, there's something lurking in her work."

I first met Justine when she would come through Texas on her biannual cross-country trips. She parked her Chevy van behind my best friend's house and camped in it. There were sweet hand-sewn curtains in the windows, made by her mother; a captain's bed; little shelves with her books, her camera equipment; her clothes, her coffee. I thought it was a perfect existence: the artist nomad, the runaway girl grown up. It all harkened back to her own childhood, tagging along with her mom who worked the Renaissance faire circuit, selling clothes she made. Later, when Justine's son Casper was born, there was a place for him in the van too – "the mama van", he called it. As he grew, bending to his fierce independent will, her photographs would expand to follow his eye – trains and hobos, men and cars, panoramas of the American West.

I told her how much I liked the runaway girl pictures. At the time she had recently begun photographing utopian communes in America – an artistic response, in part to the rise of the military and the extreme right-wing reaction to terrorism that dominated the country then. She didn't see the girl pictures as political yet. I remember her saying she worried they were sort of fantasy pictures, these narratives she constructed. I think about that a lot now, in 2018. How a girl at the centre of a rebellious narrative was once considered a fantasy.

The girls crawled through a river tunnel as water rushed by and soaked their feet. They reach a forlorn ravine where, maybe, improbably live oaks still grew or a transplanted palm had accidentally managed to thrive. They squatted to piss in fields of Queen Anne's lace, they napped in apple orchards. One day they went to the beach where they made out with boys, with each other, whatever. They stayed there till the sun fell and the cold came on and then they figured out what to do next. Maybe they'd go home. Maybe they never would. Didn't people survive in the woods for, like, months? They'd grow tanned, leathery, wild. They'd drink from the creek. They'd bathe in swimming holes. They'd forage. They'd learn to hunt. One girl claimed she could skin a squirrel, her uncle had taught her. This girl, she knew things. She'd show you.

All images courtesy Mitchell Innes and Nash Gallery



#4 Ship Wreck, 2000



#14 Broadway, 2001



#12 Sand Dune, 2002



#6 *Making Happy*, 1998



#15 *The Wall*, 1999



#22 *Boy Torture, Love* 1999



#26 *The Bathers*, 1998



#27 *Curtsy*, 2000



#28 *The Orchard*, 1998