

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

## photograph

# JUSTINE KURLAND: GIRL PICTURES, 1997-2002 AT MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

By Jean Dykstra



©Justine Kurland, *Bathers*, 1998. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

On view at [Mitchell-Innes & Nash](#) through June 29, this show of Justine Kurland's *Girl Pictures* (1997-2002) is well timed. It's the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first printing of the series, 69 staged photographs of adolescent girls living (apparently) off the grid. A lot has changed – and too much hasn't – since Kurland's photographs were included in the landmark show *Another Girl, Another Planet* in 1999, an exhibition that launched the careers of a number of the twelve artists included, Kurland among them. So it's worth considering the photographs in today's political context, a time when girls, as Representative Maxine Waters might say, are claiming their time.

Starting in New Haven, where she was finishing her graduate studies at Yale, Kurland drove across the country (with a stint in New Zealand) photographing adolescent girls in scenes that are part bucolic idyll, part *Lord of the Flies*. A gritty, outlaw narrative

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connects scenes often photographed with the composition and soft light of 19<sup>th</sup>-century landscape paintings. (Kurland named her son Caspar, after all, for Caspar David Friedrich.) Three of the images have “Boy Torture” in their titles, but unless the girls are tormenting one, boys seldom feature. Sex simmers under the surface, not to mention – and more importantly – self-sufficiency. These ad hoc communities of young women are precursors to Kurland’s series a few years later, *Of Woman Born*, pastoral photographs of naked mothers and their small naked children who seem just as self-reliant.



©Justine Kurland, *Armadillo Burial*, 2001. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

On view in its entirety, the series is on sale only as a complete set, a decision that has to do with Kurland’s market, certainly, but also with the fact that taken together, the photographs tell a more nuanced story than they do individually. The girls in her photographs somberly (and suspiciously) bury a dead armadillo, make out on the sand, hitchhike on a desolate road at night. But they also play hula hoop and braid each other’s hair and swim in a sun-dappled watering hole under a canopy of leafy green trees, paying no mind to the camera, and by default, the viewer. In the sweetly titled *Curtsey*, a girl pulls up her skirt to pee on the side of the road, amidst a crop of Queen Anne’s Lace and other flowering weeds that seem perfect metaphors for the girls themselves. They are sweet and fierce, tender and tough, and they’re either pretty or they’re not, but they’re certainly not pretty for you.