

# ARTFORUM

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Justine Kurland, *Bathroom*, 1997, C-print, 11 × 14".

## Justine Kurland

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH | CHELSEA

A few years after Justine Kurland started shooting her “Girl Pictures,” 1997–2002, she was dubbed a “girl photographer.” Although the label feels limiting, if not downright misogynistic, Kurland artistically came of age in the 1990s, a decade that celebrated the more renegade aspects of female adolescence. The “Riot Grrrl Manifesto,” published in a zine put out by feminist punk band Bikini Kill in 1991, plainly stated the case for reclaiming the word: “BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak.”

At Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Kurland's series, exhibited for the first time in its entirety, was cinematic in spirit. The sixty-nine vintage C-prints hung in a single line around the gallery. The narrative opened with a photograph taken in the postindustrial landscape of New Haven, Connecticut, and continued across multiple road trips that Kurland took over the course of five years. In these staged images, her subjects absorb themselves in activities by and for each other, from drawing on one another's backs to killing small game. They could be plucked from sundry girl-centric films of the 1990s—think Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) or Gillian Armstrong's *Little Women* (1994). Wearing threadbare, slouchy clothes, sans makeup, and often with no men in sight, these girls “act” more often than “appear”—to reverse the terms of John Berger's famous phrase, “Men act and women appear.”

The teens enact closed loops of introspection. In *Clothes make the man, Desert scene*, 2001, two topless girls stare into a shard of mirror near an open suitcase strewn with clothes. Carefully composed with a tree at the center of the frame, the picture captures the young women from the back, with only a fraction of their faces visible to Kurland's lens. They play against the stereotype of the adolescent who seeks validation from an outside gaze.

Indeed, the artist's models do not pose seductively for the camera, though there's an undeniable charge of intimacy throughout. Sensuality is expressed through the ease Kurland's subjects have with their own naked bodies. In *Bathroom*, 1997, a trio of runaways takes a break in a public lavatory. A shirtless teen is pictured from behind as she stands in front of a mirror. She gazes at her friend, who is perched on the sink, holding a cigarette and a magazine. A third girl sprawls out on the floor in front of a pile of clothes. Unlike Ryan McGinley, to whom she is often compared, Kurland does not spectacularize eroticism. This photograph turns titillating nudity and illicit adventure into something more everyday.

In a pair of photographs from 1999, Kurland switches up gender dynamics, making young men the passive subject of female desire and brutality. In *Boy Torture: Two Headed Monster*, a couple of young women pin a young man to the ground in a wintry landscape. One of them tries to spit into his mouth. A third friend watches the scene unfold while playing on the thick branches of a leafless tree. Is she horrified or aroused? A wasp-waisted female in *Boy Torture: Love*, faces away from the viewer while taking off her shirt. She's near a river-bank, surrounded by other girls and a lone boy, whose eyes are covered by another girl's hands. In the background, likely squaring off with

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Kurland's camera, a teen lies back to take in the scene. Her mien is impassive, but Kurland's composition is defiant—not every expression of female sexuality is safe for male consumption.

*-Wendy Vogel*