



Arts

Rebel girls create their own utopia in Justine Kurland's pictures

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Credit: © Justine Kurland

In the late 1990s, photographer Justine Kurland imagined runaway girls roaming the American landscape -- gathering in the woods, along highways and in open fields. Instead of encountering danger, these wayward spirits would form a sylvan utopia where girls could make their own rules.

Taken between 1997 and 2002, two decades later, Kurland's photographs, titled "Girl Pictures," have been brought together [in a new book from Aperture](#).

The photographs are a nostalgic glimpse of the era -- the girls wear ripped wide-leg jeans and shark's tooth necklaces, both popular at the time -- but the series still resonates in its timeless themes of defiance, self-actualization and female sexuality. In recent years, these themes have carried through in the work of photographers

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including Petra Collins, Ashley Armitage and Luo Yang, with their bold takes on the female gaze.



Kurland began "Girl Pictures" in 1997 while she was a graduate student at Yale. At first she focused on the concept of a runaway girl, but she began thinking about the idea of girls coming together. Credit: © Justine Kurland

"I had this desire to make this girl world, this feminist utopic solidarity between (young) girls and teenagers," Kurland said in a recent phone interview. "But between women, really."

In the years since she finished the series, Kurland has turned her camera on topics that still radiate from this first body of work: community, feminine identity, exploration and the rural American landscape. She's photographed sun-drenched scenes of nude figures living in back-to-the-land communes; and herself and her son, Casper – named after painter Caspar David Friedrich for his famous 1818 work "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog" – on extended road trips.

All of Kurland's work blurs the lines between reality and imagination. They are staged scenes that often feel like documentary images. Kurland studied under Gregory Crewdson and Philip-Lorca diCorcia while earning her masters at Yale University -- both photographers use the language of cinema to build narrative stills.

"When I first showed the work and in the '90s and early 2000s there was a lot of conversation about contemporary photography straddling fact and fiction," she

recalled. And though her practice has evolved over the years, the core ideas in her work haven't changed. "This idea of the photograph being a site to imagine is still very much what I care about."



Throughout the series, ideas of freedom and belonging prevail as girls form their own communities off the grid. Credit: © Justine Kurland

Packs of roving girls

Kurland began "Girl Pictures" during a summer between semesters at Yale, when she was dating a man with a 15-year-old daughter. Her name was Alyssum and she had been sent to live with her father in New York City because of her rebellious behavior. Together, she and Kurland envisioned the narrative of a runaway girl.

"I was (experiencing) nostalgia, realizing that I was no longer where she was (in life)," Kurland recalled. "It was this way that we could connect."

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Kurland began the project in the city, photographing Alyssum and other girls smoking in playgrounds, or climbing trees along the highway. As she expanded the territory in which she photographed -- first the Northeastern US and then westward -- the series became more about the secluded landscapes where her subjects would find a new sense of belonging.

In Kurland's refuge, girls explore streams barefoot in a pack. They roast pigs on a spit and lay supine in snowy fields. They camp out in empty shells of rusted cars or pitch a loose circle of transient tents. When boys appear, the girls are in control, pinning one down to spit in his mouth, covering another's eyes as one of the girls teasingly lifts her shirt. Kurland envisioned that their freedom, play and camaraderie could spark a wildfire.



The girls remain in control in the society they have built, capturing or teasing boys who enter their realm. Credit: © Justine Kurland

"I imagined a world in which acts of solidarity between girls would engender even more girls -- they would multiply through the sheer force of togetherness and lay claim to a new territory," Kurland writes in an essay for the book. "Their collective awakening would ignite and spread through suburbs and schoolyards, calling to clusters of girls camped on stoops and the hoods of cars, or aimlessly wandering the

neighborhoods where they lived. Behind the camera, I was also somehow in front of it -- one of them, a girl made strong by other girls."

Teenagers are primed to stage such a rebellion. "They aren't yet participating in mainstream society," Kurland said -- they don't have careers, or children, or mortgages. "There's a possibility that they could choose another way; they could choose something for themselves."

Traveling the American West

The idea of escaping into American landscape has been closely linked with masculinity, from photographer Ansel Adams traversing the High Sierras to writer Jack Kerouac on the open road. Kurland gives this sense of abandon and fearlessness to her young female protagonists, pointing to their fictional male counterparts like Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield. "They have inherited a world that they don't want -- so they strike out on their own."

Like many photographers before her, including [Robert Frank](#), [Richard Avedon](#) and [Dorothea Lange](#), the American West became the backdrop to Kurland's work. Kurland's initial love for photography was informed by those who wandered the land -- she points to Frank's seminal "The Americans" and Josef Koudelka's "Gypsies." "The idea of being able to find your way in the world by moving through landscapes is really deeply ingrained in my consciousness," she said.

Kurland meandered around the country for days at a time, visiting high schools to find girls who were interested in participating. Looking back, she is surprised at how many girls agreed to go with her. "At the time when I was young, I didn't really think that much of it," she recalled. "I was oblivious to how huge the ask was." After days in her car, Kurland was often unkempt, approaching teenagers to photograph them -- it could easily seem predatory. But Kurland would often meet their parents, or find new young women to photograph through others she had met. She had a simple pitch: "(I told them I was) imagining girls who had run away and lived in the woods. Did they want to come? The girls who said yes were likely down with that fantasy for themselves."

Revisiting the photos stirs up memories for Kurland. There was Charlotte, who wanted to be a musician, who gave off an air of eternal cool, and whose favorite word was "melancholy." There was Lily, whose life ended in tragedy some years later when she overdosed. Kurland recalled in her essay that Lily always wore rollerblades, and the poignant gesture when she hoisted her legs into Kurland's car.

Finding new kinship

After September 11th, Kurland stopped taking photos for "Girl Pictures" and began photographing communes in rural areas of California and Tennessee. The national tragedy was a wake-up call; she felt inclined to shift her work. "I (was) imagining all these girls and this utopia, this 'no place.' I wanted to find places where they actually existed."

She continued to venture on open roads for weeks or months at a time, for both that body of work as well as during her travels with Casper, the latter of which was published by Aperture in the 2016 book "Highway Kind." Kurland sold her van in 2016 after her father's death. Casper had traveled with her on his breaks, but she hated being away from him while he was in school. She began teaching more and found a different kind of community back in New York.

Today the girls Kurland once photographed are women, some with children of their own. She has kept in touch with some and others reconnected with her through the press for her 2018 exhibition at Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

When Kurland thinks back to her memories with girls in her photos, the most vivid recollections are not the times that she fired the shutter, but the moments before. In the car, the electric energy of the girls seemed boundless.

"It's difficult to describe the joy of a carload of girls, going somewhere with the radio turned up and the windows rolled down," she writes in the book. "At last we arrive at a view, a place where the landscape opens up -- a place to plant a garden, build a home, picture a world," she continues. "They spill out of the car along with candy wrappers and crushed soda cans, bounding into the frame, already becoming a photograph."

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In the car, she'd imagine all the images she'd take, but her photographs could never fully do justice to the scenes. "There's always a disappointment in the photograph -- it's never going to be as amazing as you imagine it," she said. "So my favorite part is right before...(when) I think back to the girls, that's probably the part that's the most lovely."