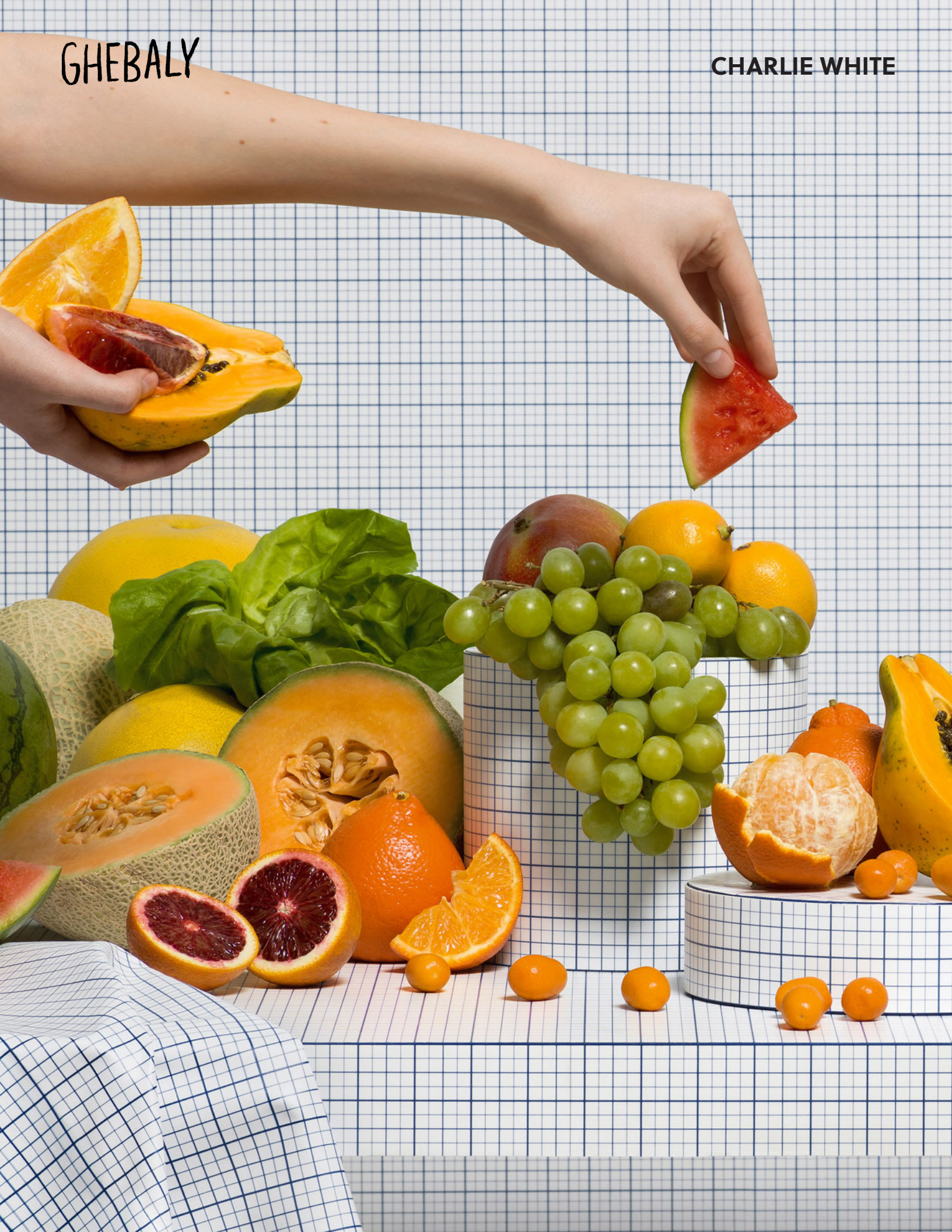
GHEBALY
CHARLIE WHITE

Jonathan Griffin

Criticism and essays on art and culture

Father Figure

by Jonathan Griffin

Anxieties about modern American manhood played out in the bedrooms of little girls

Martin Kersels, Tumble Room, 2001, installation, courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes and Nash

"A crock of shit" is how Mike Kelley once described what he called the "modernist cult of the child."[1] He was talking about the idealization of children – of childhood, rather – over the past two centuries, since Romanticism exalted it as a pure state, uncorrupted by the mores and hang-ups of culture and society. In visual art, this was manifested in the self-consciously childlike styles of Picasso, Miró and Klee, and the later affectation of children's art by Dubuffet, Jorn, and countless others who, for associated reasons, also fetishized the 'primitive' and the 'insane'. "Where do the children play?" asked Cat Stevens in 1970, testifying to the persistence of that myth of purity even through late '60s counterculture, the era of the Flower Children.[2]

By the end of the 1970s, the youth had turned nasty. In Los Angeles, there emerged a now-canonized cadre of artists that centers (in the myth, at least) around Kelley and Paul McCarthy, but which also includes Richard Jackson, The Kipper Kids, Raymond Pettibon, Tony Oursler and Michael Smith, aka

Baby Ikki. An overwhelmingly male, straight, white group, wrestling with (amongst other things) the anxieties of modern American manhood, often through the figures and spaces of adolescents, children or babies, particularly young girls.

These artists roundly rejected the two most pervasive clichés about childhood – the idealized view that childhood is a prelapsarian time of piety and purity, and its antithesis, the view that childhood is a time of savagery and violence, of unsocialized ignorance that can (and must) be remedied by acculturation. Instead, Kelley and his peers adopted a third line, strongly informed by psychoanalysis, in which childhood is by no means innocent, but is the wellspring of adult fears, desires and aggressions.

Mike Kelley, The Little Girl's Room, 1980, installation. Courtesy Estate of Mike Kelley

In 1980, for a show at LACE alongside Oursler and Syrop, Kelley made his first installation, titled *The Little Girl's Room*. The installation, Kelley later claimed, was prompted by a "dream within a dream."[3] A little girl has a vision of "a pimp-like man whose smile revealed an infinity of sharp teeth."[4] She is immediately motivated to redecorate her room, switching from girly pinks to austere modernist black and white, from pictures of horses and heartthrobs to Malevich and Bridget Riley. Kelley's installation was not even, really, a fabrication of a bedroom interior. An enclosed space was lit with black-light, empty except for one leaning sculpture and a picture of the lasciviously grinning pimp over the door. In his narrative, the prospect of adult sexuality impelled the girl to put away childish things, to embrace masculine 'advanced culture'. She is left with little more than a schematic shelter, virtually all her furniture and possessions displaced from the room itself and turned into minimalist ciphers: cold comfort indeed. In this equation, abstraction equals desolation.

In 2011, Richard Jackson created an installation for an exhibition at David Kordansky also called (with an unacknowledged nod) *The Little Girl's Room*. As in Kelley's piece, innocence, puberty and sexual initiation are allegories for cultural indoctrination. The girl, here, is a fiberglass cartoon with a smiley yellow face who grasps an upside-down pink unicorn. Her bedroom walls (actually stretched canvases) bear a conflation of clouds and stars overlaid with copies of Frank Stella *Protractor* paintings. Before the exhibition opened, Jackson activated the installation, pumping buckets of paint out of the pink unicorn's ass, in a rather distasteful demonstration of defilement as imagined by a naughty little boy – defilement of Stella, of Modernism, of tacky consumer culture, of the little girl herself. The creepiness that lurks

within Kelley's work is fully unleashed by Jackson's fantasy – a fantasy that is both knowing and ironic in its use of symbols, but also more than a little bit gleeful about the violence that it enacts. The abstraction of symbols such as the cartoon girl and unicorn, and the ostensibly innocuous substance that Jackson splashes over them (it's only paint, people![5]) give him license to transgress in a way that reveals more about latent masculine desires, perhaps, than he ever intended.

Richard Jackson, The Little Girl's Room, 2011, fiberglass, steel, stainless steel, mdf, acrylic on canvas, wood, rubber, motor, acrylic paint, 190 x 288 x 312 inches, courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

Of course, both Kelley and Jackson's *Little Girl's Rooms* have nothing, in fact, to do with little girls. "All this stuff is produced by adults for children, expressing adult ideas about the reality of children," Kelley later commented on the stuffed toys that he often used in sculptures and installations.[6] Perhaps Kelley and Jackson reveal a deeply sublimated adult fantasy: our culture invents girls in order to defile them.

In his installation *Tumbleroom*, first created for an exhibition at Deitch Projects in 2001, Martin Kersels takes a girl's bedroom and smashes it to smithereens. The work was inspired, in part, by the scene in the 1951 movie *Royal Wedding* in which Fred Astaire – newly in love and feeling lighter than air – dances on the ceiling of his apartment, but it also pays homage to McCarthy's nightmarish *Bang Bang Room* (1992), a kinetic sculpture in which walls of a living-like room move in and out, while their doors slam open and closed.

Kersels replicated the steel gimbal set that enabled Astaire's apparent defiance of gravity, and decorated the room as if the pink-walled bedroom of a teenage girl. When the room was rotated by a motor, at about four revolutions per minute, its loose contents crashed from corner to corner, gradually disintegrating. The sculpture, Kersels has said, is "an entropy machine," a grim visualization of adolescent aging, the loss of childhood innocence, the upheaval of time.[7] He also saw it as a stomach, digesting its contents and occasionally spewing out small flecks of debris.

Paired with *Tumbleroom* was a video titled *Pink Constellation* (2001). In it, a fixed camera recorded a young woman dancing nimbly from floor to wall to ceiling as the room turned, and then Kersels himself, careening and crashing into the fragile furniture. As with Kelley's *Little Girl's Room*, Kersel's teenage girl's room ingests, then spits out, the adult male culture that would normalize or transform it.

By putting himself in the work, Kersels told me he wanted the work to convey the idea of himself being shaken loose from the center of his own universe. About four years before he conceived of *Tumbleroom*, Kersels became a father. That experience of being displaced from the center of one's own orbit is a feeling familiar to any parent. (The day I spoke to Kersels on the phone, I had just let my baby son slip from my grip and fall face-first onto the floor. He was sporting a split lip and a bruise.) The sense of giant clumsiness, of parental inadequacy and potential harm is allegorized by Kersels' large frame as it collides with – and is potentially harmed by — the child's environment. *Pink Constellation* takes a less depressing position than Kelley's and Jackson's works: a demonstration of the devastating power that childhood – especially female childhood – holds over grown men.

It is too little noted that around the time that McCarthy made his first mature work, videotaped performances from the mid-1970s in which infantilized characters (mis)used commercial foodstuffs, he too became a father. Aside from the abject messiness of childcare (a messiness which children are blissfully oblivious to), one theme through McCarthy's early work is the fragility of domestic space, which in his performances is constituted by flimsy, temporary sets.

Charlie White, Patrimony, 2006, chromogenic print, 47 x 52.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Ghebaly Gallery

There is a photograph by Charlie White, the final part of a trilogy from his series 'Everything is America', that echoes the monstrosity of fatherhood, even to fathers themselves. Titled *Patrimony* (2006), the image shows a huge, hirsute man with baked red skin, more satyr than human, standing naked in

the living room of a modernist wood-paneled home. Behind him, white leather Mies van der Rohe and Eames furniture is tipped over on the rug, and a vase is smashed. In his thick-clawed fingers, the creature holds a tiny white baby girl. The baby may be at the center of the scene, but her monstrous father is the subject with whom the viewer is invited to ambivalently empathize.

White has said that he cannot conceive of his subjects without their settings; the defiled modernist interior (the grown man's room) is as integral a symbol in this narrative of patrimony as is the helplessly grotesque father.[8] The work is not so much about the raw, messy and confusing experience of fatherhood as it is the raw, messy and confusing experience of historical cultural dominance by white, Western, male figures, as perceived by white, Western men in the present day. All these artists have chosen to reckon with their own implication in the ignoble histories they have inherited. In doing so, they cast themselves both as victims and aggressors. There are generational differences in their approaches, however; whereas Kelley, McCarthy and Jackson hurl themselves, abjectly, into the depths of their own Ids, Kersels and White remain more circumspect, analyzing their anxieties about adulthood rather than wallowing in them.

A precursor to these works is *Aktion mit Diana* (Action with Diana), a 1967 performance by the Viennese Actionist Günter Brus who was influential on artists such as McCarthy. While his four-month-old daughter lay naked for an hour on a white cushion, Brus, painted from head to toe in white body-paint, manipulated objects including a rattle, a breast-pump, nails, a corkscrew, and Diana herself. Given the extreme nature of Brus' performances, which often included real or simulated acts of violence, Diana's presence must have lent the scenario an ominous atmosphere. By the end of the performance, however, the baby gurgled contentedly while Brus cowered in a corner of the white space. Brus' performance shares with all these works a fundamental narrative arc. The little girl leaves the male artist at a loss, as clumsy and helpless as White's satyr, reduced to an angry, scatological manchild, impotently savage and transgressive in only the most pathetic of ways.

[1] Mike Kelley, 'Dirty Toys: Mike Kelley Interviewed,' interview by Ralph Rugoff (1991), reprinted in *Mike Kelley*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Basel: Edition Cantz, 1992), p. 87

[2] Cat Stevens, *Tea for the Tillerman*, (1970), Island Records / A&M

[3] Mike Kelley, in *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974–1981*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark and Paul Schimmel (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; DelMonico • Prestel, Munich, London, New York, 2011). 194

[4] Ibid

[5] See also Paul McCarthy's oft-repeated defense of transgression in his work: "there's a big difference between ketchup and blood." Interview with Marc Selwyn, 1993, in Ralph Rugoff, Kristine Stiles and Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, eds, *Paul McCarthy*, (Phaidon, London, 1996) p. 134

[6] Kelley, 'Dirty Toys: Mike Kelley Interviewed,' op cit. p. 87

[7] Video documentary, shot and directed by Peter West on the occasion of *Disorderly Conduct: Art in Tumultuous Times*, 2008, curated by Karen Moss at the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA, accessed at https://vimeo.com/52303750 (https://vimeo.com/52303750)

[8] Charlie White, interviewed by Benjamin Weissman in *Monsters*, Charlie White, (powerHouse Books, New York, 2007) p.90

KCET
Cultural Journalism

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Charlie White's Culture of Desire

Alicia Eler

Artist Charlie White is invested in the project of American adolescence. Fascinated by the commodification of desire and how this mechanism operates under capitalism, White's art practice focuses on the teen girl. To White, she is the most powerful bodily form to be employed in the American pop culture imagination, both the locus of reproduction and the focus of misogynistic violence toward women and girls. She could be an embodiment of recycled lust in adherence with hierarchical white, patriarchal standards of beauty. The teen girl is constantly regenerative, yet once she sheds her adolescence, she will never exist as the same commoditized image that White captures in his photographic projects.

White, 42, has been showing internationally since his early 20s. Based in Los Angeles since 1996, he's been teaching at the graduate level for more than 10 years, and was the director of the University of Southern California's MFA program from 2007-2011. He is currently Professor of Fine Art at the University of Southern California's Roski School of Art and Design. White grew up in Philadelphia and New York City, where his father still lives. He completed his BFA at the School of the Visual Arts in New York, and then traveled to Los Angeles to do an MFA at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. A big, burly, bearded man, White is never short on words or stories, naturally gathering a crowd round him whether he's sharing a two-person table at the Viet Noodle Bar in Atwater Village or chasing his two-and-a-half year old around Cafe de Leche in Highland Park, where he lives with his wife, the poet Stephanie Ford. White is high energy, and at any moment he may be either spouting off art critical theory, pontificating on "what is Los Angeles," or making astute, highly visual observations about the world around him. He is magnetic. He's also got a broader vision of Los Angeles that comes from being a fixture here.

"Lovingkindness" from the series "And Jeopardize the Integrity of the Hull" (2003)

"Tate-LaBianca," 2006, from the series "Everything is American"

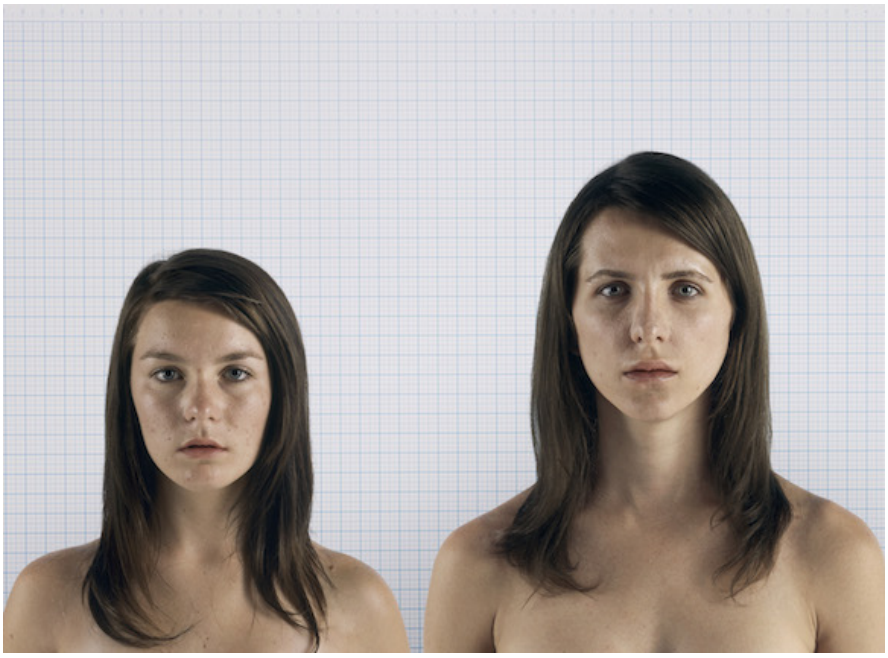
"In the early 1990s, L.A. had already become a destination for the MFA, particularly its relationship to UCLA," says White. "It felt like a very different city then, it was far more affordable, however, it was also not the cosmopolitan experience that it is now."

In the art world, Los Angeles isn't known for being the market center like New York City. Instead, L.A.'s art world seems to be rooted in its schools -- CalArts, UCLA, USC, Art Center in Pasadena, something that White knows well from his history of working and teaching. Perhaps that's why it works well for White, who lives and works in L.A. and has had solo exhibitions internationally in London, Berlin, Spain, Sweden, and Norway. In Los Angeles, his work has been shown at LACMA and LAXART, but never a commercial gallery.

Charlie White - OMG BFF LOL (Mall)

White began showing with Andrea Rosen Gallery while he was still in graduate school, a relationship that took him through many of his earlier photograph-based, highly-staged series. Two of those are "In a Matter of Days" (1999) and "Understanding Joshua" (2001) in which non-human entities are inserted into group and social situations, asking all around to reexamine their relationship to the other. A similar sort of cute, abject, hyperreal aesthetic, complete with glossy finishes on everything from boy band bodies to a nude female behind and bandaged bloody lamb, follows White into his 2003 series "And Jeopardize the Integrity of the Hull." What's perhaps best recognized as the first phase of his work -- photographs that capture a relationship to narrative and photography -- grew out into a second phase focused on adolescence as subject matter, for which he is best known.

"OMGBFFLOL" 2008) is an animated, philosophical conversation between two girls with affected Valley accents discussing the nature of consumerism and the language of commodified desire. Additional 2008 projects, including "American Minor," "Comparative Studies," and "Girl Studies" take the socio-consumerist construction of the white adolescent girl as its area of focus, traveling through transgender adolescence, the nature of the girl and her mirror, and the development of teen idols.



"Teen and Transgender Comparative Study #4" from the series "Comparative Studies" (2008)

Since 2008, White's work has begun to take on a more collaborative nature. His project "Casting Call" (2010) is exactly what its name implies. For this project, White invited 107 girls to be photographed using a neutralizing formula, looking for something in between ***go see***, a term used in fashion

to describe when a photographer is judging a neutral image of their subject to see if they have "potential," or the film industry term ***screen test***, or looking at an actor's screened audition to see if they would work for a particular role. Both types of tests have to do with understanding a person's cinematic narrative potential, and understanding what type of story would work for their look.

Image from "Casting Call" (2010)

White continued his 2012 project "A Life in B Tween," in which animated Valley-accented teen girls wax poetic on how life as TV would be better than their smartphone-amplified, networked lives in which identities transform into brand identities, and also collaborated with musician Bryan Hollon, aka Boom Bip, on **Music for Sleeping Children** (2012), songs for teen girls ages 12-16. Most recently, his "Self Portrait" series returned to a highly staged, spatially exact measurings of the human form and the foods we put into it, what could be called a self-portrait of the American consumer. But this project seems like a tangent from his latest ongoing textual project, **The Enemy**, an online triennial journal of art, culture and critique launched in January 2014. White is also currently at work on a TV show, of which he naturally could not offer many details other than it's a girls cartoon and something that he's really interested in and excited about, and it was born out of his teen girl animation "OMGBFFLOL," which did become quite popular with adolescent audiences.

White is now represented by Los Angeles' **Francois Ghebaly Gallery**. It's a big move for White, who has known Ghebaly for many years, but has not worked with him on this level -- nor has he ever had commercial gallery representation here in L.A.

"I've known Francois since 2006, and since our first encounter we have been friends" says White. "In the last two years, his program has greatly expanded and his platform has become more international and varied."

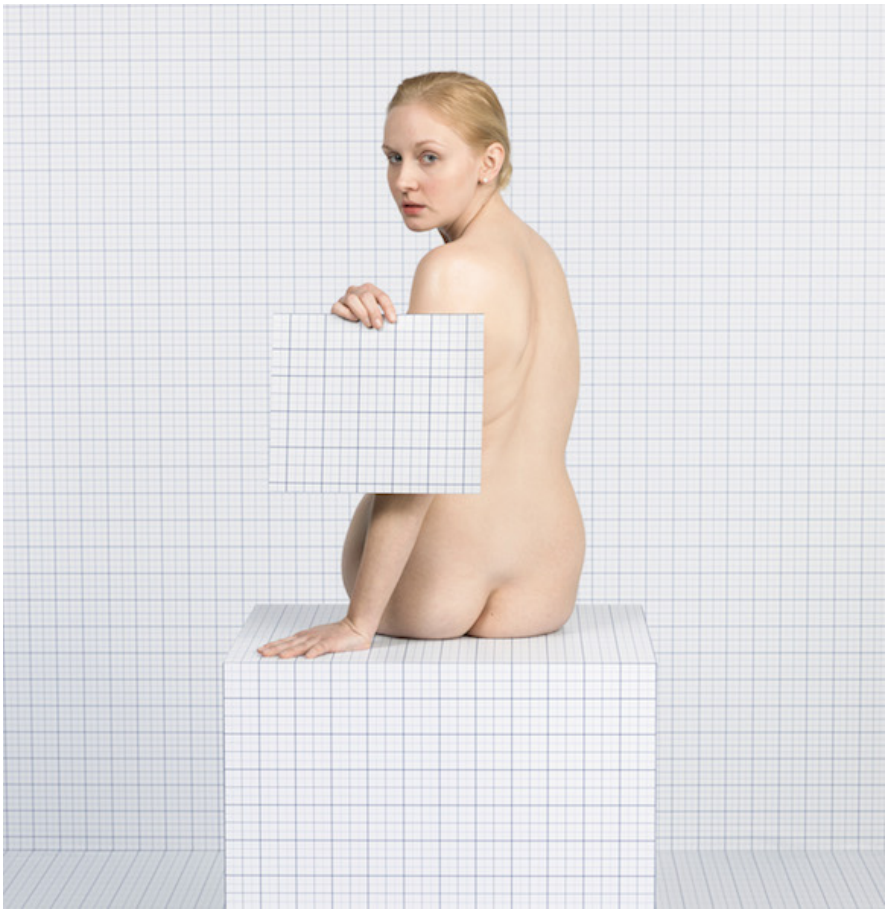
"Getting Lindsay Linton" from the series "Understanding Joshua" (2001)

"Cocktail Party," 2001, from the series "Understanding Joshua"

Timing wise, White's new attachment to Ghebaly also comes at a pivotal moment. He has not shown in a U.S. gallery since 2006, the same year that he happened to meet Ghebaly. To inaugurate this new phase of the relationship, in January 2015 he will curate an all-women's sculpture exhibition called "SOGTFO (Sculpture Or Get The Fuck Out)," with works by Kelly Akashi, Nevine Mahmoud, Amanda Ross-Ho, Katie Ryan, Kaari Upson and Andrea Zittel.

In this exhibition, White pairs two generations of sculptors including three established and three younger artists who are just beginning their careers to look at how male-dominated the history of sculpture has been.

White explains that if one really looks at how sculpture has worked and been made, it's evident that "this realm is really dominated by women and their ideas are far stronger than this cycle of the 'male genius persona.'" His title references the derogatory misogynistic phrase **"Tits or GTFO."**



"Naked Girl Sitting Down, Turning Towards Camera" from the series "Self-Portrait" (2014)

"Online boards, hugely popular spaces such as Reddit or 4chan, have been dominantly male, resulting in a culture wherein a user claiming to be female is often promoted with TOGTFO (Tits or Get the Fuck Out) to force the person to 'prove' their claimed gender, and if not, to leave the thread," says White. "This is worth considering since much of the media theory that ushered in this era viewed the internet as a space 'after' gender, or 'beyond the body.' However, what this attitude proves is that the hegemony of male culture, the concept of made-by-and-for-men is in fact immaterial and can cause the same harm outside of physical space and it has historically caused within it. So, I am taking this more current acronym, this language of the immaterial misogyny, and bringing it back to the most material subject -- sculpture -- with *SOGTFO* (Sculpture or Get the Fuck Out)."

With *SOGTFO* and his photographic studies, White's fluid, hyper-visual art practice creates another view through which to view the subjugated adolescent female body under American capitalism.

Charlie White's "SOGTFO (Sculpture or Get the Fuck Out)" opens in late January 2015 at ***Francois Ghebaly Gallery*** *(2245 E Washington Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90021).*

Selected works by Charlie White, organized by Francois Ghebaly Gallery

"Champion," 2006, from the series "Everything is American

Further Reading on Charlie White from Artbound:

Adolescence, Remixed: Charlie White and Boom Bip's "Music for Sleeping Children"

Visual artist Charlie White collaborates with avant electronic musician Boom Bip aka Brian Hollon, on a new endeavor, Music For Sleeping Children, which pairs interviews with adolescent girls with club-rocking beats.

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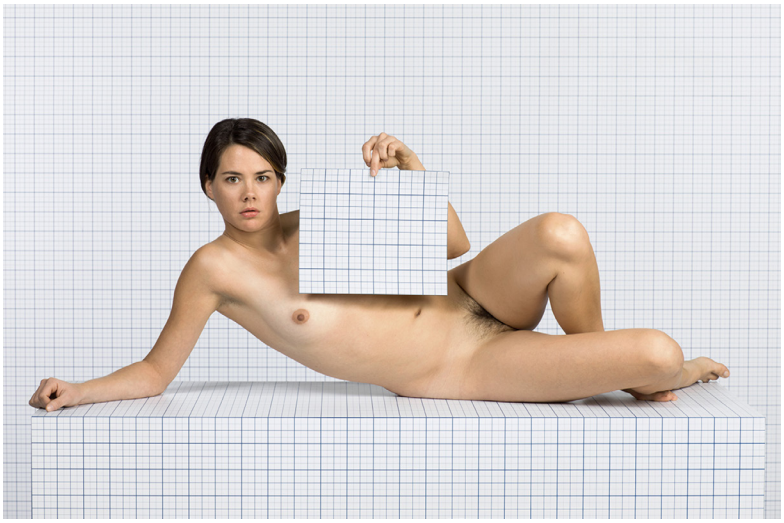
Top Image: "Bored" animation still from "A Life in B-Tween" (2012)



Naked Girl Reclining, Looking Towards Camera, 2014

CHARLIE WHITE

Interview by Ali Subotnick

"IF WE UNDERSTOOD THE TEENAGE GIRL AS AN IDEA, AS A PHASE OF LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE, THEN WE BEGIN TO RECOGNIZE IT IN OURSELVES AND ARE ABLE TO SEE ITS EXPANDING ROLE IN COMMERCIAL SOCIETY."

CHARLIE WHITE

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Born in Philadelphia, PA, Charlie White is a contemporary artist, photographer and filmmaker whose work explores identity through perception, desire and social trends. Many of his recent projects examine capitalism, America's obsession with youth, how we interact with media, and the transition from child to adult or male to female. White has exhibited internationally since 1999, and six monographs of his work have been published. White lives and works in Los Angeles, and holds the position of Professor of Fine Art at the University of Southern California, where he was director of their well-regarded MFA program from 2007 through 2011.

ALI SUBOTNICK

A curator at Los Angeles' Hammer Museum since 2006, Ali Subotnick organized the retrospective *LLYN FOULKES*, as well as *Nine Lives: Visionary Artists from L.A.*, and she was a co-curator for the first biennial *Made in L.A. 2012*. She is currently working on *Uh-Oh: Frances Stark 1991–2015,* which opens in early October. She also oversees the Hammer's artist residency program, and has written about art and culture for publications including Frieze, Parkett, ARTnews and ArtReview, among others.

Artist Charlie White investigates American excess, identity and desire through stylized film and photography. His photographs capture the tension between perception and desire in popular media and the ensuing boredom, unease and vanity of modern survival. White's 2014 work, Self Portrait, deconstructs the naked selfie by pairing a series of lavish tabletops against academic nudes. A mundane grid background connects these subjects psychologically and questions what it means to casually trade images of our private selves for satisfaction.

Much of White's work studies our culture's most idealized and complex commodity: the teenage girl. His 2008 series *Girl Studies includes American Minor,* a short film focused on banalities in the average teenager's day; *OMG BFF LOL*, an animated film about consumerism and its loneliness; and *Teen and Transgender Comparative Studies*, a side-by-side observation of girls becoming women and men becoming women. His 2009 monograph *American Minor* is a collection drawing from various projects, taking a sociological stab into the collective consciousness that worships and markets the sexualized symbol of the innocent teenager. Formally staging his photos, White strips away the organic and exposes the fiction of presentation, leaving nothing but viewer and subject.

Charlie White talks about his work with friend Ali Subotnick, long-time curator for Los Angeles' Hammer Museum.

Ali Subotnick: You seem to be fascinated with youth and that moment in life when one is "coming of age" or about to transition from child to adult. Other than the obvious, what about this stage interests you?

Charlie White: Yes, I do. However, I think that the "obvious" is not as obvious as we imagine it to be. I believe the reason youth grabs us is more elusive than we might think. So at the risk of being simplistic, I would start with the fact that we – the adult viewers – are no longer youthful, and it is this loss and the wisdom of what has passed in our bodies and lives that makes youth a complex meditation and continual cultural preoccupation.

AS: You also have an uncanny ability to empathize with girls on the verge of becoming women and, in turn, men or boys transitioning to female. Where does that empathy come from in a heterosexual white male?

CW: I think that transitioning is universal and that some of us remain located in a limbo of sorts – a space between forgetting and being. Now that I am a parent, I understand all of this much better in myself because I am continually identifying with my two-year-old son, paralleling my childhood mind with his. Perhaps the better answer is memory. I believe I have a very good memory, a memory fueled by emotional spaces and conditions, so I feel my past and that seems to allow me to empathize. It is a process of actualizing another person's perception – to become a bit like them or try to, like an actor might, but for different reasons.

OMG BFF LOL
A series of colorful retro animations by Charlie White which explore the world of two teenage girls, Tara and Blakey, from their speech patterns to themes of materialism, loneliness and desire in the context of America in 2009. The videos feature a remix of the song "We Love To Shop" by hip-hop producer Boom Bip, who also goes by the name Neon Neon.

AS: Your approach seems almost anthropological, though, like you're trying to understand and unravel the motivations and behavior of a subculture. You learned their language so deeply that your animation *OMG BFF LOL* sounds so authentic it's kind of annoying. And you worked with a girl to document a year in her life – the ultimate anthropological experiment. Am I reading too much into this, or are you trying to get inside the heads of these girls?

"I THINK THAT TRANSITIONING IS UNIVERSAL AND THAT SOME OF US REMAIN LOCATED IN A LIMBO OF SORTS – A SPACE BETWEEN FORGETTING AND BEING."

— CHARLIE WHITE

CW: Correct, I am trying to. But I believe that we are all somewhat on our way to embodying this mindset already. A mindset that is – in the case of *OMG BFF LOL* – late capitalism effectively forming our person, our desires and our systems of valuation. If we understood the teenage girl as an idea, as a phase of life in contemporary culture, then we begin to recognize it in ourselves and are able to see its expanding role in commercial society. In this way, we are all Tara and Blakey walking through the mall, and that is the point.

THEORY OF THE YOUNG-GIRL
Tiqqun is a French collective of authors and activists formed in 1999. The group published *Theory of the Young-Girl* that same year, dissecting consumer society's obsession with youth and sexuality, and mapping the nature of both its product and ideal, the "Young-Girl."

Certainly our childhoods are extending well into our adult life (the pervasiveness of games is one example, social media habit is perhaps another), but what is less recognized is the transmutation of the "teenage girl" from a subject into a genderless and ageless aspect of our privileged western identity. I feel that Tiqqun's *Theory of the Young-Girl* really captured this idea well, and that Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* offers a map for how we arrived at this condition.

ONE DIMENSIONAL MAN
A critique of contemporary capitalism as well as the Communist USSR by German philosopher Herbert Marcuse, following a pattern of social repression in both systems. Marcuse argues also that the "advanced industrial society" of capitalism creates one-dimensional individuals who are slaves to false needs and lose the ability of critical thinking.

AS: One of your new projects focuses on one of these girls, the celebrity Dana Plato, and how she was represented in photographs; how she was sexualized by the male photographer and the entertainment industry. Are you being critical of the industry? Are you trying to expose the exploitation of Plato?

DANA PLATO
A California-born actress (1964-1999) best known for her role as Kimberly Drummond on the sitcom *Diff'rent* Strokes from 1978-1986. After leaving the show, she achieved little success in entertainment and struggled with addiction and poverty. Plato died at age 34 due to a drug overdose. See images of young Plato.

CW: I am really interested in the studio photographs of Dana Plato (most shot by Herb Ball) because I think they, like a series of other photographs of young female icons in the 1970s, point to something that was just beginning to happen in commercial society that would transform our ideas about youth. Unlike the puritanically-driven tabloid Hollywood that preceded it, the teen subject of the 1970s was being elevated as a sinner, a body and a flirt. To me, Plato was the most interesting of the those, being celebrated in a group which included Brooke Shields, Tatum O'Neal, Jodie Foster and Kristy McNichol. All of these young women were the subject of intense lenticular gaze, one that stared at, undressed and fetishized their very being. This style was the foundation for how we translate teen into commodity today and the template for how teens have been packaged for consumption since.

Plato differed from her cohort in that she was much younger and far less powerful than the others – her career was both limited and short. Furthermore, she was in television, not film, which afforded another kind of image – one that was less lyrical, flat and without personality. Most of the studio images were for TV Guide promos and other Network solicitation. Dana was being elevated due to a specific role on *Diff'rent Strokes*, which lent itself to a number of erotic narratives and national anxieties that the images played on. Dana was complicated on many levels, and the studio images of her are uniquely powerful (as well as stunning) because they unpack a period when America unabashedly "looked" at the teenage girl, while inadvertently capturing a tragic life. A life that ultimately gained nothing back from the scopophilic culture that recorded it.

AS: How much of your interest in Plato comes from nostalgia? From a time before cell phones and computers, when we had to buy teen magazines to see girls like Brooke and Kristy and Dana? Are you thinking at all about how we look at these pictures differently now that things have changed so drastically with the marketing of celebrity and youth culture?

CW: I am certainly interested in how these photos look different and, in fact, are different than anything today. It's less of a nostalgia than it is anthropological interest, even if some of my curiosity began with a certain fetish for a lost style or aesthetic sensibility. For example, all of the images were made to perform functions. These functions ranged from TV Guide covers to television schedule inserts in newspapers, teen magazine cutout pages and fold-out posters, and celebrity promotional junkets. The product was Dana, and the images varied from little school-girl smiles that could share a spread with *Little House On The Prairie* to adult poses in bathing suits or skin-tight wears, which offered a different fantasy altogether.

This is an era of portraiture past; a time of bright solids and predetermined negative space for copy; a period of weekly publications and voluminous promotional materials. All of this adds to something special and lost in how photographs worked and functioned in an analog market, and what it meant when those photographs were of a teen girl and a rising star.

AS: Speaking of the entertainment industry, can you talk about your film project, Situation Comedy? As avid TV watchers, we talked about this project at length, and I find it incredibly ambitious and challenging. The film you wrote focuses on a hugely successful sitcom (one of the last) and how it develops and grows over the ten years it is broadcast. In the film, you take on the clichés and formulas of the sitcom format, but you also bring in characters that reflect the culture at large, including transexuals. All of the sudden, transexuals are all over the media – real news and fictional shows like *Transparent*. What do you make of this?

"ALL OF THESE YOUNG WOMEN WERE THE SUBJECT OF INTENSE LENTICULAR GAZE, ONE THAT STARED AT, UNDRESSED AND FETISHIZED THEIR VERY BEING."

— CHARLIE WHITE

CW: Thats a great question because *Situation Comedy* is the largest work I will most likely never get to make. As each year passes, its concepts (as you said) become closer to reality. The film was written with Vernon Chatman, who I greatly respect and is viewed as one of the few television experimentalists. His work includes *Wonder Showzen, Xavier Angle and The Heart, She Holler*. He's also involved in Louie C.K.'s show, is one of the writers on South Park and so on. So he totally and completely understands television.

Anyhow, yes, the film collapses time and moves the viewer forward across a decade of change seen only through one family sitcom, laugh track and all. I loved writing it and will probably never get the chance to make it, although seeing the incredible response to smaller projects like *Too Many Cooks* does make me feel like it could be embraced by the right person. Anyhow, the film pointed to a China fetish, transexuality, nonfictional spin-offs, micro-franchises, growing conservatism and collective social media cleansing, aiming to illustrate the future in the same way I had found looking back at important sitcoms captured the past.

FAMILY TIES
An NBC sitcom created by Gary David Goldberg that ran from 1982-1989 and reflected the cultural shift in America away from the liberalism of the '60s and '70s and toward the conservatism of the '80s. The multiple Emmy Award-winning show followed the relationship of a young Republican Alex P. Keaton and his parents, who were former hippies.

To clarify, I don't mean this in the obvious sense of a TV show feeling dated. What I mean is that when you watch a show like *Family Ties* very carefully, with an acute understanding of popular influences and politics, you can see the culture war giving over to Reaganomics, the position of Alex P. Keaton becoming the brand that America wanted, the misogyny of the time embodied in Mallory Keaton, and the aesthetics of power (specifically Nancy Reagan red) becoming dominant. This was my anchor, my truth, and it was how I conceived of a show that could similarly key the viewer into decoding everything happening in the world outside of the show as it moved forward into the future.

AS: Maybe you should get into trend forecasting. I still have faith that *Situation Comedy* will be made someday. Especially now that the Hollywood talent agencies are getting into the art business. Do you have any other unrealized projects stored in your vault?

CW: I am working on an animated girl's television show that would (ideally) challenge the male dominance of alternative cartoons, and aim to use that same platform to present something new, honest and nonviolent. We will see. I am lucky to be working with two great outfits: the animation studio Six Point Harness and the production company Mosaic. Both are very supportive of my ideas, and both agree that it is time for such a show. However, it is so much harder to make a popular product than it is to make art or art about that product, so I cannot say this will ever be realized. It is clear that some people in the world of entertainment would like to see it happen, and that is enough to keep me engaged.

AS: Back to your interest in girls, but not in a pervy way – you recently organized a show of all female sculptors. What inspired you to do the show?

CW: In 2009, I wrote an essay about collage for *Artforum* that was deeply rooted in what I was seeing in my graduate teaching. Over the past five or so years, I have been watching younger artists (mostly women) who I have taught or come to know while teaching working with objects and space in a way that outpaced what I was witnessing in the art world's market spaces and fairs. Similar to my engagement with collage, I was seeing art being made that was more interesting than the art world it would enter and more experimental than its platforms would allow. From there I began to envision a generational show, one that was intimately bound to artists I had come to know well and care for deeply.

SCULPTURE OR GTFO
A 2015 group exhibition curated by Charlie White, which featured the sculpture of five women artists while attempting to remove the gender binary of identifying it as a women's show. The name is based off of the misogynistic internet acronym (TOGTFO – Tits or Get The Fuck Out) targeted at women in chat boards.

The show *SOGTFO (Sculpture or Get the Fuck Out)* is a meditation on these feelings through the presentation of five artists whose work exceeds the language and limits that our current fair culture allows – limits based on their gender and fair culture's preoccupation with the male alpha-object. In an attempt to show a change existent yet rendered invisible through fair culture, the exhibition brings three generations together – emerging artists and recent graduates Kelly Akashi, Nevine Mamoud and Kathleen Ryan, alongside Amanda Ross-Ho, who entered into the dialog in the first decade of the the 21st century, and Andrea Zittel, who cemented her role in the '90s.

AS: How did you come to be such a feminist? You're a real champion of women but it doesn't feel like you're doing it out of anything but genuine admiration and a desire to empower women. Shall we get Freudian? Do you have a good relationship with your mother?

CW: I am not sure my mother is a part of the equation. Not this one at least. This is about artists I greatly admire. In my twelve years in academia, I have worked side-by-side with amazing women like Andrea Zittel, Sharon Lockhart, Frances Stark, A.L. Steiner, Tala Mandani and others, including you. They have been strong supports, incredible intellectual partners and great friends. I do not think my work or my ideas were immediately embraced by many them, but over time we have come to have a much deeper respect for how we all think and how that thinking varies, leaving room for complexity, contradiction and discomfort. I have also grown through relationships with other colleagues like Rhea Anastas, whose writing and thinking has been a critical part of how I understand artist's potential and notions of progress.

So what I think inspired me to curate (and I do not see myself as a curator) the show was very similar to what inspired me to the write the essay on collage six years ago – it was born from what I saw and what I understood in the world around me that I felt mattered, but was not being spoken to. I did not aim to make a feminist show. I just wanted to argue a point that was clearly limiting artists I believed in deeply, and had revealed itself as a force of cultural and psychological predetermination when regarding sculptural forms in spaces.

"PHOTOGRAPHY'S UBIQUITOUS ROLE AS A PROXY FOR A ONCE-PRIVATE NARRATIVE IS MAKING PHOTOGRAPHY MUCH LESS INTERESTING TO ME."

— CHARLIE WHITE

AS: Your work as a champion for women, transgender people and teens is admirable. You have given them a voice in a non-exploitative manner. Are there other subcultures that you are thinking of exploring in your work?

CASTING CALL
A 2010 one-day performance event organized by Charlie White, which consisted of a casting call looking for a "California Girl" between 13 and 16 to appear on an LA billboard. Viewers were able to watch the casting process through a windowed wall.

CW: I like to think of it as championing. However, I am not sure that my work is always read that way. I do see the portraiture that began in 2008 as exactly that, however that work includes young people, men, women and trans people. I would say that my recent curatorial effort is completely that – a championing of the work and, by extension, the artist. As for subcultures, I don't think I have ever thought of it that way. I have thought about groups, specifically blonde teens and their iconic role in society, like in *CASTING CALL*, or adolescence as a parallel to transition. And in much earlier works, issues that related to social anxiety and cultural tension, but never really as a subculture.

CYRILLA STROTHERS PROJECT
From 2004-2006, Charlie White documented the life of a teenage girl living in the suburbs of California through nearly 11,000 photographs. Some of these images are used as visual accompaniment to his project *Music for Sleeping Children*, an experimental pop album in collaboration with musician Boom Bip.

Maybe I see things in phases, and then I look at phases, or perhaps just moments and how a moment in a life offers something universal. When I studied Cyrilla Strothers from 2004 to 2006, what became clear was that I was not only capturing a young woman from 16 to 18, I was seeing the world at that moment. Now, almost ten years later, the images have begun to reveal an America right before the crash, before the social media explosion, smart phones, etc. An America at a high-water mark between 9/11 and the stock market implosion, and how the self – in this case Cyrilla – was able to understand her identity in relation to that moment.

As far as where I am looking now, I do not think it's anywhere completely new for me. Instead, I feel like I am understanding more by looking at the same thing, but finding it harder to capture. That's not that best answer, but that is the most honest one I can give. I believe that's why I began looking backwards at Dana Plato, began the journal or want to realize the cartoon, because photography's ubiquitous role as a proxy for a once-private narrative is making photography much less interesting to me. But change is good, and I have never really thought of myself as committed to a medium more than an idea.

All works courtesy of the Artist and Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles

ARTFORUM

Charlie White

Most viewers will associate Los Angeles–based photographer Charlie White with his distinctive brand of cinematic conceptual photography, one that—particularly early in his career—often married Hollywood production values to a giddily overripe psychosexual imagination. White made his name as the auteur behind the 1996 “Femalien” series—a thoroughly silly set of sci-fi soft-core pix—and a few years later produced the considerably more substantive “Understanding Joshua,” 2000, in which the eponymous antihero, a sad-sack homunculus, makes his way through a landscape of suburban parties and unsatisfying interactions. In such works, White courted strong reactions. And while many admired his technical skill, more than a few also dismissed the work’s reliance on the fantastical and/or pornographic as sophomoric, judging the works a little too slick for their own good and weirdly in thrall to the tropes they were ostensibly designed to interrogate.

But as in his last New York solo show nearly three years ago, White’s new work continues to move away from such exaggeration toward something subtler and more engaging. His new series of photographs, “Everything Is American,” again makes clear that a lighter touch and less hyperbolic material do not necessarily preclude the creation of uncannily perverse and compelling images. In fact, White’s past now functions as a kind of prologue to his new approach, conjuring a set of expectations that these latest works both play on and often deftly confound.

Though the gallery describes the seven images—all large, beautifully produced chromogenic prints executed in 2005—as White’s “first extended exploration of portraiture,” only two of the images, both disarmingly straightforward, would really seem to qualify as portraits: *Jody* is a close-cropped bust of an androgynous preteen girl; *Granddaughter*, a full-length shot of a nude young woman in a stuffily handsome drawing room. The uncluttered compositions, the ease of the subjects’ poses, and the directness of their gaze all are pitched to lull the viewer, yet it’s clear that White is banking on his reputation preceding him. He’s spent a career conditioning the viewer to scan his images for eerie narrative disruptions, but here uses nuance and detail to arguably greater effect—evoking a sense of menace not through overt dramatics but through a tiny cut on the girl’s face and an orchid that leers at her from the edge of the frame; desire not through blatant lasciviousness but through a plate of glistening fruit at the woman’s hip.

All of which is not to say that the artist has entirely abandoned the glossy formal devices of high-tone erotica and fantasy. Restrained in comparison to previous scenarios, both *Champion*—featuring a classically draped hero toting a lifelike Goliath-size decapitated head—and *Homo habilis*, with its off-kilter natural history diorama vibe, nevertheless seem vaguely hokey exceptions to White’s new lower-key rule. Meanwhile *Tate-LaBianca*, his fictionalized courtroom shot of Susan Atkins and friends at their Manson family sentencing, is as interesting for the games it plays with history and memory as it is for anything in the image itself. Perhaps most intriguing is the way he’s managed to preserve the purposefully discordant sexual energy of his prior work while mostly deep-sixing the T&A. A signal case in point is *The Americans, US Gymnastics Team*: Like several of White’s subjects, the coach and the injured young female athlete he cradles Pietà-like in his arms both glisten with a sheen of vaguely postcoital perspiration, their expressions caught precisely on the cusp of pain and pleasure. It’s one of the best and most subversive photos White has made—one that should satisfy both those who loved his earlier works because of their strenuous outlandishness and those who admired them in spite of it.

—*Jeffrey Kastner*

LA WEEKLY

Katy Grannan and Charlie White Bring Their Unique Portrait Photography to LACMA

BY CATHERINE WAGLEY

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2012

It's not obvious at first that Charlie White and Katy Grannan, the photographers whose work features in LACMA's new two-person exhibition "The Sun and Other Stars," belong together.

White's images fixate on how adolescence has been idealized — in making some of them, he's held casting calls where blond, slim, always white teens with hair and posture that conjure Disney Channel stars Ashley Tisdale or Ross Lynch posed in front of well-lit, gridded backgrounds.

Grannan's images, while just as intently posed, feature anonymous eccentrics she met on the streets of L.A. or San Francisco. One man Grannan photographed has a tattoo of a star on his cheek and a red blade arching down his neck, which makes it appear that he's bleeding. Another wispily white-haired woman in a pink parka with faraway eyes could be a character out of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

But because Grannan posed her subjects in front of white walls and under intense California sun, her images, like White's, look as evenly lit and exacting as they would have if shot in studios with strobes and solid backdrops. And, also like White's, every detail of Grannan's images is meant to draw your attention to the subject, and only the subject.

White and Grannan became friends, in part because they care so much about their subjects, according to White. Grannan points out they would have been friends regardless, since they "hit it off instantly," and it's hard not to love White, whose "intellect is ginormous."

Whatever the reason, by the time in 2011 LACMA curator Britt Salvesen proposed to them a joint show, the artists were already deep in conversation with one another.

Grannan had known White's work since the late 1990s, but she didn't officially meet him until she came down from San Francisco in the mid-'00s to lecture at USC, where White teaches.

"If you look at earlier work of mine and Katy's, like from the late '90s," White says, "you'll see how it has never deviated from the subject."

In the last decade and a half, a lot of fine-art photography has deviated. Portrait photography and multipart narrative shoots have been more at home in *W* or *Vanity Fair* fashion features than in white-walled galleries.

But a series of staged images White made in 1999 shows people reacting to strange encounters they've had with aliens in Highland Park or empty Inland Empire streets. In 1999, Grannan photographed a series of nude, or nearly nude, young and adolescent women centered in sterile suburban living rooms.

"We were working in that regard," White says of portrait photography, "but realizing that area of focus had moved out of the zeitgeist."

What did enter the art-world zeitgeist in the 2000s was process-based work — so much had changed in photography, and in media, so quickly. We'd gone from analog to digital; printing possibilities had multiplied. And there was Photoshop, and webcams with which to take self-portraits, and websites where you could upload images instantly.

As if anticipating the Facebook era, Wolfgang Tillmans began taking photographs of everything and anything he encountered, from fruit stands and his friends to T-shirts. He also took photographs for advertisements, which he sometimes displayed along with his other work. The only thing that made something worthy of photographing, it seemed, was that Tillmans had noticed it.

In 2006, Walead Beshty exhibited images he had taken of the abandoned Iraqi Embassy in Berlin. Since he had let his analog film pass through airport X-ray machines, the images were blurred and streaked with purples and greens. Technology had obstructed the subject.

The weird thing about photographs like these is that — even though they probe the possibilities and failures of technology and self-consciously record how photographers' experiences in the world physically affect what they make — they still feel like they're mostly photographs about photography. You look at them and think about how they were made, how they work, how they compare to other photographs you've seen.

"There's a much bigger world out there, and plenty of places to find common ground," Grannan says. "Photography is just a starting point."

She's referring to her own conversations with White, and how they would have plenty to discuss even if they hadn't both been interested in subjects in the era of the process, but the statement resonates with the show as a whole.

In Grannan's photographs, the austerity of the sunlight, the careful framing — you never see the full figure, just the head and shoulders or sometimes part of the torso and a bit of leg — and the crispness that allows you to see the brutal details of each face all feel like they're trying to get at the bigness and strangeness of what and who exists outside the photo's frame.

“I envisioned these photographs as a procession of individuals with rich histories, much like the final scene in *8½*,” Grannan explains.

That Fellini film ends with a crowd of characters proceeding along a beach, around a movie set. It’s carnivalesque but also drawn out enough that you can pay attention to each character’s individual quirks.

White, too, creates something of a crowd. In glass cases, he has laid out his research material — covers and clips from *People* and teen magazines, showing young Jodie Foster or Jessica Simpson — which he looks at in planning his own images.

Then the unnamed subjects White has photographed hang on the walls, seeming more of a contemporary moment than the celebrities in the cases, more aware of the camera and of the ideal they’re aiming for with their parted blond hair, tanned skin and hands-on-hips poses.

“Both of us work in the present,” White says of himself and Grannan. “There’s a time when the subject re-enters the picture, and that time is now.”

Charlie White’s Girl Posed (2008)

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LOOCK GALERIE, BERLINE

Art in America

INTERVIEWS AUG. 17, 2012

Kids' Stuff, Adult Matters: Q+A with Charlie White

by Ross Simonini

Image of Brooke Shields in film *Blue Lagoon.*

Artist Charlie White is consumed by the phenomenon of the consumerist teenager, particularly the female, who has, since the 1970s, been the prime target for advertising. In "The Sun and Other Stars," his two-person show with photographer Katy Grannan, on view through Oct. 14 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, White offers a wide variety of works reflecting mass-media depictions of adolescence: '90s-style after-school cartoons, documentation from a performance-audition in which he photographed 107 teenage models, and photographs of dolls fabricated to eerily resemble real teenage girls.

Also on display are White's research materials, including his collection of women's lifestyle magazines that feature blondes on their covers (*Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, etc.) and a corkboard pinned with images of teenagers from the last four decades, each one a study in the postures, hues, attitudes and esthetics that define the young adult in pop culture. White is also a writer and an associate professor at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, where he ran the MFA program from 2007 to 2011.

ROSS SIMONINI: In your work, would you say you're trying to see through the lens of the teenager, or are you an adult looking at teenage culture from the outside?

CHARLIE WHITE: I'm an adult looking at the adolescent image as a vehicle for cultural analysis. Not exactly inhabiting a teen POV, because nothing in the work relies on youthful forms of expression. In fact, I don't think any of my work that's dealt with minors—except

for maybe the mimetic quality of the animations [*OMG BFF LOL*, 2008, and *A Life in B Tween*, 2012]—has adopted the adolescent viewpoint.

SIMONINI: What defines a youthful form of expression?

WHITE: The work being adolescent in character, in tone and in attitude. Take, for example, *Girl Posed* and *Boy Posed* [both 2008] , which are about a type of portrait photography. They work within and from generic commercial modes of presentation to create a "posed" portrait of a boy and girl that operate within the vernacular of popular teen imagery and point outside of this language to something more problematic, a visual tension.

SIMONINI: What are some examples of imagery you're drawing on in, say, the *Boy Posed* image?

WHITE: I was looking for a male model that brought to mind Christopher Atkins, Brooke Shields's costar in The Blue Lagoon. Like Shields, Atkins was extremely eroticized in popular culture, with The Blue Lagoon functioning as an American coital fantasy of a union between Atkins and Shields. For me, he was a benchmark of male adolescent representation. Boy Posed indexes this representation through subtle physical likeness and the bravado in the subject's gaze, while the boy's stance points to the classical contrapposto figure. The result is a sort of Bop! Magazine/Atkins four-fold/David combination.

SIMONINI: Would you say these qualities, these tensions-the pose, the colors, the backdrops-are something you're considering when you arranged all the images on the bulletin board in *Research Material* [2012] and selected the covers from your *Magazine Collection 2004-2006* [2012].

WHITE: Yes. The imagery in *Research Material*—which is in fact just that, a portion of my collected research material—is the touchstone for much of my thinking. I am continually compiling material that contains a certain tension resulting from the conflation of commerce and complicated sexuality.

SIMONINI: Can you give me an example?

WHITE: Sure. Let me list a few examples that I hope the magazines will illustrate. Start with a contemporary teen celebrity like Ross Lynch in a pink sleeveless shirt with bare hairy underarms to camera, or a character such as tween Hannah Montana in a finger-over-her-mouth pose, or teenage Britney Spears in farm-girl themed promo material, or a come-hither teen Christina Applegate portrait to pair

with her sexpot high-school teen role as Kelly Bundy, or tween Ricky Schroder in short-shorts and a coogi sweater, or Jodie Foster naked in a hot tub, or a topless Matt Dillon. I could go on and on. The point is that such imagery is part of the commercial vernacular, one that continually evolves, depending on current social conservatisms.

SIMONINI: But you're not trying to reproduce these images, is that right?

WHITE: To some degree I am re-making as much of this tension as needed in order to analyze it, while still allowing it to become its own entity outside the commercial media that generates it. In this way, many of the works in the exhibition are translations; translating a casting call, a four-fold poster, a headshot, an after-school cartoon show, a teenager's bedroom wall, etc.

SIMONINI: Do you think this particular vernacular comes out the 1970s period of youth portrayal in the media?

WHITE: Completely. Some threshold was breeched in the '70s that transformed how the market exploited teen celebrity and the teen image. Perhaps it is as simple as the way flesh became present, specifically in images of adolescents being documented and distributed for the consumption of other adolescents. In this regard, there were Matt Dillon's topless portraits, but there were also far more complicated representations, like the 1976 publication of *Sugar and Spice* by Playboy Press that included Gary Gross's photographs of 10-year-old Brooke Shields.

SIMONINI: It could easily be construed that, behind the work, there's a cynicism or judgmental attitude toward this culture. But it really appears that you're trying to present these images without coloring them.

WHITE: That's right.

SIMONINI: Would you say that you're celebrating the beauty of these images, their design, their esthetic?

WHITE: On a very formal level there's a lot to embrace, even to elevate. Specifically, the unrestrained garishness of the teen magazine and how that parallels (more and more) the adult glamour magazine and how the glamour magazine is in turn informed by the porn magazine. Taken together, one format sets the parameters for the next, but in no specific order, so "teen" becomes "adult," while "adult" mimics "teen," and so on.

SIMONINI: "Casting Call" is a series of photographs of girls from a

performance event in 2010. Was the event an actual casting call?

WHITE: Yes, it was an actual casting call that I held at LA.

SIMONINI: Do you feel—and this a word that's often thrown around—that this "indexing" of your subject lends itself to objectifying them? Are you embracing the objectification of these teens as stock images?

WHITE: A casting call, or the image from such a call, is a proto-form of the objectified image, similar to a "Go-See" (when a model visits a photographer and ends up having his/her Polaroid taken). Casting-call images are less refined than a headshot; they are the material embodiment of ambition. With the "Casting Call" images, I'm making a document of ambition and desire, and of organization based on type. That is what the resulting portraits show.