

Tweens Take Spotlight at Ohwow Gallery in Los Angeles

By Rozalia Jovanovic 7/03 4:21pm

Tweens, those young people suffering through the awkward stages of pre-adolescence, have long been an inspiration for artists. In 1858, Lewis Carroll snapped his muse, the Lolita-esque child Alice Lidell, striking a provocative pose in tattered rags. Richard Prince put a fresh lens on this fascination with youth and sexuality for his 1983 work *Spiritual America* for which he appropriated a sultry image of 10-year-old Brooke Shields, nude and heavily made up, with her lower legs obscured by a thick mist. And that was all before there was such a demographic as the “tween.”

Aged roughly 9 to 12, the tween—as an emergent subject and object of exploitation—is the jump-off point for the exhibition “Too Old for Toys, Too Young for Boys,” organized by New York-based curator Alex Gartenfeld at the Los Angeles gallery Ohwow, which opened June 30 and runs through September 1.

“Because the teenager is a historical convention, I was hoping to get beyond it,” Mr. Gartenfeld told Gallerist via e-mail. “The tween seemed so much more honest because it’s a demographic created explicitly for commercial exploitation.”

The show, which brings together 14 works by a variety of contemporary artists, was inspired by two texts, Charlie White’s “Minor Threat” and Seth Price’s “Teen Image,” which both deal with the way artists have “predicted, responded to or critiqued developments in popular imagery,” in the words of Mr. Gartenfeld.

Some of the works instill a similar duality of creepy exploitation coupled with the defiant confidence of the tween invoked by Mr. Prince’s piece. In one photograph by Aura Rosenberg (she asked adult artists and children to collaborate on portraits) a young shirtless boy’s innocence is undercut by his tough look and the odd lines drawn on his face, which seem to reference scars or the kind of lines a plastic surgeon might draw on the skin of a face-lift patient.

But not all of the works involve tweens directly. Josh Kline’s mock-ups of images of adult celebrities are equally eerie and evocative. There are also sculptures and abstract paintings. Donald Moffett’s painting, which through its creation—by the repetitive mechanical application of paint, mimics the kind of accumulation and information gathering peculiar to the Internet.

While there is an undercurrent of celebrity in the show, it’s not a theme per se (“‘celebrity’ as a theme in art is not at all useful,” he noted) but there is an uneasy connection between tweens and celebrity in the exploration of image creation and consumption.

“A very small number of tweens are celebrities,” said Mr. Gartenfeld. “Tweens are people who are generally quite adept with social media and who are themselves consuming a lot of celebrity content. It’s interesting to think about the permutations of subject-object/subject-subject relationships (child-child, child-adult, adult-child) when it comes to ‘tween’-specific imagery. Technology affords these relationships a thrilling, oscillating proximity.”