



THE NEW YORKER

MARCH 19, 2007

HELLEN VAN MEENE

This Dutch photographer's color pictures of children and adolescents are not as peculiar as some she's shown, but they remain wonderfully odd. Working with young people in Latvia, London, Russia, Morocco, Japan, and the Netherlands, van Meene elicits and shapes performances (often contortions of self-consciousness that come easily to girls and boys in their teens), which she then compresses into portraits. The best of these have the radiant intensity of Renaissance miniatures, but their appeal is always complicated by their subjects' strikingly unconventional looks and a sense of dreamy, abstracted inwardness. What are these kids thinking? Wouldn't you like to know. Through March 17. (Richardson, 535 W. 22nd St. 646-230-9610.)

The New York Times

FRIDAY, MARCH 2, 2007

Hellen van Meene

Yancey Richardson
535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through March 17

y r

Puberty, as represented in Hellen van Meene's photographs, is like a long-term but temporary physical defect. The body is disproportionate. The face becomes a canvas for pimples. Breasts develop embarrassingly early or frustratingly late — except in boys with gynecomastia (a swelling of the mammary glands whose incidence spikes during puberty), who could probably live happily without them altogether.

Ms. van Meene's work captures the purgatory of adolescence with more detachment than sympathy. Her specialties include partly nude close-ups of androgynous teenagers and pubescent mothers. The selection here, taken from 2004 to 2006 in Russia, Latvia, Morocco, Japan, the Netherlands and England, finds teenagers and tweens wearing a bit more clothing and posed in color-saturated but somewhat claustrophobic settings.

As always, Ms. van Meene exaggerates what nature has already bestowed, dressing butch girls and femme boys in clothes that further mask their sex or posing teenage mothers with their midriffs bared to reveal distended bellies and stretch marks. Other photographs depict dreamy and dazed adolescents staring into points beyond the picture frame.

There are obvious touchstones for this work: Diane Arbus and Rineke Dijkstra. Like Ms. Dijkstra, Ms. van Meene focuses on teenagers, often at the margins of Europe. Human vulnerability and the plucky dignity summoned by people of all ages to compensate for their limitations are mainstays in Arbus. Formally, Ms. van Meene splits the difference, printing her work in color but at what is, by contemporary standards, rather small scale. The glaring distinction is that Ms. van Meene's work, while accomplished, does not feel particularly groundbreaking.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Time Out New York

February 15–21, 2007

y r

Hellen van Meene

★★★★★

Yancey Richardson Gallery,
through Mar 17 (see Chelsea)



Dutch photographer Hellen van Meene is best known for provocative color portraits of prepubescent girls and androgynous young boys that tread a line between the sensual and the suggestive. But while exposed flesh puts in the occasional appearance in her new show, erotic undertones are nearly absent.

The 20 small images were photographed on the artist's travels between 2004 and 2006 through

Latvia, Russia, Morocco and Japan, as well as in London and the Netherlands. Generally shot as busts against simple backdrops, the series takes a stronger cue from traditional portraiture than previous works did.

If the show has a theme, it might be diversity; at times the photos seem to be playing a game of compare and contrast. A pale young girl sports a mane of curly red hair, while a dark-skinned woman wears an elegant burka. A skinny white boy proudly sticks out his bony ribs, visible through a skin-tight hot-pink shirt; a chubby black youth poses regally in profile with crossed arms against a red brick wall. Van Meene adopts a pimples-and-all approach that nonetheless presents each of these young people as gorgeous in his or her own right. There is no apparent political motivation underlying this globe-trotting project, but by casting her eclectic subjects—even those who are wall-eyed, weak-chinned or have outie belly buttons—as sensations unto themselves, the artist discards conventional ideals of beauty while making pointedly beautiful work.—*Sarah Valdez*

TIMEOUTNEWYORK.COM

535 WEST 22ND STREET
NEW YORK CITY 10011
646 230 9610 FAX 646 230 6131
INFO@YANCEYRICHARDSON.COM
WWW.YANCEYRICHARDSON.COM

Aperture
Fall 2004; page 22-33

Hellen van Meene

PORTRAITS

Although the theme of adolescence is self-evident in Hellen van Meene's work, her images are far from windows into the individual angsts or pleasures of the girls (and the occasional boy) who pose for her. Van Meene carefully controls each element within the frame to create delicately textured, formal compositions. The invariable square format provides a pre-ordained symmetry within which the models are placed close to the picture plane, typically allowing only a spare selection of details from the ordinary locations into the frame: a triangular swatch of carpet, the pastel corner of a table, or the green backdrop of a backyard lawn.

The ordinariness of the environments and natural light that suffuses each image provide a sense of realism—a convincing set in which van Meene stages her drama: a series of physical manipulations of the models' bodies that, taken as a whole, form a catalog of minor ordeals. To achieve the desired effect, she might ask them to lie in a cold bath or to pinch a fresh bruise, drape fabric over or around them, or put them between the cushions of a couch. She drenches their clothes in water, or has the models wear them inside-out. She pays particular attention to their hair, spreading it out on the branches of a bush or on a wet windowpane. The subjects' expressions are consistently flat—whether they are looking at the camera, or far off to the side, or have their eyes closed completely.

The intensity and obsessive nature of these gestures suggest a symbolist agenda—some index of literary or biblical tropes from which these poses are borne. Despite her contemporary aesthetic, the dramatic nature of this choreography gives van Meene's images an air of Pictorialism, recalling the theatricality of photographers like Clementina Hawarden or F. Holland Day, who filled their fanciful compositions with the symbolism of literature, classical mythology, and religious allegory. The Pictorialists' use of heavy symbolism was co-opted from the equally romantic paintings and sculptures of the pre-Raphaelites. But the photographers could not control the expressions of their

figures the way a painter could finesse the image over time to convey "wistfulness" or "yearning." (Julia Margaret Cameron was known to lock up her sitters for hours before a session in order to elicit "despair.") After the scene was set, there was only one brief moment before the shutter clicked in which the model could attempt to express such a complex emotion. More often than not, in the final image, there among the robes and props and leopard-skin drop cloths sits a nineteenth-century person dressed as a nymph or a virgin, with an utterly blank expression.

For van Meene, there is no grand theme or narrative to be conveyed; despite the drama they imply, her interventions are pure formalism. But just as the subjects of Pictorialist portraiture often seem disconnected from the scenarios they inhabit, her models remain deliberately blasé, seemingly immune to the unnatural positions she imposes on their bodies. This disjunction is tactical; van Meene capitalizes on the weight of the dramatic pose and the "elsewhereness" of the models to illuminate the complexities of visually representing adolescents.

If they're like all adolescents, her models are painfully aware of their bodies. Further, they are becoming aware that *other* people are aware of their bodies. By compelling a model to rest her weight on her chin, or to wear a cold, wet, transparent shirt, or to perform any number of other abnormal physical maneuvers, van Meene amplifies and energizes the subject's awareness of physical self, alerting her to the fact that she is being objectified, just as if someone were staring at a particular part of her body.

Though the blank, distant expressions of the models thwart attempts to access their emotional states, their uneasy physical self-consciousness implies a response to the intrusive scrutiny of the viewer. The act of looking at these girls becomes fraught with tension, as it would be in the physical world. This layered awareness that van Meene imparts to the viewer lends her images a poignancy that is echoed in the subtle formalism of her work. ●

by Andrew Hiller

Art in America
March 2002

Hellen van Meene at Matthew Marks

Hellen van Meene's photographic portraits seem to be documentary, providing a window onto her vulnerable subjects' solitary desires and despairs. However, the images, always of adolescent females, are actually staged. For the most part, the girls are posed in a manner that makes them seem as if they carry concerns and yearnings beyond their years. They tend to show a fair bit of skin. They rarely look at the camera. Eyes are usually downcast, focused elsewhere. In the past, van Meene's models have been European. Here, they're Japanese. But, judging from van Meene's oeuvre, one might safely surmise that she regards the adolescent female's ennui as transcending nationality.

Van Meene's camera tends to linger on eccentric but captivating details. She wraps a set of identical twins in translucent pink plastic, for instance. It drapes geometrically, clashing beautifully with the natural world. She highlights slightly pimply skin, bags under eyes and flesh taut with baby fat. The anti-ideal is both a little perverted and appealing. She's drawn to windows, to the way they make vague reflections of

her melancholy muses, heightening their ethereal demeanors. Van Meene's underage subjects appear to feel a little strung out, but don't let it get in the way of their precocious emotional voraciousness.

A plump, pigtailed teen in a tartan miniskirt and sports shirt smashes the back of her body strangely against a window, cocking her hip to the side. A young girl lies on her belly, ass and legs propped up on a bed. Her face is on the floor. She coyly gazes into the camera, fingering one of her lips. The persona of the photographer, who goes through the world kinkily observing and chronicling young Asian girls, hazily indulging in the tactile and the colorful, gets passed on to the viewer of the photographs. It's not unpleasant, but it is a bit unnerving. "Are they prostitutes?" a fellow gallery-goer asked aloud.

Van Meene's work isn't total-

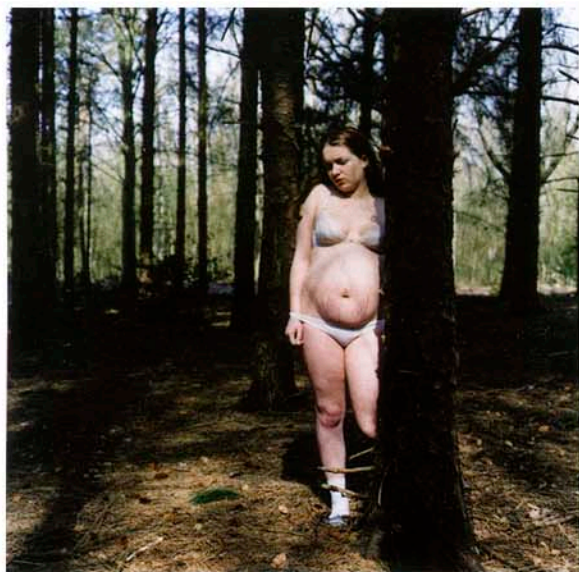


Hellen van Meene: Untitled, 2000, C-print, 15½ square inches; at Matthew Marks.

ly unlike that of the late fashion photographer Guy Bourdin. But it is markedly less demeaning than his often sadistic images of young girls in too much makeup striking compromising poses. Van Meene's empathy for her subjects shines through. Her girls are more sensual and individualized; their volition stays intact, and their aching remains their own. My favorite photograph, however, is the

least sexually charged in the show. It's a headshot of a young woman with her eyes closed. Her face is slightly square. Blossoms on a tree behind her match her fuzzy white jacket, which is buttoned to the top. Setting off the image's overall pallor, long, raven-colored hair hangs over her shoulders while the tree's branches echo a dark sinewy tangle against a pristine blue sky. She seems to be floating off into a pastel-hued ecstasy, tasting the narcotic disbelief that a moment can be simultaneously so exquisite and so impermanent. —Sarah Valdez

Hellen van Meene / New Works



The Pump House Gallery, London
Until 14 May 2006

In recent years adolescence has become an increasingly popular subject in art photography. Images of young and teenage girls in particular have featured frequently in photographic magazines, books and exhibitions as well as photography prizes, including the winner of the prestigious 2005 Schweppes Photographic Portrait Prize. Hellen van Meene, a pioneer of this genre, has developed a unique visual style of portraying teenagers which is often defined as fictional portraiture. She started photographing girls in her home town of Heiloo in Holland over ten years ago and is best known for her images showing young girls, often in strange, motionless poses. The atmosphere of stillness and intimacy of these photographs, the tension between mystery and ordinariness, convey a sense of awkwardness and anticipation characteristic of the age of transition from childhood to womanhood.

To some extent her photographs of solitary figures isolated against a carefully chosen background draw on the Western tradition of portrait painting. Like the Old Masters, the photographer selects for her image a highly controlled colour scheme, and uses daylight as the only source of illumination. However, the boundaries of classical portraiture, with its emphasis on the model's identity seem to van Meene an inadequate definition of her work. She prefers to see her photographs as records of very personal encounters that took place between her and her model. The process of establishing a meaningful relationship with people she chooses to photograph, which often influences the final image, is of far greater importance to her than their actual identity. The intimate and personal nature of these works is further enhanced by their modest scale of 30 x 30cm or 40 x 40 cm, a size conducive to one to one viewing.

The exhibition at The Pump House Gallery in London, which is the first major presentation of van Meene's work in London since her exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery in 1999, includes a selection of works made in the last two years. Apart from photographs of teenagers taken during van Meene's trips to Japan, Russia and Latvia the exhibition also includes a series of photographs of teenage mothers commissioned for the exhibition by Pump House Gallery. There is no clear separation between what at first might seem like two distinctive series of work in the space. Each of the four floors of the gallery displays a mixture of singular portraits taken abroad as well as images of South West London teenage mothers. Such a logic of display, although initially rather confusing to the viewer, reflects van Meene's view of the works, who does not perceive them as separate, but sees all of her photographic output as a continuum.

Opposite left: *Untitled*, 2004. Thanks to the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts Design and Architecture,
Opposite right: *London Teenage Mother*, 2005. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London — van Zoetendaal, Netherlands, commissioned by Pump House Gallery.



Below Left: *Untitled*, 2004. Thanks to the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts Design and Architecture,
Below Right: *London Teenage Mother*, 2005, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London — van Zoetendaal, Netherlands, commissioned by Pump House Gallery.



Van Meene's recent photographs show a subtle shift in her work, in particular an expanding range of subjects that now, apart from individual portraits of girls also includes images of boys and double portraits. Photographing abroad, away from the familiar environment of her hometown, posed for van Meene a new challenge. In order to deal with a constantly changing, unpredictable working environment and spontaneous situations she had to adjust her working method and adopt strategies often used in street photography. Working with a Rolleiflex held at a waist level, van Meene is able to establish a quick and engaging relationship with her models, whom she often meets in a street or on the bus, and quickly negotiate the way she wants to photograph them. Her portraits are a result of cooperation, rather than collaboration, as the photographer has a clear image of what she wants to achieve and the model just follows her instructions. Van Meene chooses to photograph people whose faces intrigue her. Her images are often marked by tension between vulnerable beauty and the physical imperfection of her models. Far from exploitative, they are taken with

the consent of the model who always receives a print of the image. The models photographed for her London teenage mothers project were also invited to the opening of the exhibition. These girls are depicted with their children, siblings, or alone, pregnant or with no evidence of pregnancy, looking like other teenagers in van Meene's photographs. Considered to be a sensitive issue, teenage pregnancy is approached by van Meene as an aspect of their life, rather than a condition that defines their identity. Approaching them in the same apolitical way as she does her other models she focused her attention on the girls' unique qualities which she finds particularly interesting. Van Meene's main concern is finding the way to capture them in her work and not to engage in a social debate around the issue of teenage pregnancy. In van Meene's photographs teenage mothers often appear strong and proud, empowered rather than oppressed by their condition. Approaching her models with a great degree of empathy van Meene succeeds in revealing both their unique strength and vulnerability. — BASIA SOKOLOWSKA