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Mr. Greco

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Progress by Picture

As writer-director, Eric Kaplan, insists in *Five Theses on Creativity*, “art simply refers to those aspects of our lives that can be suffused and transformed by creativity.” Throughout the text, Kaplan describes the five main facets of creativity that make art crucial to our lives. These facets are: Creativity makes something new, creativity hides itself, creativity permeates life, creativity can break your heart, and creativity is a kind of love. Taken together, creativity is at the core of our world. To be creative is to have the world at your fingertips, and to rely on creativity is to be human, and it is to love. All the while, creativity acts with such subtlety; a subtlety that is capable of dismantling our world and entirely reinventing it all within the blink of an eye. Creativity is ever-changing in itself, and the world around it, and that is an incredible, unparalleled thing. Justine Kurland is a photographer who demonstrates this idea. Through her art, she has contributed to the restructuring of the societally sound concept of femininity; portraying the raw truth of girlhood.

The ability of creativity to transform belief is heavily demonstrated by photographer, Justine Kurland. In specific, her works: *Toys R Us*, 1998; *Poison Ivy*, 1999; and *Armadillo Burial*, 2001 are incredibly influential in reshaping society’s definition of femininity. To undermine an idea that has been held since the beginning of time, through the use of art, is exactly why creativity is so important.



Fig. 1. Kurland, Justine. *Toys R Us*. c.1998. *Girl Pictures*, Aperture, 2020.

The instant bond, or connection, felt between women is often disregarded in the traditional conception of femininity, though it is one of the most integral parts. In Kurland's 1998 piece, *Toys R Us* (see fig.1), she demonstrates the power the female friendship holds over even the most mundane activities. This photograph depicts two girls in a sort of embrace, seemingly just enjoying the company of each other in a "Toys R Us" parking lot. The most intriguing part of this photograph is the staging of the models, as one leans into the other, the other braiding the hair of the first. It's difficult not to be drawn into this intimacy, feeling both warmed by and reflected in the photograph. Their position in the lower foreground is also important to consider, being placed below the words: "Toys R Us." This placement aims to suggest that the girls, themselves, are the toys. As such, a commentary is made on the longstanding preconception that women are "doll-like" and "dainty." That preconception is then juxtaposed by the attire and props of these girls (ex. exposed underwear, concealed alcohol), all of which scream: "teen rebellion." The *mise-en-scène* works effectively in this photograph to relay a sense of knowing in the female audience; a familiarity that draws the viewer in, simultaneously evoking emotion within that relatability.



Fig. 2. Kurland, Justine. *Poison Ivy*. c.1999. *Girl Pictures*, Aperture, 2020.

Kurland tends to add a fantastical element to her work, her subjects typically runaway teen girls. In *Poison Ivy* (see fig. 2), two girls are sitting in tall grass by a mossy lake. The aloofness of this, almost magical, location sets the girls in a world of their own. The, somewhat, shallow depth of field draws us into the girls' interaction, while also enhancing the dreamlike feel of the forest. The girls, themselves, appear to have just come out of the lake, covered in leeches. One of them is wearing goggles, clueing us into the fact that this wasn't spontaneous, it was a planned exploration. This reflects on the limbo that comes with the teenage years; an entrapment between childhood and adulthood. While these *characters* might be expected to have reached adultlike maturity, they haven't yet abandoned the reckless freedom of youth. Another choice that Kurland made in directing her models was to have them act in a calm manner. Though the average person might be slightly more alarmed by the presence of leeches on their body, these girls are unperturbed. This connects back to much of Kurland's work, pushing that the togetherness of girls overcomes all. When one of the girls picks the leeches off of the other before herself; Kurland urges the viewer to recognize the sense of caring that is at the core of

girlhood. Overall, this photograph wields a dreamy, youthful appeal that allows absurdity and nostalgia to act synonymously.



Fig. 3. Kurland, Justine. *Armadillo Burial*. c.2001. *Girl Pictures*, Aperture, 2020.

While Kurland’s other photographs foster a sense of recognition and sometimes warmth, *Armadillo Burial* (see fig. 3) is instantly disturbing. In this picture, Kurland has set her models in a group; some comforting each other, others standing apart in observation, and the two *bravest* conducting the “burial.” Shot in a dead, wintry forest, the girls adorned in their warmest clothes, Kurland fabricates an atmosphere that, at the surface, appears dystopian, but upon inspection, suggests utopia. A utopia in which girls are at the forefront of the world. In dressing her models in dirty, rugged clothes, and placing them in these gruesome conditions, Kurland has flipped the switch on society. The photograph parallels a *Huckleberry Finn* or *Lord of the Flies* plot, but allows the girls to do the dirty work. The strongest aspect of Kurland’s photography is her ability to tell a story, and *Armadillo Burial* is no different. The camera places the audience as a spectator; we aren’t a part of the scene, we’re watching it unfold. This choice succeeds in adding to the intrigue, as it takes us out of reality and catalyzes our ability to suspend disbelief. Curating

a seemingly abandoned world that's overrun by teenage girls, Kurland furthers her commentary on the female condition, both shocking and finding ground in her audience.

This selection of Kurland's work is merely a fragment in her much larger commentary on the female condition, though it succeeds in effectively demonstrating her perspective. Through the viewing of just a few of Kurland's pieces, we are already drawn into her reconstruction of girlhood. As urged by Kaplan, "A different way of talking can suddenly make our world seem new." Kurland's use of both the mundane and the fantastical, her intimately staged models, and her overall portrayal of female unity display Kaplan's point with precision. By depicting femininity in its rawest form, messy and amalgamated, Kurland has redefined what society has perceived it to be. As such, our world suddenly seems "new." Without art, society would have a much more difficult time reshaping belief, and it is art like Kurland's that pushes us towards progress.

Works Cited

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