



Sharon Lockhart, 1969

Shot over four seasons, time is the subject of Sharon Lockhart's *Pine Flat* installation, which consists of nineteen photographs and a 138-minute film, all of which are portraits of children. It is both a story of and a documentary about looking until one sees. As any artist or enlightened wizard will tell you, this sort of watchful resourcefulness involves embracing ambiguity to discover the beauty in and the intimacy that often springs from the accidents of life. Its absence accounts for the spiritual ache many adults experience as open-eyed innocence inevitably is lost in the process of growing up. We learn this lesson as children and, later, if we're open, can relearn it from them. After some years of necessary struggle, both parents and photographers recognize the pleasure, as well as the rewards, that result from locating the proper distance at which children can comfortably claim their independence and things come into perspective. As if to model this koan, Lockhart's purposefully unspectacular but exceedingly generous work allows both the viewer of and the children pictured in it to experience, over time, an increasingly intimate relationship with the world that is either physically occupied or portrayed.

The young people in the photographs and film came to know Lockhart over the four years she spent in their community, having rented a cabin by a creek to escape the unforgiving pace of urban life. Lockhart was surprised to find herself something of a piper; the children, immediately curious about the stranger in their midst, followed her around, inviting her to play and peppering her with questions about her life. But it wasn't until after a year of frequent four-hour commutes from Los Angeles to Pine Flat that Lockhart saw the possibility of creating art with the children who lived there. An intimacy with the place and people provided her with the necessary distance to begin seeing possibility. As the children scouted for the locations in which they would appear, they began to experience extraordinary places where, earlier, only quotidian spaces existed. As Lockhart says, "I would ask them what time of day a particular place looked best or in what season. Gradually they began to see." Eventually, in order to maintain the easy "emotional tenor" of their collective journey, the artist chose to keep the process of making art as simple as possible; eliminating her customary film crew, Lockhart taught herself to use a movie camera and employed Becky

124

125

Allen, a composer friend and frequent collaborator, to record the sound for the film. They often consulted with their mutual friend, the filmmaker James Benning, whose *California Trilogy* consists of thirty-five shots of the urban, rural, and natural landscape of the state, each 2.5 minutes long. The uniformity of the hypnotic structure of Benning's films mirrors the mesmerizing quiet of Lockhart's own fascination with an almost Zen-like repose. Questioned about this uniform structure, Benning references the origins of filmmaking, when films were shot not to construct a story, but to capture the sequence of life itself. "People would film a train coming into a station and they'd use the whole roll of film, capturing the moment from beginning to end."

When questioned about the structuralist underpinnings of her films, Lockhart counters that, while she is engaged by the motionless camera and the durational image of artists such as Hollis Frampton and Andy Warhol, she is less interested in making films about the "machinery of cinema" than she is in the possible emotional arc such extended looking creates. Perhaps this is why Lockhart, throughout her career, has returned repeatedly to directing young people. Some mix of empathy and shared memory—between the artist and her model, between the viewer and the viewed—inevitably surfaces when one comes face to face with a child. This identification creates an unusually large projection screen on which to transmit the twists and turns of one's own story of maturation and allows it to overlap another's. While Lockhart insists, "I'm so bad at telling stories," there is, perhaps, no plot to life or any narrative force greater than the inevitable connection between the beginning and the end.

From beginning to end, the action is languorous and the camera's position unchanging in Lockhart's color film, which is composed of two sequences of six portraits, each ten minutes long (or the length of a reel of 16mm film). A ten-minute intermission between the sequences consists of a black field with the word "intermission" printed in white letters and a sound track featuring the voice of a child singing a pop song. The first sequence depicts individual children; the second focuses on couples or groups, which reflects how a life is lived, since the transition from infancy to child-

hood is a story of increasing socialization. Each portrait is separated by ten seconds of darkness, which, curiously, draws the viewer into greater intimacy with the subject as if, once freed from the drama of narrative, we can savor the image longer; the longer we look, the more fragile or potentially precarious some of the conditions become. The two portraits at the beginning of each sequence are of a snowy, winter landscape. In the first, as the snow accumulates, an unseen child calls out repeatedly and with increasing concern, "Ethan, where are you?" (The film, in its entirety, answers that question.) The first portrait in the second sequence is composed of a group of children, none of whom are close enough to identify, who climb from the bottom of the frame to the top before disappearing entirely except for their laughter. Each portrait—child—required a different psychological strategy on the part of the filmmaker; despite varying levels of explicitness and repeated rehearsals, Lockhart never knew exactly how her direction would be interrupted or interpreted or how the emotion would build. For example, when the portrait of the boy in the woods with a rifle was originally shot on video, he surprised the artist by suddenly pointing the gun at her. A year later, when it came time to make the film, Lockhart set up the camera and left him to perform alone, judging he needed that distance to be himself; her only request was that he turn the gun at her camera again. Similarly, in the gorgeous portrait of two sisters' sharing a swing hung from the limb of an enormous tree, the seamless fluctuation between their playing and their fighting was a natural outgrowth of their relationship; however, the way in which the sound of an airplane suddenly penetrates the bucolic scene, disturbing its sentimentality, was a fortuitous accident the artist elected to preserve.

Like the film, the photographic portraits were similarly made without much obvious fanfare. Using only the natural light that filtered in through the open doors of the barn she used as a studio, Lockhart posed the children without props against an austere dark background, recalling the process employed by Mike Disfarmer, an eccentric photographer with an invented name who found his way to a small town in Arkansas and set up a commercial studio in 1914. Many of his restrained portraits also are devoid of props and shot

against either a free-standing monochromatic or oddly striped backdrop; all were anchored in the northern light of his Ozark studio and captured the drawn but durable face of rural America as the Great Depression gave way to World War II. However, unlike Disfarmer, whose irascibility and emotional distress created a natural distance between him and those who paid to be photographed—according to historical materials, he never lost his outsider status—Lockhart came to enjoy the trust of the children, who welcomed the opportunity to have their pictures taken. Over time, as the children became more comfortable with both the camera and the artist, art began to be made, and artifice of a hauntingly beautiful sort replaced the snapshot. In the final images, all the children rather miraculously occupy the same proportion of the photographic frame, because of the mathematically precise relationship Lockhart sustained between the person and the camera. Each looks directly at the camera, and none adopts the silly deception exhibited by adults who force a smile for it. When the photographs are lined up, this strangely egalitarian composition makes it difficult to distinguish the ages of the children, robbing each of them of some small distinction and creating a system of unnatural similarities. The tender inquisition of the photographer's eye and her manipulation of reality accentuate their likeness, mirroring the minuscule deviation of 0.1% in DNA that distinguishes one human being from another. When we learn about one, we recognize all. In many ways these images suggest a truth that weighs heavily on any responsible adult: a child's idea of life is a fiction—a futuristic imagining based on bits and pieces of parental or societal stories.

*Pine Flat* alludes to the multiplicity of these stories in contemporary American society. Growing up in a culture that constantly confuses one extreme picture of adulthood with another exacerbates the emotional whiplash that shapes adolescence in this country. Coming of age in California can be especially unsettling, as well as potentially liberating, because the state creates and circulates so many radically disparate systems for transforming values into youthful identities. Politically, it's a place of multiple personalities. For example, the pernicious conformity of the postwar era found its most extreme embodiment in Orange County with the founding of

the John Birch Society in 1958, while the counter-cultural challenges that followed in the 1960s were incubated nearby. These viral reactions included both the psychedelic abandon of Haight Ashbury and the rage of the Los Angeles riots, sparked by California's explicit attack on the fair housing section of the Civil Rights Act. It's perhaps not accidental, then, that many of the most complex and memorable pictures of adolescence originate around Hollywood.

There is perhaps no more enduring filmic incarnation of the emotional tremors that separate young people from their elders than James Dean. Born on a farm in 1931 and raised by an aunt and uncle, Dean was the insecure and sexually ambiguous answer to those who questioned the conventionality of the Eisenhower years. Starring in only three films, including John Steinbeck's semi-autobiographical *East of Eden*, which is rooted in the soil of California's Salinas Valley, Dean's improvisational approach to creating the troubled characters he inevitably played reflects a personality in formation, as well as a rebellious style of acting. This disconcertingly fretful method agitated his more experienced and less experimentally inclined co-stars, accentuating an emotional imbalance that directors such as Elia Kazan manipulated to shape the fictional relationships represented in the film. Despite his moody individuality, Dean's death at twenty-four in a car wreck wasn't all that unusual, mirroring countless adolescent adventures played out on California highways built to accommodate an undying love of the car and the freedom it affords. It's a passion that annually results in the highest number of highway fatalities in the nation. Dean died when a speeding car driven by a college student crashed into his silver Porsche at twilight on a California highway eighty-three miles from Bakersfield.

About an hour's journey northeast from Bakersfield, the town of Pine Flat is not an easy place to find. A stranger most likely would discover it accidentally. Even an extensive Internet search reveals little about this working-class community of three hundred, tucked in the foothills of California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, where, in 1848, the gold rush began along the American River. From afar, or at least from the way it first appears in Lockhart's film, this is a land-

126

127

scape of edenic possibility in which children are free to be (or, perhaps, since this is a work of art, free only to play at being) children. While an occasional moment of self-consciousness interrupts their poses, these young people occupy nature comfortably, finding ample pleasure reading in a field or learning to play a harmonica by a stream. Often centered in the frame, they inhabit the terrain: swimming, swinging from a big oak tree, wrestling, sleeping amidst leaves, nuzzling each other, and waiting, hunting rifle ready. The remarkable collective poise of these untrained actors is a sign that they are doing for the filmmaker what they've done before for themselves. Melancholy moves across a face just as an intimation of violence drifts through a scene, but, basically, these are portraits of children and adolescents who know both who they are and who the woman behind the camera is. They look perfectly natural, almost.

As in any representation of paradise, all is not as it seems at first glance. The sound track complicates this pastoral picture, punctuating bird songs and rustling leaves with the occasional buzz of a car, bus, motorcycle, plane, or gun shots. The unseen vehicles—only a school bus crosses the screen—operate as auditory ghosts, signaling the adult world that exists entirely outside the frame, as no grownups populate Lockhart's film. This bodily absence is an accurate reflection of life in Pine Flat, where most adults disappear during the day. Once the ranches that provided employment to many of Pine Flat's families vanished, the population grew more dependent on neighboring cities such as Bakersfield, one of the fastest-growing communities in the United States. It's not hard to imagine a working mother and father descending the mountain at sunrise with the car radio tuned to the "Bakersfield sound," a style of country music influenced by rock and roll and invented by Merle Haggard. The children remain behind in the one-room, twenty-three-student school. Being alone, they readily accept a stranger and play for her camera, so that their experiences become hers and then ours. In performing new roles, they safely experiment with the expectations and adapt to the increased self-awareness of an adult world. And yet, in Pine Flat, they seem happy to remain children—beautiful and believing, complex and complicit. This is a story many of us find hard to believe.

Who, then, are we who look, projecting our own inner pictures—dreams of paradise and loss—onto America's children and the landscape (or what remains of both)? How is it that this tiny homogenous community, which sidesteps the overtly sexual, violent, and often urban (if not suburban) pictures that spring from Hollywood, can represent us all? The miracle of art is that it allows for seduction—to deeply invest, if only for ten minutes, in the life of another. By creating both a methodology and a composition that models the best of adult behavior, Lockhart permits us to invent a connection to or portrait of another plus one, suggesting that each of these children are us. We yearn for more such stories even when we know we have destroyed our own capacity to believe in them long-term. So, sometimes, we flirt with notions of a far-off paradise, forgetting that Adam and Eve lived in a place where only the self-conscious serpent could be considered adult. Lockhart's *Pine Flat* shows us an alternative to the venomous and punishing need of adults to seize upon the small differences that separate and shame us. Through her own ability to allow her authority to be challenged and changed—made more forgiving—by a child's need to repeatedly invent, test, and discard reality, Lockhart restores the innocence of a young person's world. This paradise is retrievable if we look long enough to cede superficial control. As any good parent, Lockhart allows her children to live lives independent of her desires; in doing so, they show her a new way to create a luminous fiction. Just as Lockhart came to the town of Pine Flat by chance, it is her embrace of chance that allows *Pine Flat*, the installation, to capture our humanity and dreams so fully. It is a work made out of watchfulness, empathy, and trust, both received and given. Here light makes lasting images and darkness recedes, for a moment or two.

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