Christy Johnson

INTERVIEW WITH CURATOR, CIARA ENNIS UCR CALIFORNIA MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHY

FEAST: Christy Johnson and 33 Confessors is an intense, layered work comprising three distinct components: a floor-to-ceiling photographic installation, a video installation, and a book of her ever-expanding archive of First Communion photographs. Comprising 108 'found' First Communion photographs that, enlarged to poster-size and printed in color, tessellate across the gallery wall and present an army of pre-teen girls dressed entirely in white. Spanning the years 1877-1970, the anonymous portraits explore how the female body is socially and sexually constructed through transformative religious ritual and track the enduring prevalence and influence of these significant 'rites of passage.' The Set, (2007), Johnson's video installation provides an alternative to the static spectral presence inherent in the portraits by presenting instead a contemporary pre-teen couple re-enacting rituals. The final part to Johnson's triad is the book comprising first-hand testimony from thirty-three female first communicants, aged between 8 and 80, with the anonymous portraits. The thirty-three confessors – from diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds – provide intimate subjective accounts of their histories.

Of the three elements that comprise *FEAST: Christy Johnson and 33 Confessors*, I find the 108 outsized portraits of prepubescent girls the most disturbing. Aged between 6 and 8 the girls, dressed in white from head to toe often with a veil, are displayed as child-brides. Given the recent charges and incriminations leveled against the Catholic Church in connection with extensive and enduring cases of child abuse is it still possible to view these portraits as untainted and celebratory?

Yes and no. The celebration is a stained and problematic observance. The work is not intended to address Catholicism directly, but instead critique the initiatory performance of gender in ritual contexts (both sacred and secular), particularly addressing notions of purity and cleanliness. These monumentalized images become celebratory markers of an emergent pre-pubescent female sexuality and desire. The fetishized 'virginal bride' motif once safely and happily in place, now reaches the challenging excesses of the fantastically bizarre.

Received into the male dominated orthodoxy of the Catholic Church these girls are prepared for a life of subtle oppression and inevitable submission. Given that irrefutable history do you think your method of enlarging and re-contextualizing these mantle-piece mementos has freed them from these misogynistic associations?

Yes. In comparison to the treatment of the images in the book, they are more overtly feminist – they're more ideological, a critique through repetition of the rituals of repression (both institutional and familial). The size is a renunciation of where they were originally placed, and the spectator is confronted by a re-viewing. Female sexuality is not located in a comfortable place – it is not clear where it is – it is not fixed. This slippage is very important.

Much has been written about the link between photography and death but these images are a bit like grave robbing! These performers are dead children already dressed for the afterlife. When looking at them Susan Sontag comes to mind: "photography turns the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments…"[1]. Is it possible to view these images without nostalgia, melancholy, or sentimentality?

My recovery of dislocated material finds a place in the present. These lost girls are found, activated – identity mobilized through intervention. It is my intention to set up an encounter with the viewer that (hopefully) transcends sentimentality and nostalgia … although, I do not think escape from the melancholic is desirable. The book is the site where multiple voices converge, layering time and space. Memory, recall and retrieval are in dialogue and identity slips into a performative proposition. The play of fragmented image-image, image-text and text-text juxtapositions resist linearity, and explore narrativity as a set of fissures, translations, transitions and transformations.

In your video installation *The Set* (2007), you present aprepubescent surrogate marriage couple encased within atriptych structure — couple center with close up of individual child on either side. The children devour cupcakes the size of Communion wafers, re-enact a First Communion picture, or play with computer games when they believe the camera to be turned off. In filming the children 'stepping out of character,' are you attempting to expose the artifice of cinematic representation and by extension commenting on catholic rituals as learned performance?

I am interested in the authorial nature of the rituals – rote performances in the Church move seamlessly to mock performances in the studio … The Set draws on the artifice of the recorded climatic moment (fixed image). This video work is a continuous re-enactment of a photographic portrait from the archive collection, and points to the absent, unseen event that is re-done (staged) for the photographer. The representational conventions that are to be adhered to (as with wedding photography) are exposed simply through a reflexive approach where the children 'hold' their performances in the anticipation of the 'release'.

When reading the testimonials of the communicants in your book I'm reminded of Peter Mullan's recent film The Magdalena Sisters—inspired by first person accounts of physical and psychological abuse inflicted on the girls by the Irish nuns that ran the institute. Through exploring this subject in depth do you think that cruelty, corruption, and abuse of power are inevitable in such rigid hierarchical religious structures?

Mullan's film is an acute and shocking tale. The indecency and horror of child abuse is clearly not in dispute. The very nature of institutional hierarchies is ripe for the abuse of power and control … but I do not think it has to be inevitability. All of the women I interviewed explored the full range of emotions and reactions to their experiences, albeit recognizing the oppressive forces at play within the family and Church. Yes, they felt anxiously hemmed in, but were also afforded flights of fantasy and pleasure. In the end, this duality did not prove a stumbling block, but a point of reflective and poignant departure. "There was a kind of ritual to it, which is very attractive … and the symbolism is something I wouldn't have missed out on. Yeah, it messes you up in some ways, but it's something you react to."

Notes

1 Susan Sontag, On Photography (New York: Delta, 1979), p. 71. Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 300.

2 Christy Johnson, Feast: Christy Johnson and 33 Confessors (Kent and Surrey: UCCA, 2007), p, 124.