

In February we opened a major exhibition as part of the AK05 Festival. *Mixed-Up Childhood* looks at how childhood is addressed in the work of 20-plus artists, including some big names, among them Morton Bartlett, Christian Boltanski, Louise Bourgeois, Henry Darger, Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Mary Kelly, Loretta Lux, Paul McCarthy, Sally Mann, Grayson Perry, Inez van Lamsweerde and Gillian Wearing. We talk to the curators.

How did you come to be doing this show?

Janita Crow It started with me. I'm obsessed with childhood. I work in education, specialising in early childhood. My job is about making things better for children. In doing it I've become aware of the slippage between children and childhood, between actual young people and all the constructions put on them, constructions that often have more to do with adult needs and interests. For my job I read lots of theories about childhood, histories of childhood, statistical studies. It's a big area. But in the last few years I've become more interested in how childhood has been represented in art. Amazed, really. A lot of the writing

on childhood I deal with is dense, complex, a bit of a minefield; by contrast artists distil complex ideas about childhood into highly resonant images. The art has helped me think about the theories; it's given me leverage on them. That's when I got interested in doing a show.

Robert Leonard I came to the show from a different angle, not as a childhood specialist but as an art curator. When I started talking with Janita, I thought childhood would make a great show. But it was only when we started to make lists of possible artists and works that I realised what a huge area it is, and a relatively unexplored one. So much art is about childhood. It may be a cliché, but artists really are constantly dredging their pasts and reinventing them. Memories and metaphors of childhood infect their considerations of freedom, authority and identity. And since Picasso and Co., the idyllic notion of childhood innocence - viewing the world with fresh and unbiased eyes - has informed our conception of art at a basic level.

So how do you define childhood?

Janita Well exactly. That's part of the problem we wanted to explore. What is childhood? People treat childhood as a truism, a given; as if it were universal. In fact childhood as we understand it today is something recent. I like the way the British novelist Ian McEwan put it: 'Childhood is an invention, a social construct, made possible by society as it increased in sophistication and resource... a privilege.' With the show we wanted to present a collision of contrasting takes on childhood: taking in real experiences played out in fictions and fictions played out in reality. We wanted to demonstrate that ideas of childhood are contrived, contested and conflicted - 'mixed-up'.

Childhood is a touchy subject.

Robert Especially here. New Zealand is often labelled the perfect place to bring up children. In 1964 Monty Holcroft described the New Zealand childhood as 'islands of innocence', a time of protection, recurring festivals and unquestioning love. In 1990 New Zealand filmmaker Vincent Ward wrote that childhood was a common theme in New Zealand writing because of the nation's newness. He claimed that New Zealand is so remote that we venture into the world as innocents. However this warm-fuzzy image is not the image of childhood currently perpetuated in our media or reflected in our health statistics. The papers are full of sensational stories of neglect, abuse, disease, poverty; church and creche sex-scandals; P smoking parents and killer kids. These images sit alongside idyllic images of childhood. It's easy to gloss over the contradictions.

Janita But things are being done. New Zealand Government departments are making strategic advances. Our Ministry of Social Development recently suggested that if we want to respect children as citizens we need to develop new ways of viewing them. Perhaps art can play a role in this.

But Mixed-Up Childhood is an international show.

Janita Yes, but it's heavily premised on the local situation. And it includes New Zealand artists - Gregor Nicholas, Gavin Hurley, Sima Urale, Richard Killeen and Yvonne Todd. It'll be interesting to see their work dialogue with overseas figures: for instance Richard Killeen with Mary Kelly (both dealing with entering society through language), and filmmakers Sima Urale and Gillian Wearing (with their troubling family scenes).

The Australian documentary filmmaker Sarah Gibson says that we are more concerned about children and more confused about childhood than ever before. Over the last 25 years Utopian visions of children's liberation have given way to a preoccupation with child abuse and protection.

Robert It's interesting to think about that in relation to the American outsider artist Henry Darger, who died in 1972. He has all those bases covered. Institutionalised as a child, Darger created an epic art project for his private consumption. In his novel and related paintings, he imagined a planet where enslaved children fought for emancipation from their adult oppressors. Motivated by a desire to protect children, his work constantly imagined the reverse: what would happen if they weren't protected. And in gruesome detail. The paintings lurch from Eden to Hell and back. We have six fantastic Dargers in the show, on loan from New York's American Folk Art Museum.

What are some of the other hits in the show for you?

Janita There's a great Louise Bourgeois cell piece. It's a mesh and glass enclosure that suggests protection or imprisonment, privacy but also surveillance. Inside, chairs support glass bubbles, standing in for the artist's family members as 'emotional bubbles'. Family life is also addressed in Sally Mann's photographs of her children growing up in rural Virginia. Her poetic images are troubling because they cross categories and endanger oppositions: nature / culture, innocent /evil, adult / child, civil / feral, boy / girl.

Robert On a more sober note, we are thrilled to have the sixth instalment of Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document*. The *Document* records her son's early development and her engagement with it. It's a dispassionate, seemingly scientific piece, unlike more prevalent romantic images of motherhood. It's a watershed work of 1970s feminist art, a turning point from essentialist feminism to theory-oriented work.

Janita Similarly - and not - cross-dressing Turner-Prize-winning potter Grayson Perry is always asking the question: how did my upbringing make me the man/woman I am today? He covers his pots in an anarchic collage of imagery, often recalling his traumatic West Essex childhood.

It's not really a family show, is it?

Robert There are certainly some challenging works in it. It is a show for grownups because it's about how we understand childhood *retrospectively*, how as adults we reverse engineer our childhoods from our memories and concerns, and the things that get lost and found in the process. There are difficult works; some pieces play up childhood trauma, real or imagined. But there's also nostalgic work, even funny work.

Mixed-Up Childhood is supported by Creative New Zealand, the British Council, Asia 2000 and the Elam School of Fine Arts International Residency Programme. It will be accompanied by a major catalogue.