

THE OTHER MOTHER

Little children are no longer told to be seen and not heard. We encourage them to exercise their personalities, to be curious, lively and articulate. But when these little genies pop out of the bottle how do we exercise control? Spell out boundaries? Establish mutual respect?

These basic questions apply in most families. In the case of Rebecca Hastings, juggling time between household and studio, they become acute. For this artist the studio within the home is an inner keep, physically removed from the hubble-bubble of daily life but not from spill of noise and other reminders of children testing the boundaries. This context is front and centre in Hastings' recent work. It helps explain the call to order suggested by iconography and style, the porcelain skin of the pigment masking the turbulence beneath.

The portraits of the artist's son and daughter have been created on the artist's own turf – in her studio. Where minutes earlier, one or the other child may have been trailing around the house, free as little birds, here they have entered the cage where all kinds of rules and directions apply. (Please) sit still. Hold this. Put this on. Hold that pose. Look at me. Compliant children obey at this point but the artist confides that some bribery is usually required – sufficient for a few minutes photo-shoot. The props and clothing have been made or selected by the artist who also determined the poses. No room for negotiation. The other mother, the artist one, is in charge.

Images of children cast as mannequins are potentially problematic. Vacillating public attitudes towards childhood as either fair game for exploitation or a state of innocence to be protected from predation have created uncertainty for artists who legitimately want to explore related territory. On one hand Hastings' portraits sit comfortably within a broad 'artist's family' genre. But given that the children are not 'caught' in moments of innocent make-believe the viewer has to deal with the fact that the artist is making a statement about her own circumstance, namely the constant battle to find space in which to think and act as an artist. In this context, perhaps we are looking at self-portraiture by other means.

The visual language of high-fidelity realism reinforces Hastings' circumstance. These are real children, not some fictional 'others'. But this same realism, which drives the 'I'm in control – aren't I?' reading deserves scrutiny. There is artifice abroad. Shadows have been excluded. The lustre and textures of skin and clothing are intensified. The lighting is low-down. Suddenly

these 'real children' cease to be so and become actors in an absurdist, gaslight theatre production. Apply a Brechtian perspective and the quirky elements of the Star Wars-like costuming and makeshift silencing devices (such as the lace doily - one of a number of references to the artist's childhood years) require the viewer to do a double take and embrace the here and now of the subject while playing with the thought that these images could be metaphors for the journey into the risk-laden 'tweenhood' years.

The obvious 'scold's bridle' referencing in the telephone mouthpiece or upturned lampshade needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. Applied to the tongue of course. Hastings comments that 'it's all make-believe' but the viewer still has to come to terms with the matter-of-fact heft of the imagery and decide if it is only charades or is something else going on. And all the while mother and child eye each other off in finely calibrated moments of slightly unnerving candour and a sense of a temporary truce.

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