

## Rebecca Hastings

*We went for a walk in Uncanny Valley*, Dr Jacqueline Millner 2016

Human-induced climate change, environmental destruction and global economies based on the assumption of constant growth pose among the greatest challenges of our time. Artists have increasingly engaged with these issues, sometimes collaborating with scientists, sometimes drawing on the rethinking of human/non human relations in new materialist philosophy. Rebecca Hastings has taken a different approach, personalizing and synthesizing her response to such challenges in painted portraits of children. In these condensations of symbolism, Hastings captures broader anxieties and ambivalence about the future and the capacity of our species to survive.

Children are highly charged subjects in art that tend to wriggle free of artists' intentions. Often chosen for their associations with innocence or closeness to nature, representations of children are also open to darker interpretations.<sup>1</sup> A child may be free, but they are also vulnerable. A child may be pure potential, but they are also individuals whose steely will commonly eludes adult understanding. Children may more readily than adults express biophilia<sup>2</sup> — our innate tendency to focus on living things — but they are renowned as the most adaptive of our species as demonstrated by their astounding early adoption of new technologies. Children have become — or, some more cynical might say, have been cultivated as — the ideal 21<sup>st</sup> century consumers: unbending in their pester power and defined by their access to and knowledge of the latest tech craze.

Hastings draws a line between the technological suffusion of first world childhood and environmental neglect. As increasingly younger children are exposed more to screen worlds than to life exploring the outdoors, their regimes synchronized more with capitalist time than circadian rhythms, a new syndrome appears to be emerging: 'nature deficit disorder'.<sup>3</sup> With nature experienced more as abstract concept than lived reality, so decreases the likelihood that a deep connection — and its associated duty of care — will form.

The children in Hastings' works are strangely ambiguous: simultaneously of this world and alien, contemporary and futuristic, childlike and ageless. They could be representations of the real, or they could be fantasy humans like those created in the digital quest for verisimilitude — the quest that has given us the term 'uncanny valley' to denote the point at which the synthetic human's fine differentiation from the real causes abjection. Of course, we could say that we are already surrounded by synthetic children in their popular culture and commercial manifestations — a point not lost on Russian artists AES+F whose uncanny video installations such as *Last Riot*

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<sup>1</sup> See Ann Higonet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998

<sup>2</sup> Edward O Wilson, *Biophilia* 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, Workman Publishing Company, 2005

bring home the overlap between the commodification of childhood, the loss of the natural, and digital technologies.

Yet, Hastings works with painting. As such she necessarily summons the traditions of the medium, including the history of how children have been painted in the Western canon, quite distinct from photographic traditions and their contemporary manifestations in popular culture. Also, along with its conceptual credentials, painting remains a highly tactile medium which foregrounds its material links to earthy pigments and random mark-making. Painting's materiality, tradition and plasticity allow Hastings to intensify the ambivalence of these works that imagine a child both at home in and alienated from mediated life, a potential catalyst for new interspecies relations or a symptom of humanity's contempt for the life that supports it.