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purity

## NAKED TRUTH

All naked kids are nymphets

PROFILE BY JULIA REISCHEL | REISCHEL@WEEKLYDIG.COM

The *Dig* offices are full of disturbing images that blend into the background—the manga tentacle porn on the fridge, for instance. But our everyday outrageousness paled when Lorin Hesse, an artist whose show will open at the Atlantic Works Gallery this week, brought in a stack of portraits of nude prepubescent girls and piled them on the conference room table.

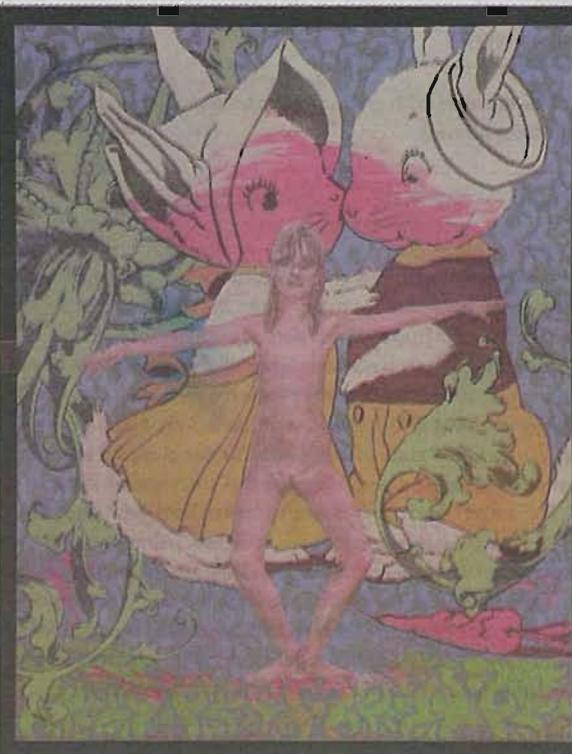
Hesse enlarges candid vintage photographs of naked children, sketches in the details with graphite and then layers the portraits over backdrops of 1950s wallpaper patterns, cartoon characters and floral decorations. She also tweaks pages from antique children's coloring books so that they portray their logical perverted extremes.

It's palpably awkward to look at reproductions of Hesse's work, and acutely uncomfortable to be in the same room

as the originals. What do you say when you're standing next to a picture of a 7-year-old girl bending her knees in a plié, her hairless vagina spread open toward the ground with every crinkle and fold clearly visible?

"It's like a car crash," Hesse says. "You can't look away."

A different Hesse piece depicts a smiling little girl leaning against the front of the naked man who's wearing an even bigger grin. A series of small images entitled *Paper Dolls* portrays naked little girls in a variety of poses wearing transparent dresses, their tiny breast buds and vulvas coyly peeking through. In *Lambs*, multiple hands are holding a smiling naked girl with curly hair aloft. In one of the manipulated coloring book pages (which look as though they've been torn straight



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Hesse argues that child nudity is sexual, and, when combined with cultural codes of silence, it causes child abuse. Since the 1960s, she says, nudity has become synonymous with sex. That's why naked little girls are so shocking—even *Lolita*, Nabokov's celebrated

from a *Little Golden Book*), Sally, a bunny, is riding a scooter, her short dress revealing a cartoon cooter. "Sally enjoys playing with no panties," the caption reads.

You could call this child porn, even though Hesse's just using published, non-sexual photos from vintage nudist magazines of girls who are probably grandmas now. These days, it's a crime just to view "sexually explicit" pictures of children, and whatever defines sexually explicit is vague.

You could just as easily call it art. There is a precedent—Henry Darger, a Chicago recluse who left stacks of lavishly illustrated portraits of naked little girls in his tiny apartment when he died, is

tale of pedophile passion, doesn't contain any explicit descriptions of what the nether regions of a nymphet actually look like. Hesse points out that *Lolita* was published right around the time that nudist magazines like *Sun Love* and *Sun & Health* stopped featuring pastoral shots of families, including children, cavorting naked in the sun. "In the mid-'60s, they become more pornographic—a way for people to get off," Hesse says. "The body shapes and ages change dramatically."

Hesse not only wants us to acknowledge that naked children have become sexual, she wants to force us to experience it firsthand. "I have this secret desire to call people out on their inner selves. I

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celebrated for his work. He might've been a pedophile; no one knows for sure what compelled him to draw his naked girls. Hesse acknowledges that her art looks like Darger's. But it comes from a completely different impulse, she says. She herself was raped as a child, and uses her work as a tool to expose the hidden connections between our society's sexualizing of young girls and child abuse.

"There are lots of people out there who are thinking about this," she says. "When I was told that statistic, about how one in four children are sexually abused, I thought, 'Fuck—why don't we talk about this more?' It's criminal. It's the worst kind of sexual deviancy in our culture. And mostly, we don't talk about it."

just want you to respond, to trigger some kind of thought process," she says.

That's where the line between her work and pornography gets fuzzy. Face-to-face with a 7-year-old vagina, every possible reaction is potentially sexual. If you say it's pretty, you're admitting that it's attractive. If you hate it, you doth protest too much. In the end, no matter what you do, you're a pedophile. To Hesse, whether it's your fault or her fault that you're titillated by the images isn't the point—it's that images of naked little girls, no matter how innocent, are titillating at all. "We live in this society," she says. "How can we not be affected?" ⊗



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