
DIGITAL PLAY WENDY MCMURDO

COLLECTED WORKS 1995 - 2012

The Scottish born artist Wendy McMurdo has emerged in the last two decades as a significant international figure. Exploring the possibilities of digital photography, whereby elements of photographs can be pieced-together or removed, her practice has analogies, in terms of its scale and compositional clarity, with Jeff Wall's pioneering digitally-based work of the 1980s and 90s. Whilst Wall's work initially has the appearance of 'documentary' photography, although in fact it is radically contrived and makes complex allusions to the history of painting, McMurdo's images, which largely concentrate on the theme of childhood, are overtly 'staged' and refer more directly to photographic tradition (such as Victorian 'spirit photography') and to the nature of the medium itself.

In one unforgettable image in this exhibition, a young boy in a museum, who has been looking at a small diorama in which a stuffed owl swoops on a scuttling mouse, looks round to acknowledge the photographer. His alert expression, and the frozen action presented in the diorama, metaphoricise the click of the camera's shutter, but the image has in any case been digitally generated. This metaphoricity crops up again in another work, the video-projection *The Loop* (produced in collaboration with Paul Holmes) in which the very title of the work suggests not only a video loop, but also the relay of attention from the adolescent girl to the image of the elegant figure skater shown on the adjacent screen whose actions (skating loops) she so attentively approximates. These, however, are just a couple of examples. Throughout her work, McMurdo's keen awareness of the metaphorical possibilities of her technical operations coalesces with her overriding subject; the imaginative life of children.

The centrality of imagination as a theme in this show is underlined by comparing the photograph of a *Shoe Doll* with the set of *Robot Workshop* images. The *Shoe Doll*, once a poor Victorian child's plaything, bears witness to the transformation of a mundane object via a child's imaginative neediness. In the *Robot Workshop* pictures, children have adopted 'robotic' headgear, which although comical on one level, is deeply sinister on another (with unmistakable photographic allusions to Ralph Eugene Meatyard or to Diane Arbus's late *Untitled* series). These images speak of children's ability to enter, via play, into other levels of reality. But, whereas the *Shoe Doll* is representative of a primitive, 'home made' technology of toy-production (reminding us of the parental adage that all a child needs in order to play is a cardboard box), the *Robot Workshop* images (in which cardboard boxes have actually been utilised) suggests children's flirtation with more advanced technologies, and their identification with automata and alien beings. (At one point in the show, the *Shoe Doll* is brought side by side with a small robot, titled *The Toddler*). Running concurrently with the theme of the child's imaginative power is the theme of the child's interaction with, and possible surrender to, modern technologies. This surely reflects contemporary fears that, in modern computer-based play, children are in some sense 'possessed' by forces beyond themselves. The computer-generated techniques used by the artist ironically underscore this point.

Just as this exhibition takes us on a journey into the psychology of modern play, so it seems to explore stages in children's identity-formation and learning. The show as a whole covers a period of almost twenty years, and moves from McMurdo's 1995 series *In A Shaded Place*, where the digital repetition of images of young children evokes the uncanny notion of the psychological double or 'doppelgänger', to a recent sequence of photographs of 2009 in which adolescent skaters are juxtaposed with their idealised, digitally-generated 'avatars'. The progression involved here seems to follow certain stages in child-development. If the images of doubles evoke the Lacanian 'mirror stage', wherein the pre-linguistic child comes to terms with its 'other' in the mirror, resolving the resultant mismatch between its self and its image in order to forge an ego-identity, McMurdo's images of teenagers and their 'avatars' explore processes of identification whereby older children create ego-ideals.

Along the way, other groups of works seem to speak of intermediate stages in children's cognitive development: The *Museum* images address processes of learning and assimilation; The *Musician* and *Computer Class* images explore technical mastery and skill. But, to reprise an earlier point, what is striking about these images is the way that the children seem to be in thrall to powers that are outside of their control. Young girls stare at stuffed bears or dolls; their stares are returned by their inanimate counterparts. Children playing (invisible) instruments appear lost in trances. In the *Avatar* images, McMurdo has removed the image of the skater's partners so that they look like marionettes hanging limply from invisible strings. In the *Computer Class* photographs the removal of the computers produces a sense of the children's weird immersion in the world offered by the missing object. A poetics of absorption, bordering on self-loss, is invoked.

Again and again we are forced to switch from a sense of children's imaginative autonomy to a sense of their helplessness. In the final analysis it is this paradox that makes this work so haunting. We live in an age when writers, such as Neil Postman, have talked about the 'disappearance of childhood' with children increasingly exposed to 'adult' forms of knowledge via television and computers, such that traditional distinctions between childhood and adulthood have become blurred. At the same time we have inherited from Romanticism the sense that children are closer to the irrational and to the marvellous than adults. McMurdo is at one with major contemporary artists such as Susan Hiller (whose work *Psi Girls* of 1999 McMurdo has cited favourably) in exploring the child as an uncanny figure, entering into collusion with 'higher' forces, but she appears queasy about the degree of surrender involved here, and the potential loss of the child in the mechanisms of the adult world. In her *Avatar* images we enter into the strange world of online projections of identity. Whereas, in terms of computer games, 'avatar' figures may simply be cartoon-like alternative selves, generated by children in the course of their gaming, experts in robotics have envisioned a future in which mechanical robots will make way for digital avatars. In the most nightmarish sci-fi scenarios these avatars become real-life equivalents for ourselves. Having absorbed our personal histories, they compete with us for our identities. Although the digitally-generated skaters in McMurdo's *Avatar* images speak poignantly of the ego-ideals of adolescent girls, they potentially have a more sinister side.

Despite possessing this dark undertow, McMurdo's viewpoint seems largely to be positive and empathetic. Her images are characterised by a distinctive post-surrealist poetics. The invisible is made palpable via the intensity of children's belief. The inanimate seems to be on the verge of stirring into action via the agency of the child's will (as in recent children's films such as *Night at the Museum* or *Toy Story* which rework the trope of toys or other objects coming to life). Perhaps the curiously calm quality of McMurdo's images, in which events that ought to be traumatic, such as a young child's encounter with its double, occur matter-of-factly, is due to the artists' fundamental empathy with her subjects. She seems to be at one with the children who, entranced, enter their digital futures like somnambulists.

David Hopkins, June 2014

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