

left:
SIMEN JOHAN,
Untitled #100,
1999, toned silver
gelatin print
Courtesy the artist



right:
SIMEN JOHAN,
Untitled #98, 2001,
c-print, Courtesy the
artist



SIMEN JOHAN

KATIE KITAMURA

With an acute eye and with extraordinary empathy, Simen Johan explores the emotional isolation and psychological vividness of childhood. His photographs of children are at once startling and persuasive, and his current exhibition at Yossi Milo Gallery reinforces the nuanced consideration of a growing body of work.

The children in these photographs are unremittingly solitary. These images do not simply function as portraits of children; rather, they are first and foremost portraits of children's fantasies, of those 'things unseen' that reside within the emotional and psychic space of the imaginer. As such, each image contains an expanding narrative, and it is the multiplicity of this unarticulated narrative that gives the work its visual density.

Johan relentlessly manipulates his photographs, employing multiple negatives to create a fabricated residual image. The resulting work thus seems to contain the spectres of its many composite parts, and the contrapuntal juxtaposition of images parallels the thematic and narrative complexity of Johan's photographs.

These images burrow their central figures into large, intricate narratives. The photographs communicate the non-linear, lateral fantasies of childhood. Though the children in these photographs are visibly complicit within these narratives (indeed, these narratives are of their own crafting), they also manage to retain their innocence as visual signifiers. Therein lies the strangeness and the strength of Johan's work; these photographs counter the purity of the child with impure narrative, the innocent with the knowing. Thus in *Untitled #9*, a small child cunningly plays with an erupting mass of rubbish; in *Untitled #95*, a cherubic boy rides a tricycle, pulling behind him a horrifically roped, frozen monkey. It is the disjunction between the impure fantasy/intent and the purity of the dreamer that makes these works simultaneously shocking and charming, dark and dreamy.

What makes this work haunting is the way it visually captures the relationship between the subject and the subject's fantasy. That is to say, these children are not simply the conductors of these narratives, but also the passive participants of the fantasy. These are remarkable images about the way in which fantasy surpasses the subject, and the gesture of release that occurs when the dream narrative overcomes the dreamer.

Some of the strongest images contain less complicated narratives; they capture instead the intense interiority of childhood in an astonishingly visceral way. In *Untitled #102*, a doll-like girl holds a camera, standing in a snowy landscape. In *Untitled #97*, a young child holds a book, and stares out the window. As figures they are entirely opaque; indeed, the porcelain glassiness of the girl's eyes in *Untitled #102* is testimony to this impenetrability.

These works in particular are about the onlooker, about the observatory figure (hence the child equipped with the camera). They are images about the way in which we piece together an interior richness out of the exterior observations we make. And they are also about the way in which the gesture of observation itself – surely including Johan's own photographic act – immediately makes the observer opaque, and unreadable, to the external world. They communicate the refuge the fantasies of observation proffer and as such are strange, and strangely peaceful.

In these two photographs in particular (*Untitled #97* and *Untitled #102*), the stillness of the child is represented in a way that seems to endow the image with the richness of sanctity. Within a consistently exceptional body of work, these are perhaps most persuasive, if only because they are themselves the evidence of things unseen. They allow things to remain unsaid, allow the fantasy to remain implicit and unknown – and therefore, intact.

SIMEN JOHAN: EVIDENCE OF THINGS UNSEEN
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www.yossimilogallery.com