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Photographers can't help but wonder, when they look at Loretta Lux's portraits of children, what digital legerdemain she uses to create them. One member of a popular online photography forum has even deconstructed Lux's presumed Photoshop technique on his own computer, determining it to be a judiciously applied combination of Gaussian Blur, unsharp masking, and use of the Levels control to give the children and their settings a distinctive pallor. But ask Lux if she can tell you, even in abridged form, what she does with software to achieve the portraits' look and she answers, simply, "no." That's her prerogative, driven less by a need to protect proprietary technique, perhaps, than by a wish to be taken as a serious artist in a world of digital doodling.

Yet Lux, who was a painter before she turned to photography, is just as reticent about how she wants viewers to respond to her images. And that's almost perverse, given the impossible mix of adjectives critics have used to describe the work: disquieting, charming, disturbing, lovely, creepy, arresting, repellant, kitschy, even monstrous. "It doesn't matter what I intend," says Lux. "People are allowed to think what they please. What matters is whether or not the pictures work." Even that has been subject to debate, though the pictures have already garnered the thirty-something photographer, a German who now lives in Dublin, Ireland, both a new Aperture monograph, *Loretta Lux*, and this year's coveted Infinity Award for Art from the International Center of Photography.

THE CHILDREN WHO INHABIT LORETTA LUX'S PORTRAITS ARE MORE REAL THAN THEY APPEAR. BY RUSSELL HART



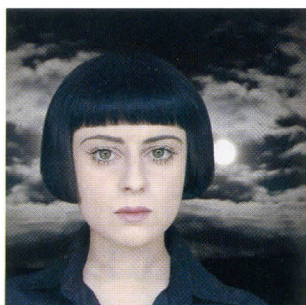
This page:  
Loretta Lux's  
"The Rose  
Garden, 2001."  
Opposite: Her  
"Study of a  
Boy 1, 2002."







"IF THE VIEWER  
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Lux acknowledges a debt to her former medium. "I don't think I could make these images if I hadn't been a painter," she says. "I structure my pictures carefully, organizing forms and colors like a painter does on a canvas." Indeed, her images seem to reconcile portrait traditions as preposterously unlike as Renaissance masters and Margaret Keane, whose sublimely kitschy paintings of children with huge, kittenish eyes held such bourgeois sway in 1960s America. "If the viewer draws associations with painting and art history, that is a good thing," says Lux. But the photographer rejects the lowbrow suggestion: "I personally don't believe my work would have been acquired by so many museum collections if it was kitsch."

If Lux's pictures "work," it is because their styling and subtle alteration of her subjects—the implausibly cooperative children of friends—make them into something beyond portraiture. She sometimes gets a stylist to do the hair, but Lux chooses the clothing, which has a quirky retro quality not ordinarily found in children's fashion and often seems too small, as if the wearer had already outgrown it—an impression aided by Lux's apparent enlargement, on the computer, of heads, eyes, and

other individual features. Lux choreographs the children's poses with equal attention, though the settings and backgrounds are typically stripped in after the fact from Lux's own photo archive. Likewise, her lighting is consistently shadowless—light that would seem revelatory if it weren't at odds with the children's emotional opacity. Indeed, Lux's children are blank, at best lost in a daydream, at worst more remote than the most withdrawn real-world child.

The end result of Lux's superb art direction and meticulous digital manipulation is that her images really aren't about any one child. They "belong to the genre of portraiture, but in a way, the children don't represent themselves," she explains. "These are not portraits in a classic sense because they don't represent the actual child's psychological or personal situation." The children in her photographs are idealized, but not in the sense of being perfect. They are all the things that real children, to the consternation of parents, can be: awkward, distant, and unengaged, yet beautiful and fascinating in their own flawed way. ■