BLAKE FITCH
EXPECTATIONS OF ADOLESCENCE

Essay by Andy Grundberg
with curator’s commentary by Hannah Frieser

April 1 – July 18, 2008
Reception: April 10, 5–8 PM

LIGHT WORK
ROBERT B. MENSCHEL MEDIA CENTER
316 Waverly Avenue, Syracuse New York 13244
Gallery hours are 10 AM to 6 PM Sunday through Friday except for school holidays
It is rare in contemporary photography to encounter a series of pictures this beautiful, compelling, innocent, and intriguing. That they should come from someone who has spent much of her career devoting herself to promoting the talents of others makes them even more special. I feel as if Blake Fitch, whom I first met when she was the director of the Griffin Museum of Photography in Winchester, MA, has snuck up behind us and delivered a classic Zen slap.

The photographs are the result of a ten-year project during which Fitch portrayed the growth from early adolescence into adulthood of her half-sister, Kate, and their cousin, Julia. The girls, now young women, are the same age, and fifteen years younger than the photographer. The first photographs show them at age 12, the most recent at 22. They are, in a dual sense, perfect subjects: blessed with impeccable genes and unmarked by the tribulations of life, they have the beauty of a Bronzino or Botticelli, and as young relations to Fitch they make themselves fully available to the camera. One has the sense that nothing is artificial in the way they present themselves to our interrogation, or cosmetic. Alison Nordström has written sagely (in The Light Work Annual 2007) about the quality of the girls’ gaze, which functions as a register of their self-consciousness and self-confidence. In pictures like Girls in Bathroom and Kate Putting on Make-up, their young eyes are elsewhere than with us, suggesting interiority and self-protection. Kate at Window and Katie in Red Towel precociously speak otherwise; Kate/Katie confronts us as ably and disconcertingly as in her incarnation nine years later as the dauntingly sensual Kate in Orange Bikini. More to the point, perhaps, is that in all these exquisitely composed earlier images the protagonists appear to be costumed, to be trying on their clothes as if trying on their own identities.

Ten years is a long time in any life, but the ten years from childhood to adulthood are an eon. Just look at what age hath wrought for Julia in the interlude from Julia in Flower Room to Julia on Christmas Eve. Something similar can be seen in tracing Kate from Katie in Middle of Backyard to Kate on Back Path at River. One imagines that a sculptor has worked away on a blank of stone and carved out cheekbones, defined chins and breasts, added individualized expressions. As they age, they differentiate: the girls look nearly identical, but the young women in their twenties are clearly distinct.

This chrysalis-to-imago metamorphosis is most apparent, naturally enough, in images that show more of the cousins’ growing bodies than the puritanical guardians of our nation’s family values might care to countenance. Not to worry: most MySpace pages have more prurient interest than these. At the same time, one cannot deny that the bathing suits and underwear on view allow flesh to be displayed as a signifier of incipient womanhood and thus potential sexuality. Adolescence, lest we forget, is defined both scientifically and behaviorally by the onset of hormones, which are the real sculptors at work on the young human body.

Focusing on the subject of adolescence as it presents itself visually is not without peril, and it is not without precedent in today’s art world. Photographers as accomplished as Sally Mann and Rineke Dijkstra, not to mention Hellen van Meene, Kelli Connell, Lise Sarfati, and others, have based their careers on photographing children in the process of growing up. For instance, Mann depicted girls on the cusp of adolescence in her series At Twelve, then moved on to her own two girls, as well as her son, picturing them from early childhood on. Dijkstra has photographed teenagers on beaches, videotaped them dancing at rock clubs, and followed specific individuals
into adulthood by photographing them annually.

Fitch acknowledges a debt to Mann and Dijkstra’s example, as well as to the work of Tina Barney, whose pictures combine elegant interiors with docudramas starring her family and friends. What separates Fitch from these artists is her work’s concentrated focus, its autobiographical character, and its refusal, as presented here, to obey straightforward chronology. Turning the pages is like bouncing back and forth in time, as if a family album’s worth of pictures had fallen on the floor and the prints forever scrambled. The effect is disconcerting, which helps focus attention on how much integrity and ingenuity each of these pictures has.

When I first encountered Fitch’s images I imagined that she had photographed a number of adolescent girls, although I admit being struck by how similar they were in aggregate. Frankly, it was a surprise to learn that all the characters in this photographic array boil down to two people. Not only two people, but two female relations to whom she is closely tied and whose childhoods seem to embody an ideal Fitch may feel was denied her—the artist’s parents split up when she was a young girl, and she was uprooted from Rochester, NY, to North Carolina as a result. The settings of the photographs are equally restricted in number—all were taken either at Fitch’s grandparents’ home in Rochester, or in and around the family summer home in the Thousand Islands, on the St. Lawrence River.

One can envy the classic lacquered speedboat, the vintage wooden dock, the bright upholstery and warm furniture inside the house, and see in them a parable of languid affluence. White? Yes. Anglo-Saxon? Apparently. Protestant? Check. Or one could better read them as signs of desire—not of the consumer but the psychological kind. The comfortable settings in which Kate and Julia compose themselves are comforting precisely because they speak of tradition and heritage and continuity. This is both a blessing and the burden the now-young women will bear, just as the photographer does. They must measure the passage of their lives with the help of pictures, since the world they share seems to exist outside of time.

As with Mann’s work, Fitch’s project can be judged a felicitous fiction, a recreation of an edenic upbringing that cannot quite be believed nor authoritatively denied. Yet its documentary trappings are so convincing that only a hardened skeptic would want to know if Fitch chose the dresses or planned the poses. So we are left with a mystery, photographically speaking, that in the best case adds to our comprehension of another mystery, which is what growing up turns out to be. I am not sure this is what Fitch intended, but I am confident that this is what she has accomplished.

Andy Grundberg

Andy Grundberg is a critic, curator, and educator in Washington, DC. He is the chair of the photography department at the Corcoran College of Art and Design.