Julia in Flower Room
Blake Fitch
Interviewed by Carys Fieldson

In her project, ‘Expectations of Adolescence’ Blake Fitch documents two family members, half sister Kate and cousin Julia, on their patient voyage into adulthood. The work focuses on “Kate and Julia’s evolution, from adolescent self-discovery to becoming confident young women.”
Katie in Red Towel
In her project, ‘Expectations of Adolescence’ Blake Fitch documents two family members, half sister Kate and cousin Julia, on their patient voyage into adulthood. The work focuses on “Kate and Julia’s evolution, from adolescent self-discovery to becoming confident young women.”

The project, spanning across a decade, captures intimate glimpses of family life shot between Fitch’s grandparents’ home in Rochester, NY and the family’s holiday house in upstate New York. Fitch sensitively portrays moments of intimacy between the two cousins, “captured in settings where they found themselves naturally.” Fitch’s images attest to the gentle passage of time, as together the girls navigate endless summers working at the local Post Office and reading by the St. Lawrence River.

In images such as ‘Katie in Red Towel’ (1997) Fitch recalls the moment as particularly identifiable, “…just how beautiful she looked, at the end of the dock after a rainy foggy afternoon when we had all been swimming.” Fitch draws this image into comparison with her striking portrait of ‘Kate in Orange Bikini’ (2006), captured a decade later, in which Katie confidently addresses the camera. The two images poignantly correspond, depicting Kate’s metamorphosis from uncomfortable child into self-assured young woman, as Fitch states, “she has this stance and presence, she’s just evolved into this confident woman.”
I spoke to Fitch to discover more about her project, and her photographic process. I asked whether her approach was impulsive and spontaneous, or whether she directed the scenes in any way... “It was a combination. There would be moments when [the girls] were hanging out doing their thing, perhaps sunbathing and reading, and I would run and get my camera and snap some shots. For other shots I would direct it more specifically to realize the image I had in my mind.”

The girls are often pictured in moments of waiting: for nails to dry, for their act to begin, for dusk to settle. I asked Fitch how such quiet, reflective moments interrogate the subject of adolescence, she expressed she has always been drawn to “create images that capture moments of stillness and inner thought [...] though adolescence can be filled with excitement and carefree fun, it’s also a time of insecurity and self-discovery for many of us. My intention is that in those implied moments of waiting to have revealed a real sense of transition and self-reflection for these girls.”

When asked how important the domestic setting was for communicating her vision of adolescence, Fitch reveals the locations were instrumental in conveying a sense of ‘timelessness’... “There weren’t any specific clues that would indicate the image was shot in the 90’s or in the early 2000’s (no computers or that kind of thing) so hopefully the images are relatable to multiple generations and the passage of time.”

“I like the nostalgic feel of it, that it offers this timelessness...” Fitch exclaims concerning the outdated décor of her grandparent’s house- suggesting the discontinuity of eras and decorative fashions further distorts the time-frame of the project. “They represented a nearly unchanged traditional environment that ties together several generations from my family.” She continues, “When I look back at family photographs of my father in his youth, my brothers, sisters and cousins, and myself, the spaces haven’t changed much at all. It is meaningful to me, to see that several generations of my family have experienced their own adolescence in many of the same locations.”
‘Expectations of Adolescence’ follows a distinctly linear timeline through adolescence, however Fitch discloses she is interested in playing around with audiences’ perceptions of chronology through her approach to curation and display: “I don’t [display the images] in chronological order; I grappled with that for a while. I just think it’s more interesting to have this back and forth situation when you’re confronted by the girls younger and older and seeing them at these different phases of life and the juxtaposition between the two.”

“To see the transformation of an awkward, young Kate practicing for her dance recital in our grandparents driveway as compared to the way she confronts the camera years later with her proud and powerful gaze, she’s just evolved into this confident woman. I think it’s interesting to see how she’s transitioned and I think that’s more interesting than seeing it in chronological order.”

As the series spans a 10-year period, I was interested in finding out how Fitch was able to discern when the project reached its natural conclusion... “I began the project when Kate and Julia were about twelve years old and finished when they were 22. I would see the girls a handful of times over the course of a given year. During that time they would get a bit older and their lives would evolve, gradually transitioning from awkward girls into confident young women. The project did naturally come to a close and ten years seemed like a reasonable span of time to chronicle this adolescent period for each of them.”

When I posed the question about artistic influences Fitch was hesitant to draw direct comparisons between her work and that of her contemporaries, stating: “I think it’s better to just not try to be influenced by other people as much as possible.” However she added, “I had a broad range of photographic interests that influenced my work over the years. Some artists that come to mind were Tina Barney and Rineke Dijkstra.”
Girls on Front Porch at Sunset

Julia in Cheerleader Jacket
In a more recent project ‘Dress Rehearsal’ Fitch returns again to the subject of female adolescence. In the series, her photographs depict girls “trying on their femininity” in the guise of ‘dress up’ princess robes. Fitch discussed her fascination with ‘Princess Culture’ and revealed that, as a mother to a 5-year old girl, her fascination was driven by her conflicting associations with the phenomena: “A lot of the paraphernalia and a lot of the stuff that comes along with this girly girl culture are identifiers that helps them figure out who they are... it’s about identifying your gender. [...] Honestly I think it’s OK to be a ‘girly girl’, I mean why can’t you wear pink and be into tutus and sparkles? You just don’t want that to totally identify who you are. You can wear a princess dress while you’re climbing a fence or playing in mud or shooting your bow and arrow. But I understand the concerns a lot of parents have, myself included, about the messages that some of these stories have.”

I was curious to find out why the theme of female adolescence has been such a rich investigation for Fitch, and why she continues to explore the experience of girlhood. To this Fitch explained... “I’m no expert at all, other than being a female that has gone through it. It’s a period when you’re trying to figure out how you fit into the world and how to define yourself, especially at that point how to define yourself as female. I look back and remember a lot of the awkwardness of growing up.”

Fitch’s images interrogate the very fluid subject of youth and self-discovery; her photographs explore highly personal narratives that are relatable to our collective memory of adolescence. In doing so, she generates a timeless portrayal of the passage of youth as we too regularly forget we once experienced it - a waiting room for life.

www.blakefitchphotos.com