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Must See: Polly Borland's Surreal Photo Series 'The Babies'

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It's been 16 years since Australian-born, Los Angeles-based photographer Polly Borland released *The Babies*, a book visually chronicling her extensive time spent over the course of five years with various communities of adult men who like to dress up as and act like babies. Yes, it's a thing. And yes, when it was released, *The Babies* was subject to a range of reactions from the public, most of which hovered somewhere in the neighborhood of 'totally freaked out.'

"Everyone was just horrified. People kind of couldn't deal with it," Borland recalls, speaking via phone. "I don't get it. I find it fascinating. And yes, I can get that it's challenging and maybe disturbing, but all my work is challenging and disturbing. Maybe it's because it's rooted in reality — a lot of people originally thought 'oh she made that up, she dressed those people up.' It's something about the fact that they're real."

From July 22 through August 19, the series will be displayed for the first time in its entirety at Mier Gallery in L.A., but Borland doesn't have much faith that the reception will be all that much different this time around. In fact, she's installing it in a manner she describes as "claustrophobic and confronting." From what I can tell, she means that in a positive way.



Polly Borland, Snuggles, Julianne, Mummy Hazel, and Cathy in the street, 1994-1999, Archival pigment print, 26.6 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and MIER Gallery.

Borland is known for both fine art photography and portraiture, having shot everyone from Queen Elizabeth II to Susan Sontag, who provided a foreword for *The Babies* after meeting Borland on a shoot and becoming fascinated with the series. A true marriage of fine art and journalism, the project started as a one-off shoot for the British newspaper *The Independent*, which at the time ran a Saturday supplement known for its innovative photojournalism. Having documented fringe communities like Trekkies and nudists, Borland was tipped off the existence of the adult baby world by a friend who rightly assumed it would be of interest to her. But in the pre-internet '90s, Borland was at a loss for how to track the adult babies down. Another friend suggested looking in the back of adult magazines at the

classified ads section. Borland did and found one was for something called the ‘Hush-a-Bye Baby Club.’

“I rang the woman who was running it and found that she was very open because she was running a ‘large baby’ clothing company, selling baby clothing to adult babies by mail order, and also running a bed-and-breakfast. That was the club. It was sort of like a bed-and-breakfast,” she recalls. “And she was really open to publicity because she thought it would help her business. So me and the writer [from *The Independent*] went down and introduced ourselves and then we ended up there over a weekend and they were having a party — all these adult babies having a party in various stages of regression, and the first time we went ‘round there, there was one adult baby staying there and he was crawling around the floor.”

While the writer was apparently horrified, Borland found herself fascinated. After she decided to produce the book, she not only returned to the same club in England to document more parties, but found other clubs in France, America, and Australia. She traveled with a group of adult babies to Disneyland and drove with them from Los Angeles to San Francisco. She photographed them in the shower, in the bath, at play, and in states of quiet contemplation.



Polly Borland, Tommy at home, 1994-1999, Archival pigment print, 6 x 9 inches. Courtesy of the artist and MIER Gallery.

“I did feel I was bearing witness to something that had never been witnessed before, so it felt important,” Borland explains. “It also felt visually stimulating on an aesthetic level, it had all the elements of surrealism, theatrics ... [it was] psychologically kind of loaded. It just had so many elements that kept me invested.”

The images themselves are gritty, with a color palette that’s simultaneously washed-out and lurid. The adult male body isn’t usually an especially visually appealing sight, and pacifiers and bonnets don’t do a whole lot to change that. But what’s incredible about them is their honesty and vulnerability. It’s as if the people

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who are in these photographs have completely forgotten that the camera — and perhaps the real world entirely — even exists. Perhaps that's why, if you didn't know any better, you'd assume they were staged. It just seems too perfect that these people would allow themselves to be documented like this.

In one image, a man with piercing green eyes stares straight into the camera. Bubbles from a bath cloud his cheeks and a pink pacifier droops from his mouth. The sandy blonde wig atop his head is slightly off-center. It's a hard image to look at, but I'm still not entirely sure why. Perhaps it has something to do with the abject helplessness in his eyes. He's completely in character, even in his own mind. And we're not used to seeing adults — especially adult men — look that way. But for him, he has escaped his adult male role and his adult male responsibilities.

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Polly Borland, Julianne in bath at home, 1994-1999, Archival pigment print, 40 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and MIER Gallery.

It's also clear from the photos that these men share a real sense of community. There's a raw joy and companionship in their interactions with one another. But there's also still a great deal of shame and sacrifice in living this lifestyle, which leads me to wonder: What are they really gaining from all this? And is it worth it?

“It felt to me like they were disconnected and it was probably because they hadn't really been connected to their families, or their mothers, and I felt I understood them,” Borland says. “It was only really towards the end that I realized I didn't necessarily understand them. And maybe what I was trying to figure out —

because that's what I was doing, I spent five years trying to understand them — but that maybe there wasn't that much to understand. You know?"

Why the public perception of *The Babies* was initially so harsh and dismissive may be another issue with less than meets the eye. Western society isn't great at dealing with differences, especially ones that we perceive as freaky, the end. However, it's worth considering whether the public would have received the images differently had they featured adult women rather than men. There's something about adult men dressing up as children that seems like it might insult the often fragile male ego, and it may not help things that cross-dressing is also a part of the experience, as many of the men like to emulate female children. But had the babies been women, it's likely a level of sexuality would have been ascribed to them immediately, whereas, with men, viewers find themselves secretly hoping it's not a sexual thing (but, of course, assuming that it is).



*Polly Borland, Julianne at Mummy Hazel's, 1994-1999, Archival pigment print, 6 x 9 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and MIER Gallery.*

Interestingly, sexuality doesn't appear to be a part of the equation for most of the babies. After all, whatever they gain from this child's play is far too precious and real for them to muddy with such adult matters. In her essay, Sontag writes: "The world created by these adult babies must be counted as a sexual fantasy, even if, most of them being 'baby purists,' they don't have sex. What does on in these depressing rooms is a kind of theatre. Play-time. But entirely unfeigned."

And perhaps it's the "entirely unfeigned" part that makes the whole thing so hard to fathom. After all, most of us forget how to really play pretend after a certain age. We stop fantasizing about things that aren't related to sex or money or how

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other people see us. I'm not suggesting we should all go out and invest in pacifiers and diapers and start crawling around on the floor, but it's worth considering that in some ways, it might be a hell of a lot healthier than how the rest of us deal with our problems.