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OFFSPRING Leaves No Child Behind
Posted by **Jared Craig**, Thursday, October 5th, 2006

In the visual arts exhibition, "Offspring," now at the Boston University Art Gallery, a number of artists present, often with sardonic wit and dark whimsy, their challenging vision of contemporary childhood. Visitors may not always find the works on display pleasing, but at the very least the artworks will trigger thoughts about how society is redefining childhood in uncomfortable ways.

Nicholas Prior's "Untitled #48" is a representative work. It is a photograph of a boy dressed in a shirt and tie that are a size too big for him. He's sitting in a large, fancy chair and holding a large cup of tea. The size discrepancies suggest that this is a boy forced to grow up too quickly. His long hair exudes an innocent boyishness, but everything else about him is strikingly mature. In the foreground are two wispy and gray flowers in a vase that nearly blend into the drapes. The only sign of life in these flowers is the little bit of pink in their blooms. The only sign of life in the boy is the flicker of longing in his eyes.

The boy's eyes are striking: they are fixed on something to the left and out of the frame of the picture. It is as if he is staring at something he was yearning to be part of — perhaps it is his lost childhood, or our fantasy of what being a kid used to be. The boy is an outsider trapped in a world that he doesn't want to be in, neither a proper kid or a satisfied adult.

Hidden in the back of the gallery an interesting exhibit entitled "Idealized Images" confronts two American stereotypes. A June 2006 "Newsweek" article with the headline "Rosemary's Babies" is surrounded by an annoying crowd of Anne Geddes

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pictures, figures, and calendars. The clipping contains pictures of devilish kids from violent movies such as "Village of the Damned," "The Omen," "The Reaping," "The Exorcist," and "Silent Hill." The exhibition seeks to juxtapose our country's worship of innocence with the cult of "creepy kids" in the movies.

Frankly, "Idealized Images" should have used photos by someone besides Geddes. There is nothing innocent about the babies she photographs — they have been painted and dolled up to the point that they are only fit to be used to sell greeting cards. Geddes' photos are about the exploitation of demoralized children. Thus the display is more successful as a depiction of the end of innocence than a depiction of the battle between purity and an evil maturity.

The most striking piece in the exhibition is in Stephen Chalmers "Images of Innocence" series. All three images in this work are silver salts embedded in anodized aluminum. These metallic tones, along with the use of light and shadow, give the pictures a somber power — they depict innocent creatures in a broken down and corrupt world.

The best of the pieces is the first in the sequence, Untitled #3. Ironically, this is the only work in the exhibition that features no children or adults. The protagonist of this portrait is a tricycle, which sits in the middle of the frame at the end of a long hallway between two windows. The window on the right allows the light to come in — the sunbeam lends the tricycle a dusty but heavenly glow. The bike's front tire faces the viewer — there is the suggestion it is turning. But why and where? The toy, like so many of the children in this exhibition, look as if it is trapped between two worlds. The tricycle appears to be shiny and new, ready to become part of a kid's childhood. But it also looks sad and lonely, as if it is begging for a boy to ride it and there are no takers.

"Offspring" is an interesting look at what is happening, at least to this collection of artists, to childhood in a society that is anxious to make us all grow up as quickly as possible.

"Offspring," which features the work of nine American and international artists, runs through October 8, 2006 at the Boston University Art Gallery.

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