

Visions of Childhood:

A Contemporary Iconography

Whitney Museum of American Art
Downtown Branch
Federal Hall National Memorial
26 Wall Street
March 28 through May 11, 1984

Visions of Childhood: A Contemporary Iconography explores the various ways artists in recent years have used the subject of childhood to express a wide range of personal and social concerns. In the 1970's figuration came into focus in new ways, and with it came a resurgence of interest in returning recognizable content to art. Many artists turned inward, using personal symbolism and narrative fantasy as forms for their art. Other artists used figuration to examine political and social realities and to critique the practice of representation itself. The iconography of childhood—that is, images of children and objects associated with children—has proven to be a popular means for expressing these forms of artistic vision.

This show demonstrates the diversity of approaches that contemporary artists use to represent childhood. Using the iconography of childhood as a basic vocabulary, the artists in this exhibition manipulate their imagery through a wide variety of styles and media. The four general groupings outlined below should not be seen as exclusive; they overlap at any number of points. The first group uses memories of childhood situations as the basis for narrative fantasies; the second incorporates objects related to childhood, primarily as formal elements; the third appropriates images of children from the media; and the fourth uses portraits to explore both formal and personal concerns. Eric Fischl, Jed Devine, Jeffrey Isaacs, and Michel Demanche use narrative fantasy to examine the psychological complexities of children. In the photo collage by Demanche imagery from a first-grade primer is presented as a rebus illustrating a child's first experience of death. Photographers such as Sandy Skoglund, Katherine Fishman, Don Rodan, and William Wegman, as well as the sculptor Tom Otterness, create narrative work which depends on allegorical associations. For example, Otterness's *Bad Boys* is one portion of a narrative cycle for an architectural frieze. Otterness depicts a continuous procession of stylized, chubby children whose existence, beginning in *Paradise* and terminating in *Judgement*, is represented in short, allegorical episodes. Artists such as Nic Nicosia, Jonathan Borofsky, Neil Jenney, Lois Lane, and Hollis Sigler consciously incorporate elements of naive stylization into their narrative work. In *Coloring Book # 2*, Nicosia takes a child's coloring book as a metaphor for the imaginative inner world of a child and projects it outward to her immediate environment.

Artists in the second grouping, such as Janet Fish, Don Eddy, Laurie Simmons, and Richard Prince commemorate childhood by using its ubiquitous souvenirs as formal elements in their works. Images of marbles, squirt guns, Mickey Mouse, and Trix cereal resonate with associations as familiar and reassuring as our memories of Saturday

morning television. Don Eddy, for example, creates an imaginary world by realistically rendering a multitude of toys in his air-brushed compositions. Laurie Simmons photographs children's toys which act as surrogates for heroic cowboys. By placing the dolls in unusual settings, Simmons cleverly stresses the disjunction between humans and their doll incarnations. Karl Wirsum, Starr Ockenga, and Olivia Parker use children, rather than their toys, as design elements chosen for a particular form, color, or texture, as well as for their ability to evoke strong, subjective reactions.

Most of the sculptors in this show use childhood associations to add a sense of spontaneity and whimsy to their work. In particular, Rodney Alan Greenblat's *Wishing Well*, Keith Haring's *Crib*, and Ronnie Cutrone's *School is Out* embellish real objects with playful imagery, whereas Chris Macdonald and Emily Jennings construct geometric sculptures related to childhood toys.

The iconography of childhood has the potential to evoke highly emotional responses. Most of the work in the first two categories depends upon the viewer's associative memory and emotional identification with the situations and objects represented. A rather different set of intentions informs the work of Thomas Lawson and Robert Longo, who use images of children taken from photographs and re-present them in the form of a critique of the original representation. Their techniques act to defuse the original impact of their media appropriated images. There is little in these pictures for the viewer to identify with and, in fact, the sense of alienation and emotional distance that the style engenders plays an important role in the works' effectiveness.

Mike Glier's drawing, *Atlanta: Charles Stevens*, stands midway between media appropriation and portraiture. Like Lawson and Longo, he paints from a photograph, but rather than use his medium as a critique, he uses it as a transparent expression of his feelings, creating a memorial to a murdered child. John Ahearn, on the other hand, makes true portraits—vivid characterizations of neighborhood children from the South Bronx. Outside of the community in which they were made these lifecast sculptures, using children who would not normally be subjects of such celebrated portraiture, take on new meanings.

Finally, Alex Katz and Susan Rothenberg, in their respective works *Walk (study)* and *Maggie's Split*, also make portraits of children they know, while using the child's form as a locus for an exploration of spatial relationships. In both works the generalized form of the child, arms spread wide, is used as an abstract structural element—one that expresses an emotional state of childlike joy in simple movement.



Neil Jenney, *Girl and Vase*, 1969

As indicated by the explicit title on the painting's frame, a binary relationship exists between the separate images in Neil Jenney's *Girl and Vase*. Their equal size, as well as their isolation within an amorphous brown environment, establishes the relationship between a young bawling girl and a broken vase. The viewer is encouraged to equate the vase's condition with the girl's emotional response. Is she upset merely because the vase is broken, or is this an early confrontation with the adult world of possession and responsibility? The child's first realization and awareness that material objects (and by extension, life itself) may be only temporary is an understandably traumatic experience. Jenney's finger-painted technique, when used in conjunction with this depiction of a childhood event, heightens the dramatic situation. On the other hand, the composition's simplicity and limited range of colors keeps this representation from becoming a specific incident happening to a particular girl. Like all of Jenney's paintings from this time, it has allegorical significance.

— J.v.L.



Eric Fischl, *Digging Children*, 1982

Eric Fischl's *Digging Children* is a pulp psychodrama played out by a cast of elongated, energetic, naked children. Fischl takes an ostensibly innocuous scene of children playing on the beach and transforms it into a dark, enigmatic vision of youthful sexuality. The irregular arrangement of the figures serves to skew the viewer's perception of the scene. The narrative mystery is obscured by the larger mystery regarding the peculiar energy of the piece. The expressionistically painted figures serve to heighten the drama. The title has an ominous sexual ambiguity concerning who is doing the "digging," the children or the viewer. Fischl's work combines subject matter which is highly charged and allegorical with a style that is local and literal to the point of tawdriness. The child, a central image in Fischl's work, proves to be the ideal site for the nexus of the profound and the banal.

— S.L.G.



Jonathan Borofsky, *Mom, I lost the election at 1,933,095*, 1972

Jonathan Borofsky structures the narrative content of this painting by using a diptych form. Between the two parts of the composition, Borofsky establishes a small time interval. In the first panel a boy approaches a blue car. In the second he opens the door of the car to find his mother. The visual device Borofsky employs is of a cinemagraphic nature. In the first panel we are given an overhead view point, then in the second we cut to the side view. In this panel Borofsky “zooms in” on the scene, making the boy and the car larger and therefore more intimate. This close-up shows us the boy with his head bent, and one can almost hear him saying, “Mom, I lost the election.” Recaptured from Borofsky’s own memory, this confession communicates on a wider level the hurt pride and frustration that one inevitably experiences during childhood. The personal content of the work combined with awkward rendering expresses the vulnerability of the little boy. Like Jenney’s portrayal of a girl and a vase, this small incident can be of great emotional impact at a particular stage of a child’s development: the encroachment of the adult world upon that of the child.

— J.v.L.



Nic Nicosia, *Coloring Book # 2*, 1981

In *Coloring Book # 2* Nic Nicosia has set up a combination of real and illusionistic elements to create an entirely new artificial environment. It is a photograph that shows both the objective world in which the child lives and the subjective world of her perception. *Coloring Book # 2* is an approximation of a child's world at home. Rendered in a simplistic two-dimensional style the couch, lamp, table and television contribute to the domestic ambience. The young girl, who lies on her stomach watching television, is on a purple and red tile floor that is portrayed in the confused perspective typical of the naive drawing style Nicosia uses in this series. The girl's position, diagonally cutting the picture plane and parallel to the wall, intensifies the distorted perspective and invites the viewer to enter the room — the girl's subjective world. The TV positioned directly in front of the young girl can be seen as an extension of her imagination — the result of Nicosia having drawn a fantasy rather than a figurative depiction on the TV screen. The TV could be thought, metaphorically, to represent the child's alter ego. The artificial environment contributes to the overall coloring book qualities of the piece, qualities which are associated with childhood.

— C.H.K.



Olivia Parker, *The Black Package*, 1980

Olivia Parker creates fictional narratives by embellishing single photographic images. *The Black Package* is a haunting, melancholy composition comprised of an antique photograph of a stiffly posed girl and a black package balanced on the table's edge in front of her. The young girl, wearing a cameo pink party dress, is glazed with dark tones that have cracked and peeled away. In the foreground, the gift, wrapped in black paper and red twine, protrudes into space, emphasizing the two-dimensionality of the photograph of the child. Parker manipulates the mood of the composition by substituting colors within it: a gift, usually wrapped in gaily patterned paper, is wrapped in the unlikely color of black. The pleasant memories usually associated with a photograph of a child in party clothes and an unopened gift are negated. The image is plagued by unsettling and suggestive nuances of death and mystery. With a few objects, Parker orchestrates a disturbing fiction comprised of a table balancing two independent and somber images. Their relationship, or rather its absence, becomes the focal point of Parker's miniature drama.

— J.L.C.



William Wegman and Michael Smith, *Portrait of the Artist Michael Smith As a Young Man*, 1982

William Wegman and Michael Smith's *Portrait of the Artist Michael Smith as a Young Man* is a documentation of Michael Smith's performance character "Baby Icky." The title, which we recognize from James Joyce's novel of the same name, is poking fun at the high toned conception of the artist's earnest soul-searching in which he discovers his poetic vocation at an early age.

The illuminated blue backdrop, an essential element of the typical department store portrait, sets the stage for this memorable moment and intensifies Baby Icky's awkward pose. The typical accoutrements we associate with the artist's trade are missing. Instead we find other important elements depicting Baby Icky's early developmental stages: teething toys, baby bottle, diapers and undershirt. Most significant, perhaps, are the single white baby bootie, bruised by the hard lessons of learning to walk, the adorable baby bonnet, obviously hand-knitted by Baby Icky's grandmother, and the white sunglasses, a favorite souvenir from the likes of Disneyland. Wegman and Smith's collaboration in *Portrait of the Artist Michael Smith as a Young Man* is at once a satire of the art historical practice of portraying the artist and a jocular commentary on the practice of recording a child's early developmental stage.

— C.H.K.



Mike Glier, *Atlanta: Charles Stevens*, 1981

Atlanta: Charles Stevens is one of a series of paintings and drawings from *New York Times* photographs of the black children slain in Atlanta. In this drawing one of the murdered children, Charles Stevens, gazes at the viewer with disarming directness, his lips slightly open as though in anticipation of laughter or speech. The size of the head is the first clue that this portrait is meant as a memorial. The gestural strokes signal the artist's emotional involvement with the subject but their stiff opacity fails to infuse any sense of personality into the image. The use of black and white half-tone shading accentuates the painting's relationship with the original newspaper photograph, an additional reminder that it is no longer possible to paint Charles Stevens from life. The implicit irony in this series of works is that only by dying did these children become suitable subjects. Blown up to 6 by 5 feet on the gallery wall, Charles Stevens is, literally, much larger in death than he ever was in life.

— S.B.K.



Starr Ockenga, *Untitled*, 1983



Starr Ockenga, *Untitled*, 1983

Both of Starr Ockenga's Polaroid photographs remain untitled intentionally as they are studies and explorations of infancy, not intended to be viewed as portraits of individual infants. Victorian laces, dolls with eyelids shut, and freshly cut flowers are the provocative props in Ockenga's works which evoke emotional responses from the adult viewer. Whether the infants laugh, cry, giggle, or kick, they unselfconsciously examine and spontaneously react to the eclectic objects with which Ockenga surrounds them. In the first photograph infants — all sprinkled with freshly cut flowers — are crowded by eerie, sleeping antique dolls. One child is fascinated by the surreal surroundings, while another seems silently confused in her trespassed space. In the second photograph, infants examine clear plastic masks. They peer through the transparent surfaces with mixed reactions. One child is instantly stilled by the novelty of the facial mask; another seems to giggle with delight. It is the unusual compositional combinations in both of Ockenga's works which elicit the viewers' emotional and subjective reactions. When placed beside the children in the first photograph, common dolls appear to mock eternal sleep, and together with plucked flowers and scattered petals, may suggest symbols of death to some viewers. Other viewers are captivated by the infants' instinctive responses to the differently textured elements within the fanciful environment. Again, Ockenga's perceptive juxtaposition of infant and objects allows even more powerful reactions to the second photograph. To some, a child's laughter when viewed through the mask's transparent surface, is disturbing in its distortion. The infants are unaware of the viewer's notion of suffocation. Conversely, other viewers affirmatively acknowledge the infants' natural, inquisitive nature as they examine something new to them. Ockenga is aware of the different behavioral responses in both adult and child and combines both in her photographs. She captures, visually and emotionally, the ambiguities of human behavior through an exploration of its beginnings in infancy.

— J.L.C.



Ronnie Cutrone, *School is Out*, 1983

Ronnie Cutrone's *School is Out* uses a blackboard as a canvas, as a sculptural object, and as a central object in the child's world. Cutrone offers an ironic look at both the adult's and the child's use of the blackboard by printing didactic adult homilies next to a large cartoon drawing of Felix the Cat: a site of instruction by one group, the blackboard becomes the site of pictorial play by the other. Keith Haring's *Crib* functions in a similarly subversive way. By adorning a baby's crib with his strange, totemic "radiant child" imagery, Haring challenges the notion of the crib as a domain of purity and innocence. Rodney Alan Greenblat's *Wishing Well* is a literalization of a child's storybook fantasy, a smiling sky-blue well which gladly grants children's wishes. Greenblat's irony is inseparable from his imagery and execution: the banal, simply drawn images of planes and happy faces reveal all of the blandness of a suburban child's fantasies.

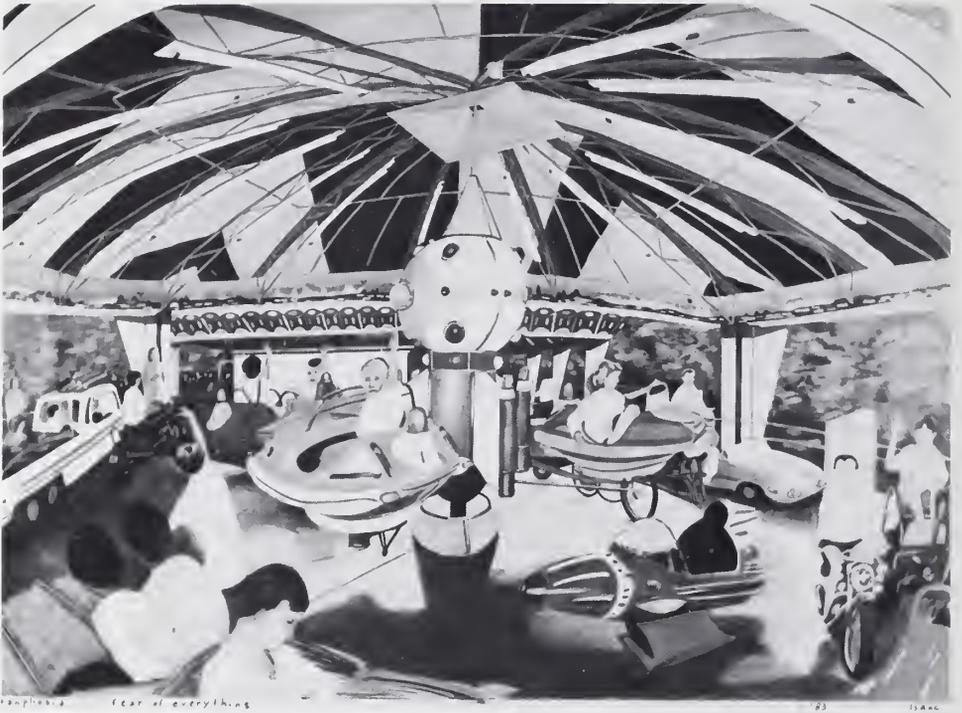
— S.L.G.



Thomas Lawson, *Don't Hit Her Again*, 1981

Thomas Lawson's *Don't Hit Her Again* employs a crudely painted image and title derived from a tabloid photograph and caption. The image is composed for maximum recognizability, cropped for melodrama, and set floating in a paint-daubed ground. The effect of the work is one of dislocation: the instinctive response engendered by a picture of a battered child is subverted by the anonymity, vulgarity, and lack of context of the image. The garish two-color palette works to distance the image from "real life" (the term Lawson ironically uses to describe his work). The roots of Lawson's imagery are in Pop art, which glorified the disposable icons of consumer culture. But Lawson's image of the battered child is doubly disposable: it comes and goes with the daily paper and is accorded its fifteen minutes (or less) of fame (Warhol's standard for success in the modern world). Lawson exposes the ways that a potent image, like that of a child, can be appropriated and exploited, in this case to sell newspapers. Lawson's work, by examining practices of the media, reveals its capacity to abuse human life through representation.

— S.L.G.



Jeffrey Isaac, *panphobia — fear of everything*, 1983

In this painting of a carnival merry-go-round the familiar swirling sensation of a carousel is dramatically captured in the overall composition. The boy in the pink car at the center of the pictorial plane is in sharp focus; the surroundings, the other figures and cars, are indistinctly rendered, thus enhancing the sense of their spinning, circular motion. The underside of the merry-go-round's shelter expands in all directions in an umbrella-like fashion, heightening this sense of rotation and movement. The result entices the viewer to participate in the carnival excitement.

Unlike the other children whose faces display the more typical range of juvenile reactions, the face and posture of this central figure are fraught with anxiety and fear. Is he so cowardly that he is afraid of a carnival, an event especially appealing to children? Could he be the victim of "panphobia — fear of everything"? Or is his emotional response not that unusual, considering the excitement of carnivals, themselves an unique blend of exaltation and fear?

— J.v.L.



Sandy Skoglund, *Maybe Babies*, 1983

Sandy Skoglund's dye transfer print of a three-dimensional installation pilots the viewer beyond the boundaries of childhood into an abstract and intangible point in time—one which exists prior to birth, perhaps even conception. In a womb-like darkness or void, infant dolls float and tumble, *in utero*, beside occasional segmented green lines. In the background, a man pauses behind a window to stare at the infants. The effect is disconcerting as attention shifts between what is real and what is imagined—between what exists and what might exist. Several questions are raised which stem from the possible meanings of the segmented green lines and the relationship between the man and the "maybe babies." Can these lines be read as umbilical cords and their segmentation symbolize interrupted life? Does this interruption occur prior to birth, allowing interpretations of Skoglund's work as a statement on abortion? Does the disturbing, apocalyptic atmosphere incite this image to be viewed as a warning against the annihilation of future generations resulting from nuclear warfare? Or is this work a less specific but equally disturbing probe into the unpredictability of fate and the uncertainties of life in general? As is implied in Skoglund's title, maybe the work addresses all these questions.

— J.L.C.



Hollis Sigler, *Remember Childhood . . .*, 1977

The title of Hollis Sigler's drawing, "Remember Childhood . . ." is an explicit invitation to identify with the vision presented, but Sigler's choice of imagery frustrates our attempts at making narrative connections. What are those conical forms? Haystacks? Are we right to feel a twinge of menace in the way they have the empty swing set surrounded? The childlike drawing style gives these ostensibly inanimate forms a distinctly human presence. It is common for children to imagine that their toys and other familiar objects are alive, to project their feelings and fears into them. Sigler's other works often include anthropomorphized objects infused with the anxieties of their owners; in this drawing, that process of personalization seems more the product of a child's consciousness.

Two lines from Sylvia Plath's poem, *Daddy*, "The black telephone's off at the root / the voices just can't worm through," aptly describe the telephone, lost and disconnected at the picture's lower right, as well as express the viewer's feeling of frustration in the presence of imagery which remains resolutely silent and private. The yellow crayon strokes that radiate around the outside of the drawing infuse the surface with gestural energy, a golden aura that reinforces our sense that we are looking into a special, separate world. Just as we can never become children again—never reason, believe nor imagine as children do—so the vision of childhood represented in this drawing remains tantalizingly out of reach of our understanding.

The Lois Lane collage drawings make an interesting contrast with the Hollis Sigler drawing, "Remember Childhood . . ." Both Lane and Sigler use recognizable images, but juxtapose them in puzzling ways. Their images are placed in an ambiguous, non-realistic space that subverts most normal contextual references. Sigler uses pastel color and

gestural strokes to compact her drawing with atmospheric energy. In contrast, Lane uses reductive means: a linear drawing style which gives only a cookie-cutter silhouette to forms; a collage technique which literally cuts away the photograph's extraneous references; and a black surface which isolates and clarifies the images' interrelationships.

Defining Hollis Sigler's style as "childlike" is not problematic, whereas Lane's drawing style is more difficult to characterize. The collage drawing which features a baby in a stroller makes this point clear. The photograph of a sleeping baby positioned on the back of a three-legged creature makes the animal-like form unambiguously childish. Surprisingly, in other drawings and prints by Lane this same three-legged form has an entirely different effect—that of totemic, primitive drawing. In those works its simplification seems rooted in the modernist tradition of abstraction.

Not only does the image of the baby and stroller make the drawing childlike, it also sets up a distinction between what is real and what is imaginary. Fast asleep, with mouth agape and feet dangling to one side, the child may be dreaming that a magical beast carries him on its back. The photograph of the baby, detailed and historically located, presents an external view of childhood. The drawing, idealized and fantastical, presents the child's imaginative inner life.

— *S.B.K.*

Checklist

All dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

John Ahearn

Victor and Ernest, 1982

Oil on cast plaster, 24 x 22 x 9

Collection of Arthur and Carol Goldberg

Jonathan Borofsky

Mom, I lost the election at 1,933,095, 1972

Oil on canvas board, 16 x 40

Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Ronnie Cutrone

School is Out, 1983

Chalk, magic marker, and acrylic on blackboard, 60 x 60

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York

Michel Demanche

Tom and Betty Learn to Read, Left

Dominates Right, They All Fall Down (Death), 1983

Photo-construction, oil, and graphite, 40 x 49

Private collection; courtesy Gallery One, Fort Worth

Jed Devine

Untitled, 1980

Palladium print, 8 x 10

Daniel Wolf, Inc., New York

Don Eddy

C-IV, 1981

Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36

Private collection; courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York

Eric Fischl

Digging Children, 1982

Oil on canvas, 66 x 92

Private collection

Janet Fish

Picnic with Joellee, 1983

Oil on canvas, 42 x 94

Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Katherine Fishman

Where Do Babies Come From?, 1984

Oil on photograph, 19 x 19

Collection of artist

Mike Glier

Atlanta: Charles Stevens, 1981

Oil stick on paper, 74 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 60

Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Rodney Alan Greenblat

Wishing Well, 1982

Acrylic and mixed media on wood, 82 x 26 x 26

Collection of Eddo and Maggie Bult

Keith Haring

Crib, 1981

Marker and enamel on baby crib, 40 x 48 x 24

Collection of H. Olivieri, Chicago; courtesy

Hal Bromm Gallery, New York

Jeffrey Isaac

panphobia—fear of everything from *Nine*

Common Phobias, 1983

Pencil and watercolor on paper, 22 x 30

Collection of the artist

Neil Jenney

Girl and Vase, 1969

Acrylic on canvas, 58 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 76 $\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Francesco Pellizzi

Emily Jennings

Double Whammy, 1983

Wood, spring steel, and enamel paint,

39 x 31 x 12

Collection of the artist

Alex Katz

Walk (study), 1970

Oil on masonite, 12 x 16

Collection of Paul Jacques Schupf

Alex Katz

Tracy on a Raft (study), 1982

Oil on masonite, 16 x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$

Private collection

Lois Lane

Untitled, 1978

Collage and craypas on paper, 16 x 20

Collection of George and Anne Grant

Lois Lane

Untitled, 1978

Collage and craypas on paper, 49 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 38

Private collection

Thomas Lawson

Don't Hit Her Again, 1981

Oil on canvas, 48 x 48

Collection of Raymond Learsy

Robert Longo
*Study for Love Police: Engines In
Us/Golden Children*, 1982-3
Charcoal, watercolor, dye, and graphite on
paper, 30 x 50
Metro Pictures, New York

Chris Macdonald
Car # 17, 1984
Oil paint on wood, 37 x 32 x 66
Collection of the artist; courtesy
Cable Gallery, New York

Nic Nicosia
Coloring Book # 2, 1981
Type C print, 30 x 40
Courtesy of the artist and Delahunty
Gallery, New York and Dallas

Starr Ockenga
Untitled, 1983
Polaroid print, 24 x 20
Collection of the artist

Starr Ockenga
Untitled, 1983
Polaroid print, 24 x 20
Collection of the artist

Tom Otterness
Bad Boys, 1982
Painted cast polyadam, 10 x 47½ x 5½
Brooke Alexander Gallery, Inc., New York

Olivia Parker
The Black Package, 1980
Polacolor photograph, 8 x 10
Marcuse-Pfeifer Gallery, New York

Richard Prince
Untitled (Trix), 1983
Type C print, 20 x 24
Metro Pictures, New York

Don Rodan
Chastity from The Seven Cardinal Virtues,
1981
Cibachrome print, 8 x 10
Castelli Graphics, New York

Susan Rothenberg
Maggie's Cartwheel, 1981-2
Oil on canvas, 25 x 30½
Collection of Ellen Kern

Susan Rothenberg
Maggie's Split, 1981-2
Oil on canvas, 60 x 60
Private collection

Hollis Sigler
Remember Childhood, 1977
Craypas on paper, 23 x 29
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Laurie Simmons
Brothers/Horizon, 1979
Type C print, 5 x 7¼
Metro Pictures, New York

Laurie Simmons
Untitled (Horseless Riders), 1979
Type C print, 4⅞ x 7⅞
Metro Pictures, New York

Sandy Skoglund
Maybe Babies, 1983
Dye transfer print, 30 x 40
Castelli Graphics, New York

William Wegman and Michael Smith
*Portrait of the Artist Michael Smith as a
Young Man*, 1982
Polaroid print, 24 x 20
Collection of Michael Smith

Karl Wirsum
Study for Kid Kedzie, 1982
Ink and pastel on paper, 23 x 35
Achilles/John Collection, Chicago

Photo Credits

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