Why It’s Fun Being a Girl: Witnessing Adolescence in Charlie White

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The Teen and Trans Comparative Studies by Charlie White bring into focus several interrelated ideas about emerging sexualities. These works promote a dialogue around the value of discussing mutable gendered identities such as teen girl and transwoman. Through his careful meditation on the image of each, the resulting work shows that the two figures in combination open up a wealth of interpretative modes for thinking about what’s “real,” “natural,” and “manufactured” in the presentation of self. Adolescence, puberty, and girlhood get compelling attention in the doubled portraits White organizes in his series The Teen and Transgender Comparative Studies of 2009. In each of these five photographs, White couples a white teenage girl between the ages of fourteen and sixteen with an adult white transwoman of unspecified age, most likely in her thirties framed by
a gridded white ground. Through interviews with the artist, research into theories of transsexuality, and considerations of feminist art, this paper will examine how White's otherwise complicated, voyeuristic *Girl Studies* project makes a productive statement about female puberty rather than an exploitive one.

I first encountered one of these photographs at The Jewish Museum in November of 2009 while attending the reception for the exhibition *Alias Man Ray*. On the lower level in the elevator lobby, this photograph was installed adjacent to a pair of images from Dutch Rineke Dijkstra’s series on Israeli women soldiers before and after service, such as these two images. I stood looking at these photographs for awhile. I found myself puzzling out the complexities of these images, but was instantly drawn to the dialogue of the two different figures in White’s image. Are they strictly eugenic images of measurement and comparison? Is the image of the teen girl scandalous because she is so young, does the teen girl balance the image of the transwoman? Are they dopplegangers or daughter and mother and ultimately, are they the receptacle for male sexual desire or anxiety? Are transwomen simply going through a second adolescence making their experience equivalent to that of teen girls? These are beautiful images, lushly depicting a pair of females, but complicated in content and form. In particular, one of the main comparative points here is the reduction to puberty as the aligning experience between girls and transwomen, which focuses on the constructed form of living in a body.

Charlie White is a Los Angeles-based artist, educator, and administrator. He works primarily in photography and film. He grew up in Philadelphia, was educated in New York City and Los Angeles. He’s been exhibiting his work since 1999 and has had several solo shows of his work, in addition to having his art included in many group shows and film festivals. Currently, White is Associate Professor and Director of the MFA program at the University of Southern California’s Roski School of Fine Arts.

White is obsessed, by any measure, with teenage girls; a point he articulated in a 2007 profile in *The New York Times* as “I am like the bulletin board of a preteen girl,” he said. “Or I am that girl.” The artist's control and his need for order prompt me to regard him as obsessed (or is it fascinated?) with how his persona and work resemble a teen girl’s obsession with her appearance and a transwoman’s fixation with her presentation. White certainly isn’t alone in his attention to the teen; critic Jerry Saltz remarked in 2003, “The Number One obsession of the moment in every single category of culture is the teenager.”
The teen girl is the focus of several works, most notably the three series comprising the collected group known as Girl Studies. The Teen and Transgender Comparative Study series is part of this larger project, which includes a short 35mm film titled American Minor and an animation titled OMG BFF LOL (both of 2008). It is from his investigations into adolescent boys that he found his way to examining transwomen. In 2003, he was making an image about a boy band and produced this image Plum, typical of his work in that the figures are depicted in a tightly controlled manner, every detail of their postures, poses, gestures, and gazes refined to emphasize their androgynous and erotic physiques as their feminine aspects are complicated by the masculine bare chests which show they do not have breasts. Alongside this investigation of the girlish boy, White was also looking closely at the ideal of the teen girl—a white, fair-skinned, blond, and blue-eyed girl. In 2003, White was commissioned to make a portrait of a girl named Cyrilla Strothers by the family, but the sessions failed to produce satisfying images, but the portrait process became The Cyrilla Strothers Project of 2004-2006, in which the artist gave cameras to Cyrilla's parents, brothers, and friends, as well as involving several of his assistants in photographing Cyrilla at all times of day from the first day of her junior year to the day of her senior prom. Cyrilla eventually became disenchanted with the project. It yielded 11,000 photographs, a compendium of images of adolescent malaise, primarily in settings at home and at the shopping mall, through the lens of the subject's friends and family. While that project was occurring, White also created a massive archive of teen magazines, purchasing any issue that featured a blond white teen girl on its cover.

As an outgrowth of that project, White created the three animated shorts about two possessive, bored, and materialistic white girls named Tara and Blakey as archetypes of the idealized teen girl engaging in stereotypical activities (three minutes, shopping at the mall; two minutes, Tara in her bedroom; and one minute, Blakey crying in her bathroom) focusing on two characters Tara and Blakey. These two characters personify teen girl culture and the power of the adolescent consumer identity as determined by a narrow fixation he’s using, taken from popular culture that a middle- to upper-middle class white teen girl might have. He combined the lexicon of images utilized for
Saturday morning cartoons with media images of the American girl princess, akin to Paris Hilton and Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. White has said he made these animations because he felt the animation form exposes what's a priori problematic about teen girls and their representation He's looking at the most ugly and more popular form of representation of teen girl and using this form in a flat, disconnected manner to prompt the viewer to consider what's being said. He told me that the significance of the script lies in the promotion of the consumer fetishism knit into the identity of the teen girl. The characters say: “Is it better to want than to have? I love to have but I also like to want. Wanting is a kind of Hell and having is a kind of Heaven. Having is so much better than wanting.” Thus, White creates a cartoon version of the melancholy of a consumer-oriented, puritanical culture and the status of the teen girl within it.

More recently, White returned to the teen girl in a public art project, Casting Call (September 2010), sponsored by the Culver City, California public art organization LAXART, in which numerous girls were screened and one of the teen girls was successful at the “casting call.” Her likeness would be featured in a prominent billboard in Los Angeles. Surveillance, exploitation, whiteness, and the ideal teen girl are all central to this recent project as the artist figures in the precise form of a particular kind of teen girl loved by the most banal forms of popular and commercial culture but uses real girls as his way to identify and emphasize this archetypal figure.

In this recent work, White is expressly concerned with delving into the manufactured subject of the teen girl. Writer Christoph Doswald has noted White's images cover the “taboos of nascent sexuality in the American teen girl—both the vulnerability of that sexuality as a topic and the ruthlessness with which it is exploited when it goes unexamined.” The discussion of the work helps situate it in response and reaction to those mechanisms of exploitation and derision. The artist remarked on one of the works from this series and its operations as emanating from the media-constructed image of the teen girl:

*The American Minor* is an examination of the teenage girl at the beginning of the 21st century. It shows her psychic environment formed by much-emulated celebrities from the Hollywood glamour industry, as propagated by illustrated magazines such as *People* and *Cosmopolitan*. Ultimately, it is about the identity quest of young people in a society that gives a vast amount of space to the myth of beauty and surface reality, a society that understands the feasibility of such surface reality as a consumerist message.

The teen girl is often seen as symbolism of coquettishness and a knowing flirtatiousness, even as the girl herself may feel inscribed with the unknowable body with its surging hormones and changing shape. She functions as synecdoche for a kind of duplicitous sexuality, both budding and submerged. Embedded behind the sexuality in his images is White's regard for the teen girl as a passive receptacle for presumptions about consumption, beauty, and vulnerability. Despite the real weakness, exposure, and susceptibility of teen girls, culturally, they are a cohort of idealized version of clean, soft, naive, easily embarrassed, and silly adolescent females. She's pegged as stereotypes, archetypes, and categories as the bad girl, as the good girl, as the outsider, as the insider, and other possible variations beyond these categories. She seems both the intimate acquaintance and the unknowable quantity. She's often seen as the libertine daughter but she is often struggling through the drudgery of life, equally bound by familiar obligations and social expectations. White's
emphasis is on the social construction rather than the biological state of teen girl. The teen is the more familiar of the two women. But, ultimately, neither is representing herself. They are really propositions about sameness, fantasies (or are they fantastical?) projections of the a curiosity about the teen girl. The constructed image here is emphasized by the gridded background, suggesting an image in process at an early phase of Photoshop manipulation (even though White uses little manipulation in these images).

The Teen and Transgender Comparative Studies series evolved out of a simple and accidental grid created by personal photographs sent to White by models he’d photographed. The teen girl is a 12-13 year old girl, whom he’d photographed with several other teens in 2004. He had been working on creating a portrait of a transgender (which is how White addresses and names the transwomen he’s photographed) and had made several images of Tina, also known as Lustina, but he was unsatisfied with how the portrait turned out. He left the four photographs in a grid pattern on his studio wall. In 2007, he returned to that grid of photographs because of the similar likenesses and their resemblances. They became the generating force for White in creating this series comparing the portraits of an adolescent girl and a transgender woman in one image; two states of puberty—biological on the teen side and chemical/surgical on the trans side. White focused on identifying passable transgender, male-to-female subjects. His discussion centered on transgender subjects who could pass as women in society, women who had all had surgery and were actively involved in hormone therapy. The decision to emphasize transwomen who pass is a particular decision that focuses on one segment of the trans population since not all transwomen seek to pass.

White emphasized to me that the teen girl ultimately became the axis around which the dual portrait revolved. In the binary opposition of the image, the teen girl is in the first position and, therefore, privileged position. Both are the girl with gender passing as sex. He said he wanted the images to feed each other informationally. Both are engaged in an individual gender transformation and a state of becoming. Each is physically maturing and transforming as a woman. The language of their gender is emerging and base upon external signs of sexuality which both occur in both the natural and manufactured states of female puberty.

Despite having created several bodies of work in which his control of the production is markedly intense, in this series of images, White severely limited his intervention into the image. He remarked:

I want them to look alike. I can’t make that happen if I manipulate them. It is a lie if I manipulate them. All of the editing and manipulating came in deciding who would sit in front of the lens. The passable transgender and the teenager who matched [in appearance] would operate in the same way.
One of White’s main presumptions is the idea of passability, which is a contested concept in trans communities and trans studies. He takes up the construction of passing without really breaking it down into the many component parts at work in the life of the transgender woman. One of the main presumptions of photography is that the final image conveys reality, rather than a manufactured situation akin to reality. It is an indicator of reality, but is often a phantasmagoria of the real. Though these images are not manipulated, careful consideration went into their facture. He chose the women because of their physical similarities. Despite looking at several possible subjects, he built a relationship with the adult woman and then cast the younger woman based on the likeness to the adult transwoman. He had the families of the teen girls photograph them without make-up, just out of the shower, and as unmediated as possible. He didn’t digitally alter the figures except to match the flow of their hair or connect lighting. And he used a kind of casting process in which he sought similar facial features, as in a mother and daughter casting search process. He isolated twelve pairs of teen girls and transgender women and the five eventually succeeded as visually appealing and suggestive pairs. He didn’t photograph the two figures together, but did shoot them on the same day. He used a kind of controlled styling to create a similar viscosity, making all the surfaces similarly moist in appearance. What is striking about this comment from this artist is his willingness to stay in the background and one political implication of this decision is, ultimately, his ability to put on view in a direct manner two people (and by extension two groups of people) obsessed with their appearance and presentation which society has deemed the main concerns of these two groups.

One aspect underscoring the discussion of images of the teen girl and the transwoman is the idea of desire. Female and male desire converge and diverge in examining these subjects and their status at large through the mechanism of looking at these photographs. What are the issues of desire here? How does the dialogue between the two figures inform the images? This situation combines the desire of the women themselves and the presumed male viewer, both of themselves and of these images. The presumptive gaze of the teen girl is unclear in relation to the
transwoman. Harsh or intense looking at teen girls is tantamount to scopophilia. The teen girl is the more scandalous of the two figures because her appearance has been so layered with consumer materialist interests she almost ceases to exist as an individual but she also serves the role of making the image of the transwoman more normative, as though her presence makes such an image accessible. The voyeurism here is looking at two figures learning to be sexual beings as each apprehends her mature female sexuality. The issue of desire is complicated for teen girl and transwomen and even in the isolated representation of just the head and shoulders in these images calls forth a flurry of associations, references, and narratives about sexuality availability, exploitation, purity, accessibility, and inaccessibility. Even without much make-up or coifing of the hair, the women remain objects of the gaze.

One of White’s reference points for this series was Jennie Livingston’s documentary Paris Is Burning of 1990, in which passing and realness are central constructs in the contests as part of Harlem costume and dance balls. In the “Executive Realness” contest, contestants showcase their abilities to look the part of the executive. Whereas these kinds of drag events in the past would have focused solely on attempts to look like women, they expanded to include an even more poignant kind of longing for an impenetrable class differential as conveyed by the wearing of suits, ties, dress shirts, dress coats, and polished leather shoes with the occasional accessory such as eyeglasses or a prominent watch. In this film, one of the speakers remarks on the significance of passing, “To be able to blend, that’s real…to look as much as possible like your straight counterpart,” while another says “I would like to be a spoiled, rich white girl.” The orthodoxy centers on conformity and ambitiousness; ultimately, it is laden with aesthetic implications in which what one acquires is of greater import than what one creates. Such points have clear connections to the fantasies and priorities of the teen girl and transwoman.

To put it more broadly, these two groups are consumed with and fanatical about passing—two groups consumed with an extreme ideal of normalcy; in both cases, the females here represent groups, including under-represented groups, but the desire to show them (on the part of White) and the desire of the teen and transwoman, as depicted by White and in the specific models he selected, reiterates existing notions about desire and how these two want to be seen. It is a stereotype, leveling the individuality in favor of normative ideas about each as a representative of her respective “group.” This particular point highlights the fact that these transitive states of being both involve and incorporate thresholds. The subject is always leaking, despite considerable energy to prevent such leakages or slippages of the cloaked version of self, the presentation of the self. Above all, this situation of being a self “under construction” and in a heightened state of evaluation results in a kind of innocence—albeit one that is based in a construction informed by consumption. These images emphasize the luminal state of emergence in which both subjects are engaged.
One interesting feature of these five photographs is that the artist's ability to articulate his meaning is heightened—he's a college professor and he has published, adding useful layers to their function since he remarks on how they serve him, stopping short of outlining their programmatic value to him. White told me that behind the two figures in these five images “there is a white male behind both of these figures, meaning me” and that he did not feel comfortable exploring any other races besides white because he is not white. White described to me the significance of discovering the existence of boyish girls which for him was a watershed moment in his erotic history as a young adult—tantalizing and exciting. Within the underage girls is a fascination for him with the domination of media referents. Within the transwoman is the sensuality of the masculine female. So swirling around these images of a teen girl and a transwoman is a self-portrait of the artist perhaps responding to his own youthful erotic charges and contemplation of self and desire in American society, who embeds himself in the physical and cultural reality of each figure.

That White terms this project “Studies” speaks to the clinical aspect he's embedded in each of the works. He's treated them frontally and flatly, because as White explained, “the point is to compare.” The figures are positioned in the forward picture plane and are life-size. The two figures appear against a three-part grid (dark solid blue lines crossed by red lines with intersecting light blue dashed lines) which the artist explained was selected purely because it was more successfully visually than any other grid form. The medical is a particular important feature here since transsexuals must rely upon diagnostic tools in order to identify their stated gender preference. The medical is a particular important feature here since some transsexuals rely upon diagnostic tools in order to identify their stated gender preference; but this idea of relying on a medical diagnosis remains a flash point in trans scholarship, communities, and lived lives. The model for understanding transgender is a medical one, relaying upon categorization; that is, it is primarily a negotiation between a social construction of a diagnosis and a self-definition. A “nonstandard experience of gender” is hampered by limited knowledge about people and terminology, imagery, and institutions are sorely lacking in recognizing difference. Legal policy, documentation, and
official records of identity, as well as medical and anatomical adjustment and reassignment all depend upon medical classifications and terminology. The graphing draws in these referents. Gender dysphoria is a complex set of phenomena and mechanisms, involving persistence around which the individual forms experiences to support the desire for transformation and transition. Transgender, or transsexuality, is no longer in the state of imagination or fantasy since chemical and surgical options now exist to make transformation possible. Many transgender people simply identify as trans while others make the shift from one gender to another over a short or longer period of time, usually dependent upon finances and social supports. One compelling overlap between transwomen and teen girls is that this ubiquitous desire for change has resemblances to the malaise of change and one’s changing body; I distinguish these changes from adolescence because the adult transwoman’s transformation is a different lived experience because of the choice the adult makes which is not available to the child becoming a woman.

Similarly, female puberty has been presented as a medical issue. French critic Michel Foucault first spoke of “the clinical optic,” that examination of the body according to anatomical and medical specifications, or a combination of looking and describing. As Australian feminist theorist Catherine Driscoll has pointed out, “In defining bodies with an expanding vocabulary including the specular division of bodily form into anatomies, this optic produced a new form of the body’s visibility.” Bodies are not neutral terrain for the imposition of cultural consciousness, making the sex/gender distinction fraught, as both teen girls and transwomen confront hormonal changes previously unknown to either. The polarity of bodies stems from their role in society as sites of desire, as embodying consumptive practices, and as loci for the projection of a whole host of tropes—economic, political, sexual, and social among them.

In both scenarios, the body is seen as evidence. White references the history of identity photography through the use of the framing grid. The body as evidence of self is primary in this particular history, in terms of how society legally identifies an individual. Such regulatory documentation is essential in establishing recognition of self. For many trans people, such identification of self is a central feature of transitioning. The teen girl functions as a stabilizing element here, even as both figures share facial expressions of discomfort, even shock or surprise in some cases. We presume here in the binary opposition of these two figures that the girl is first and therefore privileged. The contrast to the teen girl has the effect of opening up the clarity and fixity of the transwoman’s identity, both highlighting the state of puberty for the younger figure while directing the viewer’s attention immediately to the second puberty of the transwoman also engaged in transitioning.
The pairing of two females, one older than the other, calls to mind images of mothers and daughters which is an interesting key to some ways of thinking about the pairing of a teen girl and a transwoman. White mentioned the significance of the mother/daughter portrait as the basis for this image. The accident of birth confounds the mother/daughter situation here. In such a familial relation, the notion of “I will become what you are” is layered within the image of daughter in connection to the mother. Some transwomen want what the girl will become, confounding the usual expectation of mother’s status (and, by extension, her dominance and authority). Kinship is further implied by the artist’s choice to focus on a resemblance, crafting the images to select two figures whose coloring made them into a pair.

Though these subjects had no relationship other than White’s inclusion of them into this image, the idea of universal identity for teen girls and transwomen is then underscored by the graphing and its suggestion of scientific determination and resolution. That state or suggestion of purpose or fortitude has within it its own indeterminacy because both figures are in a state of change; that is, growth and maturity with the teen girl and transforming and changing with the transwoman. Both are in a fugue state, moving, shifting, and altering. But one’s essence is seemingly always the same, even as one abandons past states of identity—childhood for the teen girl and maleness for the transwoman. Though one’s identity changes, essence can be clothed in different forms and shapes. However, using the teen girl as the metaphor here underscores how essence could shift or change. If it didn't, we would all remain locked in a state of childhood. The transwoman chooses to abandon her masculinity and her maleness, whereas the teen girl’s change is inevitable. Returning to the palimpsest of mother/daughter kinship relations, motherhood at this moment in history is not a certainty for girls when they become women. Motherhood is a choice, much as transsexuality is a choice for some and a compulsion or necessity for others yet both are rooted in internal requirements such as instinct, cultural and psychological factors, as well as economic ones. The nature of consumption practices—dress, makeup, skin treatment, hair treatment, and body modification—between the teen girl and transwoman mirror one another as the transwoman adds
breast indicators, makes facial changes, and other similar efforts to achieve womanliness. Young female adolescence might be considered as a model for some transitioning transwomen who are in a similar state of puberty.

The role of childhood has further significance here in that both figures have expressions of dissatisfaction, even as their appearance is accentuated to suggest beauty. Teen girls are in a state of change, still young and requiring familial and legal support. Additionally, adolescence, especially in American culture by the late twentieth century with the Riot Girl movement, has been characterized as a time of rebellion which stems from a feeling or set of feelings rooted in dissatisfaction. This series showcases that transwomen similarly evolved out of a state of dissatisfaction, but it is instead a childhood of dissatisfaction for many transwomen some of whom have reported an awareness of wanting to transition as early as age two, which is arguably the developmental moment of individuation. The transwoman, ultimately, seeks a rebirth, which happens in small stages, culminating in such profound yet mundane decisions as which bathroom to use.