Carolina Antich

When I was a little little girl, I drew pictures of ugly little girls, their tight lonely features delineated by the dull tip of a Ticonderoga pencil #2. After I finished each portrait, I pretended to transform my subjects (through the magic of Venus Paradise colored pencils) into princesses: peacock-blue eyes, geranium-pink lips, sparkling tiaras atop suddenly perfect curls. These imaginary makeovers rendered my girls not only beautiful but loveable, a narrative entirely believable to me, even though I was the kind of mean-spirited sprite who precociously rejected Cinderella, Snow White, and all other Disney-fied damsels as fairytales.

This was before I discovered that adults drew differently than children, that the tight black lines of a #2 pencil needed makeovers themselves, in order to be considered art. This discovery came about, not through an encounter with a charcoal drawing by Henri Matisse, but when I received a children's book as a present on my eighth birthday. The book was Kenny's Window by Maurice Sendak, published in 1956 and on celebrated reading lists for several years before it made its way to my bookshelf. Sendak's line—shaky pen strokes in sepia and black—conveyed unhappiness, fear and loneliness in the way that only children can experience these existential matters.

Like many of the presents that my parents presented as "good for me," my skewed imagination reinterpreted "Kenny's Window" as public proof of my private thoughts: "you see, they are wrong and I am right." (The internal battle of my unhappy childhood was publicly validated by no less than an author heralded in the New York Times!) Sendak influenced my life in many ways—my own son Max is named after his protagonist in Where The Wild Things Are—but most insidiously by changing my own little girl drawings. I switched from pencil sets to a box of Crayola watercolors, trying to master his edgy pen strokes with the point of a plastic paintbrush.

All of this is a roundabout introduction to the work of Carolina Raquel Antich, a young Argentinean artist who now lives and works in Italy. Her images of children seem almost as if they were made by children, but they are filled with a sophistication about simple gestures that only a child notices.

Smaller than all the other people on the planet, children pay attention as if their lives depend on it, catching clues from first-sightings of ordinary encounters at the dinner table or in the playground. How to use a fork, how to ask for more, how to make your parents happy, how to keep the bullies away—the observations of a child make no differentiation between life and life-threatening circumstances. While their own drawings provide fertile ground for psychologists looking for clues of dysfunctionality, most of us mostly dismiss their notations as worthy of nothing more than a refrigerator door. We greet even our own child's drawings with a "That's nice, honey" or "Isn't that wonderful?"

The trick achieved by Antich is that we can't dismiss her work, even though it may leave some wondering if she ever learned that artists are supposed to draw differently than children. Her children are painted on blank empty backgrounds, leaving little to distract our eyes from their own simple gestures. A little boy concentrates on drawing a picture in *Dipingere* or a little girl in a tutu shyly steps toward the audience in *The Last dance*. Even in groups, these school kids rarely seem less lonely; they are stuck in nuclear families posed as hierarchically as nesting eggs or in classrooms frozen in time for their yearbook picture.

These images are not documentation of childhood nor are they documentation of memories of childhood. They function more like a moment when we manage to reinhabit a memory, reliving the complexity of keeping a stiff upper lip even as we endure a broken arm. "My imagination is more directly from the world of a child," says Antich, "But revisited with more significant rigor." Indeed, these gems of images condense those moments of terror, torture, and relief—perhaps, the inescapable reality of childhood—with the fearlessness that only an adult can conjure many years after the trauma has passed. To Antich, her work represents a "negotiation" between the child and adult space, the constant comparison between the inside and outside, vulnerability and endurance, that allows us each to survive childhood.

But, what about innocence?

Now, there's the problem.

Who doesn't presume that pictures of children are metaphors for innocence? Antich forces this issue by creating images of children that seem innocent enough, but rarely are innocent themselves. It is not her subject matter that creates this tension, despite the implied narratives of her depictions of boys playing at the grown-up game of *Negotiations*, or a shirtless youth precariously holding two birds on a pole in her more recent work, *Volare*. Instead, even in pictures where nothing much seems to be happening—two disembodied heads of boys that seem to be sharing a secret or a very sweet ballerina holding the hem of her tutu—we cannot shake the feeling that something dangerous is taking place, something awful and scary and barely comprehensible.

Some have suggested that these works are commentary on contemporary events—Columbine or Jean-Benet Ramsey—so scary that they have irrefutably erased innocence from our understanding of childhood. Others have credited Antich with conjuring up child-like metaphors of adult behavior, making war, for example, more up-close and personal by putting the weapons in the hands of children. But, the complicated truth is that childhood does not need the amplification of media imagery and news headlines to be a terrifying experience in and of itself. Antich seems to understand this fundamental truth, or more pointedly, remembers her own childhood truths, and limns her seemingly simple renderings with an aura of inescapable tragedy.

Poetry, rather than fairytales, is a better comparison for these haiku-like works that grow less and less literal as Antich grows as an artist. Her animation, *Timida*, barely register a story-line, as a single emotion—the embarrassment of a blushing girl--is repeated again and again in a video loop. By contrast *Drummer Boy,* in 14 animation sequences, conveys the unsettling narrative of war, complete with gun shots and the voices of soldiers on the battle field. Unnerving and charming, these animations leave no escape into either fantasy or memory, no relief from its evocation of life's little discomforts. The repetition is not merely the result of technology, but a simulation of the mimetic behavior of children in relationship to drawings. Children, as opposed to artists, seem happy to draw the same picture, over and over again. But, of course, as video games take over the world of childhood imagination and channel all this repetitive behavior into the singular receptacle of a joystick, Antich's animations are almost artifacts of a time when pencils and crayons and dolls and toy soldiers were more fertile material for playtime dramas.

Once upon a time, little girls painted princesses and little boys scrawled bomber jets with blue ballpoint pens. Together, they fought wars and loneliness in the margins of their Adirondack notebooks. It is Antich's unique talent to recover these marginal gestures as source material. But, it is her genius that she imbues these markings with an emotional resonance that is truly her own.

Barbara Pollack

Barbara Pollack is an artist and writer based in New York who frequently contributes to The New York Times, Time Out NY, Art in America and Modern Painters among other publications.