

Art in America

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Nicholas Prior at Yossi Milo

Yossi Milo has developed something of a specialty in showing photographers who focus on the strange and exclusionary aspects of childhood, from Loretta Lux's wide-eyed innocents, who look unsettlingly lifelike though they are computer amalgams of different photographic sources, to the likewise digitally concocted, feral creatures of Simen Johan, to Alessandra Sanguinetti's girls absorbed in a fantasy play in which grown-ups almost never make an appearance. The latest show at Milo's gallery to mine such territory was by the New Yorker Nicholas Prior.

Prior's exhibition of a dozen untitled C-prints (nearly all of which are 32 by 40 inches) offerer up a view of childhood as serious business, an impenetrably private, somber condition not easily breached by adults. Though all of the pictures are undoubtedly staged in some way, the least elaborate (and the most successful) of them do not seem artificial. A boy sitting in a white bathtub gazes implacably at the photographer; he is framed by a white, half-open door on the left and a sheer shower curtain on the right, behind which another figure opposite him in the tub is just discernible. In another work, a boy dressed in black stands in the snowy woods, staring straight at the camera. Some distance behind him sits a German shepherd, whose steady gaze echoes the boy's. As in these images, a kind of alter ego hovers in the wings of a number of Prior's scenes, waiting, it seems, for us to leave. It's as if his camera has caught a glimpse of the imaginary friends so many children invent. They aren't menacing, exactly—they just aren't any of our business. A boy sitting on the



Nicholas Prior: *Untitled #44*, 2003, Cibachrome print, 32 by 40 inches; at Yossi Milo.

floor facing away from the camera seems to be looking at nothing but a picture window. In fact, a shadowy figure is barely visible behind the floral curtains.

Occasionally, Prior stages events that register as too explicitly uncanny or emotionally fraught to be convincing. The image of a boy who seems to be ritually burning his own artworks in an outdoor fire, surrounded by a small group of adults, has a touch too much Gregory Crewdson-ish portent about it. But a beautifully composed image of a small girl standing unfazed in front of a porch where two adults wearing dark hooded coats and Halloween monster masks are chatting brings to mind Eugene Meatyard's use of such costuming in his casually surreal images of his own children. It strikes just the right note of offhanded weirdness.

—Jean Dykstra