

Teenage Wildlife by Morganna Magee

Essay by Jessie Boylan

“Since the day you came into my life, I knew we would be here until the end. [...] I Never used to believe in the saying “dreams can come true” until the day I met you. [...] My whole world lights up so damn bright when I am with you.” - (Shania’s Room, 2016)

i.

As adults, we have inevitably survived our teenage years, and our experiences have varied depending on our upbringing, our parents or carers, our homes, our incomes, our culture, our geographical location, how we came into the world and our date and time of birth. We are not, however, all born with the same opportunities and, as a consequence, our paths will go in divergent directions.

For Morganna Magee, her project *Teenage Wildlife* was initiated while considering the ways in which her own teenage years shaped her. As a child, Magee remembers being alone, angry and uncomfortable within herself, which compelled her to run wild. She says, “I was so empowered, I loved feeling free to be as self-destructive as I liked and that I was accountable to no one but myself.”¹

In 2015, while working as a photographer and teaching a photography program for young people, Magee met one of her main subjects – Daisyanna. One of the students told her about Daisy, saying she was beautiful but “a massive slut.” Magee asked to get in contact with her to see if she wanted to be a part of her story on teens. When they met, Daisy was fifteen and had recently been in a serious accident in a stolen car and “was shaken into good behaviour for a while.”²

Magee instantly connected with Daisy’s rebellious attitude, which subsequently reminded her of herself as a teenager, when she routinely acted out against her family and enjoyed being careless, irresponsible and erratic.

After some trust was established, Daisy then introduced Magee to Shania and Teeya, three young women who are the protagonists in this book. They are connected as family and by the fact that they all had to become adults too quickly, through motherhood and responsibilities usually preserved for those far beyond their years. In some ways, for Magee, this project is a process of mourning for a life that she wishes her teenagers could have had: “I wish that they could just be twenty and unattached” she says, “I wish they had a chance to be fuck ups, everyone should be able to be a fuck up when they’re young.”

For the three teenagers depicted within these photographs there is not much choice. They are part of a cyclical process that invariably entrenches women and teen mothers in poverty in one of the richest countries in the world.

¹ Morganna Magee in conversation with the author, June, 2019.

² Morganna Magee in conversation with the author, June, 2019.

According to an Australian Institute on Health and Welfare Report titled 'Teenage Mothers in Australia' published in 2015, teenage mothers are more likely to "experience broader disadvantage because of their younger age, including access to education, employment and social support" and they are "nine times as likely to live in the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) areas," and remote areas, as well as being more likely to have babies that are "pre-term, of low birth weight and more likely to suffer higher morbidity and mortality."³

This cycle was witnessed by Magee and she became closer to Daisyanna, Shania and Teeya. Poignantly, this cycle can also be witnessed in these photographs.

In the photograph *Daisyanna at 16*, Daisy's wrists bear the scars of years of cutting, a teenager's tiny body, forced to grow up and be an adult too quickly, but also showing her resistance and determination. In the image *Daisy's Room, 2016* we look at a bed in a caravan, cigarette lighters stuck to the wall, colour coordinated, a surveillance camera, photos of Daisy by Magee, more vernacular pictures of Daisy and her child and Daisy and her boyfriend with his face rubbed out. The viewers attention is often drawn to small and telling details within these often ad hoc compositions: the words "wild and free" and a "Keep Calm I'm a MILF" mug, as well as the large patterned word "dream" almost lodged into the wall, a painting of an idyllic waterfall at the edge of a lake in the centre of the wall, scented candles on the shelf, images of lions printed onto a pillow case. This place is a sanctuary- a small place of refuge amidst a chaotic existence.

ii.

In her publication *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008), Ariella Azoulay discusses the ways in which photographers automatically enter into a form of a contract with someone they have photographed, at the instant of photographing them:

Photographs are constructed like statements; the photographic image gains its meaning through mutual (mis)recognition, and this meaning (even if not the object itself) cannot be possessed by its addresser and/or addressee. Citizenship likewise is gained through recognition, and like photography is not something that can be simply possessed.⁴

Importantly, Azoulay says that this contract is:

An attempt to anchor spectatorship in civic duty toward the photographed persons who haven't stopped being 'there', toward dispossessed citizens who, in turn, enable the rethinking of the concept and practice of citizenship.⁵

This series is Morganna Magee's contract with the teenagers she has photographed; for Magee long ago decided that these lives have not simply stopped being 'there' and that they deserve a process of honouring through a journey of collaboration and mutual recognition, which allows her subjects to take control of how photographs of them are made and

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018. Teenage mothers in Australia 2015. Cat. no. PER 93. Canberra: AIHW.

⁴ Azoulay, Ariella, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, (Zone Books: NY, 2008) 25.

⁵ Azoulay, 16.

subsequently how they are seen in, and through, images. These are visual documents, but they are made through an empathetic lens and relationship, rather than a simple act of witnessing.

This mutual recognition is a multi-relational methodological act between: photographer and subject, subject and photographer, subject and camera, subject and self, viewer and subject, and so on.

In *Shania's Room, 2016*, there is graffiti covering the walls, as well as lyrics or a letter written in green and red marker, there are photocopies of selfies arranged haphazardly. A sheet-less empty bed signifies an intimate space as well as actions, moments, disruptions, arrivals and departures. In his book, *The Decision Between Us: Art and Ethics in the Time of Scenes* (2014): John Paul Ricco states that beds are scenes of "exposure to the outside,"⁶ they are "scenes of bodies in their retreat. Whether as the scene of erasing or the scene of withdrawing, these scenes are to be understood not as 'empty,' but as *unmade*."⁷ Being unmade is to be exposed, but there is a choice in this exposure amongst this sanctuary.

When we are exposed to the world, how can we take back some semblance of control, and organise our own lives according to how we want to see ourselves? This is what Magee's subjects grapple with when they perform for the camera. Perhaps to be able to control the version of how they're seen in photographs is the one space in which life can be concrete, where they can simply exist. As Ricco affirms "Existence is precisely the risk that we take in living."⁸

iii.

As we begin to weave through these photographs we are confronted with a feeling of intrusion. Are we invited, or are we intruding? Are we looking at an 'other' enabled by the photographic act, or are we given signs and clues and ways of understanding lives rendered unintelligible by society's norms and lives that we are usually excluded from?

Magee has spent years gaining the trust of her subjects and she has become many things to them; their friend, their mentor, a pseudo-mum figure, but mostly she has become their ally. This trust has enabled a photographic process that is both driven by Magee's long-form documentary process and by the subjects themselves. Magee doesn't decide what happens when she's with them, she mostly just 'hangs out' and says that the actual photography is only fifteen minutes of her visits. "But," she says, there is a clear 'photo shoot time' versus 'hanging out time' in the way they work. "They usually get changed straight after I've taken the photos, so we can sit around and gossip comfortably."

⁶ Ricco, John Paul, *The Decision Between Us: Art and Ethics in the Time of Scenes*, (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2014), 8.

⁷ Ricco, 11.

⁸ Ricco, 13.

To choose not to direct a portrait is a very deliberate and potentially political act for a photographer. It means relinquishing control and creating a shared decision-making process that is based not on an imbalance of power, but on mutual regard. It also becomes a kind of social practice, one that may have both therapeutic and radical implications. As artist and co-founder of the socially-engaged research and archive project 'A Social Practice', Eliza Gregory, states: "Many of the most complex and exciting elements of contemporary photographic practices are invisible to audiences. They consist of relationships, compassion, patience, and listening. They consist of really challenging oneself, as the artist, to give up conventions within the art-making process that subtly reinforce oppressive social dynamics."⁹

It's clear Magee is operating in line with these ethics, she is determined her subjects have authority and autonomy over how they are represented. Undoubtedly this approach can be chaotic at times, because, says Magee, "usually they are fighting with their parents who try to get me on-side the second I walk in the door. I've photographed Daisy mid fight with her mother and she stopped and posed for me."

The images themselves are judiciously arranged and composed carefully. The square, tightly cropped, at times off-kilter, format feels somewhat claustrophobic, as if we are too close but simultaneously kept at a distance. They are revealing, but much is also left outside of the frame, and without details, we are left wondering and wanting more. This is perhaps a deliberate act; why reveal too much and who the hell are you to be looking at these photographs anyway?

We are stuck in bedrooms, caravans and backyards, we have walls around us and we can only leave by looking away, perhaps, into our own home and lives, considering lives removed from our own, at least for a moment, before continuing.

Shania, 2017 depicts another interior space, the same room pictured in the previously discussed image, but in its' original state, pre-ordained – pre-witness, as if waiting for events to come – an anticipation that pervades much of this work. A dreamcatcher hangs just above Shania's head, an unintentional observer. Shania's expression is calm, as if ready and accepting of the journey ahead. This is one of the portraits that seems more candid and less controlled than the others. Shania doesn't appear too concerned with performing or where she is positioned in the frame and there is some reprieve in the sincerity of her presence.

In *Camera Lucida* (1981) Roland Barthes states that "The photograph possesses an evidential force, and . . . its testimony bears not on the object but on time."¹⁰ Here, it is the photographic portraits that possess the evidence of time. We traverse five years from front to back and we see Shania before getting pregnant, during, and afterwards. We see Daisy, Teeya and Shania with their boyfriends, with each other, with their children. We jump back and forward in time, we see them with and without make up, made and unmade, sometimes we're not sure if we're looking at the same person or same life, because of what time and adversity does – ultimately what having a baby as a teenager does: it shifts their gaze and their presence so forcefully. This force is also not lost on the viewer of these images – the empathetic witness.

⁹ From the personal website of Gemma-Rose Turnbull, co-founder of 'A Social Practice' <https://www.gemmarose.com.au/photography-as-a-social-practice>, (accessed 10th July, 2019).

¹⁰ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography*, (Hill & Wang: New York, 1981) 89.

To study these images is to journey along their contours, across the arrangement of objects, of lives, at once organised and scattered, holding a memory of occurrences in which only subject can experience, and viewer can watch.

In *Teenage Wildlife*, Magee has embarked on a process of respectful honouring; of her own life as a teenager – who is now a respected documentary photographer – and of the subjects she photographs. She has preserved their story, allowing them to exist beyond the walls of their reality and has shared in enabling them to possess their citizenship through a journey of recognition.