



Fig. 1. Clara Gutsche, *Janet Symmers*, from the Series “Milton Park,” 1972, gelatin silver bromide print, selenium toned, 35.5 x 30 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2. Clara Gutsche, *August 1975*, from the Series “The Cencic Sisters,” 1975, gelatin silver chlorobromide print, selenium toned, 10 x 12.7 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 3. Clara Gutsche, *Helen*, from the Series "The Cencic Sisters," 1975, gelatin silver chlorobromide print, selenium toned, 12.6 x 10 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 4. Clara Gutsche, *Joanne, Helen*, from the Series "The Cencic Sisters," 1975, gelatin silver chlorobromide print, selenium toned, 10 x 12.7 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Clara Gutsche: Portraits of Girlhood

Twyla Hatt

Montreal-based photographer Clara Gutsche (b. 1949), who teaches at Concordia University and Champlain College, began her artistic career when she and fellow artist and frequent collaborator David Miller (b. 1949) resolved to save the buildings in their neighborhood from being demolished. They photographed the homes and people of the Milton Park community between 1970 and 1973, resulting in the series *Milton Park*. Thereafter, Gutsche continued to explore photography through a series of projects, embracing both portraiture and a documentary approach in her investigations of the inner landscapes and interpersonal relationships of her subjects. Her black and white pictures of preadolescent girls in *Milton Park* and in her following series *The Cencic Sisters* (1974–76) demonstrate her ability to combine these two photographic genres. Gutsche lived next door to the Cencic girls and, with their mother Katrina's permission, photographed and documented their lives and relationships with each other.

Family photography was originally intended to document a family's lineage. Portraits were taken in photographic studios where the subjects, composition and background were strictly controlled. This was the only kind of family photography that existed before George Eastman (1854–1932) invented the portable Kodak camera in 1888, which enabled people to photographically document their everyday lives. This concept of intimate family portraiture expanded around the time of the Great Depression in the United States, when revealing the difficult living conditions of impoverished families became a concern to documentary photographers such as Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) and Lewis Hine (1874–1940). The sustained interest of documentary

photographers in recording moments of daily family life enables them to capture the immediacy of spontaneous movement and expression. Their subjects are typically not posed and may be less aware of the camera's presence than they would be in a studio. When Gutsche discusses her method of photographing families, she often references Walker Evans's (1903–1975) documentary style.¹ Evans's works concentrate mainly on life in rural America in the early- and mid-twentieth century. During this period of modernity he captured the honest and at times devastating reality of the American dream. The term “documentary style” suggests that photographs taken using this approach are informative but also evoke a narrative, as the photographer brings their own meaning to the work through their idiosyncratic style. So while documentary images appear to be objective, they are ultimately subjective in nature.

The figures in the four photographs from the *Milton Park* and *Cencic Sisters* series are preadolescent girls. *Janet Symmers* (1972) (fig. 1) exemplifies how Gutsche combines some of the older traditions of family photography with documentary photography. In this work, a young girl is standing on her bed with a puppy in her arms; on the wall behind her are a number of posters of male rock bands belonging to the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. The moderately high angle of the shot positions her slightly above eye level. Gutsche used a 4 x 5 view camera—popular in traditional photography—and black and white film, which she felt very committed to at the time.² Furthermore, the large format camera allows for greater attention to detail than a smaller format camera would. While the composition is staged, the objects in Janet's room—which she has selected and arranged herself—reveal her personality and identity. Furthermore, her decision to wear a wig and carry her dog under her arm reflects her agency as a co-creator of this photographic representation of her.



Fig. 1. Clara Gutschke, *Janet Symmers*, from the Series “Milton Park,” 1972, gelatin silver bromide print, selenium toned, 35.5 x 30 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Photographic representations of children are inevitably shaped to some extent by the photographer. Children became the main subjects in family photography because they are “the living embodiment of the passing of time during a period when personal identity is being developed.”³ However, capturing a child’s identity becomes a challenging task when considering art historian Anne Higonnet’s contention that depictions of childhood are always constructed.⁴ Gutschke’s images of girlhood and knowing children constitute a shift away from romanticized portrayals which separate childhood innocence from adult experience and deny children’s bodies and self-consciousness.⁵ Shannon Walsh, a filmmaker and writer, has said that images of young girls ought to “construct innocence in flux, a space of contradiction and change.”⁶ Indeed, several opposing elements appear in *Janet Symmers*, reflecting the tensions that may arise at this particular stage in a young girl’s life between pre-teen innocence and adolescence. Janet is holding a puppy; pets have commonly accompanied young girls in portraits as symbols of

domesticity.⁷ Her blouse and skirt resemble a schoolgirl outfit, bringing to mind the discipline and conformity expected of students. Yet behind Janet is an array of rock band posters featuring James Taylor (b. 1948), Creedence Clearwater Revival and Québécois pop artist Robert Charlebois (b. 1944). The masculine world of rock music contrasts with the innocence, sweetness, sugar and spice traditionally associated with girls. Thus, despite the photograph's traditional elements, Janet becomes an active participant in the construction of her representation, rather than a passive image of childhood innocence that denies her lived experience and self-identity. In exploring this young girl's identity through the personal space of her bedroom, Gutsche creates a more modern and complex representation of girlhood.

In contrast to *Janet Symmers*, the photographs of the Cencic sisters show them outside their home. In *August 1975* (1975) (fig. 2), the sisters and some neighborhood friends are playing Chinese jump rope on the sidewalk near St. Joseph Boulevard.



Fig. 2. Clara Gutsche, *August 1975*, from the Series *"The Cencic Sisters,"* 1975, gelatin silver chlorobromide print, selenium toned, 10 x 12.7 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

While the photo captures an ordinary afternoon in these girls' lives, it had to be partially staged because of Gutsche's use of a 4 x 5 view camera, which demands that its subjects hold still for a few minutes. The street setting is typical of documentary photography. However, the depth of field extends only to the front doors of the houses behind the girls, so we remain within the limits of their private sphere and familiar surroundings. The two girls in plaid lived in the house on the far left in the image.

This photograph explores the relations among these girls, who represent various stages of girlhood. The figures, from left to right, are Dorothy, Arceles (behind Dorothy), Helen, Doris and a neighbour with a cat. Whether it be Helen's free-spirited attitude, Dorothy's self-aware pose with one hand brushing her hair back, or Doris's bored look, the girls' body language and demeanour express their individual personalities and how they interact with one another.

A feminist sensibility permeates Gutsche's images. *Helen* (1975) (fig. 3), for example, is vertically framed to signify Helen's strength, power and height.⁸ Her gaze is the predominant focal point and sets the tone of the image. She expresses a strong, perceptive individuality, yet her posture and indirect gaze suggest anxiety and concern. Although this photograph remains formal in its framing, Helen's pose and the outdoor setting are informal. The shadows behind Helen fall onto her face, adding to the enigmatic quality of her presence. Frowning, she appears to be preoccupied by perhaps troublesome thoughts; however, the glaring light that shines on her from the other side reveals a twinkle in her eye which might suggest otherwise.



Fig. 3. Clara Gutsche, *Helen*, from the Series “*The Cencic Sisters*,” 1975, gelatin silver chlorobromide print, selenium toned, 12.6 x 10 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

For Gutsche the feminist aspect of her work resides in placing value on her subjects’ lives and making visible their personhood.⁹ Helen is not represented as a sweet, innocent and sensualized girl with braids basking in the sunlight. Instead, Gutsche reveals the psychological complexity of girlhood, and as such her images depart from what one typically finds in traditional portrayals of girls.

A girl’s pose for a camera displays a sense of self-awareness and is often performative in nature, whether it be a sensuous stance or a disturbed expression.¹⁰ This relationship between photographer and subject is made explicit in *Joanne, Helen* (1975) (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Clara Gutsche, *Joanne, Helen*, from the Series “*The Cencic Sisters*,” 1975, gelatin silver chlorobromide print, selenium toned, 10 x 12.7 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

This photograph, along with the others discussed in this essay, is a product of the close bond that Gutsche developed with the Cencic girls, who were like surrogate daughters to her.¹¹ Gutsche became part of their family over the course of the two-year period that she lived next to the girls and photographed them. As a result, her autobiographical presence is palpable in this series. The two children seemingly felt comfortable letting Gutsche capture more than just joyful or pleasant moments. Joanne, who is standing in the doorway of her home, has a very stern look on her face as her eyes meet the viewer. Helen, on the other hand, with her hip jutting out, is glancing downwards at the floor, purposely averting the viewer’s gaze.

Gutsche recognizes the budding sexuality that Joanne and Helen display in their gestures and stance. But it was not sexual cognizance that she intended to reveal in this photograph. Rather, as Shannon Walsh explains in her analysis of girlhood images, these young women

occupy a space of identity that is very particular to a certain moment in their lives. ... [I]t is not only adulthood that preoccupies their quiet spaces and sulky glances. The portraits attest to

something outside the version of childhood and womanhood that we find comfortable and familiar. ... [T]here is an element of sadness. ... Sexual social scripts are being written, and in our mind's eye we see the woman lurking within the girl strain and contort with internal growing pains.¹²

Gutsche's documentary portraits of girls reflect the shift in late-twentieth-century visual culture towards more nuanced representations of girlhood. While *Janet Symmers* constructs the identity of a single subject by examining the relationship between her and the personal space of her bedroom, the series *The Cencic Sisters* investigates not only the individuality of each of the two girls, but also how they interact with each other as siblings, with their friends and with Gutsche. While the artist represents the difficulties of navigating the period between one's pre-teen and teenaged years, she also shows the solidarity and companionship between them, making this series an intimate portrait of sisterhood. Furthermore, the familial nature of Clara's relationship with the Cencic girls gave her the opportunity to capture more informal and revealing depictions of girlhood.

NOTES

¹ Clara Gutsche, interview with Twyla Hatt, November 19, 2015.

² Ibid.

³ Henry Peretz, "Facing One's Own," in *Family: Photographers Photograph Their Families*, ed. Sophie Spencer-Wood (London; New York: Phaidon Press, 2005), 6–7.

⁴ Neil Cocks, "Fort/Da: A Reading of *Pictures of Innocence* by Anne Higonnet," in *Children in Culture, Revisited: Further Approaches to Childhood*, ed. Karín Lesnik-Oberstein (Houndmills; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 147.

⁵ Ibid., 148.

⁶ Shannon Walsh, "'Losers, Lolitas, and Lesbos': Visualizing Girlhood," in *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood*, ed. Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 192.

⁷ For example, the British Romantic artist Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) produced many paintings of little girls cuddling dogs.

⁸ Richard D. Zakia and David Page, *Photographic Composition: A Visual Guide* (Burlington, Massachusetts: Focal, 2011), 95.

⁹ Clara Gutsche, interview with Twyla Hatt, November 2015.

¹⁰ Walsh discusses the performative nature of child subjects while discussing the work of other postmodernist photographers that portray what Anne Higonnet refers to as “Knowing children.” See Walsh, 195.

¹¹ Clara Gutsche, interview with Twyla Hatt, November 2015.

¹² Here Walsh is describing postmodern photographer Hellen van Meene’s (b. 1972) portraits. See Walsh, 192, 198.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cocks, Neil. “Fort/Da: A Reading of *Pictures of Innocence* by Anne Higonnet.” In *Children in Culture, Revisited: Further Approaches to Childhood*, edited by Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, 147–166. Houndmills; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Peretz, Henry. “Facing One’s Own.” In *Family: Photographers Photograph Their Families*, edited by Sophie Spencer-Wood, 6–7. London; New York: Phaidon Press, 2005.

Walsh, Shannon. ““Losers, Lolitas, and Lesbos’: Visualizing Girlhood.” In *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood*, edited by Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, 191–205. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

Zakia, Richard D., and David Page. *Photographic Composition: A Visual Guide*. Burlington, Massachusetts: Focal, 2011.