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By Carol Kino

So They All Get Naked and Play, Like Mom Did

IT'S difficult when you have a kid," the photographer Justine Kurland said. "If they're in a good mood, you can get work done. But if they're in a bad mood, you're at their mercy."

Ms. Kurland is known for photographing people in American wilderness landscapes, but the scene this day was the rent-stabilized apartment she shares with Casper, her 2-year-old son, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Casper, named for the 19th-century German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich, had just given a textbook example of one of his trickier moods. His father, the sculptor and multimedia artist Corey McCorkle, who lives 10 blocks away, arrived to take him out for breakfast, but he refused to budge. Instead he sat sobbing, rooted to the kitchen floor, a stunt Ms. Kurland said he increasingly liked to pull when she was scouting locations on the extended road trips she takes for her projects.

Casper's influence can also be seen in her latest photographs. Ms. Kurland first became known for a series that depicted teenage girls running wild in nature. In her current show, at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in Chelsea, the landscape is populated by tribes of naked mature women - many of them pregnant or nursing, suggesting wandering fertility goddesses - who are playing with their children in paradisiac settings of forest, meadow and sea.

The series is titled "Of Woman Born," a nod to the 1978 manifesto on motherhood by the feminist poet Adrienne Rich. But Ms. Kurland usually refers to them as "my mama and baby pictures."

"You want even more with a child because you're responsible for someone," she said. "I'm picturing the world I want to be."

Now 37, Ms. Kurland first came to attention when her work appeared in "Another Girl, Another Planet," a famous 1999 group show whose curators included the photographer Gregory Crewdson. It heralded the arrival of the so-called "girl photographers" like Dana Hoey, Malerie Marder and Katy Grannan, many of whom had been students of Mr. Crewdson in the master of fine arts program at [Yale](#).

They were all making staged photographs that seemed to address adolescent female identity. Yet Ms. Kurland's girls never appeared passive, or even seductive; instead she put them in nature and assigned them active roles: climbing trees, paddling in swimming holes, carrying a slaughtered deer through the woods. She describes the series as "a Huckleberry Finn narrative, but giving it to girls."

Her lushly colorful twist on the landscape once rendered by American photographers like Timothy O'Sullivan, Mathew Brady and Carleton Watkins proved alluring. From the beginning

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the nature Ms. Kurland captured, using only available light, has been evocative and exquisitely detailed.

Her photographs are also clearly grounded in art history.

"One doesn't normally talk about contemporary work in terms of sheer beauty," said Jay Gorney, who directs the contemporary program at Mitchell-Innes & Nash and first encountered Ms. Kurland's work in "Another Girl." "But in terms of its beauty and its composition, and the very careful placement of the figure in nature, her work is almost like 19th-century landscape photography."

Others are drawn to Ms. Kurland's early work because it seems to give a postfeminist spin to the transcendentalist ideal of finding oneself in nature. Claudia Gould, the director of the [Institute of Contemporary Art](#) in Philadelphia, where Ms. Kurland had a solo exhibition in 2003, mentioned the 1998 photograph "Bathers," which shows half-clothed girls paddling in a verdant green river bed. To Ms. Gould it recalled Thomas Eakins's 1882 oil "The Swimming Hole," which depicts young men skinny-dipping in a lake, "only these were teenage girls and it was a photograph," she said.

The painting made waves in its day, Ms. Gould noted, because of its casually homoerotic undertones. Likewise Ms. Kurland's work "evokes this carefreeness of adolescent girls at play, being free," Ms. Gould said. "And the question is: Are they experimenting with sexuality? Same as with the boys in Eakins. It is a kind of feminist version, without being really heavy about it."

AS Ms. Gould also pointed out, Ms. Kurland's projects often seem to parallel her own life. She began the runaway girls series at Yale, posing local high school students and college freshmen in New Haven's semi-industrial surroundings, a landscape she calls "degraded sublime." After graduation, wanting her own trans-American odyssey, she began venturing out on road trips and pushed her territory toward wilderness.

She was working for Mr. Crewdson as a studio assistant at the time. "Every week or so she'd run away," he recalled, "and then finally she just left. That's when I realized her pictures are autobiographical."

Ms. Kurland may come by her restlessness naturally, for she spent her own childhood on the move. In 1978, when she was 7, her mother began supporting the family by selling hand-sewn clothing at Renaissance Faires around the country; frequently Ms. Kurland and her older sister were taken out of school to tag along.

"It's a great job for a single mom," said Ms. Kurland, who has photographed the carneys who travel with those fairs. "You can work and work and work at home, and then turn over your inventory in eight weeks." Occasionally they would camp in the woods, and the girls would hunt for fairies. Perhaps that's why the sensibility of Victorian fairy painting frequently flickers through her photographs.

Her mother now lives on a Virginia farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains, near several back-to-the-land communes. That setting inspired Ms. Kurland's formal group portraits of legendary utopian communities, like the San Francisco Diggers in California and the Farm in Tennessee.

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"My mom just naturally wanders around naked," Ms. Kurland said, explaining what prompted her to photograph nudes in Edenic surroundings.

While the commune photographs look strangely like posed Victorian portraits, the "naked," as she calls them, often suggest Pre-Raphaelite paintings, or scenes from myth. Her titles frequently reinforce that association; a 2001 photograph of three flower-bedecked women walking through shoulder-high grasses, for example, is called "Diana and the Hunters."

Clearly there is a strong push-pull between realism and fantasy in Ms. Kurland's work. Her commune portraits, which she began shortly after 9/11, were a bid to make her work more political. "It felt like the narratives I was making were too cotton candy," she said. "I wanted to find people who were living with this utopian ideal." But in her naked portraits, she presents "the fantasy version" of commune life.

In early 2004 she made a photograph of seven naked pregnant women, all friends of her mother's, gathered like witches or sprites on white-fur rugs around a campfire. A year after Casper's birth that photograph became the basis of her "mamas and babies" project, in which make-believe and advocacy seem to combine.

"There's something political about creating a world that you want to exist," she said. And in a sense these new works also relate to the aesthetic of late 19th-century landscape photography, which "was really about this idea of projecting an idealism onto a landscape," she said. "It was a way of settling the West."

PERSUADING strangers to pose, often without their clothes, has never been a problem for Ms. Kurland. "I can always spot people," she said. "It's, like, really one of my superpowers. I can always tell which teenage girls would love living in the woods with their friends."

Finding mothers was equally easy. "It's like with teenagers," she said. "You find one mom, and you get 10."

She typically spends about three weeks in an area before a shoot, scouting locations and finding the right figures. She usually travels the same route, from New York to the Pacific Northwest and back, so may already have willing collaborators in a location.

If not, "I hang out in health food stores and playgrounds with a box of prints and talk to strangers, try to show them pictures, tell them what it's about," she said. "The ones who believe in the vision are the ones who come."

That's how Ms. Kurland met Amber Roberts, a nomadic political activist, in a vegetarian restaurant near Arcata, in Northern California. "She just walked up to us and said, 'You have this beautiful family, and I'm a photographer,'" said Ms. Roberts, who is in two seaside photographs of women and babies. "It's not posing, really. We all just get naked and go play on the beach. She just says, 'Do you want to just go over by the fire pit, maybe in a circle so I can see everybody?' Then slowly the children follow their mommies."

Meg Hayden, a midwife in Tennessee who has known Ms. Kurland since an early runaways shoot, said: "It's not often that you get the chance to be outside and take your clothes off. In some ways it feels natural, but because it's something you don't get to do all the time, it is liberating. It is kind of a heightened reality."

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The locations Ms. Kurland chooses, and the way she frames each shot are part of the experience too. "Sometimes you're going to these locations that you didn't know existed, that are tucked away," said Alice Duffy, a prenatal yoga teacher in Texas who has worked with Ms. Kurland for several years. In "Expectant Women" Ms. Duffy is one of three pregnant women gathered like the Three Graces in a leafless forest, with a child squatting on the ground before them.

"When you're in the setting, it's very normal," she said. "But when you see the pictures, it's like: 'Wow, the way she's framed stuff, it looks even prettier than the environment you were in. Where's that fantasyland?'"

Ms. Kurland says she never lights a scene or retouches a photograph, nor does she really direct her models, either, beyond setting up the stage and telling them where to stand and whether to walk or sit. "Somehow they believe in this vision of themselves," she said. "It's kind of about validating that fantasy."

For several years now Ms. Kurland has spent most of each year on the road, living in a green Chevy Astro minivan that is neatly equipped with a built-in captain's bed and satin damask curtains sewn by her mother. Before Casper's arrival, she traveled with a battery-operated cooler to keep her film fresh; it has been jettisoned to make space for his clothes and toys.

She recently switched cameras, from a large-format 4-by-5 Linhoff to a medium-format Pentax that uses rolled film, because "it was too difficult loading sheet film with Casper," she said. She often finds herself scouting for child care on the road, along with models and locations.

Yet her need to keep traveling means that her relationship with Mr. McCorkle is always in flux. "Corey's always been really supportive of the road trips, but he really misses us," she said. "He makes the sacrifice because he believes in the work."

She added that she can't bring herself to stay put with Casper in New York. "There's this way that photography is always about going out searching," she said. "I'm not the kind of a photographer who can photograph my home."