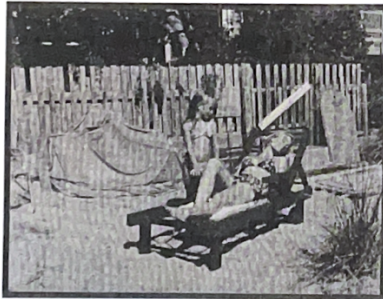


Artweek



Michael Stuetz, (above) *Noreen & Junliana*, 2001, C-print, 40" x 50"; (below) *Bronwyn & Itel*, 2001, C-print, 40" x 50", at POST, Los Angeles.



Michael Stuetz at POST

Children may be one of the most over-photographed subjects in this medium's history. Ever since the 1888 introduction of the Kodak #1, practically every parent has had a camera and taken pictures of their kids. Historically, the idea of childhood has been fertile ground for artistic expression, from the sugary sentimental to the disturbingly sexual to the coolly analytical. Michael Stuetz's sensitive photographs of children and their parents stand out for their unsentimental yet compassionate view of this complex relationship. The parental bond may be the most powerful psychological and physical connection humans have and studies on early childhood development suggest this bond is constantly being challenged through rebel-

lion, dependency and guilt. Furthering this intricate relationship are the popular notions of childhood innocence, the instincts of overprotective parents and the real-world dangers threatening society's most vulnerable members.

Stuetz's photographs delve into these issues with eight 40-by-50-inch color images that hover between casual snapshots and psychological dramas. Mostly made in the comfort of the subjects' homes, each photograph is a study in the child/parent relationship with the child as the focal point. The parent is generally posed in the background, waiting for the photograph to be made, while the child is prominent. Sometimes relaxed and at other times anxiously waiting for the click of the shutter, the children set the tone for our reading of the images. In *Titi & Sophie*, Titi (the child) sits comfortably in a kitchen chair with her feet on the cushion. She looks off to the left, seemingly unfazed by the photographer and his large view camera's presence. Titi's unconscious gaze suggests the growing self-awareness that leads from youth to adolescence. She looks off toward the bright light streaming into the cozy kitchen, her expression carrying all of the seriousness that a healthy youngster can muster. She is the center of the image and one can assume, by the refrigerator which is heavily decorated with a child's artwork, that she is also the center of attention in her home. Mom, or Sophie, remains recessed in shadow in



Michael Stuetz, *Sallie & Nasema*, 2001, C-print, 40" x 50", at POST, Los Angeles. page 24

a corner, standing ever attentive. This is an image of the child-centric world of many young families.

In *Sallie & Nasema* the youngster (maybe 6 years old) is proud and stiff in the center of the photograph, wearing a pink Powerpuff Girls shirt and standing next to her mother. The child is full of self-confidence and seems ready to bolt once the picture is made. She exudes childhood energy and restlessness while the adult stands relaxed but protective nearby. In contrast is *Katbe & Nola* where the child is outside on a balcony looking into the home. The adult is also outside but leaning over the railing and in the backyard there are horses grazing. Inside, there is a dog sitting in the foreground looking out, directing our attention diagonally across the picture plane to the girl and then the adult. The girl seems quite tentative about the picture making process and though not hiding, she is only partially participating. The adult, preoccupied with watching the horses in the backyard, seems unaware of the photographic process or even the child. This is a powerful image and the most psychologically complex photograph in the exhibition. The relationship between mother and child is overshadowed by the upscale home and signs of luxury. Unlike the previously discussed photographs, this is not the child-centric home. The adult's red shirt, gently bowed back, bare waist and prominent buttocks suggest that her youth and sexuality are still an issue, while the pudgy, plain child has not subsumed the family's life. Off to the left of the photograph is a large dark area, which the child faces. Psychologically, this darkness leaves a distinctly uneasy feeling in the viewer and further enhances the photograph's ability to suggest the potential conflicts of the child/parent relationship.

—Thomas McGovern

Michael Stuetz closed in May at POST, Los Angeles.

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