

## Smoke and Mirrors

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Teenage girls gathering in public bathrooms to apply make-up, smoke cigarettes, gossip about boys, music, and fashion is a common occurrence. Yet, when filtered through the camera of Los Angeles artist Laura London, who has been working with the subject over the last few years, there appears to be something not so matter of fact about these rituals of youth. In fact, there is something strange, or rather strained in these photos of young women at the onslaught of self-awareness and self-discovery that transcends the usual difficulty and awkwardness of adolescence. Young riot girls, hippie chicks and punk rockers sitting on the sidewalk sulking are not documented simply to illustrate this increasingly important demographic. Nor are they the work of a social anthropologist, who may observe the curious habits of girls spending hours in their bedroom playing guitar and giggling. Rather, London's most recent images straddle the sociological and the physiological. They are staged fictions rooted in the girls' social, emotional, and corporeal reality.

The girls in London's photographs are not models or aspiring young actresses, but her own students. They are inserted into a mise en scene which heightens the signifiers of an American adolescent world. The bedroom scene is an actual reproduction of the artist's own teen retreat, down to the same exact sleeping bag on the bed. It is in such images that we really begin to understand London's work within the context of filmmaking and within a broader movement of contemporary photography in which the photographic truth has been replaced in favor of fiction, fake narratives, and staged events. Like Cindy Sherman, Sharon Lockhart, and the teenage girl images of Sarah Jones and Dana Hoey, London directs every aspect of the photo shoot. Planning well in advance she scouts locations searching for public bathrooms with expressionistic graffiti, a gritty urban street corner, or the perfect sunlit park. She then works on costumes, creates special lighting, and dresses the set in order to amplify these sites of teen angst.

While some of her photographs are quite involved and require much preparation, and others, such as the more traditional portraits require only the subject and special lighting. For example, several of the Polaroid's depict solitary illuminated silhouettes or cropped figures that emerge hauntingly from a black background. Inspired by the 17th century Dutch painting, *Untitled (studio portrait with Vermeer lighting)*, portrays a girl with the hair color and highlights of the moment almost magically appearing from the velvet background, her intense red hair shimmering like fire.

"I first saw her when she was sixteen, in the early summer."

- Sigmund Freud, Dora

London first spotted Naomi, a punk rock girl of about fifteen, in the summer of 1996. Fascinated by her tough exterior, vampish makeup, and torn stockings, the artist incorporated her into this ongoing photographic project. During the process of working with Naomi, London discovered that beneath her hard shell lies a sweet young thing. And like Freud who was hired to discover the fugitive inner life of young Dora, London has taken it upon herself to continue her investigation into the inner lives of her young subjects by making Naomi her own case study. In the series "True-Self: Portraits 1-6 London places her analysand in front of a mirror (the original point of recognition of the self) in a dressing room of an upscale Beverly Hills department store. Positioned behind Naomi, just as Freud would have been sitting behind Dora, London photographs her as she looks at herself in the mirror.

As Naomi watches herself, London in turn observes and records the emergence of Naomi's many inner selves: Naomi as debutante in the ball gown; Naomi as Prada wearing bookworm; or Naomi as vixen in a tight leopard print dress. Are these different personae, about true identity, masquerade, or projection? Perhaps they are an accurate reflection of all the multiple "true" selves found in every subject.

Caught in this hypnotic web of gazes one could forever ponder these photographs like the girls in their images endlessly examine themselves. For Laura London's images of Naomi and others not only reflect the ambiguities and contradictions contained within today's youth they also mirror some of the most intriguing work created in current photography.