

Time Out

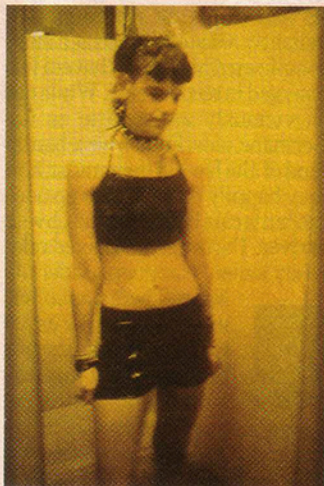
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ART

Laura London
Caren Golden Fine Art,
through Sat 20 (see Soho).

There's something about teenage girls that seems so trivial, yet so deep. They can be sweet and cruel, goofy and serious, sexy and clueless. Photographer Laura London takes up Cindy Sherman's idea of posing for the camera, but London uses teenage girls as models instead of herself. That's not the only difference, however: London stresses inner complexity over visual clichés, even as she skirts those very clichés. It's a dangerous game, but London by and large succeeds.



Laura London, *Sketchbook Dressing Room Portrait, 1, 1998.*

The main reason is her collaboration with 15-year-old Naomi, a punk rocker she met in 1996. The focus of this exhibition is the half-dozen or so photos that make up "True Self: Portraits," which show Naomi before a dressing-room mirror in a posh Beverly Hills store.

Naomi is exactly like one of those special teenage girls I described earlier: She's physically mature, though somewhat awkward; cute, but with a dark side; earnest and always searching. She looks like a young Sandra Bernhard.

London explores Naomi's moods by carefully choosing wardrobe and setting. We see Naomi in a sexy leather outfit, with her head bowed in apparent doubt; angelic and ivory-shouldered in a fuchsia prom dress, capturing that moment when every father cries; squatting in a halter dress, brandishing tattoos that spell out LOVE/HATE across her fingers (imitating *Night of the Hunter?*), while shadows and multiple reflections mirror some inner struggle. In another shot, she's with one of the girls, in a back-to-school number, casually tossing off sexiness in a way guaranteed to torture male classmates. Elsewhere, she does an Ava Gardner twirl, showing off her underarms in a sleeveless see-through beach dress; she dons glasses to sit, Buddha-style, with an oh-so-serious mien; and she stretches out on the floor like a vixen in a leopard-print dress, gazing upon her burgeoning cleavage.

The camera obviously loves Naomi, but I'm not sure whether the strength of "True Self: Portraits" lies solely with her or with London's abilities as an artist. Whatever the reason, these photographs steal the show.

—Robert Mahoney