

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

Images of Innocence: Young Enough to See All Things Honestly

By KEN JOHNSON

After graduating from high school in 1969, Wendy Ewald took a job teaching photography to children on an Indian reservation in eastern Canada. Intent on a career in photography and inspired by Walker Evans's photographs of Depression-era farmers, she imagined producing her own documentation of life on the reservation. But the photographs her young students took with cameras donated by the Polaroid Foundation changed everything.

In an autobiographical essay, Ms. Ewald recalls that while her photographs were always respectfully selective, the children were able and willing to take pictures of anything: "the chief, drunk, trying to saw a board; a young couple fighting; a teapot on the windowsill; a great-aunt in her white Sunday dress sitting on the rocks by the shore." Their photographs, she writes, "were more complicated and disturbing than

"*Secret Games: Wendy Ewald Collaborations With Children 1969-99*" is at the Queens Museum of Art, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, (718) 529-9700, through June 8. "*Morocco 1995*" is at Scalco, 560 Broadway, at Prince Street, SoHo, (212) 334-9393, through May 10.

mine, and closer, I realized, to what their life was like."

Another young photographer might have been inspired to try for more intimacy in her own work. For Ms. Ewald, the experience ignited a passion for teaching and started her on a nomadic journey dedicated to working with children. After graduation from Antioch College, she spent seven years teaching in a remote part of the Kentucky Appalachians. Extended stays in Colombia, India, Mexico, South Africa and other countries followed over two decades.

Ms. Ewald's career is now the subject of a thought-provoking and often powerfully moving retrospective at the Queens Museum of Art in which her own and her students' photographs are mixed. The show was jointly organized by the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., and the Fotomuseum Winterthur in Winterthur, Switzerland. A smaller exhibition, of works produced in Morocco in 1995, is also on view at the Scalco gallery in SoHo.

Judging by the children's photographs, Ms. Ewald must be a terrifically inspirational teacher. She encouraged her students to take pictures without concern for aesthetic or social niceties. Many of their photographs are as beautiful, haunting and heartbreaking as anything by



Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

A detail from "Mommy and Daddy" by Martha Campbell in Queens.

Diane Arbus, Nan Goldin, Larry Fink or any number of photographers who focus on the rough poetry of everyday life. Images of their homes, families and friends are dark or washed out, grainy, blurry and formally off-kilter. Images based on dreams and fantasies are strange, scary, funny and often wrenchingly sad.

In Martha Campbell's portrait of her parents in their Kentucky home,

the father, unshaven and overweight, slumps in a vinyl armchair in filthy overalls, looking stupefied — exhausted from work, maybe, or drunk. At his side, the mother, a handsome, worn-looking woman, stares at the camera with an expression that seems to combine tenderness, rage and anxiety. Overexposed, off-center and fiercely unflattering, it is a picture of almost terrifying emotional

candor.

Dozens of children's photographs — almost all black-and-white — have a similarly raw impact, frequently amplified by captions and, in some cases, longer autobiographical texts. Under Kalu Rupsingh's photograph of a little boy sitting in the dirt wearing a bizarre plastic mask while a dog lounges in the background, we read, "My lame cousin-brother is dressed like Saint Sadhu Hari." Dominga González Castellanos says of her picture of a grimacing boy tied to a post with a heavy rope, "Sebastian was punished for eight hours." A South African girl named Nicoline Cuyler's describes her blurry image of a man staring into her yard from the other side of a wire fence with chilling honesty: "What I don't like about where I live — a black man."

A viewer senses that Ms. Ewald, whose expertly made photographs tend to render picturesque even the most distressing scenes of poverty and squalor, could not have made such images herself. When accompanied by text panels in which children tell their stories in their own words, Ms. Ewald's photographs pale by comparison. This gives one pause. Is she using children as gateways to emotional terrain from which she would otherwise shy away?

Ms. Ewald's employment of chil-

dren adds a certain shadowy intrigue, a hint of moral ambiguity, to what otherwise would seem to be an enterprise of selfless altruism. But no matter whose needs are ultimately being served, you do feel that Ms. Ewald has tapped into a miraculously rich source of information about the world.

There are instances, however, where her agenda becomes intrusive. For a project in Durham, N.C., she asked children to imagine themselves as members of another race. She photographed them posing with props as their black and white selves and then invited them to alter the negatives by scratching lines and textures into them and adding words. Whatever educational value this may have had, the photographs look contrived and emotionally empty.

A video in which children recite stories about children who survived the Holocaust is similarly ideologically forced. And an installation of large banners illustrating Arabic letters and words, recently made in collaboration with Arab-American children in Queens, is little more than a generic campaign for multiculturalism.

It is when she sends her young charges out with the license to shoot their own worlds in whatever ways they want that real photographic magic happens.