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1 .Henson fracas: Art the victim of child s-xualisation

Former Australia Institute executive director Clive Hamilton writes:

A selection of photographs from the Bill Henson exhibition in Sydney, closed after a visit from the police, appeared on the gallery's website until late yesterday when the site was shut down.

Henson is one of Australia's foremost photographic artists with a considerable international reputation. Much of his work explores the idea of adolescence as metamorphosis from childhood to adulthood. It reminds the viewer of the anxieties, confusions and intense emotions in which their mature selves were forged.

The photographs in question are of a n-aked girl, back-lit, who appears to be about 12 years old. Her poses and expression convey wistfulness and ambiguity, as if she is saying "Here I am, as you see me; but who am I?". Like much of Henson's work they have a dream-like quality to them.

The photographs show the girl's budding breasts, her hips and, in one case, a glimpse of her v-gina. Their intention is not to arouse er-tic feelings and they are unlikely to do so except in those already inclined to view children in that way. They are imaginative, haunting and beautiful. Although not s-xual images, they can be seen as a commentary on the slow, halting and unsettling metamorphosis of child's body into an adult one.

However, the fact that the pictures cannot be characterised as p-rnographic is not the end of the ethical story because the social context in which the photographs are presented changes their nature.

If we lived in a society of sophisticated people with mature s-xuality, one that respected children and the integrity of their maturation process, then there could be no objection to the Henson exhibition. Alternatively, if the photographs were seen only by the intended audience and in the gallery environment, the exhibition could fulfil its purpose without controversy.

Perhaps some decades ago such a world, or at least a subset of the world, existed; but it doesn't any more. The exhibition cannot be isolated from a society in which children are increasingly exploited for commercial reasons and used for gratification.

Childhood has become highly charged s-xually, in a way that goes far beyond, and distorts, the normal process of s-xual development in children. I am not referring primarily to the fact that children grow up in a culture saturated with s-xual imagery, but to the trend towards presenting children in advertising and media in increasingly er-ticised ways.

This trend was described in detail in the Australia Institute's report *Corporate Pa-dophilia* and has been supplemented by evidence presented to the on-going Senate inquiry into the s-xualisation of children, including the land-mark report by the American Psychological Association.

In addition, the testimony of experts like criminologist Bill Glaser that pa-dophiles not only find stimulation in media images of er-ticised children but take them as a justification for their own predatory urges inescapably casts a darkness over the Henson photographs.

There can be no doubt that the images posted on the web are now circulating around the world and being used by some men for s-xual gratification. The images will be available in perpetuity. For those who want them.

It is impossible for a 12-year-old to understand the implications of allowing her n-ked body to be presented to the public. As she cannot give informed consent she is in the hands of the adults around her — her parents, the photographer, the gallery owner. I don't doubt that their motives were pure; but they were also naïve and they have caused damage to the child.

The s-xualisation of children by the media and the wider culture has occurred only over the last decade or two; yet as a result images of n-ked children can no longer be seen as harmless.

It is tragic that those who are responsible for s-xualising children have robbed us of the ability to see Bill Henson's photographs the way he intended. In destroying the s-xual innocence of children they have destroyed the innocence of innocence.

Closing down the exhibition should not be characterised as the victory of prudery over artistic licence. Oddly perhaps, if the exhibition had been mounted in more conservative times it would have passed unremarked and been appreciated by the art-loving minority.

If artists have a responsibility to push at the boundaries of the acceptable, society has a responsibility to push back. After a decade or more in which children have been increasingly exploited, society is beginning to push back and Bill Henson has been a victim: innocent perhaps, but he should have known better.

Crikey hyphenates words like s-x and v-gina not out of prudery, but in an attempt to lull over-zealous email spam filters into a false sense of security.

Note from author: It was a mistake to use 'v-agina' instead of 'vulva' in this article.