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Complex Intuitions

Eve Wood looks at the photographs of Michal Chelbin

Michal Chelbin's highly evocative photographs are both acutely sensitive explorations of the human condition as well as beautifully conceived black, white and color portraits that give more than a nod to other more venerable masters of her craft, such as Diane Arbus and Mary Ellen Mark. Like these artists, Chelbin's vision is compassionate and drawn from an exquisite understanding of the often complex relationship between the camera and its subject. Chelbin's work is derived from a deeply intuitive wellspring of imagination and humanistic perception wherein her subjects reveal themselves quietly and with tremendous delicacy.

Chelbin's newest body of work takes as its subject young girls and boys on the verge of adolescence. Chelbin's attachment to her subjects is palpable and each of these images is strangely haunting, yet somehow familiar.



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Making work like this can be risky in that the artist must constantly skirt the sentimental at every turn. However, the wonder of Chelbin's vision is her ability to communicate the complexities and sometimes pained intensity of youth, while remaining true to her own aesthetic.

In her image Jenya on a Fur Chair for example, the young girl sits, her small arms wrapped around her knees, her eyes looking coyly into the camera. The image betrays an awareness of both the quiet power of youth and its subsequent fragility.

Raised in Israel, Chelbin's vision as an artist was formed much more by her own personal aesthetic than by any specific cultural or historical mores and therefore there is no evidence in Chelbin's work of a false humility. Each image stands as a testament to the ardor of being alive, simply and elegantly, in a world where life and the beauty of living are often subjugated by tyranny. Chelbin has wrought her vision with divine human clarity and each of her images stand as fierce testimonials to the grandeur of youth, as well as the strange awkwardness inherent in being alive.

Another image, Alicia, Ukraine demonstrates this exceptionally, as revealed in this young woman's face is the haughtiness of youth, masking a deeper, more complex awareness of the difficulties in being so young and so beautiful. The girl seems to know something we do not and were we to discover her secret, she might come undone. This tension courses through most of Chelbin's images and is what gives them their dignity and strength.

Other images such as Mickey and Amir are more overtly eccentric in the same way a Diane Arbus photograph captures a moment of unique tenderness, yet within this exquisite oddness is a quiet harbor, as the chimp poses alongside the little boy like an old Vaudevillian friend.

The authenticity of Chelbin's perceptions is refreshing in these times of deceit and selfishness. One hopes that these works will have lasting amplitude and will continue to move people and affect a deeper awareness of the intricacies of our collective human experience.