

LOOKS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT

Smoking, snogging, bored, posturing – the pupils captured in photography teacher Joseph Szabo's exhibition are familiar to anyone who knows what it is to be a teenager

REPORT LUCY ALEXANDER

We all remember them – the bullies, the swots, the cool girls, the class clowns, the sappy couple, the show-offs, the loners. Every school in the world has the same cast of characters: stock players familiar to anyone who has read Shakespeare, watched *Beverly Hills, 90210* or, indeed, been a teenager. That complexity of the teenage spirit in all its manifestations has been captured by American photographer Joseph Szabo in a new exhibition. *Teenage* is an evocative series of black-and-white portraits and reportage taken during Szabo's years as a photography teacher at a suburban high school on Long Island, New York, during the Seventies, Eighties and early Nineties.

Szabo's students are shown at work, at play and indulging in that definitive teenage activity – lounging around looking bored. Clothes and hairstyles change, but the faces and attitudes are timeless, and Szabo's camera reveals the entire teenage experience with nuances of expression and pose. It's a uniquely American take on that well-known rollercoaster of confused intensity.

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<< The project was prompted by Szabo's desire to connect with the unruly pupils in his photography classes. "I wasn't too happy in teaching because the students lacked discipline and they weren't interested in learning. I thought, something has to change or I'm leaving. I felt I didn't understand my students and I wanted to close the gap, so I had the inspiration that it would be more exciting if I brought my camera to school." This subtle form of flattery had the desired results. "It worked like a charm because when you photograph somebody what you're saying to them is, 'I like you enough to take your photograph.' They responded and the gap began to close."

Szabo quickly became accepted as a friend and mentor by his pupils and their friends. He understood the vulnerable teenage psyche, he was on their side and he was genuinely interested in their opinions and feelings. "There were a lot of rough kids in the school, and I realised early on that when you take photographs you have to have the best intentions – you could show the nasty side of people if you wanted to but you won't last very long. When you're trying to connect with teenagers, you want to always look for the good things and the strengths, to give them faith in themselves."

Szabo admits that not every adolescent was overjoyed to be followed around by a teacher with a camera, but says he "very rarely got a bad reaction". "For the most part, the kids enjoyed being >>

Previous page: *Lunch Break*, 1977. Those were two of my students. Whenever I got to know couples I would follow them and photograph them. They were just sitting during a lunch break, having a smoke before the bell rang.

Above: *Cast Party Dance*, 1976. This scene is really typical: you just feel so much for the lonely person. This was a cast party after the yearly musical. I was having my soda and sandwich and I looked up and saw the couple dancing and the little girl on the left and I knew that was the photograph. She was probably in 10th grade there, but as she went through high school she became more

popular and more beautiful so she had her moment later on.

Top right: *Laura, Sweet 16*, 1989. Every once in a while I would ask a student if I could do a home portrait. They always said yes, and I would give them a letter for their parents. I went to this girl's house and noticed the picture of Marilyn. She was obviously one of her idols; as she was talking she mimicked Marilyn with her hands.

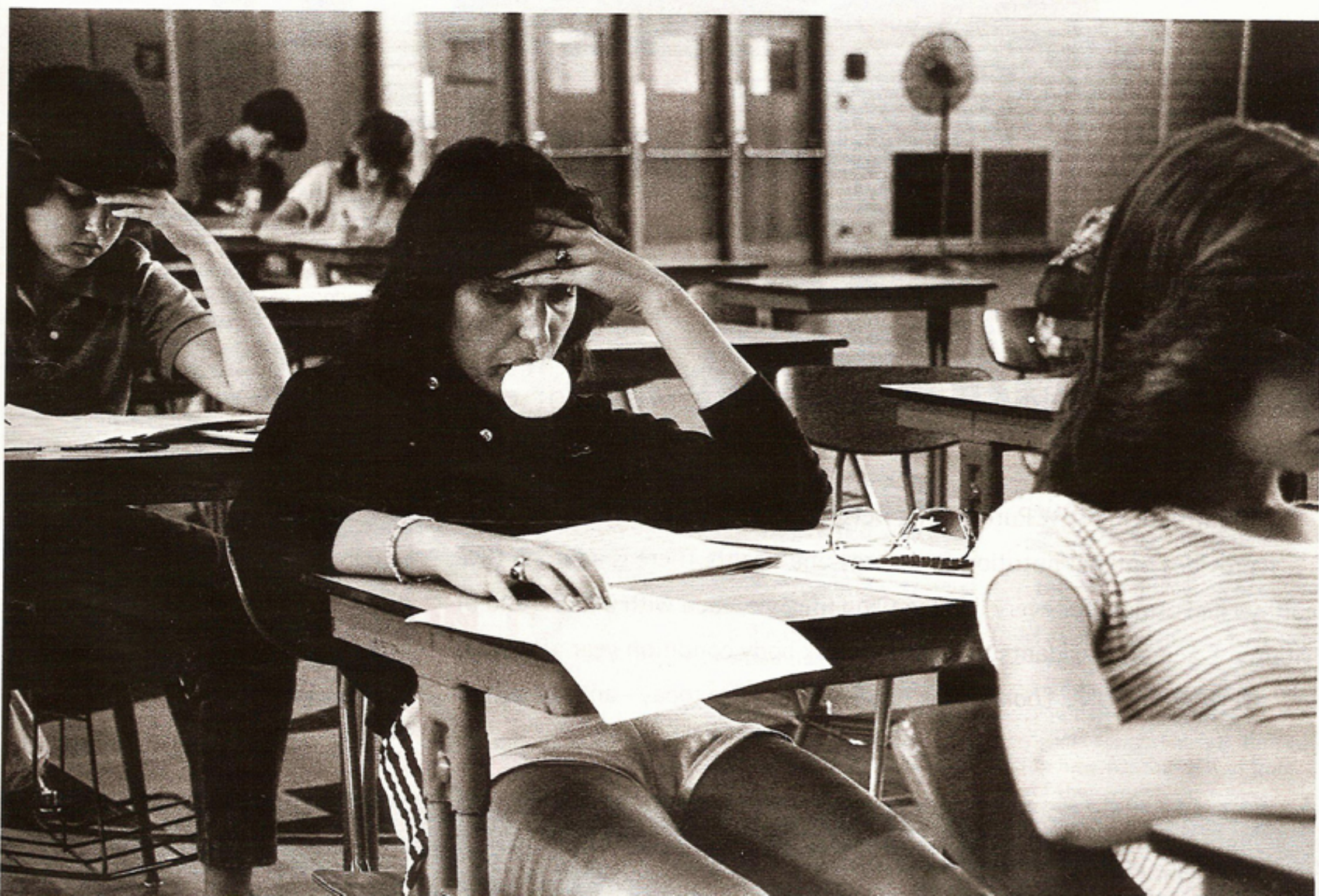
Right: *Bubblegum Girl*, 1984. She's taking an exam and she's very relaxed. You weren't even supposed to be chewing gum at school, but there she was, taking a serious exam and blowing bubbles.

'I FELT I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND MY STUDENTS; I WANTED TO CLOSE THE GAP'

VALENTINES ARE A GIRL'S
BEST FRIEND



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<< photographed. Some were a little questioning, but when they saw my pictures they understood that I was for them and not against them." Even the couples photographed mid-clinch? "They seemed quite comfortable with the whole thing, which amazed me. I think part of the secret is not to do a lot of talking when you're photographing because you don't want to draw attention to yourself."

Vulnerability is perhaps the single strongest emotion that radiates from the *Teenage* photos. Szabo describes how this would be expressed differently by different types. "I tended to photograph girls more because they had a much more open response to the camera. They were not afraid to show their emotions, whereas guys tend to put up a wall. Their big emotion in front of the camera was, 'I'm macho and I'm going to show you that I'm tough.' Not all the guys were macho – the ones who weren't involved with activities in the school, the loners. I would pay attention to them because I felt for them, I felt they're just as good as anybody else."

Szabo's teenagers were clearly then, as now, obsessed with constructing layers of self-image. Badges, cars, elaborate hairstyles and, most obviously, cigarettes, feature heavily. Szabo believes that smoking is both a form of rebellion and a barrier against boredom. "Teenagers have that feeling that they're invulnerable. Even though the health message is out, they feel that it doesn't apply to them yet. >>

'I PAID ATTENTION TO THE LONERS – I FELT FOR THEM. THEY WERE AS GOOD AS ANYONE'



Top: *Three Guys and Three Girls on the Beach*, 1989. I saw the girls first with their amazing hair, but when I raised my camera they were very camera-shy. They were with the three guys, and I realised that the only way to get this picture was to get the guys in, too. They were much more bold, so I put them in the foreground, and they just loved it.

Above: *Lisa*, 1975. She was one of my very good students, very interested in photography. In one sense she was intimidating because she was so beautiful, but I said to myself, you have to photograph the beautiful as well as the not-so-beautiful, you have to document the whole scene. She was thrilled to have her moment in front of the camera.



<< When you're standing around, if you light up a cigarette you have something to occupy your attention, so you don't look stupid."

Now aged 60 and a teacher at the International Center of Photography in New York, Szabo works with an entirely different, even more vulnerable social group. He is photographing the residents at Christa House, a home for the dying poor on Long Island. "They love the attention. I listen to their stories, and when I photograph them, all of a sudden they brighten up – it's like, 'I'm ready for my close-up now!'" Szabo hopes the pictures will eventually become a book, to highlight the need for places like Christa House, "for people who are poor and have no place to go in their last days".

The teenagers from Szabo's book are grown-up and scattered around America. There are success stories and sad stories. From the snippets he hears, Szabo knows that one boy is now a successful Hollywood film producer, but one girl is long-term unemployed and possibly homeless. He keeps in touch with as many as he can. "Many of the girls got married, and some are working as technicians and nurses in hospitals, some are beauticians. Some have gone into the corporate world. I get e-mails from a lot of the kids and I see some of them on occasion. It's great to still feel that closeness."

Teenage is a collection full of nostalgia, not just for long-past fashions and friendships, but for what Szabo believes was a purer age. "Judging from what we see on the news and read in the papers, I think innocence has disappeared quite a bit. Teenagers today talk about all kinds of subjects that you wouldn't even think of mentioning in the Seventies and Eighties. On the other hand, teenagers are still very vulnerable and they need just as much love now as they did back then." The essential fragility that Szabo captured so vividly remains, for him, the eternal teenage condition. ■

Teenage is at the Michael Hoppen Gallery in London from March 8 to April 16 (020-7352 3649) 2005



Top: Chris on Senior Day, 1977. He was one of my good, close students. His father had died early on, and he looked up to me as a father figure. He was like an intermediary for me: if something was happening at the weekend, I would just ask Chris, 'So, can I come with my camera?', and he'd say 'I'll check it out, Mr Szabo!' He's still in touch with me. Now he's an editor

for his own international magazine called *Wine Country*. He never went to college but he's made good. **Above:** Kim, 1984. Both were my students. It was very unfortunate about the one on the left. I don't know exactly what happened but she died of a drug overdose when she was at junior high school. It was so sad because she was a lovely girl – never a problem.