

Alpha Girl

Angela Grossmann's Portrait Toughs
by Deborah Campbell
Summer 2006



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A trio of adolescent girls in short shorts and sneakers huddle over one of their peers, who is looking up at them with an indiscernible expression: fear, perhaps, and the unquenchable desire for acceptance. These girls, the ones on top, are the alpha girls, whose scorn can slice to the bone. For the artist Angela Grossmann, who has made them the subject of a series of the same name, they are a study of the power and frailty of female adolescence. “Alpha girls were the girls I considered in absolute control,” she says. “It’s the most vulnerable of ages. The place where you are made.”

Some women have openly wept when faced with the “demonic divas,” as Martha Langford, the artistic director of Le Mois de la Photo, a biennial Montreal exhibit that in 2005 included Grossmann’s *Alpha Girls*, calls them. “When I look at the force of the work, it’s almost as if she’s seizing the ground from Willem de Kooning, the faces from his women’s figures—seizing the work back within a

feminist vein." The figures, like the sour-faced girl in a ruffled party dress or the bevy of Lolitas with their cutting smiles, retain a vulnerability that speaks to the tenuous uncertainty of their power.

For the past two decades, Grossmann has explored the social margins in her mixed-media practice. When we meet at her Vancouver studio, Grossmann, with her mane of black hair, red lipstick, jeans and sneakers, looks as unselfconsciously glamorous as a 1940s film actress on her day off. Against a white wall, amid canvases and various works-in-progress, leans a painting of a naked girl with a boyish frame against a blood-red backdrop. In accordance with Grossmann's penchant for painting one work on top of another (which has sometimes meant that an interested collector returns to buy a work only to find that it's too late), this one reveals a man's eyes in the profile of the girl's new breasts. Is it alluding to the power of the male gaze? The corruption that accompanies the loss of innocence? The girl is vomiting: this is the age when body anxiety arrives unbidden; the age of anorexia and bulimia as weapons against the onset of adulthood—against the way, as Grossmann puts it, "nature sideswipes us."

The *Alpha Girls*, she says, "seem all-powerful" but "the range of envy and admiration and idolatry is ridiculous, because it's so fleeting." She paints not only alpha girls but the "anti-alphas," and one thinks of Reena Virk, the British Columbia teen who was beaten to death by a group of teenagers, mostly girls from her high school, in 1997. Lately, the work has evolved (for all of Grossmann's work is a kind of organic evolution) to figures of boys between ten and 14, whose lives are somehow less complicated, if equally vulnerable.

Born in London, Grossmann moved to Canada in her teens, and she carries the weight of history, her own and others', into her work. Her materials—found objects, vintage photographs, postcards, old suitcases belonging to orphans, bits of ribbon and popped balloons—form the canvases or accoutrements for her collages and paintings. When she talks about her work, she uses words like linkages, solitude, loneliness and tragedy, though in person she is warm and irreverent. "I'm dealing with the other side in my studio," she says. "We all do."

Her affinity for emotionally fraught figures stems from childhood. She was raised in a bohemian family (her parents met in the Young Communist League) with a father who was a graphic artist (he created his own typeface) and a mother who was a key organizer of antiwar protests and covered the walls of their home with murals. Each of the family's four children has a different father: for Grossmann, her story encompassed her father's past as a German Jew and the legacy of the Second World War.

Though she "used to cringe" when the death of her father's family in the Holocaust was mentioned in regard to her work, she has come to accept it, and it

may be this proximity to injustice that inflames Grossmann's interest in the marginalized. Pulling up the sleeves of her old cardigan, she thumbs through a folder that contains the prison files of petty criminals from the early 1940s, records abandoned by the British Columbia Penitentiary when it closed down. Grossmann rescued the files from a Vancouver junk shop. The prisoners' details are typewritten on aging paper: their crimes, scars, girlfriends, hometowns. One man was convicted of stealing two dollars from a letter, his first offence and one that he couldn't explain to his captors. Another received 15 lashes in addition to prison time. In the black-and-white photos attached to the files, their expressions look painfully startled, awash in confusion.

Grossmann handles the files lovingly, proprietarily, as she does in the ongoing series that emerged from the prisoners' mug shots. "I keep them private and protect them because I feel responsible to these people even though they are probably dead now," she says. "I've always felt that the most intense moment must have been when they were being photographed, the moment when they were transferred from being free to being incarcerated. That's why I kept their eyes."

The other details—their hair, their bodies, the lines of their faces—have become part of Grossmann's rehabilitation project. In the paintings, their faces have an air of surprise at the way life has turned out. She adorns them with ruffles, with bows, with a shock of colour. Of this work she once said, "In our highly cleansed times, it seems bourgeois institutions feel it necessary to protect us from 'unsavoury' elements—the bad, the mad, the dead. This work attempts to make visible some of those hidden from view."



Portrait of a woman, 2014. Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.

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It is also about redemption. "I can undo, redeem or give them back something," she says, "though it's too late in their own lives. I can recreate them and take away what was done to them." She pauses. "What if. I've always been interested in that idea."

Making art, she says, speaking of her process, "is all about sacrifice. You have to sacrifice what could be in order to make the whole thing work. You have to let go of what you love about the work. If you can't, you can't succeed as a painter. And you have to have faith that it will work out. These three things: sacrifice, risk and faith."

The authenticity of the work emerges from her personal perspective. A couple of years ago, she went to Las Vegas with a group that included her art-school chum Douglas Coupland and her now teenaged son, Sebastiaan. Grossmann was staying at the Luxor, one of the city's many subverted realities, psychically located somewhere between theme-park fantasy and funhouse nightmare. Coupland recalls: "At first it was fun, then overwhelming, then horrifying." After a few days mired in a place that boasts of eradicating (or temporarily suspending) one's past and future, Grossmann threw herself headlong onto the only plot of grass she could find. "Finally, something real!" she cried.

Grossmann is concerned with authenticity, even when she invents new pasts and futures for her subjects. Like the Paris-born artist Christian Boltanski (whose work Coupland compares to Grossmann's), her work is based on the belief, in Coupland's words, that "everyone's soul is equally important." He calls the petty criminals "prime Grossmann material: people who have been forgotten but have been preserved somehow. She gives their lives an arc, a trajectory, a mobility, a meaning."

Coupland's friendship with Grossmann goes back to their art-school years at Emily Carr (where Grossmann sometimes teaches) in the early 1980s. They were part of a celebrated group of five that included Derek Root, Graham Gillmore and Attila Richard Lukacs. In their third year, three of them ran for the student society and won by acclamation: Coupland (then known within the group by the nickname "Dougal") as VP, Grossmann as Secretary and Root as Treasurer. The Christmas party they orchestrated that year made the national news.

With the exception of Coupland, who describes himself as "the fifth Beatle," the group focused on painting, often working in the same room, swapping techniques and perspectives. In those days, the art school stayed open till 2 a.m. at end of term (and allowed students to smoke inside!), and art dealers began passing through late at night to look at their work. At graduation, the four were featured in the "Young Romantics" show at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Their enviable reception was that of a young artist's fantasies, and a springboard for future success.

The “infamous liaison,” as Attila Lukacs characterizes it, has lasted till today. “We’re like brothers and sisters,” he says. But, from the beginning, their relationship was tumultuous. Jealousy, competitiveness and the clash of outsized egos were always part of the background noise. Given the talent that accompanied their ambitions, it could hardly have been any other way.

“The yardstick we measured our success by was each other,” Grossmann recalls in retrospect. “We thought we were the only thing going on and basically that’s the way it went. We were all such big personalities.”

Lukacs recalls envying Grossmann’s abilities. “She’s dealing with the inner essence of the subject matter, not just the features. A lot of the time her figures appear to be turned inside out.” She was the one, he says, who brought critical theory to the group, while some members hardly picked up a book. Together, they went scavenging for art supplies or found their way into trouble. On one occasion, following an exhibition that somehow incorporated fish heads, they headed over to a nearby concert by the punk band Skinny Puppy and disposed of the heads on the dance floor. Later, Lukacs, Root and Grossmann arrived at the gallery to find that someone had returned the gift through the mail slot. While the men retched, Grossmann took charge. “She was tougher than any one of us,” says Lukacs.

An alpha girl of a different sort.