

We Are Not In The Shadows
Anne McNeill, Curator, *Being Inbetween*

'To face the camera is to open a conversation, to make yourself both vulnerable and powerful at once.' Zanele Muholi

I am looking at my studio wall where I have methodically pinned a grid of ninety-one photographs of individual girls, all aged between ten and twelve. As each of the girls stare back down at me my mind wanders back to a photograph of myself at a similar age. I no longer have this photograph, or even know where it is. It was never kept in the family photo album, nor was it framed and then displayed on my parents' mantelpiece. It has been lost in mists of time but this photograph is not lost to me. I can remember and vividly recall every single little detail. I am wearing a white woollen polo neck, from C&A, a now long-defunct department store, and brushed blue denim dungarees from the Littlewoods catalogue. And although you cannot see my feet, I know I am wearing Clark's red leather buckle sandals. My black hair is shoulder length, with a rather severe fringe, cut by my mother. I am looking straight at the camera lens. I assume I am happy, though maybe I am not. What I do know is that, around the time the picture was taken, I felt mostly self-conscious and slightly ill at ease with myself. This photograph was taken at the time of leaving behind my childhood but before becoming a teenager: the often confusing and perplexing limbo when girls are between the age of ten and twelve. It is to this time that artist Carolyn Mendelsohn has turned her lens, exploring that 'in between age' to record and document, in her own words: 'those mysterious hinterlands on a journey towards adulthood...to give girls of this age a platform, to empower them and create a beautiful portrait of them as they really are.'

Six years in the making, the genesis for Mendelsohn's powerful and poignant *Being Inbetween* series stems from recollections of being a girl of that age. The catalyst for the project was a photograph and one deep-seated memory in particular:

*'The things people said to me at that point really stuck in my head. One memory is particularly vivid, I am twelve years old. It is a balmy summer's day and the family is planning to have a barbeque later that afternoon. I was only a small thing at that time, but incredibly self-conscious. I spent the most part of the morning in my room - I recall spending a silly amount of hours deciding whether to put on a pair of shorts because it was a hot day, plucking up the courage to go downstairs in a pair of shorts. I remember walking slowly down the stairs to be met by my Dad smiling and saying 'Oh my goodness! Your legs look so chubby.' I ran upstairs mortified; feeling exposed.'*¹

Whilst she now knows her father was being flippant, and that his clumsy words came from a place of love, this feeling of being exposed stayed with Mendelsohn for some time, and it was this feeling that sparked the idea for undertaking this project.

¹ In conversation with Anne McNeill, and quoted Yorkshire Post, August 2020.

Being Inbetween is a considered body of work that explores the complex transition for girls who are leaving their childhood behind but are not yet quite adults. Often girls at this age are described as 'tweens' and by implication are part of an amorphous group and not individuals in their own right. From the outset Mendelsohn's intentions were clear; individuality is vital to the project and each girl's visibility is key. Starting with a simple call-out via the usual social media channels and word of mouth, the portraits soon began to garner positive press coverage and attention from curators and fellow photographers. This initial interest, combined with Mendelsohn's boundless energy, sensitivity and belief in the project, led to her to go beyond her own networks and significantly expand the project. As the project grew, Mendelsohn was mindful of representation and of the diversity of young people in England today. The resulting ninety-one portraits feature girls from a spectrum of cultural and ethnic backgrounds including Black, Asian, Chinese, dual heritage, and white; disabled girls as well as able-bodied; and girls from a range of socio-economic circumstances.

Mendelsohn's photographic modus operandi is simple and effective. Her peripatetic photo studio set up remains the same throughout. Every portrait is evenly and beautifully lit; the girl's features and gestures recorded against the same grey hand-painted backdrop that slightly changes depending how the light falls on it. In these three-quarter length portraits, each girl looks directly into and at the camera. This is a deliberate tactic employed by Mendelsohn, to ensure the dynamics between herself and the girls are that of participant and collaborator, and not that of a passive sitter. I often hesitate to use the word sitter when describing the person who is being photographed by a photographer as, to me, it implies passivity. Mendelsohn's compelling portraits transcend this passiveness and bestows a certain truthfulness of representation where the girls are both creative participants and collaborators. The girls are looking right back at us, into our eyes, as if to scrutinise us. This careful and measured photographic approach bestows the girls with the authority they deserve, and grants them a certain power held within their gaze. As artist Casey Orr writes,

*'The individual gaze of each girl never averts, never looks away. The power of this series is undoubtedly held in the gaze. There is a stillness: an unapologetic engagement with the viewer. These are girls journeying into adulthood, standing here at a precipice and on the point of no return.'*²

They inhabit a space that, in the words of Becca, 'let's people see who we really are...and not in the shadows.'

Whilst photography is about observing, the camera can also be a tool for listening, in order to find out more about person being photographed. Each portrait is accompanied by text that represents the subject in their own words, taken from conversations during the sitting. Mendelsohn never pushes for an answer, and it is to her credit that the studio environment she creates is a safe space for the girls to answer these questions with total trust and without fears. She asks each girl the same set of prepared simple questions, beginning with

² Review by Casey Orr for Photomonitor, *Being Inbetween*, curated by Carolyn Mendelsohn and Anne McNeill. Crossley Gallery, Halifax. 2018.

factual ones: 'What is your full name? How old are you?', followed by more in-depth and emotionally-charged questions: 'What are your hobbies? What is your ambition? What do you really dislike? What are your hopes for the future?' Finally, the girls are asked if there is anything else they would like to say, a question introduced after a pivotal exchange with Olivia in the early stages of the project. Olivia ended her session by saying:

'I am 12 years old and I was born with a heart condition...I have been for seven major operations and am due for another in about six months. I used to be worried, but now I am used to them so it's just normal.'

With these powerful words, Olivia provided a new level of comprehension and a pivotal moment for Mendelsohn that she describes as 'overwhelming and significant'.

Fashion also plays a crucial part in *Being Inbetween*. As a genre, fashion photography more often than not constructs a spectacle; a show in which the model is cast as the performer. Mendelsohn's instructions to the girls before undertaking the photo shoots, are clear and unambiguous. Outfits and clothing are not to be chosen by their parents, overriding the urge, consciously or unconsciously, to present their child in the best light. This approach empowers the girls to dress in clothes that make them feel comfortable. Accessories and logos act as signposts to reveal meanings to the viewer, as we try to decode these contemporary motifs. Becca, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, wears a t-shirt that wittily and unashamedly proclaims I'M JUST IN IT FOR THE PARKING. Ruby, who states 'not everybody is like what you see in the magazines...everyone is perfect and unique in their own way', declares on her t-shirt that she is an INFLUENCER. Each girl's outfit can be viewed as the outward manifestation of their personality; each girl the author of her own look and artist of her own image.

Mendelsohn's empathetic portraits capture each girl's uniqueness and her own distinctive personality and 'celebrate the beauty that is wholly them, one that is sometimes concealed in silence, attitude, embarrassment and self-consciousness'.³ Body language and gestures play a large part; even the girls who are shy and introverted present confident smiles. Sometimes, arms are folded across their body, not in an ill at ease, protective manner, but in poses that denote strength and dignity. The girls have the authority of their own destiny and they are declaring, in a proud and positive way, WE ARE HERE. In the words of Stephanie, 'it's important you want to be *you* and no-one else'. Mendelsohn says, 'they are so many things; strong, characterful, wise, fearful, fearless, funny, and unique, but often people underestimate them and don't listen to them.'⁴

The final portraits were shot three weeks before the world went into lockdown, and it was when Lottie, answered that her fear was coronavirus, that an unexpected outcome of the project dawned on Mendelsohn:

'Having done the series over more than five years, the interesting thing is, and I hadn't anticipated this, is that it has also recorded changes in what was happening in

³ In conversation with Anne McNeill

⁴ Huffington Post UK 2016

*society and what young people's fears were. At first there were fears about hunger, homelessness, loss, and war. As time went on, and last year particularly, it became about the world and the environment. And then it moves onto Lottie and her fears around coronavirus. That has been fascinating, looking at those answers and how they record our history.'*⁵

As 2020 nears its apocalyptic end, and as these girls now face their teenage years in a new and uncertain world, I cannot help but wonder on what the future holds for the girls. Eden-Ny, says 'I wish for everyone to be happy and that no one would have to starve or feel that they are not equal to everyone else'. While such a future is far from assured, what I do know is that Carolyn Mendelsohn, through a creative labour of love and resourceful determination, has given us the privilege of sharing their hopes, their ambitions, their hopes, fears and dreams. If these ninety-one young girls are 'permitted' to be who they are and what they want to be, then society and humanity will be their safe in their hands. *Being Inbetween* is a significant and inclusive portrait of our times. These remarkable photographs are playful, yet serious; and while they are a record of our uncertain times, they are, in another way, timeless.

⁵ Interview with the artist, Yorkshire Post, August 2020.