

Babe

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Foreword

Petra Collins's work cuts through any critical eye I might possess to that sad lil' storage unit in my chest where my feelings sit all tangled up until they're undone by the world she can reveal with one capture of fluorescent lighting, iPhones, and cheap beauty products. I first found her work when I was 15, and it was strange to see photos of girls my age exploring their sexuality without being sexualized. The photography of young women that I was used to seeing in fashion magazines seemed to adhere to the nebulous standards of *What Men Want*, the roots of which are pretty chicken-or-the-egg re: woman-hating men or self-hating women. "Edgy" art magazines offered more of the same, just with flash and in a hotel room in Paris. The more heavily-circulated photography on the Tumblr community I was in asserted that girls could explore their sexuality only by being in front of the lens, not behind it. Photographers like Lauren Greenfield had ventured into the world of young women, but as documentarians, not peers.

Now I'm 18, and Petra's shooting for the exact magazines that I felt alienated by before. She's

used platforms like Tumblr and her website, *The Ardorous*, to create a network for other young women to share their work, too. She continues to spread the wealth with this book. So, *Babe* has an obvious *importance*: the visibility of female artists in a male-dominated art world. Said artists de-infantilizing and redefining "babe" for themselves through depictions of beauty far from the Photoshopped ones that saturate our culture. There are screenshots of Google searches, texts, and girls taking selfies; young people commenting on technology in an age when adults are so dedicated to prescribing its effects on us.

But it's also challenging, a little upsetting, a little funny. The images these young women (and one man) are creating themselves in do not leave me feeling immediately empowered. The fluorescent lighting and cheap beauty products bum me out — I know that bathroom, that mirror, the self-worth riding on that selfie. I get it, this part from Petra's artwork where she wrote out girls' stories of sexual harassment and assault (in colorful marker, adorned with stickers): "Even as one part of me thought what a stupid threat it was

and what kind of integrity [the catcallers] must sacrifice to keep their friends, another part was deeply ashamed for having felt pretty in her new clothes all day and bringing sexual attention to herself.”

Let’s just turn to Aimee Leigh’s contribution:

*Your search – **young girls loving themselves** – did not match any documents.*

Petra and her fellow artists are not constructing a utopia, but a non-judgmental, Sharpie’d-over, vaguely smelly high school bathroom. These works wear constructed girliness with a bit of a smirk, but do not frown upon or collapse from inside of it. The artists find joy within it; they’re resilient. Sandy Kim’s photo of a text message from “Colby” reading “Can i cum on your face today?” is hilarious to me! Jenny Zhang’s poem about remedying her yeast infection with the “boo” who gave it to her is a high-pitched squee of delight at the goofy, beautiful intimacy of sharing your body’s grossest functions with a loved one.

It’s the same squee that I hear from the loud colors and grins of Rachel Louise Hodgson’s drawings. And the same sweetness of Grace Miceli’s hand-drawn heart with a “me” ribbon around it.

The book’s final visual piece, by Jamia Wilson, is the most explicit about our quests for a kind of self-love that is real, on our own terms, and by our own currencies:

“When I’m feeling like I’m fronting or losing myself — or martyring myself, I imagine my five-year-old self ... with ashy knees and a big snaggle tooth smiling at me and reminding me WHO I AM.

I just can’t lie to HER.

I just can’t lie to ME. Myself.”

The artists here pinky-promise not to lie to us, either.

—Tavi Gevinson

Introduction

This book contains the work of many bright, talented, and endlessly inspiring women who I believe have the power to change the world. Their art has come to me in different ways — mainly through the Internet — where I have spent countless hours searching for like-minded people to connect with. Looking at, creating, and sharing artwork has been integral to my life — it was (and continues to be) what keeps me alive and sane.

I grew up with the need to create things and a need to connect as an artist. I learned from early on that doing this was necessary because, in my academic life, I was constantly being told I wasn't good enough, that I was going to fail classes, that I was too distracted, that I couldn't sit still, that I needed to be put in a special class because reading was difficult and words didn't come out the way I intended them to. Through television, movies, magazines, and the music I listened to, I realized that my value as a girl (and soon-to-be woman) relied on my outward appearance, which was a good thing because I wasn't smart anyway, according to my teachers and peers. Always in my mind was the reminder that

appearance mattered most, that in order to be a young woman I must have male approval. I made sure that I subscribed to all things that gave me the tools and guidelines to achieve this. The magazines I read told me which makeup would make me look grown-up yet youthful, gave me (confusing) tips on how to be sexy yet virginal, told me how to dress hot but not too hot so as not to get mistaken for a slut. There was no mention of any ways of being a girl that didn't promote a very narrow kind of physical perfection.

I took my first photography class in high school. I was slowly becoming more aware of my body and the changes it was going through and wanted to capture this. I was a little scared, a little angry, and definitely excited. I wanted control of my body, my image, and myself because, at this point, I didn't have any.

A year passed and, even though I almost failed photography class, I continued to take photos. Around 16 or even 17 I fell into a toxic relationship with myself. My body was almost an adult one. Where there was once smooth surface was now

totally covered with hair; spots where bones were apparent became rounder and smoother. My life became chaotic quickly — family, money, and my body were all under attack. Everything seemed like it was ending, nothing was stable, so my mind and body mirrored that. I began withholding things from myself — mainly food — but also any positive thoughts of self-worth. This continued for a couple years. I let myself get into bad relationships with others as well, mostly unconsciously. I experienced success and with that came pain (because the cycle of self-hate never ends). What kept me and still keeps me going was and is creating artwork. The process and end result of making images validated my feelings. It produced physical, tangible evidence of what me and my peers' lives were like, letting me actualize those feelings of hurt or pain or confusion or pleasure. I always clung to whatever permanent thing I could create or find, so taking photographs, curating, and creating artwork has made the most sense.

As a young female artist I never saw a place for my work, didn't see images I felt reflected me

anywhere. I decided to create my own online platform and called it The Ardorous, a word I made up that stems from "ardor," which means "enthusiasm or passion." I wanted to create a space for girls like me to show their work and connect with one another. Now at 22, five years later, *Babe* happened and is a culmination of all the pieces from The Ardorous that have inspired, provoked, and aroused me throughout the years. I hope the work in this book does the same for you, or at the very least urges you to create and to not give up on creating. Things didn't get harder for me, but they also never got easier (and probably won't get easier), but because I continued to create and will continue to do so, I have allowed myself to make space, to carve myself a new landscape, which I hope will be inclusive enough for others.

—Petra Collins



Holt

