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Different for Girls

By Emily Rapport

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In "Touch Your Mirror," on view at EXTRA Projects in Logan Square through April 18, artists Jessica Frances Martin and Taylor Morgan delve into the secret world of the teenage mind. More specifically, the female teenage mind. In art history (and in popular culture), the male gaze often determines ideals of beauty which are absorbed as social norms. Modern beauty aesthetics has vacillated between the delicate, chaste ideal popularized in Victorian art and early advertising to the overtly sexual appeal of early film stars like Jean Harlow. Through film and advertising, mass media has amplified and further standardized Western beauty ideals. The end of World War II, and the advent of the American teenager in the 1950s, shifted focus to a new force in the marketplace: the American teenager. The teenager embodies duality, both innocent and imbued with sexual power. Half child and half adult, the teenager is driven by the need to be accepted as well as to assert their independence and flout societal restrictions. Martin and Morgan explore the internal and external transformation of youth through the lens of female adolescence as self-awareness shifts the individual into more complex relationships with society.

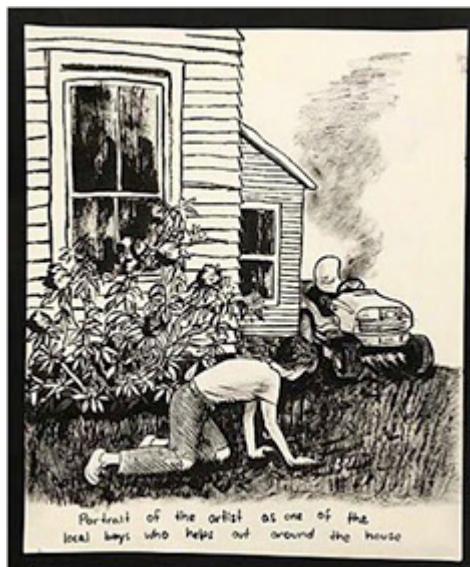


Left: Jessica Frances Martin, Brooke Emerging from the Lake, 2018, 22" x 28", inkjet print.
Right: Jessica Frances Martin, Green Girl, 2018, 44" x 54", oil on canvas.

The passage from child to woman is something that happens in public. It is physical in a way that male adolescence is not because a woman's body acquires a cultural weight and attention as it changes. With that in mind, Jessica Martin's childlike fantasy collage-drawings of Brooke Shields and Jennifer Connelly are haunting in their contrasts. These are young women half-in and half-out of childhood, thrust into an adult world where beauty and sexual viability determine their primary value. The film *Blue Lagoon*, shot when Brooke Shields was 14 years old, is referenced as Brooke's disembodied headshot emerges from a colored pencil blue lagoon/kiddie pool.

Rainbows and butterflies surround the underage Venus while a sedate swan hovers (or lurks) nearby. Framed by perfect hair and a made-up face, her eyes offer a view of an internal struggle. We all have a desire to please and to be liked, especially as children. In an industry that is known to churn through women, and girls particularly, the dawning awareness of their own desirability is complicated by a sophisticated understanding that to achieve success they must conform to expectations and please their audience.

Martin's paintings have an ethereal translucence. The flat, barely descriptive lines are dreamy and agitated, evoking an eerie sense of *deja vu*. In *Green Girl*, an anonymous girl-next-door type looks resolutely away from an unseen viewer. Her pink mouth downturned, her girlish limbs posed awkwardly, she is in-between states and perhaps not fully present in herself. Ghost-like tree limbs flicker like a past that can't be recalled with accuracy. The immediacy of the foreground, with the heaviest paint application, depicts tall, spiky grass and claw-like flowers. These innocuous details feel like they provide the focus the subject needs to get through something unpleasant.



Left: Taylor Morgan, *Couch (What a Way to End a Playdate)*, 2018, 40" x 46", oil on canvas.

Right: Taylor Morgan, *Portrait of the Artist as One of the Local Boys Who Helps Out Around the House*, 2018, 11" x 13", ink on paper.

In Taylor Morgan's painting, *Couch (what a way to end a playdate)*, two girls conspire to remove

a bloody looking stain from a pink flowered couch. The girls are illuminated by the golden glow of a table lamp, while sharp angles lead the viewer's eye toward a slash of shadows and (presumably) adult knowledge of transgressions. The male gaze is referenced and disavowed in the sharp turn of an elbow (reminiscent of Balthus' paintings of young girls arranged in unlikely but advantageous positions). The girls also look away from the viewer, but for different reasons. Unlike the subject in *Green Girl*, these girls are present in the moment and, significantly, not isolated. They are imbued with the power of self-belief (we WILL get this mess cleaned up and not get caught). These girls have more important things to do than to please a voyeur of youth and beauty. Bonded in a heroic challenge, girlhood will not surrender quietly to the demands of adulthood.

Boys and young men have their own obstacles to endure, but they are not judged or constrained the way girls usually are. Morgan's drawing, *Portrait of the Artist as One of the Local Boys Who Helps Out Around the House*, positions her protagonist crouched behind towering sunflowers, jeans torn, peering around a corner at a waiting tractor. The tractor is the get-away car, the ability to adventure in the world, beyond the domestic, internal confines of home or the expectation of beauty: a boy's privilege.

The drama of the teenage world, the heightened awareness of the physical self as we struggle with who we might become, is mirrored in the endless fascination and importance given to youth in our culture. It is a hero's journey of its own, a rite of passage where we all experience the visceral hum of transformation. Childhood is when imagination and emotion seem to burn brightest, if only because every experience is new and uncharted. How identity is empowered or disempowered, how we see ourselves versus how society sees us, and how we value our self-worth in terms of pressures to conform and grow up, are at the root of this inviting and energetic show.

Emily Rapport studied painting at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York and received her BFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2005. In 2018, Emily opened Eat Paint Studio, a working studio and gallery in Chicago.