

# IS THIS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE BORN IN THE '90s?

*SONJA AHLERS speaks with LUCAS SOI about LOLITA*

**Sonja Ahlers:** So how did you get into this?

**Lucas Soi:** I'm always looking for reference material for my drawings and I came across a couple of these photos on the internet – I use the internet now more than books because it's easier to do Google Image searches – and every few months I'd make an effort to follow the trail and found more and more, and then finally came across this huge online archive of them, all mixed in with amateur porn and spy shots up girls' skirts and stuff. I dug through tens of thousands of pictures to find these ones, candid shots taken by teenage girls of other teenage girls in their bedrooms and hotel rooms and –

**SA:** – you did tell me that the settings, the backgrounds were a big influence.

**LS:** Oh definitely. At that time I was as interested in landscapes as I was in figure drawing... it was a package deal. And I mean, the whole idea of growing up in your room really appeals to me. I really identify strongly with the bedroom. I love being in bed, reading in bed, listening to music in bed... I mean, you can look at the backgrounds of almost every one of these photographs and see a world of information.

**SA:** Growing up, I mostly 'interior-decorated,' so I know what you mean about the details. I moved my stuff around endlessly. I had tiny rooms and tons of stuff and was always talking my brother into changing rooms. I fantasized a lot: Kelly Reno from *Black Stallion*, Henry Thomas from *E.T.*, Indiana Jones, Superman – pathetic! This worked its way to Duran Duran. My room was covered in an elaborate large scale Duran Duran collage. I was extremely wholesome and naive. I listened to my radio all day and all night. I read and read and read into the wee hours. At a certain point, I got into these teen romance books like *Sweet Dreams*... I still read them for fun.

**LS:** There's this photo I'll always remember, it's of Gérard Brach, Roman Polanski's writing partner, he's in his mid-thirties in bed in his pajamas with a typewriter on his lap working away on a script. That's how I see myself strangely. I've never been able to draw in bed though.

**SA:** I like that visual. What I noticed most in the backgrounds of your girls' rooms are all the pastel colours. The colour that strikes me most is the hot pink that shows up. There's a power in that. I'd be interested in knowing more of the meaning behind this particular shade of pink. It's almost close to magenta or fuchsia, two colours I hate. They're super fake. And I associate it with *Barbie*, who is obviously messed.

**LS:** Really? I love these colours – it's part of the whole reason why I did the project. People are always wondering if I'll do anything other than black and white... well here it is. I'm a huge fan of '80s advertising, which relied on pastel or neon variations of green, pink and blue. And the sense of humour! This book makes me laugh.

**SA:** I love the pastel palette though. I've been obsessed with old episodes of *Miami Vice* for the last few years. Colours are powerful. I love the whole art deco Miami-in-the-Eighties vibe.

**LS:** I remember showing you the picture of the girl holding the Harry Potter book and telling you how I thought it summed up the whole project.

**SA:** Yeah how again?

**LS:** That picture just sums up the whole book, you know? It's candid, like it's a private moment; it's got that "wink-wink" aspect to it, like an inside joke; we can guess the timing too, like it must have been when the last Harry Potter book was released. The unselfconsciousness of the girl reflects her age; her pose, so many poses in this book!, copycatting models in ads. And they're on family vacation, so we can assume their social class, one that can afford holidays and new bikinis and advanced copies of books. All of these photos are taken in suburban households, or motel rooms... and that establishes this atmosphere of relaxation, the leisure of it all, of being in this self-contained little world.

**SA:** I can see that. My favorite picture is probably the one of the girl asleep with her back to the camera on a cloud-print pillow. It's like the cover of a *Sweet Dreams* book. This is innocence. I know you think all of your girls are innocent but this one is pure to me. One thing that we don't agree on is how natural these pictures really are.

**LS:** Well, like 'natural' compared to commercial photography...

**SA:** I see it and I don't. Their youth is natural but these girls are done *up*, I mean sometimes heavily made-up. Cosmetics. It's work to maintain this shell.

**LS:** And I was kinda seeing what I wanted to see, like if they're in their pajamas they've probably washed their face already or just woken up or something. I mean, I can see where you're coming from... part of my thing is showing what is attractive, as opposed to what prevails in North American advertising; like when a girl isn't all made-up and is in her sweatpants eating ice cream, that's hot you know? It's my personal aesthetic, I guess. I mean, I guess I'm interested in the maintenance and grooming habits of girls too; these pics definitely obsess on those personal rituals...

**SA:** What about the age of the girls?

**LS:** Well that's a direct engagement with contemporary popular culture in general. I mean, Miley Cyrus photographed topless for *Vanity Fair*? Or remember Britney Spears'

first album cover? They're pushing the limits of what is acceptable. I think these photos give you a different reality, like what these girls really do, what they end up doing after they come home from the mall...

**SA:** The commercial aspect bothers me too. My big concern is that these girls have been 'promised' by TV, Hollywood, mags, celebrities that they're gonna 'get some too' but the reality is that it's a power structure in the shape of a pyramid and not everyone can fit at the top. Some of these girls will be working in an office wondering what happened to the promise of a Mountain Dew commercial.

**LS:** I dunno, the best example I can give is from my own teenage years, when I was obsessed with how my hair looked. I used all kinds of mousse and gels trying to get my hair to look like the guy in the magazine. It took me years to realize that they use all that shit just for the photograph. Dude doesn't actually walk around like that... But every girl wears a bit of make-up, don't they? Compared to the airbrushing, computer manipulation and professional help in the magazines, these pics are *au naturale*, no?

**SA:** That's hilarious... your hair! Very superficial. We all did it. Like the No Doubt song goes (words by Gwen), "the magic's in the make-up."

**LS:** That's true. The girls are all similar in that way, by being the "popular" ones or whatever – that was a conscious decision on my part. I mean, that's who I grew up with in school: white, blue-eyed blondes from upper-middle class suburban households. They're the most familiar to me, the ones I've dated, the ones I grew up with in West Vancouver. In the "popular girl" you find similarities: the lack of ego, the sense of common purpose, the privileges and opportunities, the conformity, the stress of maintaining, which leads to the alcohol, which leads to these photos... I mean, nerdy girls are documenting their lives too, but in fantasy, like in art or writing. Their reality is kinda dull compared to an active *Gossip Girl*.

**SA:** I see the same level of detail from your drawings in these photos. I like the random pop or juice containers on the counters of some bathrooms where girls are sitting on the toilette. There's a lot of those shots. Riding the porcelain bus.

**LS:** Yeah... it seems so appropriate in this context. We're already invading their privacy at home, so why stop at the bathroom door? I think we see them consume so much and you wonder where does it all go? Well, it ends up on the counter-tops and the floors and in the drains... I mean, in the infinite energy of youth, the boundless joy, the love they give one another and the lengths to which they go is gonna be all out... like that famous saying by Seneca about the Romans, "They vomit to eat, and eat to vomit." Total decadence.

**SA:** You mentioned Britney Spears before. Her last album *Blackout* is awesome... made totally under duress with the bottom falling out. Some of the girls remind me of Brit. The hair, the tans, the clothes. Brit has fairly bad mall style. She's kinda clued, but she

tries. Sometimes I see her outfits and I'm embarrassed for her... I like it when she gets attached to a pair of Gucci sunglasses or boots and doesn't change it up for weeks.

**LS:** Britney is like the apotheosis of these girls. She'll be sixteen forever, no matter how long she lives. She's almost like Peter Pan, you know? And the fact that she became so popular during her decline and helped make these insane candidly explicit photos is really crazy. The no-underwear pics. In every pack of teen girls there is a camera and it goes with them everywhere, the car, the bathroom, the bedroom, everywhere...

**SA:** Where do you see this all starting?

**LS:** I think in 1996. Grunge had died out and teenage girls were the ones waiting to fill the vacuum. Who was the next big music phenomenon? The Spice Girls. They were dressed in casual streetwear, something everybody could go out and buy, and photographed in soft candy colors. Then *Titanic* came out in 1997 and thanks to repeat viewings teenage girls made it the highest-grossing movie of all time. Girl power became spending power.

There's this article in *Fortune* from '97 where they estimated that by 2006 there would be 30 million teens in the U.S., the highest level since 1976. They added that teens would spend \$84 billion of their own money that year.<sup>1</sup> I compared that figure with a report written in 2004 by Mintel; they said teens age 12 to 17 were spending \$175 billion annually.<sup>2</sup> That's a 100% increase in spending in the teen market in less than ten years.

**SA:** This is fascinating to me. And where does it all go?

**LS:** We see it, right?, in these pictures. There was this great quote by Randy Hild, head of the women's division of Quicksilver, they're the largest maker of surfwear: "A guy will buy one, maybe two, surf board shorts each summer – and if there are not too many holes in them, he'll probably wear them again next summer. But a girl goes through four or five pairs a summer, and there's no way she'll wear the same ones again next year."<sup>3</sup>

I also like how the modern technology we see, like all the laptops and flat-screen TVs completely root us in the now. These pictures could never have been taken at any other time than the 21<sup>st</sup> century...

**SA:** The cover really speaks to that idea.

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<sup>1</sup> Munk, Nina. "Girl Power! Penniless Mall Rats No Longer, Teenage Girls Now Have Billions To Spend." *Fortune* Dec. 1999: 64-70.

<sup>2</sup> DJS Research Ltd. "Teen spending estimated to top \$190 billion by 2006." *Market Research Portal*. 8 Aug. 2008

<<http://www.marketresearchworld.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=615&Itemid=>>

<sup>3</sup> Munk, "Girl Power!", p. 69.

**LS:** Totally. I really saw music being played in the background of most of these pictures. I mean, what else would they be dancing or drinking or playing to. It's not like they're in a library.

(Laughs)

**SA:** But it's interesting to note the Spice Girls/Grunge benchmark. I remember how I felt about the Spice Girls... I wasn't feeling ironic at that point. I thought it was stupid and think they kicked back all the forward progress of the feminist movement of the early '90s. I still cringe to write the word 'riot grrrl' 'cause it was always embarrassing to use that media term, even to the girls who were. Kim Gordon said at that time "and the myth that things have progressed." Things haven't progressed. Riot grrrl is just a tiny historical blip at this point. After the Spice Girls things backslid. I find myself lamenting the movement... It almost makes me cry because it was this amazing explosion of female power that fizzled right out like a firework.

**LS:** I hear you. I kinda look at the Spice Girls as contemporary feminism being mainstreamed, just diluted of all its power, and the shell, the image part of it remains. The same thing has happened to hip-hop ten years later!

**SA:** These girls are the antithesis of riot grrrl to me.

**LS:** Of course. They're the popular girls. □