In striking counterpoint to Rheims’ formally posed and photographed figures are the 15 full-colour photographs by controversial US photographer and filmmaker Larry Clark.

The Kids Portfolio comprises fifteen of the ‘real’ young actors featured in Clark’s 1995 film Kids, a full length feature about 24 hours in the lives of a handful of New York street teens. ‘I always wanted to make the teenage movie that I felt America never made,’ Clark has said. Like his earlier series Tulsa and Teenage Lust the work overflows with the rowdy athleticism and sexuality of boys doing boy things.

Like Rheims, Clark identifies precise moments when the categories which we use to define people are no longer clear. In these works the kids stand clearly, but awkwardly, on the verge of adulthood, reflecting adult mores as much as lost innocence.

The order of the still images has been changed from how they appeared in the film which confuses / changes the film narrative, emphasizing the aesthetic nature of Clark’s work by its presentation in this way. While the film moves towards a final end the photos leave that ambiguous.

There is a blurring in Kids between scripted film and documentary – between what is real and what is acted that is also apparent in the ‘candid camera’ nature of the images - is he documenting the scene or creating it?

Through the development of Clark’s work, and from statements by the artist, it is evident that his subject matter is a response to his own ‘missed,’ difficult adolescence, an indifferent, alienated father and the frustrations of late puberty.

“What one looks at when one looks at pieces by Clark then, aren’t the kids themselves, but Clark looking at the kids, off to one corner and out of the picture frame, but always implicitly present, focused on what his camera has caught. And what he wants out of that looking is not to have them, but to be them, or at least to understand what it would be like to be them.” 1

To view The Kids Portfolio is to be aware that the subjects are posing. This in turn reflects the self-conscious posturing inherent in the lives of Clark’s ‘real’ actors, parading and acting out their mix of vulnerable adolescence and licentious behaviour.

As in previous work where Clark has dealt directly with violence, adolescent sexuality and the drug culture, there is a need to suspend judgment when viewing his pictures; moral or legal questions are not what are at issue here.

While there are aspects of the work that give it a verite feel, there is an important difference. In almost all of the work it’s as if someone who was a member of the gang has taken them. (In fact in earlier work Clark had a dual role as subject and photographer, turning up in several of the photos, participating in the events he was documenting).

"Clark’s camera is a co-conspirator to the scenes he records, and his images address you as though you too were a fellow outlaw.” 2

1 Jim Lewis, Larry Clark What it this? Parkett No. 33, 1992
2 Ralph Rugoff, I am Camera, Larry Clark walks in the teenage world. LA Weekly Oct 1991
Larry Clark - The Kids Portfolio

ISSUES & QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHILE AT THE EXHIBITION

1. What are the aspects of Clark’s work that give it a documentary feel? Are there elements in the photos that reveal a constructed or posed image compared with aspects of spontaneity? Discuss both content and the formal elements of the photographs in your answer.

2. Give the works titles and consider what is revealed.

3. How has Clark used the act of posing or the self-consciousness of this age-group in his work?

4. Clark has been quoted as saying he wanted to be a storyteller – has he succeeded? Whose story is he telling?

5. Clark has described his work as autobiographical but as he is distanced from the subjects in his work by age, (he was born in 1943), and by being behind the camera, how can this be so?

6. Clark suggests that the behaviour of his subjects’ is a modern day rite of passage, a renunciation of the senseless and violent culture they see around them. Discuss.

7. The photographic images are a re-edited sequence of stills selected from Clark’s film Kids. The order of the images has been changed from how they appeared in the film. Why do you think Clark has done this? How does it change the meaning of the work in regards to the narrative, the nature of time and the aesthetic qualities involved?

8. Stills are often used to advertise films, discuss Clark’s intentions in making these.

9. What does the skateboard represent to the subjects in Clark’s images and in the images themselves. What role does it play in their lives?

1. Both photographers ‘found’ many of their models in the street. What does the ‘street’ represent and what role does it play in C20th culture?

2. ‘Because cameras turn us all into actors, portraits tend to be the record of a performance,’ wrote Ralph Rugoff in the L.A. Weekly reviewing earlier work by Clark. Discuss in terms of both photographers.

3. Choose a portrait by Clark and compare the way the subject has been portrayed in contrast to a work by Rheims. Discuss formal elements and the artists’ intentions.

4. Both Rheims and Clark blur boundaries in their work and both make photographs of an age group of which they are no longer part, although they may spend time in the places where their models hang out. What sense do you get about the way Rheims and Clark view their subjects and the way the subjects view themselves? What can you discern about their attitude to their lives?

5. Discuss the difference in meaning and context that may occur if Rheims had used colour photography and Clark black and white.