

Off The cuff

DON MILLIGAN'S

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Preying on children

THIRTY-FOUR YEARS AGO BROOKE SHIELDS' mother arranged to have her young daughter photographed by Gary Gross. The little girl was pictured heavily made up in an alluring pose: an almost adult face staring out above a child's naked body glistening from the bath. Playboy Press published the photo, but Gross' plans for a poster were put on hold in 1981 as Brooke Shields attempted to secure ownership of the image by going to court. The judge said that ten-year-old Shields had been a "hapless victim of a contract . . . to which two grasping adults bound her".

The adults in question, her mother and Gary Gross, thought that they were simply promoting Gary and Brooke's careers. The idea that she was "a hapless victim" probably did not enter their heads. Nor, I suspect did either of them think that a sexy photograph of a child had anything very much to do with paedophilia or with encouraging the abuse of little girls. Times change, however, and it is now as plain as a pikestaff that it is a photograph which will attract the interest of paedophiles and is, simply by this fact, "an act of child abuse".

This strange historical transformation was brought to the fore last week when officers from the Obscene Publications Unit of the Metropolitan Police visited Tate Modern, the UK's national museum of modern art on London's South Bank, to warn exhibition organizers that the display of a version of the sexy photograph of young Brooke Shields might lead the gallery to inadvertently break the law or might even cause offence to visitors.

The founder of Kidscape, Michele Elliott, said of the photograph "It must be pornography. It is certainly not art. If you are using a picture of a naked child to bring

people to your exhibition, then you are exploiting that child. It is as if they are using a 10-year-old girl for bait. I find it disturbing and they should be ashamed of themselves. And putting the picture in a room with a warning outside really is a magnet for paedophiles.”

I have to say that I am much more alarmed that the police and the founder of Kidscape are acting as arbiters of what we are allowed to see in our modern art galleries, than I am by the prospect of Tate Modern being besieged by paedophiles anxious to get a look at pictures of nubile ten-year-olds. I could recommend any number of works that might please a paedophile. One need only think of *Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time* at London's National Gallery. In this great work, by Agnolo Bronsino, a Cupid of about thirteen thrusts his buttocks towards us; he is fondling his mother's breast while kissing her on the mouth. The pair is accompanied by a number of other allegorical figures, the most prominent of whom is a much younger child evidently intent on making even more mischief. Needless to say, all the principal figures are as naked as the Gods and Bronsino intended

There is something for everyone in this sumptuous painting, which Cosimo de'Medici sent to Francis I, the King of France. It is both erotic and erudite and it is plain that Bronsino's genius was to ensure that his work carried both intentions with luminous intensity. I trust that the only reason that you can still go to see it is that the Obscene Publications Unit and the directors of Kidscape have not heard that this magnet for paedophiles has been on show in the gallery on Trafalgar Square since 1860.

There might be another reason. Cupid does have wings and he is painted and not photographed. Perhaps paedophiles are only attracted to modern photographic images, or at least images made in the last fifty years or so. This may be so, but I am not sure that the police or the self-appointed guardians of children's interests have any evidence for this.

In the absence of such evidence might I suggest the removal of Eros from Piccadilly Circus and call for

the suppression of the cherubs and putti that have been tumbling around ornately embellished buildings and holding up the drapes throughout Europe for some considerable time. Naked children are, like naked men and women, often good to look at. (The fact that having just typed this sentence strikes me with terror is more to do with the times in which we live than any criminal intention or desire on my part.) One does not have to be a paedophile or a person with abusive or corrupt attitudes towards children to agree that they are, like adult men and women, often good to look at.

To deny this is simply absurd; it is as absurd as attempting to ensure that all images of children are free from erotic or abusive associations. Given the variety and complexity of people's sexual interests images of almost any sort might arouse inappropriate or damaging feelings – we cannot allow this reality to frame or determine what is permissible in our public art galleries. If we did, large amounts of our artistic tradition would have to be locked away from public view, and all exhibitions would have to be vetted by boards of censors before they could open.

The artwork in question (the one which included the Gary Gross photograph of ten-year-old Brooke Shields) is Richard Prince's photograph of the earlier picture by Gary Gross; it forms part of an exhibition at Tate Modern called *Pop Life: Art In A Material World*. The work is a meditation on crass materialism and its title, *Spiritual America*, is an ironic reference back to an older, perhaps more pastoral America, one rooted more in hard work than in easy consumption. However, whatever the merits of this work or of dubious artistic asides on excess, luxury, and sensuality, there can be no good grounds for suppressing this work or for closing down any part of a public art gallery.

Children are exploited and abused throughout the world. Many of the goods freely available in Primark and in many other stores could not be bought, or bought so cheaply, if it was not for the work of

hundreds of thousands of extremely young people crowded into sweatshops all over the world. Children work in factories, farms, mines, and on rubbish dumps in many benighted places. They staff the armies of warlords; they dodge the traffic in many of the cities of the poor world peddling stuff in order to keep body and soul alive. Pimps and brothel keepers trade boys and girls to well-heeled men throughout the world every day and every night of the week. As James Baldwin once bitterly noted, a boy can be had for the price of a meal in any city in the world.

This misuse of children and young people will go on despite the efforts of the latter day Savonarolas in the Metropolitan Police, or in those organizations dedicated to finding paedophiles in every shadow or nuance of modern life.

Children and young people are peculiarly vulnerable because they're usually small, inexperienced, and penniless; they frequently find it difficult to make sensible or reasoned decisions and, by and large, they cannot choose where or with whom they live. For all these reasons it is important to ensure that children are protected from misuse and exploitation.

However, no sensible strategy that aims at keeping children safe from dissolute or corrupt parents, pimps, people traffickers, sweatshop bosses, dodgy neighbours, or depraved teachers, can start by chucking out erotic pictures. I suspect that the reason that these self-appointed guardians of children start here is because of their inability to tackle the widespread abuse, which is actually taking place. Attacks upon artists and art galleries are a displacement activity for people who know little or nothing about art and are unable to do much about the actual abuse of children taking place in the heart of family life, in the heart of the garment industry, and in factories assembling all manner of products throughout the poorer countries of the world.

The Directors of Tate Modern should not be so spineless. They should fight back against this witch-hunting atmosphere and defy those who would banish eroticism (or pornography) from our art galleries.