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First solo show by Los Angeles photographer Melanie Pullen opens at Jenkins Johnson Gallery



Melanie Pullen, Soda Pop Boy #2, (Bubble UP! So-DA-Licious), 2015, c-print, 60x48.
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SAN FRANCISCO, CA.- Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco, presents its first solo show by Los Angeles photographer Melanie Pullen, previously represented by Stephen Wirtz Gallery. The exhibition features photographs from Soda POP!, her new series that plays with cultural assumptions; she combines things typically associated with childhood, such as computer games, and places them in adult nighttime settings. The unease is heightened featuring young people marginalized by society, neglected street kids, or male prostitutes. There will be a reception for the artist on Thursday, November 5, from

5:30 to 7:30 pm. The exhibit runs from November 5, 2015 through January 9, 2016.

As an eight-year-old insomniac Melanie Pullen would hang out her bedroom window on Christopher Street in New York City. There she became friends with a man who would stand outside her bedroom window every night at exactly midnight, a seven-foot tall cross dresser who worked the corner of her street until 3 am. He would tell her crazy stories while fixing his messy blond wig between gigs. Their friendship, while unconventional, helped Pullen survive the lonely, late-night hours. Exploring these previous states of mind and her current experiences as the mother of a young child, she found herself awake and alone late at night after her son had fallen asleep. In the same way her cross dressing friend entertained her then, she now often occupies this time playing Candy Crush Soda Saga on her cell phone. The game depicts sickeningly sweet colors and candy that sparkle and pop while a deep voice congratulates you with statements such as “juicy” and “tasty” as you work your way to clearing a plane of corresponding treats.

In the same time window in which her cross dressing friend worked, midnight to 3 am, Pullen now meets young men around her Los Angeles neighborhood, in places such as the Los Angeles Metro Station or the Santa Monica Pier, seedy locations that are safer visited by the light of day. Pullen pays each \$20 and has them select a vintage soda bottle. She finds the vintage bottles, with names such as “Pleasure Time!”, “JUMBO!”, and “Dad’s” at online auctions. She lets the young men pose as they wish, usually photographing where she approached them. The organic, slightly impulsive nature of the shoots further plays with our ideas of what’s appropriate for young people and how it actually manifests itself, emphasized by the knowledge that her subjects are exactly what we don’t expect.

The interactions Melanie Pullen has with these young men, who she refers to as “lost boys”, are very personal experiences. In contrast to the 80 plus person team on her series High Faison Crime Scenes, Pullen only brings along her assistant for the Soda POP! shoots. This gives the opportunity for conversation and connections. In one of these encounters she met a young albino, and as she photographed him he opened up about his life. He grew up in foster care after his single mother died when he was six years old. Now that he is in his early twenties he is transitioning out of the foster care system. His story and his unique look had a great impact on Melanie and she is now planning on using him as a model for future projects. Pullen has had comedic meetings as well. She recalls stumbling upon a couple making out by the train station and approaching them to ask if she could take one of the gentlemen’s photographs. This choice apparently made the other jealous and they proceeded to fight in between each of the shots. Pullen also notes that a surprising number of these young men she meets refer to themselves as artists and they show her their work.

Pullen describes the photographs in Soda POP! almost as “fake soda ads”. They are reminiscent of subliminally sexual advertisements, with the shape of the soda bottle correlating to the shape of a curvy model sipping from it as a phallic symbol. The photographs of these night wanderers offer the same impression as one of those iconic ads, but in a context that has been turned on its head; the young men pose with their prop, not in a safe and clean studio but on a street corner or in the subway.

Melanie Pullen was born in New York City in 1975. She is self-taught and was raised in a family of photojournalists, publishers and artists. Currently she lives and works in Los Angeles, California. Pullen has exhibited in various museums including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Jacksonville Florida, the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego California and Museo Jumex in Mexico City. Pullen has been recognized in numerous publications including Art Forum, ArtReview, CBS News, CBS Radio, Elle, Fortune, GQ, LA Times, National Public Radio, New York Times Magazine, Nylon, Photo, Rolling Stone, San Francisco Chronicle, Vogue, and W. She is available for interviews.