

"Being a Girl" from a painting to TikTok

Young heroines play a major role in pop culture, film, and literature, but they have been less visible in the art world. The exhibition "Being a Girl*!?" at the Lentos Museum in Linz explores female identity formation in many facets. The focus is on self-empowerment. However, the rather tame exhibition hardly tackles sensitive issues such as sexuality, mental health, or consumer pressure.

What is a girl? A young female being on the path to womanhood – or a cultural construct? The Middle High German origin of the word "Mädchen" (girl) originally referred to an unmarried maiden, not necessarily a servant, as the word "Magd" (maid) is understood today. For centuries, girls were expected to remain virtuous and in the background, but thanks to TikTok and other platforms, girl culture is receiving more attention than ever before: from the naturally styled "clean girl" to the "pick me girl" who craves male attention, to the rebellious "brat" who flirts with nonconformity.

Art history is also rich in depictions of girls, but so far only a few exhibitions have been dedicated to their diversity. The Lentos Museum in Linz is now doing just that with the exhibition "Being a Girl*!? From Panel Painting to Social Media." The asterisk in the title refers to diversity and queerness in the approximately 150 works – even if the themes of homosexuality or transgender identity are hardly present.

Blood Donation for Little Red Riding Hood

The exhibition explores what empowers or restricts girls in the 21st century. The tour, however, begins historically: In Eugenie Breithut-Munk's 1908 painting "Children's Dance," a girl enthusiastically twirls in a floor-length silk skirt – likely a piece from her mother's wardrobe. Adolescence is the time when femininity is produced, practiced, and controlled, wrote cultural studies scholar Catherine Driscoll in 2002. As a pioneer of feminist "Girl Studies," the researcher of girls' issues has investigated from an early stage how films, series, music, fashion, and media shape female identities.

In fairy tales, heroines usually have to suffer before rescue arrives. The US artist Dwora Fried contributes the pop-art-like box "Big Red Riding Hood" to the exhibition, in which Little Red Riding Hood sits as a composite plastic figure. A red tube is wrapped around her naked doll's body – an IV drip after being rescued from the wolf's belly? Fried emphasizes the violent side of

the story. At first glance, the landscape painting featuring a woman in a dirndl dress by Ceija Stojka (1933–2013) also appears fairytale-like. However, the title "Self-Portrait with Tattooed Concentration Camp Number" refers to the Roma artist's experiences in the camps as a ten-year-old.

Stolen Childhood

The chapter "Girls* as Maids?" depicts child labor: While peasant girls and flower girls were still romantically idealized in Baroque and Biedermeier painting, images from the interwar period, such as Hans Fronius' milkmaid "Mizzi" and Demeter Kokos' "Goatherd," tell of hardship and exhaustion. The combination of these paintings with the social documentary photo series "Child Labour Exploitation – Stolen Childhood" by photojournalist Fernando Molerés, who, for example, photographed a young carpet weaver in Turkey, seems somewhat arbitrary. The exhibition repeatedly deviates from the theme of art, displaying, for instance, a girl's bodice from 1800 and an antique dollhouse.

Children's portraits once served political marriage alliances and were sent as a form of advertising. This was the case with Jakob Seisenegger's 1537 portrait of the three-year-old Archduchess Eleonore of Austria, wearing a wreath of flowers in her hair. In the portrait "Ila," Albin Egger-Lienz captured his daughter in 1920. The girl hated posing and had to be bribed with gifts to sit still. Dorothee Golz's image montages combine old master paintings of women with contemporary settings. The head from Jan Vermeer's famous painting "Girl with a Pearl Earring" now sits on the figure of a woman wearing jeans. Rosa Rendl's photo collage "Never Tired" addresses self-presentation in the age of the selfie.

Resistance and Empowerment

Under the hashtag "#sadgirl," social media users discuss topics such as depression, eating disorders, and bullying. Given the increase in these problems—since the coronavirus pandemic, more and more teenage girls have needed psychiatric help—the tame selection of works is disappointing. The cultural-historical motif "Death and the Maiden" briefly appears, and the topic of abortion is addressed with only a single work. Vulnerability is conveyed by the photorealistic painting "When they told us about the night" by Markus Åkesson. It shows twin girls huddled together anxiously on a sofa in the darkness—both unsettling and tender at the same time.

How can girls assert themselves? The video "Dirty Care" by Isa Schieche shows women wearing masks, panting as they box. The background of this work is martial arts training for trans women, who are constantly threatened by violent attacks. Charmaine Poh from Singapore addresses in her video "Good Morning Young Body" the humiliating online comments she read about herself as a young actress in a TV series in the early 2000s. Poh created an avatar of herself as a twelve-year-old, who talks about her own traumas and the need for protection against misogynistic hate speech and cyberbullying.

Hairy Self-Images and Perceptions by Others

The exhibition reduces the physical transformation of adolescents to the growth of hair. In the section "Grow it, show it," Marlene Haring's witty photographic staging in a fur costume stands out. As a 15th-century depiction of a saint shows, the penitent sinner Mary Magdalene was also depicted covered only in hair. When Trude Engel, the dentist's daughter, saw her portrait by Egon Schiele in 1913, she grabbed a knife. Enraged, she stabbed the black-haired, curly-haired canvas Lolita, who had less to do with the model's appearance than with Schiele's erotic fantasies.

But how do girls react to the beauty ideals that beauty tutorials and casting shows impose on them? The exhibition, with its restrained approach, ignores both the consumerism inherent in digital capitalism and new forms of sexualization. The fact that so much remains implicit may also be due to consideration for the young target audience, for whom a separate workshop area has been set up. The photographer Anna Breit, born in 1991, asked kids on the street if she could photograph them in their homes. From her compelling series "Teens (in their rooms)," various girls* look out at us – undoubtedly a generation under pressure, yet one that still inspires hope.