

# VIVA LOLITA

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Occasionally there are shows so off the mainstream artworld radar that they're worth noting. With fears about predatory paedophiles a daily feature of contemporary culture, most curators would run a mile rather than put on a show celebrating the adolescent object of desire of Vladimir Nabokov's notorious 1955 novel *Lolita*. Undeterred, curator James Putnam has assembled a rambling survey of work by artists who toy with suggestive images of adolescent, post-innocent-almost-sexual girls. And though this crowded, shamelessly commercial show necessarily comes across as something of a one-liner, the sheer repetition nevertheless allows for an odd insight into how the image of the adolescent female is always a site for competing, never-disinterested desires.

The voyeuristic, male, fetishising gaze is here in abundance; or rather, the clichéd signs that communicate this gaze are – schoolgirl outfits, short skirts, sidelong glances – and there's the sense that these artists already know that we are too smart to take these images too seriously. So Nobuyoshi Araki's monochrome photograph of Japanese schoolgirl sitting on grass, holding a skinned banana and looking coyly to camera can be played for laughs, just as Nazif Topçuoğlu's various staged photographs of young women looking adoringly at bodybuilders or older men exercise already exhausted conventions. And if you like ogling girls in their underwear, then Li Bo's textured, textile-and-spraypaint photorealist canvases do just as much as your average men's mag.

But *Viva Lolita* has more interesting angles. Weirdest are those artists who might be disparagingly called 'outsider' by the artworld's insider crowd. Edvarda Braanaas paints rigid, awkward, naive images of stylised women in passive, disjointed poses, with bizarre titles like *Ceci n'est pas une fille* (2006) and *Young Girl in the Position of Doing Nothing* (2007). Stu Mead's idealised portraits of well-proportioned and unspoiled young women are full of elegantly implicit erotic charge, though Putnam has shied away from Mead's more untrammelled fantasies (his website hosts a gallery of cheerful surrealist obscenities that would make Georges Bataille proud).

While these rehash recognisably male forms of fetishism and desire, it's the work of women, and those that operate outside a Western sensibility, that is the freshest. Hellen Van Meene's wistful photoportraits of 'cute' Japanese girls, and her portrait of a naked, heavily pregnant girl, have a vivid and gentle empathy for their subject, while Charlotte Beaudry's painting of an unselfconscious dancing teenager has a clarity that forces any voyeuristic intent back on the viewer. Other female artists articulate a confrontational, self-confidently seductive 'postfeminist' Lolita, with Heli Rekula's diptych blonde *Desiré* (2006), dressed only in white T-shirt, chocolate smeared around her mouth, or in Fafi's cute-aggressive *manga*-style cartoon protagonists – although these contrast strongly with the harmless 'native' cute of Koichi Enomoto's watercolour cartoons. The presence of *manga* and Japanese subjects is telling – Japanese cultural interpretations of the 'Lolita complex' lack the anxiety that marks Western approaches, or at least still know how to distinguish between the imaginary and the real. But in a culture now convinced that dangerous images incite dangerous acts, *Viva Lolita* is both strangely innocuous and already too risky – a sad comment on how little we trust ourselves to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. *J.J. Charlesworth*



Jens Lucking, *Engel*, 2007, archival ink print, 104 x 84 cm. Courtesy the artist and Maddox Arts, London