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Lori Waxman, "Rudzienko': Girls in the Forest," *Chicago Tribune*, July 21, 2016



'Rudzienko': Girls in the forest



An image by Sharon Lockhart from the "Rudzienko" exhibit at the Arts Club of Chicago. (Michael Tropea / Arts Club of Chicago)

Two teenage girls lie on the floor of a pine forest. The brash bottle-red hair of one rests on the tight black jean-clad legs of the other, hands end in green and blue-painted fingernails, legs stop at leopard-patterned high-tops with neon laces.

What do they talk about? The girls speak in Polish, so their thoughts remain obscure, as do those of their counterparts in other tender scenes: two girls slow dancing amid walls of peeling paint, two girls walking hand-in-hand at the top of a dusky field, two girls trying and not-quite-succeeding in flying a kite in a farmer's field. Translated dialogue, when it comes, in text scrolls that separate the picturesque episodes, is two parts hard life, one part philosophy, all parts teenage. (Think reflections on parental suicide plus favorite food, all in the span of a minute.) The young women are the heart of "Rudzienko," a spare and potent film and eponymous exhibition by Sharon Lockhart on view at the Arts Club of Chicago. Rudzienko is also the name of the town outside of Warsaw, Poland, where the girls live in a group home called the Youth Center for Socio-Therapy. Lockhart, an American artist in her early 50s who lives in

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Los Angeles, shows with the blue-chip Gladstone Gallery in New York and is the recipient of prestigious grants from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller foundations, befriended the teens through one of their cohort, a girl named Milena. Lockhart and Milena have collaborated since 2009, when the then-9-year-old helped direct the children in "Podwórka," a film about kids at play in the crumbling courtyards of Lodz.

Lockhart has been known since the late 1990s for giving sustained views of the invisible everyday: a Japanese girls basketball team exercising in a gymnasium, a mason redoing the floors in a Mexican museum, a clam digger at low tide in Maine, factory workers on their lunch break. Her precisely composed photographs and films shot from single points of view are both like and unlike the great social records produced in the first half of the 20th century, by the German portraitist August Sander or the French anthropologist Jean Rouch. Like them, she looks closely and empathetically at people who have mostly gone unseen and unrecorded. Unlike them — but very much like the generation of artists that preceded her, the Pictures Generation of the 1980s, which included Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine — she stages and re-creates scenarios, sometimes re-photographing old pictures into new ones. Add to that her interventions and collaborations with her subjects, and it becomes evident how many disciplines Lockhart borrows from with each project: fine art, documentary, art therapy, theory, anthropology and so on. The practitioners of these fields have often insisted on differences rather than commonalities — to maintain the subjectivity of fine art, the objectivity of documentary, the privacy of therapy, the abstractions of theory, the unobtrusiveness of anthropology. Lockhart crosses these borders fearlessly.

So it is with "Rudzienko." The film and a series of related photographs, of girls running against a twilight forest, were shot over the course of two summers during retreats Lockhart organized in Poland, with a team of educators and creative collaborators, for the Youth Center teens. The exhibition doesn't document those workshops but rather presents vignettes that arose from their philosophical discussions, movement exercises, craft experiments and writing seminars. That scene of two girls trying to jump a narrow concrete breakwater amid a field stream, or those three girls in an abandoned hut lost in deep chatter — they're staged. They're invented. They're reconstructed.

The staging of the film and photographs makes them no less affecting and only a little bit less real. In being that little bit less real, they insist on the importance of the moment, of the need to repeat it, capture it and disseminate it. That's psychotherapy, art therapy, theater and documentary rolled into one, plus some post-modern performance methodologies and Comp Lit. If such interdisciplinarity seems heretical, it also raises crucial questions about the limits and promises of each field, while finding a rare place for them in the museum.

Two works in Lockhart's exhibition offer another kind of re-enactment. The photograph "Milena, Radawa" — a mint-green background to which five historical images of children are pinned — painstakingly re-creates the wall of a room in a rented house where Lockhart and Milena stayed one summer. For a series of untitled studies, Lockhart re-photographed snapshots from her own childhood: a little girl in a man's arms atop a mountain range, a woman and two kids in a rowboat at the edge of a lake, so many youths in plaid.

I am less a fan of these studio works than the ones made in Rudzienko, because I am less a fan of re-photography generally. The Pictures Generation made the point of appropriation well in the 1980s, Richard Prince especially, and it often feels hollow today. In the context of "Rudzienko," with its focus on childhood and its representation, Lockhart redeems the tactic, imbuing it with

GLADSTONE GALLERY

an empathy, attentiveness and self-reflexivity not part of the original gesture.

That's a repetition worth making.

*"Sharon Lockhart: Rudzienko" runs through Aug. 13 at the Arts Club of Chicago, 201 E. Ontario St., 312-787-3997, **www.artclub.org**.*