

Polly Borland's Photographs Reveal the Weird and Wonderful World of Adult Babies

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The first time Australian photographer Polly Borland heard about the Babies, she thought, "No, that couldn't exist."

Her friend assured her it did. There were secretive clubs in England where adult men spent weekends dressing up as babies, napping in cribs, wearing and soiling diapers and sometimes even suckling a surrogate mother's teat.

Borland, who says she has always been fascinated by the "weird and wonderful," was instantly intrigued. She was living in England at the time and, in addition to her fashion and editorial work, had done some photojournalism projects on a wide range of subjects (nudists, Trekkies, wrestlers, etc.). She loved photographing people who inhabited the margins outside traditional norms. She had to know more about these adult babies.

It was the early '90s, so Googling wasn't an option. Instead, Borland picked up some fetish magazines from the top shelves of a newsstand and dug through the back pages until she found an ad for the Hush-a-Bye Baby Club in Kent, England.

The ad listed a phone number for Mummy Hazel. Borland called, and accepted Hazel's invitation to visit her home/Adult Baby nursery.

Soon, Borland and a reporter from the *Independent* were sitting in Hazel's living room, gathering information and images for a story that would run in the paper's weekend magazine.

"We were sitting there chatting with Hazel and there was literally just a big man in a nappy crawling around on the floor," Borland recalls. "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. It was a combination of weird, surreal and sort of psychologically disturbing. It

fascinated me because it was so visually arresting. It was like a weird, adult Alice in Wonderland situation."

After her piece ran in the *Independent*, Borland continued to visit the Babies at Mummy Hazel's. She went there for weekend trips, photographing them as they went in and out of role-playing, sometimes crying for their mummy to change a poopy diaper, sometimes taking a break to drink a beer or take a phone call from work. The Babies accepted Borland's presence and warmed up to her camera. "I think that as a nonjudgmental observer, I gave them validation and permission to exist as they wanted to," she says. Because the Babies were comfortable with Borland and her camera, they gave her incredible access to photograph their secret world. As the years went by, the internet became more ubiquitous and accessible, connecting the photographer with Adult Baby communities in Australia, France and the United States. She photographed her Baby friends in their homes, accompanied them on a trip to Disneyland and captured intimate images of them bathing and sleeping. By 2000, she had enough material for a book of photographs. *The Babies*, with an introduction by Susan Sontag, was published that year by PowerHouse Books.

This summer, for the first time in more than 15 years, all of the images from *The Babies* will be on display. The show, which opens at Mier Gallery on July 22 and runs through Aug. 19, marks Borland's first solo show in Los Angeles, where the photographer now lives and works.

"I think it's gutsy for Nino Mier to show this work," Borland says. "I don't know what it is about this work but people find it creepy."

Snuggles, Julianne, Mummy Hazel and Cathy in the street, 1994-1999

It can be an uncomfortable experience to look at the Babies. The lighting is harsh and revealing, and Borland's lens zooms in unapologetically on the flabby, blotchy, pale skin of her subjects. An unattractive pink hue dominates, appearing on faded plastic shower curtains, oversized nighties and the diaper-rashed skin of exposed asses and scrota.

"Close is ugly. Adult is ugly, when compared to the perfections of the recently born," Sontag writes in her introduction to the book.

The disturbing things. The ugly things. That is where Borland focuses her camera's lens. Where others would avert their eyes, her gaze lingers.

"It is easy to create pretty pictures," Borland explains. "I can do that. I've done fashion. I've done beautiful portraits of beautiful women. But for me, when I look at work, I want to be challenged on some level. I like the idea that I don't necessarily provide all the answers. People have to think about what they're looking at."

Sitting in her sparse and airy Arts District studio loft, Borland talks about her photographer heroes — Diane Arbus and Larry Clark — and how she was inspired by them to capture images of the bizarre, darker slices of the world that many people prefer to ignore.

She recalls the first time she was affected viscerally by a disturbing image: "It was in my early 20s. I was studying art in Melbourne and my tutor took our class to a little gallery. On the walls were pinned photos from Larry Clark's 'Tulsa' and 'Teenage Lust' series. They had scratch marks all over them and there were images of young boys with erections and needles in their arms. I experienced a physical reaction. It was a transcendental, inspirational moment. I suddenly realized that it is important to feel, to experience things that I don't understand or that I find uncomfortable. That is what keeps us from going through life sleepwalking."

If viewers at the Mier Gallery this summer need a break from the rewarding challenge of perusing Borland's *Babies*, the gallery's smaller, second space offers an equally provocative but less disturbing alternative.

Recently, Borland has experimented with transforming some of her photographs into tapestries, and a selection of these works will fill the smaller gallery.

The tapestries on display are all drawn from one image — an iconic photo of Queen Elizabeth II that Borland took as part of a portrait commission from the Palace. ("They must not have done their research on me," she jokes, noting that she took this photo after *The Babies* was published.)

To create the tapestries, Borland had a cross-stitch pattern made of her Queen Elizabeth portrait, which she then sent to an English nonprofit called Fine Cell Work, which trains and pays prisoners to create handcrafted needlepoints. Several prisoners — a Mr. Stewart, a Mr. Pink and a Mr. Hawkins among them — then stitched the image by hand. Borland notes that they did so while living in British jails managed by Her Majesty's Prison Service.

Because each prisoner used the same original image and pattern, the tapestries look identical on the front. It's the messier backsides of these pieces that interest Borland, and it is that side that will be on display in the Mier galleries. Here, Queen Elizabeth's slight smile is distorted and wonky. In one, her lipstick bleeds with a slash of red wool. In another, her eyes are blacked out where a stitch was tied off in a knot.

Borland's backward tapestries are slyly subversive. On one side, they're simple needlepoints of a beautiful, Palace-approved photo of the Queen. But their impact is heightened because their underbellies are put on display, their backstories are loaded and they are hung just a room away from images of naked, middle-aged Englishmen sucking on pacifiers and drooling on bibs.

Borland smiles as she runs her hands across the brightly colored wool. "The Queens are kind of scary in their own way, aren't they?" she says.

They are. And it's what makes them distinctly Borland-esque.