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Unacceptable Censorship, or Confusing Adolescence with Childhood: Another Look at the Henson Case

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Introduction



Opening tonight at the elegant Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in the heart of Paddington is an exhibition of photographs by Bill Henson, featuring naked 12 and 13 year-olds. The invitation to the exhibition features a large photo of a girl, the light shining on her hair, eyes downcast, dark shadows on her sombre, beautiful face, and the budding breasts of puberty on full display, her hand casually covering her crotch (Miranda Devine, "Moral backlash over sexing up of our children", *Sydney Morning Herald* 22 May 2008)

This strange photograph is disturbing. We are compelled to look, and look again... The power of the image comes from the striking beauty of [the girl's] facial features, superb in definition, held against the abjection of her body (Roger Benjamin, "The Henson Defence", *The Australian*, 31 May 2008).

The content contains an image of breast nudity that ... creates a viewing impact that is mild and justified by context. The image ... is not sexualised to any degree. The content therefore warrants a PG classification. Classification Board report, 3 June 2008, TO8/2335.

... in a halo of light at a moment of such profound self-absorption she appears to have become her own body, a child and the woman she will soon be, both entirely beautiful. Her breasts are buds. Her crotch is modestly obscured by her hands in deep shadow (David Marr, *The Henson Case*, 2009,108).

... Whatever violence the furore over Henson's exhibition may have done to its intended reception, the reproduction of the photograph in the print and electronic media opened it to audiences that otherwise would never have seen it. The redeployment of Henson's art work to this new media gave it a new life, and a second flight, which would have been denied it were the photograph confined to the auratic sphere of the gallery...the photograph...engages a critical relation to the fantasy of childhood innocence, by revealing its uncanny, horrifying aspect: the desire through which the perceived 'reality' of childhood is established. (Joanne Faulkner "Vulnerability and the Passing of Childhood in Bill Henson: Innocence in the Age of

Mechanical Reproduction", *Parrhesia* 11, 2011:52).

The Bill Henson case led to the impounding of some of the artist's photographs by New South Wales police from the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney in 2008, highly critical comments by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and considerable debate in the media and the press. Subsequently protocols were established by the Australia Council for artists working with "children" under 18, as well as calls for the abolition of "artistic merit" as a criterion in the censorship of artistic work dealing with "children". Child protection activist Hettie Johnson has been at the forefront of ongoing condemnations of Henson's photography as degrading to "children" and has called for its suppression. This paper argues that not only have adolescents and teenagers - the very people that some of Henson's photographs deal with - been left out of the debate, they have continually been referred to as "children" by adults who claim to be representing their interests. I look at both aesthetic and ethical and moral aspects of the debate, as I believe both are inter-related.

The above quotations, all referring to Bill Henson's 2008 portrait *Untitled #30*, provide the main narrative thread and aftermath of what has become known as "The Henson Case" (Marr 2009). Miranda Devine started the media furore with a relatively neutral description of the portrait of "N" (as Marr refers to her) in the context of an article about a senate inquiry into the "sexualisation of children in the media", and did not even need to editorialise in order to provoke a deluge of negative responses. Devine's description of the portrait is in fact very restrained, acknowledging its "sombre" quality and its "beauty"; only the misplaced word "casually" suggesting anything untoward. It was of course the fact that it appeared on the gallery invitation that provided the trigger for the furore. Benjamin's description, on the other hand, is more provocative: he acknowledges the image is "disturbing", and the word "abjection" casts something of a pall over the innocence of N's exposed body. The clinical report by the Classification Board is cast in neutral terms, referring to "breast nudity" as a censorship category and denoting "mild" in its effect, making the all-important declaration that the image is not "sexualised to any degree", and giving it a 'parental guidance' certificate. Marr's description, despite his highly defensive position, is not dissimilar to Devine's, although the terms "modestly obscured" (as opposed to "casually") resonate as an argument against "sexualisation". Faulkner's comments, in suggesting that the exposure of the image to public debate was beneficial, and that the image itself is "horrifying" in its revelation of "childhood innocence" seem misguided, unnecessarily melodramatic and inappropriate on at least two counts. This is not the image of a "child" but of an adolescent, and there is nothing "horrifying" about it at all - on the contrary, as the other statements indicate, it is "beautiful". "Disturbing" perhaps, but surely devoid of any "horror". And its reproduction in the media, which subjected it to ugly blackouts over the breasts and crotch, was surely yet another form of "violence". The fact that the image is still not available on the Roslyn Oxley9 webpage among Henson's 2008 exhibition photographs is proof that it has effectively been censored out of circulation, and the fact that the only place it can be found on the internet is on the website of a now defunct UTS Arts and Social Sciences subject 'Communicating the Social', as part of a student project, (communicatingthesocial.net) is proof that the image has effectively been removed from public view. Hardly "a new life", or "a second flight". Faulkner's perspective is similar to that of the editorial in *The Australian* on 7th June, 2008, which pronounced "A Good Outcome" from the "moral panic" of the Henson affair, and declared there was "a lesson be learned" from "all parties"- child abuse campaigner Hettie Johnson, the NSW police, the arts community who pressured Rudd to recant, and above all the regional galleries who removed Henson's works. Almost all parties, with the exception of the media.

Growing Up

That the Henson case continues to leave a scar in public memory is demonstrated by the odd consistency in the rhetoric used by *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic John McDonald in his April 2011 defence of Bill Henson, "Edgy insights into the soul and self". Reviewing the artist's exhibition at the Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne, McDonald aligns himself with Henson supporters, as he did in 2008, represented here by "a show of force by the Melbourne establishment", including the "cream" of the city's "legal and medical professions". He cites a survey by the *Age* in which 83 per cent of its readers failed to find Henson's work offensive, stating, "Perhaps we're finally ready to approach this business like grown-ups" (McDonald:2011). (In 2008 he came to Henson's defence by referring to the artist's detractors as "philistines" (*SMH* May 24, 2008) — hardly a helpful argument.) He then approvingly refers to Victorian premier Ted Baillieu - whom Marr, in *The Henson Case*, noted disapprovingly, "said nothing at all" as leader of the opposition about the Henson debate in 2008 (Marr 2009:92). On this occasion Baillieu defended the exhibition, and McDonald expresses approval of his "unusual maturity for a politician. One wonders if we can expect that kind of forthrightness from Barry O'Farrell". O'Farrell was, as Marr also reminds us (2009:145), the first politician to make a statement about Henson's 2008 exhibition at The Roslyn Oxley9 gallery, to the *Daily Telegraph*, to the effect that "sexualisation of children under the guise of art is totally unacceptable". He added, despite his having seen the Henson retrospective at the NSW Art gallery in 2005, which contained far more provocative images of adolescents, and passing no comment, "It is definitely not OK for naked children to have their privacy and their childhood stolen in the name of art" (Marr 2009:11).

McDonald goes on to distinguish Henson's work from "puerile attempts to scandalise an audience" by "wilfully offensive artists", stating that "[Henson] prefers to photograph teenagers because they have not developed the hard casings of self-esteem, social status and bad faith that we call our personalities". He suggests Henson's public has now passed the age of puerility and adolescence and become mature enough to understand and speak out about how his work is "the very antithesis

of pornography", in which "[e]very viewer becomes a voyeur, whose chief pleasure lies in identifying with the active or the passive side of the sexual act" (McDonald 2011). This characterisation of a pornographic "voyeur" is somewhat clouded by McDonald's earlier statement in a review of Henson's 1998 Roslyn Oxley exhibition, approvingly quoted by Marr: "What may be most unnerving is that Henson turns every single viewer into a voyeur lurking in the dark" (*SMH* 23/8/1998, cited in Marr 2009:35).

McDonald's assumption that Henson's public is now adult enough to appreciate the artist's portrayal of vulnerable, self-conscious pre-teens and teenagers who lack our adult masks of confidence, self assurance and cynicism, contains an inherent paradox. Its projection of adolescent characterisations onto the people who protested against Henson's images shows a continued refusal to engage with some of the most important issues arising from the Henson affair. Kylie Valentine's article "Innocence defiled, again? The art of Bill Henson and the welfare of children", published in the *Australian Review of Public Affairs* the month after the 2008 Henson scandal, responded in part to Kevin Rudd's comments that he found some of Henson's photos of adolescents "revolting ... just allow kids to be kids". Valentine noted that apart from both sides of the debate never acknowledging each other's arguments, there was an important element lacking, namely:

discussion about adolescent sexuality, about the representation of sexuality, and about the agency of children and young people in negotiating both sexuality and representation. The welfare of children is either defended by those decrying the Henson exhibition, or dismissed as irrelevant to the issue. The debate has largely been between adults over the values that adults should hold in protecting children and viewing art. Children and young people themselves have been almost entirely absent (Valentine 2008)

As these comments demonstrate, throughout the Henson debate, there have been continual slippages between designations of adolescents and children. Just what constitutes an adolescent in the 21st century, when it is now quite common for girls to begin menstruating at the age of ten? Clearly the designation of what constitutes a child has changed since the 20th century, and certainly since the 19th century, which is where the Christian moral precepts invoked by child protection activist Hettie Johnston and others of similar persuasion appear to originate. Given that Henson has never used male or female models under the age of twelve, he appears to be well within the boundaries of adolescence. As Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos states in her article 'Philippe Aries and the sociology of youth' (1995):

The vast sociological literature on the transition to adulthood today suggests that adolescence is composed of a set of transformations — biological, cognitive, psychological, social, economic, cultural — rather than of a single, "short" or "long" process of transition from one status to another. These transformations vary in their pace and intensity, and they do not necessarily occur synchronically or even gradually; they differ along lines of social class and gender, and are affected by fluctuations in job opportunities, political circumstances and so on' (1995:84).

The complexity of adolescence, and the variety of its occurrence outlined here suggests that notions of "childhood", "adolescence" and "adulthood" are by no means fixed. But one thing is clear from Ben-Amos' article:

"adolescence is our society is defined as a stage in which young people are no longer children, but at the same time are not as yet required to assume all the responsibilities of adults" (1995:82-83).

Teenagers and Adults

In Tony Wyzenbeek's 2003 ABC documentary *The Art of Bill Henson*, which was re-screened by the ABC during the media furore in 2008, Henson uses the term "teenagers" in stating clearly that he is interested in photographing boys and girls in the transitional stage of adolescence:

The reason I like working with teenagers is because they represent a kind of breach between the dimensions that people cross through. The classical root of the word "adolescence" means to grow towards something. I am fascinated with that interval, that sort of highly ambiguous and uncertain period where you have an exponential growth of experience and knowledge, but also a kind of tenuous grasp on the certainties of adult life (Wyzenbeek 2003).

It is this liminal, or in-between stage at the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood that interests Henson in choosing subjects for his photographs. As Catharine Lumby noted in the *Age* at the time of the 2008 media furore, some of Henson's photographs are

images that remind us that young teenagers are neither entirely innocent nor entirely adult. They exist between these zones and that's why teenagers' relationships with grown-ups, particularly their parents, are so often fraught. ... But it is quite another thing to say that young teens should never be allowed to play in a safe environment with fashion, music and media that gives them a taste of what grown-up life is like (Lumby 2008).

Lumby clearly characterises Henson's subjects as "teenagers" or "teens", not children. Due to what Faulkner has described as "a social overinvestment in the notion of childhood innocence" (2011:46), Henson's work became confused with the sexualisation of children and child pornography. Using Walter Benjamin along with a few lashings of Freud, Faulkner attempts to analyse the ambivalence experienced by the spectator in engaging with works such as *Untitled (#30)*, which she claims

confronts the viewer with the child's vulnerability so starkly that they are forced to countenance their own fetishistic desire for innocent childhood. What they find in this "showground mirror", however, is the spectre of the paedophile, understood as a reified and radicalised portion of a more ordinary adult desire for the ideal of childhood (2011:51).

Leaving aside the fact that this is a rather dangerous argument to pursue in view of the continual taint of paedophilia which obscures the issues in the ongoing Henson debate, and for which one can only be grateful that academic journals are not read by the general public, the subject of *Untitled #30* is not a child. Nor is the viewer of the photograph necessarily an adult, or subject to the psychological distortions of the "showground mirror" Faulkner imposes on the viewer, which presumably includes female as well as male spectators. Faulkner's observations fetishise the photograph in ways which are not only unhelpful, but they play directly into the hands of the repressive protocols and legislations in relation to artistic representations of "children" that have eventuated since the Henson exhibition in 2008. The Australia Council's Protocols for Working With Children in Art, released in November 2009 include the following stipulations:

5. If you are working with anyone under the age of 15 and they are to be fully or partly naked, this may be prohibited by state law. If it isn't prohibited, you will need to get and send to us evidence of the permission of the parent(s) or guardian(s) stating that you have explained the context for the work to the parent(s) or guardian(s) and the child, and:

- they understand the nature and intended outcome of the work;
- they commit to direct supervision of the child while the child is naked; and
- they agree it is not a 'sexual, exploitative or abusive context'.

9. If you are distributing — by publication, in promotional material or through digital media — any contemporary images involving a real child under the age of 18 who is fully or partly naked, you will need to get the images classified by the Classification Board prior to publication.

- Images of infants less than 1 year old are excluded.
- Images documenting activity in a public space, where the children were not employed by the artist and they took no directions from the artist in the creation of the image, are also excluded.

Note the slippages here in the definitions of children — in clause 5, it is under fifteen, then in clause 9, under eighteen. And as Marr pointed out in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Footnote 9 on page 7 of the protocols "explains they're laying down the law for all images of children 'created in the previous 18 years'" (*SMH* Dec 19-21 2008). This involves the torturous process of contacting models and/or their parents for approval for images created since 1990.

Faulkner further claims that

Through his use of telephoto lenses, Henson captures the parent's thwarted, tender protectiveness, exercised from afar - as if they were voyeurs rather than parents, because their children no longer want them near. This parenting-at-a-distance Henson so aptly represents magnifies the sense of fragility we feel towards the subjects of his work (2011:46).

This is again to assume that the spectator at a Henson exhibition is always an adult, and to ignore the fact that many of his spectators are of school and university age. Henson's work involves numerous school visits, and an education kit available online for years 9-10 (Middle Years) and 11-12 (HSC and VCE) students (artgallery.nsw.gov.au), contains at least two images of adolescents that could be considered provocative or confronting. One of the more alarming aspects of the Henson controversy in 2008 was that a number of pre-teens I was acquainted with, directly or indirectly, were fed knee-jerk responses to Henson's images as "pornographic" by their teachers at school. On the other hand, when I finally got to see the Roslyn Oxley9 exhibition the day before it closed - an extremely powerful, moving experience which demonstrated how tightly integrated into a photographic narrative all the images, human, landscapes and still lifes were - there was a group of secondary school girls on a field trip to the gallery giving the photographs serious and thoughtful attention. And one of the most conclusive demonstrations of young people's engagement with Henson's work was the references to it among the 2008 cohort of Sydney HSC art students, who showed in their art work they were perfectly capable of participating in the debate, reproducing the black bars obscuring breasts and genitals in the media (Schwartzkoff 2009).

That there is still a continuing refusal to allow any participation by adolescents or young adults in the ongoing Henson debate is evidenced by a report in the Melbourne *Herald Sun* on April 1, 2011 expressing "Alarm over Bill Henson's new Melbourne show at Tolarno Galleries featuring nude teen girls". The article reported "Bill Henson was at the centre of a new storm after it was revealed school groups are being exposed to provocative photos of teenage girls at his new exhibition". The scope of the exposure was then revealed when a spokesman from Caulfield Grammar School "refused to reveal whether parents approved yesterday's excursion" by twenty-four year twelve photography students. Predictably, Hetty Johnston was wheeled out once again to say: "I have seen a book of his works; let me tell you, they are disgusting".

This was despite the fact that "all of Henson's images on display ... had classification approval". The news of yet another Henson scandal came in the light of an announcement in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on April 18 2011 of another senate inquiry, launched by the conservative Christian Guy Barnett, calling for all artworks and books containing nudity to be classified, and the removal of "artistic merit" as a criterion for classifying art works. This was to be a prelude to the Australian Law Reform Commission's review of the classification scheme later in the year. Bennett, an outspoken opponent of Henson's work and a participant in public hearings about Henson's work in 2008, was quoted as saying the Henson controversy "caused a great deal of community angst"- appropriately enough, an expression commonly used to refer to adolescent problems, as in "teenage angst".

Re-Viewing *The Henson Case*

Marr's book *The Henson Case* chronicles the media furore and police impounding of Henson's work in May 2008, with the clear aim of vindicating the artist and disproving the arguments of his detractors that it is in any sense pornographic. Marr chronicles events from the perspective of the Henson camp, but leaves relatively untouched the issue of protecting adolescents from the debate. This is despite quoting the curator of the Albury Art gallery that Henson's work is "hugely popular among young people — a big audience" (57), a comment that Henson himself has also made on numerous occasions. Marr notes "One question was in everybody's mind, how could N's family consent to her naked body being shown to the world?" (62). Continued concern is shown for the welfare of N, without ever allowing her a voice, except on one occasion, in reported speech. After N, her mother and elder sister seek refuge in the family's beach house in Victoria at the height of the media furore and are joined by Henson and a male friend, N is quoted by her elder sister as saying: "Right. I've done with this. I've been here, we've met, we've hugged; we've eaten dinner, I've watched you two guys get pissed, and I'm ready to go back to school" (Marr 2009:101). This suggests that N was far more capable of coping with the situation on her own terms than the adults involved were.

Henson himself claims in Marr's book that N could provide "no obvious benefit for the overall argument" (99), at least to the media who were obviously not going to give her a fair hearing. In the course of discussing Henson's relationship with his models, and with N in particular, and quoting a lengthy email exchange with N's mother, Marr unwittingly unleashed another moral panic, after a portion of the book was excerpted in the *SMH* in October 2008. Marr reports that the artist had approached the parents of a boy and a girl at St. Kilda Park primary school, where he had been allowed by the headmaster to scout for models, something that he had done on numerous other occasions. The image this aroused of the artist preying on unsuspecting children caused a further media furore, with Miranda Devine weighing in cynically in the *SMH* to claim that Marr's "final draft of history ... has now blown up in the faces of Henson's apologists ... The controversy will sell more of Marr's book; Henson will sell more photographs at higher prices" (6/10/08). The resultant scandal evoked recollections of an incident involving one of Henson's main influences, the Renaissance Italian painter Caravaggio, who was assaulted by bystanders, accused of paedophilia, and run out of town by bystanders and police for sketching adolescents at play in Siracusa, Sicily in 1608 (Fo 2005:131-132). This suggests that little may have changed since the 17th century in terms of moral panics arising from artists' portrayals of adolescents.

Henson and Caravaggio

In his book *Sexuality and Form: Caravaggio, Marlowe and Bacon*, Graham L. Hammil notes:

The ideological ire of Caravaggio's contemporaries is primarily supported by an extended misreading of Caravaggio's formal project from the old-fashioned perspective of Renaissance aesthetic culture (2000:71).

While Hammil rather mischievously uses this as a lever into an extended queer "misreading" of Caravaggio's work, there are affinities here between the "ideological ire" he was subjected to and the "ire" projected by the religious right in Australia on to Henson's work. Hammil claims that sex is central to

Caravaggio's aesthetic and historical project insofar as it doesn't signify. For this reason, any attempt to make the sex of Caravaggio's aesthetic meaningful, to make it communicate, ends up being anachronistic — not just historically inaccurate, but also out of step with the temporality of the flesh (2000:63).

The same argument could be applied to Henson's work — attempts to sexualise it or read sexuality into it are similarly anachronistic and out of step. Nonetheless, amongst the other images of "teen porn scandals" published in the *Weekend*

Australian on May 24, 2008, was Caravaggio's "Amor Vincit Omnia", "the full frontal nudity" of which, the caption claims, was "unremarkable" in the early 17th century. Hammil notes that in this painting:

with Cupid's pose what might at first seem like straightforward exhibitionism turns quickly into a coy withdrawal. While the boy projects his right side forward, he withholds his left side, draws it back into the shadows, hiding his left arm and the lower half of his left leg, a dynamic of exhibitionism and withdrawal most forcefully located in his exhibited genitals and shadowy perineum (2000:86).

Cupid's penis is acorn-like, and de-sexualised, although the expression on his face is cheeky, if not quite seductive. A similar dynamic of restraint and distance is at work to an even greater extent in *Untitled #30*, with "coy withdrawal" predominating and the absence of any genital display.

Caravaggio's painting "The Conversion of St. Paul", which hangs in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo in the Piazza del Popolo in Rome, portrays the moment on the road to Damascus after Saul hears the voice of Jesus saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" and asks the question, "What am I to do?" Hammil notes:

Paul's supine body, open armed and open legged, encourages us to trace out the absent voice as that of a lover whose spatial outline the quietude of both the old man and the horse block out. [They act] as a bulwark that denies the particularly illicit materialization of this voice that Paul's body appears to encourage (2000:79).

Hammil's idea of the "absent voice" in the painting is intriguing. Throughout the performance of Enzo Staiola, who is not an actor, in Vittorio De Sica's 1948 film *Bicycle Thieves*, the unheard voice of De Sica, who is an actor as well as a director, is embodied in its absence, providing the boy with directions: look up, look confused, look intrigued, look horrified, etc. etc. What I would like to suggest here is that in Henson's portraits there is a similarly gentle, absent, paternal voice, giving his young subjects quiet and affectionate directions about posture and expression. (This is discussed in the documentary film *The Art of Bill Henson*.) And like Caravaggio, there are also biblical dimensions to Henson's portraits, secular as they are, in their solemnity and grace.

Incidentally, Caravaggio's response to the "ideological ire" of his contemporaries may be contained in the only self-portrait he did, representing himself as the severed head of Goliath, and in the only painting he ever signed, a signature only discovered through a restoration in 1956, which was contained in the blood pouring out of the neck of the beheaded John the Baptist.

Further Consequences of the Henson Scandal

Five months after the scandal in Melbourne, new protocols were established for school visits, as John Masanauskas of the *Herald Sun* reported:

A probe last year cleared the principal of any wrongdoing, but the Brumby Government promised to review its school visitor guidelines. New rules, seen by the *Herald Sun*, mean all visitors at least will have to register their arrival and departure during school hours (*Herald Sun* 19/3/2009).

Another of many consequences of the Henson scandal of 2009 involving inappropriate targeting of images of children included the removal of a photograph of two toddlers naked to the waist, by Nicole Boenig-McGrade, from an exhibition at the Subiaco Public library in Perth ("Innocent photo of playing kids pulled from Subi exhibition", Fran Rimrod *WA News* January 28, 2009). Boenig-McGrade's response was cautious but damning:

As an artist, photographer and protective mother of two children I believe in protecting all children, but the law is silencing the wrong people and we are heading back to the dark ages (in Rimrod 2009).

The one occasion in Marr's book where a child is allowed to speak is in the controversy surrounding art critic Robert Nelson and artist Polixeni Papapetrou's photomontage of their naked 8 year old daughter, *Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Beatrice Hatch* on the cover of *Art Monthly* in July 2008. (The image is viewable at polixenipapapetrou.net)

This image had been used previously on banking firm Citigroup greeting cards — the business equivalent of Christmas card art. Henson describes the cover choice of this image in Marr's book as "counter-productive, whether well-intentioned or cynical" (Marr 2009: 139). The photo was, with some justification, universally derided by both sides of the Henson debate, and as a result the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade cancelled its subscription to *Art Monthly*, effectively removing the magazine from Australian embassies around the world (Marr 141). Marr describes the appearance of Olympia, then aged eleven, at a press conference held by Robert Nelson, after asking her father, "Why isn't anyone interested in what I have to say?" She was, according to Marr:

the unlikely star of the proceedings, a sort of Shirley Temple of art criticism, giving her opinions on nudity ... and the Prime Minister [and provoking] a fresh round of tabloid abuse, dark mutterings from child

protection advocates, ferocious attacks on Robert Nelson by the columnists and further comments by the Prime Minister (Marr 140).

The Nelson-Papapetru photo is an example of what Faulkner rightly refers to as a 19th and 20th century "aesthetic, kitsch significance still evident in contemporary representations of children: in advertising and entertainment media, greetings cards, and popular prints" (2011:49). Although based on a Lewis Carroll's photograph taken in the 1850s, it replaces Carroll's ambiguity with twee preciousness, and projects onto it what Faulkner refers to "the kitsch representation of children as pure, passive, and pet-like" (50). The furore it produced and the subject's role in it suggests that the following claim by Valentine may have been premature:

Increased participation by children in public debates about the representation of adolescents such as Henson's would produce new knowledge. Such participation would also be likely to add to the complexity of these questions. ... If we are to contest the sentimental and simplistic vision of childhood as vulnerable innocence, and replace it with something more unfamiliar and rich, there needs to be debate about what granting full personhood to children should entail (2008).

On the other hand, increased participation by adolescents in public debates about the representation of adolescents would certainly produce "new knowledge" from the perspective of the peers of Henson's subjects. Valentine points out that the former Henson models interviewed in the media were all adults who had modelled for the artist up to twenty year ago, and likewise the models Marr talked to were all adults. In her article on the Henson dispute in the *Age* in May 2008 Catharine Lumby concluded:

Protecting children and young teenagers involves respecting their difference from adults. It means allowing them a space in which to explore their emerging selves free of the demand to always be seen in relation to adulthood — as either pure or entirely knowing. It means involving them in the debate rather than always speaking on their behalf (2008).

If one emphasises here "young teenagers" in a debate in which both camps were speaking on behalf of children and adolescents, and advocating their protection or exemption from sexualisation, rather than acknowledging the important active role they could play in the debate, new knowledge would definitely be produced.

Conclusion: A "Tainted Artist"

Paul Sheehan, the most often published journalist in the Sydney Morning Herald, and curiously ignored in Marr's book, was quick to weigh into the 2008 Henson debate in an article entitled "Artists Crying Out for Martyrdom":

If you confront people long enough, don't whine when you yourself are confronted. If you mine the terrain of adolescent sensual awakening for commercial gain, if you spend years living on the artistic edge, while gaining public attention and financial reward, don't complain when your actions begin to carry the taint of exploitative voyeurism (Paul Sheehan, *SMH*, 26/5/2008).

There are pseudo-biblical cadences in these phrases, as well as innuendo masquerading as moral outrage, conveyed by the word "taint". It is Sheehan who is cynically imposing the "taint", not Henson, as well as investing in the ambiguous notion of "voyeurism". (The fact that that the Virgin Airlines in-flight magazine is called *The Voyeur*, suggests the word, like "virgin", has lost its frisson and become an outmoded, mundane way of seeing things.)

To me the image of N, the adolescent girl at the centre of the controversy, is extraordinarily beautiful. The lighting and the use of shadow is masterful and very Caravaggio-like, and its glow is almost numinous. Its aura is reminiscent of Renaissance paintings in galleries in Italy which project a three-dimensional radiance. There is a warmth and a vulnerability in many of Henson's photographs of adolescent subjects that evokes feelings of tenderness. I am in no way titillated, or sexually aroused by *Untitled #30* at all, as I might be by pornography.

I am very moved by N's modesty and sense of innocence in Henson's photograph, and the way she delicately places her hands over her groin. She is in an in-between, girl-woman zone which radiates beauty and delicacy and the only desire she invokes in me is a feeling of protectiveness. There is a peacefulness and a serenity in the image which places it far beyond the "taint" of pornography. It engages, challenges, confronts and moves us, even if the "us" may be predominantly male. And there is no doubt that there are differently gendered and highly subjective responses to Henson's work; I have had arguments about it with a number of women. It is also notable that most who have come to Henson's defence are men. But I believe the image actually desexualises its subject. Her barely formed breasts and obscured pubic area project a sense of modesty and even chastity. When I sent the image to a colleague, feminist writer Debra Adelaide, who has a teenage daughter, she agreed it was "beautiful" and commented, "it's almost as if he's honouring her". She also pointed out that she found it confronting, "like most good art should be", in the sense of challenging the spectator to revise rigidly imposed ways of thinking about the

representation of young adolescents and the "taint" of sexualisation.

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