

## Everyday Time Travel: Photography as Effect in Jay Muhlin's *Kid*

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Inside a gallery, a young girl matures across the surfaces of walls, tapestries, and printed pages. She is an unstable anchor within a kaleidoscope of images marking the cycles of the seasons. Her repeated appearance weaves together the pink cherry blossom blush of spring, the bright heat of summer, fall's spectacle of dramatic transformation, and the stark minimalism of winter, yet she changes herself, transforming over the span of the gallery walls as she grows up. The girl is the titular subject of Jay Muhlin's *Kid*, an exhibit in which photographs are an effect of a relationship and a form of everyday time travel, in which linear progression affixes to cyclical and synchronous time.

*Kid* is the protagonist of a photographic theater that includes a troupe of characters. There's the family cat, or Cat, whose self-assurance and yellow eyes cast him in the role of the trickster. Less threatening than the villain and not quite as helpful as the sidekick, Cat evokes the tricksters that animate children's stories and cartoons, such as the Mad Hatter or the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*, or Little My from *The Moomins*. He is a mischievous presence introducing Kid to opposition in life—real danger is sublimated into a cranky, yet cute, indoor pet. In addition to Cat, there is Rabbit, who appears in different guises. Kid is fascinated by Rabbit: She dresses up as Fiona from the show *Adventure Time*, a costume that resembles her drawings of Rabbit, and lays a trail of carrots to summon the creature. Rabbit is a figment of Kid's imagination—simultaneously other and mirror, it is the ideal friend who already knows Kid's deepest secrets.

There is also the Photographer, who accompanies Kid on her adventures and documents their interactions. Though never fully in the frame, his physical presence is marked by extended arms that reach down to support Kid as she explores the world, as well as the elevated gaze of the camera. Photographer introduces Kid to images, gifting her jigsaw puzzles, birthday cakes, and prints of her own representation that Kid can touch and manipulate. Kid and Photographer are related through images rather than blood. The show is a deeply personal one for Muhlin; the Kid in the photographs is Louisa, the daughter of his ex-wife, that Muhlin helped raise as her stepfather for four years and continues to see weekly despite not

having legal claim as a guardian. Within the gallery, the constellations of images map out the parameters of a relationship in which two individuals choose to share time despite being separated by a generation. Rather than being fixed within familial or patriarchal lineage, the pair negotiates their bond using images as punctuation to mark to their inside jokes and mutual care.

Photographs of children complicate the already unstable boundary between art and life. A photograph that is “too cute” delivers an affective immediacy that pierces through the category of art. This may be generative, but too frequently borders upon the saccharine tone of the ubiquitous commercial family photo-shoot. Images of children may also appear overly nostalgic, resurrecting romantic sentiment of the photographer towards lost—and mythical—childhood innocence.

Muhlin’s photographs stage a process—that of a sustaining a relationship that is even more precious and fragile when the camera is put aside. Kid is intimately familiar with her photographer: In one image, Kid hangs off a couch, her arms dangling overhead, openly facing the camera with a gaze that is comfortably passive and trusting. Muhlin’s photographs of Kid resonate with the work of Ralph Eugene Meatyard, who worked in Lexington, Kentucky during the 1950s and 1960s. Far away from the art centers of New York and Los Angeles, Meatyard explored photography as an abstract, time-based practice while making images with his family. Meatyard developed a mode of “No Focus” photography where a moving figure appeared as a blur within an otherwise delineated scene. In one series, Meatyard photographed his children leaping from windows, porches and even rooftops, transforming static, domestic architecture into springboards for flight.<sup>1</sup> The leaping children appear blurry with the sleeves of their white shirts distorted into gauzy wing and legs stretched to abstraction, marking the duration of exposure. These blurry, unfolding figures appear to be emerging within the photograph, suggesting that the image is yet to develop. Childhood is figured through a blur of ghostly traces of fleeting moments and still-developing momentum, paused in free-fall.

Despite the intent-of-focus focus and glossy surface of Muhlin’s work, there is a similar interest of communicating an animacy that remains excess to the still photograph. In Muhlin’s work, Kid develops within and through images. Spanning a four-year span, the photographs present a subject-in-flux: Kid visibly matures over time, even as numerous pasts appear concurrently within the gallery. Linear, cyclical, and synchronous time coexist in Kid to present photography as a mode of everyday time travel.<sup>2</sup> Instead of

spacecraft and warp drive technology, images bridge temporalities by accumulating time stamps as they move across media platforms, attach to surfaces, and pass through hands.

Within the gallery, Muhlin explores the elasticity of the image and its ability to accumulate time by staging encounters that address numerous senses. A printed rug welcomes visitors to step onto a photographic ground and become its figure. The glossy, seamless surface of a photograph softens when printed on textile, welcoming transparency and touch. These architectonic interventions reveal that images are no longer confined within the two-dimensions—they constitute the very mass and definition of the world. Certain curatorial choices come with the help of Louisa the Kid: the pair picked out the frame colors and crafted a fragrance of gardenia and honeysuckle that perfumes the gallery with a scent-image of the pair's woodland hiking adventures. Here, the photographic subject is also the co-curator of her own image. These multisensory experiences displace the primacy of vision, as well as photography's status as a final, isolated product: images are an effect of gestures and interactions.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the installation is the swing. A seat of board and rope, a classic fixture of tree-lined backyards, hangs from the gallery ceiling and invites visitors to abandon their stable footing. To sit upon the swing is to animate the exhibit. Photographs become colorful blurs—much like Meatyard's leaping children—as one traverses the installation space through a lateral swing. Each swing is different, yet, when repeated, creates a rhythm of playful suspension. One doesn't exactly go anywhere with this movement; the swinging motion undoes its own spatial advancement as one swings back-and-forth. Swings work by converting potential energy into kinetic energy and the kinetic into the potential: to swing is to oscillate between what is and what is possible. Potential energy is felt at the top of the swing in the moment when one seems to hover before being pulled back down. To leap from this peak is to enter a photographic blur, a field of lateral relationships.



<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Marijana Rayl, photography specialist at Phillips, for the insightful conversation about Meatyard's work.

<sup>2</sup> This idea is inspired by Karen Redrobe's recent work on Lucrecia Martel's *Salta* trilogy *The Holy Girl* (2004). Redrobe delivered a colloquium talk titled "Thinking Like a Holy Girl: A Philosophy of Grandma's Bedroom" on September 22, 2017 at the University of Pennsylvania in which she discussed science fiction as a genre that does not need to take place in such specific coordinates as "the future" or outer space but instead plays with the laws of our current reality to open new political and social configurations.