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Youth Movement

— By DANIEL KUNITZ

"Childhood," William Golding opined in the pages of the Guardian, "is a disease — a sickness that you grow out of." To the four artists included in "Past Presence: Childhood and Memory," childhood may be a sickness, but not one you necessarily get over.

In keeping with its subject, the show, currently on display at the Whitney Museum at Altria, is diminutive in size. And, unlike children, it doesn't cry out to be noticed, though there is work here very much worth noticing. As Carter Foster, the Whitney's curator of drawings and the organizer of this show, points out in the wall text, the experience of childhood is a relatively recent theme in art. Velázquez, the French genre painters of the 18th century, and others depicted children, but it wasn't until after Freud that artists like Balthus began to explore the languors and anxieties of childhood from the tyke's point of view.

Here only Peggy Preheim reproduces the features of actual children. In "Alexandria" (1996), she turns to the ubiquitous family photograph — both her own and found images, we are told — to consider the sources and forms of how we remember our minute selves. The work is comprised of a set of fastidiously rendered graphite drawings based on the snapshots she has gathered: a girl seen with the eye and nose of another child squeezed into the frame; two dark-haired hounds, shown frontally, their bodies bisected by the frame; a romantic landscape — road and mountains — that looks as artificial as a postcard; a child in a window; a hand holding a frog; a boy on a rock, a girl's profile.

It seems pretty straightforward. Yet consider the drawings for a moment, and you realize how the often extreme cropping mimics the ways we reframe our memories of ourselves, how some of those memories are dim and confused, or how others are, like the landscape, impossibly idealized. Ms. Preheim has chosen her subjects astutely, for maximum ambiguity. Is the hand with the frog holding or cruelly crushing the animal? Are the multiple views capturing the same child or a number of children? And, hewing to her theme, all the drawings are quite small.

Tininess, taken to "Alice in Wonderland" extremes, also strongly informs Charles LeDray's sense

of our minority years. He sewed together miniature jackets, pants, sweaters, and other garments to create "Untitled/Clothesline" (1992), a sorry soft-sculpture hung on the wall. Given their small sizes, it is unclear whether the ratty garments were made for infants or dolls. I suppose that's the point: Artists have often pictured children as doll-like people.

That they were meant to suggest dolls' clothing becomes clearer when one encounters Mr. LeDray's "Milk and Honey" (1994–96), a set of 2,000 miniscule white porcelain objects crowding the glass shelves of a vitrine. Surely these jugs, vases, bowls, and tea kettles are dollhouse toys, and the title reinforces the dreamy, idyllic feeling of play. The austere and uniform whiteness of the objects, however — which reminds me of Josiah McElheny's versions of Modernist designs — undercuts the playfulness, disappointingly yanking one into art historical commentary.

If pure play colors the bright end of the spectrum of childhood experience, terror and fear occupy the darker side. **Robert Beck** skillfully collapses these poles in two large, looming, drawings based on a 1987 book called "The Modern Man's Guide to Life." The better of the two, "Glove Skinning (Black and Blue) ('The Modern Man's Guide to Life' by Denis Boyles, Alan Rose, and Alan Wellikoff)" of 2004, does not require the reference to the book. Using charcoal and shoe polish on sheets of paper sewn together with thread, he reproduces illustrations explaining how to skin a rabbit. (Tie the animal upside down, by its splayed legs, to a stick. Make an incision and peel away the hide.)