

Leaving Home: On Zoe Crosher's 1YR Later series

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"All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by sliding out of this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." –Susan Sontag

1 YR Later presents nine women, each photographed once, and then again, in the seventeenth and eighteenth years of their lives. The series takes the form of diptychs, double portraits that make visible the subtle transition from adolescence to adulthood. All photographs may be memento mori, yet Zoe Crosher's diptychs amplify that inexorable character of photography. Her photographs refuse the singular, definitive portrait, which might be seen to neatly sum up its subject's personality or psychology. Instead, Crosher advances a nuanced account of change by allowing time and space to intervene between one image and the next.

Crosher first photographs the women while they are still living at home, returning to photograph them the following year (usually during winter holidays) to document the changes that may be evinced from the women's forays into the broader world. The photographs are candid, showing the women always from a frontal position, seated or standing in their bedrooms. When Crosher returns to photograph the women a year later, each subject assumes roughly the same pose as in the earlier images. That there are few formal variants between the images allows those variants, however subtle, to come to the foreground. In the second year photos we notice new fashions—or better, new modes of self-fashioning: changing hairstyles, for example, or new objects and decorations in the rooms. Lori has gone blonde, we notice, but she signals her continuing devotion to the Backstreet boys, gesturing to the hand-drawn poster of the band that serves as a backdrop to both of her 1st and 2nd year images. Harriett has traded a poster of the Clash for a world map on her wall—suggesting her own newly expanded horizons. Kristin has put away her teddy bear.

If adolescence is a messy, prolonged, transitional state, caught between the securities of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood, how does this transitional state affect young women in particular? Once upon a time, not so long ago, a woman of this age group remained bound to the confines of the parental home until she moved on to the house of her husband. Or, depending on her class status, she might have gone to college, or taken a menial job. Perhaps needless to say, most western women today have far more options in spheres of education and of labor. One of Crosher's subjects, Marcy V, stands proudly against an American flag, which suggests her impending entry into the military. Nicole, on the other hand, wears a Columbus University sweatshirt, signaling her newfound allegiance to her educational institution.

Unavoidably, we may look for shifts in the women's appearances: in their postures and poses, in their weight gain and loss, in the quality

of their skin, tanned or pale. These details attest to the passage of one year's time, but they also suggest the way in which these women act as photographs—images of themselves—even before Crosher snaps her camera. Susan Sontag, again: "So successful has been the camera's role in beautifying the world that photographs rather than the world, have become the standard of the beautiful....We learn to see ourselves photographically: to regard oneself as attractive is, precisely, to judge that one would look good in a photograph." Beautiful and young, Crosher's subjects are adept at presenting themselves as images to be looked at. Surrounded by exaggerated images of female beauty in mass culture, they have under their belts seventeen years of practice at looking good in photographs.

In many cases, there are other photographs embedded within the Crosher's photographs. Walls are adorned with posters of Pearl Jam and Pink Floyd or plastered with snapshots of friends. Such photographs serve as talismans, magical tokens that bring the outside world close. For the women depicted in Crosher's series, photographs taped to walls instantiate the reality of a public world beyond the private confines of the domestic bedroom.

The conceptually-inflected, time-based format of Crosher's project may resonate with past works such as director Michael Apter's *Up* film series, in which he filmed the lives of fourteen British children, revisiting them photographically every seven years. As another point of comparison, photographer Nicholas Nixon has photographed his wife and her three sisters (the Brown sisters) once a year every year since 1975. Yet Crosher is not interested in following her young subjects throughout the courses of their lives. In her *1 Yr Later* project, she focuses in on a crucial, transformative moment in a women's life: leaving home. How do encounters with a broader public sphere affect the already transitional identities of young women leaving home? Crosher's project cannot help but call to mind our culture's broader fascination with women's coming of age stories. Think of Joyce Carol Oates's classic short story, "Where are you going? Where have you been?" (1966), or any number of films from John Hughes's oeuvre (*Pretty in Pink*, 1986), or Brian de Palma's darker take on the subject in *Carrie* (1976). The transition into adulthood for women in particular becomes tied to an ability (or failure) to own their own sexuality.

Crosher's photographs invite such inquiry—so many women displayed on so many beds—yet no coherent stories emerge. Like the temporal transition they depict, these photographs remain suspended in uncertainty, markers of promise rather than fulfillment.