

Making Viewers Wonder



Nancy Siesel/The New York Times

The British artist Maria Marshall in front of a laser-disc projection of her "Don't Let the T-Rex Get the Children" at the Team Gallery in Chelsea. Creepy, often funny, her work is about adult anxieties.

By WILLIAM HARRIS

MARIA MARSHALL is not the first visual artist to use her offspring in her photography-based work. Sally Mann is probably best known as the person who has been there and done that. But if Ms. Mann's documentarylike recording of her children's often-naked adolescence was provocative, Ms. Marshall's work is more jarring. She taunts the viewer with images that are both creepy and often hilarious, while pushing every conceivable moral and psychological button. Ultimately, the work is about adult anxieties.

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Why They're Uneasy

A year ago, Ms. Marshall, a Londoner, showed in New York for the first time. Her video installation "When I Grow Up I Want to Be a Cooker," at Team Gallery on West 26th Street, was a 20-second loop that depicted her 2-year-old son taking a drag on a cigarette and blowing a smoke ring. (The title, like those of all her work, is taken verbatim from her boys, Raphael, now 6, and Jacob Blue, 4.)

At the time, the critic Ken Johnson, writing in *The New York Times*, wrote: "We need a moratorium on video projections. There are too many and most are inane and visually enervating. Occasionally, you come across a gem that makes you believe in the future of the genre. Maria Marshall has produced one."

Ms. Marshall's oversize Iris prints have been on view in the back room at Team throughout the year, including one of Raphael staring straight into the camera while a white rat reaching for an unseen morsel stands on his head. Now she's back with a more formal show of three videos — the longest is one minute and 45 seconds — and three lush photographs, on view through Dec. 23.

One grainy black-and-white video seems to capture a boy drowning. A second shows a busy schoolyard, except the film is speeded up and the children resemble scurrying cockroaches about to be squashed. The voice-over narration by Jacob retells the story of "The Three Little Pigs." In Ms. Marshall's version, the pig is the bad guy, trying to destroy three adorable wolves. The third video shows Jacob smiling sweetly at the camera, his face filling the frame. As the camera pulls back, one sees that the boy is in a straitjacket, his head is shaved and he's in a padded cell.

"My intention is not to shock," said Ms. Marshall, 33, who looks more like a teenage baby sitter than the parent of two boys, "but to make people think about what they're looking at and ask themselves why it makes them uncomfortable. The work comes from my own paranoia of being a mother."

Ms. Marshall, an Iraqi Jew born in Bombay, may be part of the generation of young English artists who are causing a commotion at "Sensation," a show at the Brooklyn Museum featuring some of their work. But unlike her peers, Ms. Marshall has not had a solo show in London. Nor did she attend Hammersmith, the hip art school there, but graduated instead from the Wimbledon School of Art. Still, her career has taken off. In the last year, she has had one-person shows at Ace Gallery in Los Angeles and Real Art Ways in Hartford. Future exhibits are scheduled for Chicago, Oakland, Calif., and at the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, Conn.

"My work is about fantasy and fabrication," said Ms. Marshall, "placing elements together that suggest something, or present contradictions. My work is not about capturing a moment. When my children had chicken pox, I did not take pictures of them. It's not about being sensational." □