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Layers of Meaning

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Sena Clara Creston, Kerosene. Photos and permission Sena Clara Creston.

"I compose my decisive moment," so states emerging photographer Sena Clara Creston with regard to her recent photography show "Night Lights." While the late Henri Cartier-Bresson might take her to task over her meaning and his of what the "moment" entails, there is no question that Ms. Creston intentionally constructs her images in this show. This approach is not necessarily a bad thing, for it allows her to invite the viewer to enter a realm of eerie visual scenarios that evoke both scenes from well-known motion pictures and the viewer's personal memories of youthful exploration.

"Night Lights," exhibited at the storefront PLP Gallery

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in the West Village during January, featured six carefully assembled pieces that use custom-built light boxes to illuminate Creston's large color photograph transparencies. All of the images portray isolated older children and adolescents in bucolic and small town surroundings. Creston creates moody tableaux of these youths in the process of taking their first tentative steps toward examining their mysterious, expanding world and existence.

The pictures, in general, feature glowing, saturated colors that accent the studied poses of the people in them. One can also distinguish visual allusions to films such as *Firestarter* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The theatricality of the images and their presentation convey the heightened sense of melodrama that many young people project unto their daily lives shaped, in part, by their absorption of mass media. The familiar pop culture iconography helps to draw the viewer into the world of the images.

This approach vaguely recalls the early work of Cindy Sherman (particularly her famous *Untitled Film Stills* series) in that both artists use stock filmic imagery and role-playing to provoke viewer associations. But whereas Sherman uses this technique to examine the objectified personas women could be expected to play as defined by popular media, Creston explores the wonder and epiphany young people experience at a pivotal and disorienting moment in their lives—when they start to branch out from the safe cocoon of home and begin learning how to fly on their own.

Creston's use of pop culture imagery may be the visual hook that initially attracts viewers but the

deeper and more powerful allure of these pictures is their ability to remind viewers of experiences or settings from their own past. This work invites reverie—contemplation of what it is to wonder and explore the world around you at a young age.

Morgan is the photograph that sets the general tone for the show. A silhouetted aura surrounds a teenage male. He is stepping on a split wooden plank on a misty night in a forest backlit by a strong, but indistinct, light source. What could the source be? An alien spaceship? An oncoming car? The light is the antagonist of this spooky drama. It could be a still from a horror or sci-fi flick or a reminder of what it's like to be caught alone in an isolated, potentially threatening place.

Even more disturbing is *Kerosene*. A young girl with her back to us holds a bucket. She faces a seemingly fiery, apocalyptic neighborhood panorama. By using blurred focus, Creston bounces the surrounding streetlights, house lights, leafy trees and sidewalks to create a maelstrom of chaos and apparent destruction. It's up to the viewer to decide if the girl is the cause or the victim of the catastrophe.

In stark contrast, *Poison Oak* is the show's wild card—it's the only photograph taken during the day. It doesn't fit the overall look of the show or the concept of the exhibition's title. It depicts a young boy exploring a wrecked and rusted truck surrounded by gnarled trees—implying that daylight reveals a twisted, decaying world.

Other photographs in "Night Lights" are more subdued in their content and implications but are just

as effective in creating pensive, evocative atmospheres.

It bodes well for this promising new artist to use her skills and imagination to encourage her audience to recognize and think about the pop culture and personal associations these images inspire—and how these associations can both overlap and remain distinct from each other.