



## Print Article



**Angela Strassheim**  
*Untitled (Alicia in the Pool)*  
 2006  
 Marvelli Gallery



**Angela Strassheim**  
*Untitled (Savannah's Birthday Party)*  
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**Angela Strassheim**  
*Untitled (Ashley on her Horse)*  
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## MINNESOTA VICE

by Ben Davis

Angela Strassheim, "Pause," Oct. 20-Dec. 2, 2006, at Marvelli Gallery, 526 West 26th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001

The 36-year-old, Minnesota-born Angela Strassheim came to art world prominence on an act of self-exposure -- her "Left Behind" series of photos depicting her own conservative Christian family. It was certainly this subject matter that induced Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne to include images by the 2003 Yale grad in 2006's "Day for Night," their vision of the Whitney Biennial as paean to the darker side of American consciousness.

"Pause," Strassheim's new series of 20 photos (each produced in an edition of eight) at Chelsea's Marvelli Gallery, marks a deliberate step away from this personal reading of her work. The new photos have the same hyper-controlled, candy-colored esthetic, and focus on the same type of airless, white suburban Minnesota, full of spacious, ordered houses, overstuffed but emotionally vacant rooms and Middle American ephemera. But whereas the idea that she was capturing her family was built into the concept -- and the reception -- of the previous works, here her figures deliberately reach for a more universal significance.

In the "Left Behind" photos -- for example, in the much discussed picture, included in the Whitney Biennial, of her adult brother standing behind his young son, grooming him for church as both stare intensely into the camera lens as if it were a mirror -- the deliberately composed look seemed to express the gravity of a world steeped in rigid faith. At the same time, the staged appearance of each of the images telegraphed Strassheim's keen sense of alienation from her own family's reality -- every image seemed frozen like a clinical specimen, as if we were looking in at aliens.

The new work has the same, almost lugubrious atmosphere. In Strassheim's universe, people do not, as a rule, break out in a smile. But the new photos -- all of them printed at a painterly size, and worth seeing up close for their wealth of carefully focused details -- make it clear that this is less a matter of evoking an oppressive social climate, and more about a citation of a certain sobriety borrowed from classical art. They reframe the lineage of Strassheim's work, from the socially loaded portraiture of Sharon Lockhart to the cerebral pastiches of Jeff Wall.

Art-historical riffs are not totally new to Strassheim -- a young girl sprawled on her bed in the "Left Behind" series was clearly meant to evoke Dalí's floating Christ, for example. But here, the references have been sharpened to become more clearly the center of concern. In *Untitled (Alicia in the Pool)*, a young woman in a simple white bathing suit, standing uncomfortably in a plastic kid's pool, a clothesline and industrial buildings forming a backdrop, recreates Botticelli's *Venus*. Similarly, the composition of a photo that depicts a girl's birthday party -- the table perpendicular to the camera, the birthday girl staring soberly into the camera at the center, the

mannered contortions of the various girls around her as they reach for balloons -- conjures da Vinci's *Last Supper*.

Elsewhere, a blond teenager in riding attire on horseback channels Velazquez; a clear-eyed young girl at a piano, Vermeer. The echo of Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* runs through a portrait of a preteen in a dance studio gripping a hula hoop, complete with her ambiguously knowing gaze at the viewer and a vaguely cocked reflection in the dance-mirror behind her.

The references often vibrate with queasy sexual undertones. In *Untitled (Fort)*, we see a young girl, buried except for her head in a tent made out of covers, and are reminded of the flesh-and-fabric patchwork of Klimt's voluptuous *Water Serpents* (there is even a stuffed snake in the foreground). In another photo, a father pushes a tot on a swing, and the pose and the dark mist of shadow surrounding him recall the Rococo innuendo of Fragonard's *The Swing*.

Even disregarding all art quotations, Strassheim's environments are consistently shot through with a lurking perversity. Both come together decisively in *Untitled (The Spanking)*. Along the left edge of the picture, there is an out-of-focus doorknob, giving the sense that we are peering voyeuristically into someone's private space. Within, two figures are caught reenacting Max Ernst's famously transgressive *The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child before Three Witnesses*, only instead of Mary disciplining the infant Jesus, we have a lean, gray-haired father-figure perched on the side of a bed, teenage girl bent over his knee. Her underwear is pulled down, and you can see the flesh rippling where his hand impacts her bare bottom. She appears rather too old for such treatment, while he, if you look close, lacks any sort of wedding band on his fingers. . . .

These accents were present in the "Left Behind" series as well -- they were clearly of a piece with Strassheim's sense of distance from the world she was chronicling, teasing out the dark, unacknowledged forces beneath the surface of Midwestern normalcy. It's significant that she lingers on images of girls and young women -- according to a *City Pages* interview, though Strassheim has made a sharp break with the faith and "can't be preached to anymore," she believed in the Rapture until she was eighteen. The unsettling atmosphere of her carefully stage-managed photos reflects the critical eye of a disillusioned apostate, even as they express an insider's grasp for the details.

This ambiguous position is also the key to Strassheim's art-historical play. The temptation is, of course, to read the meanings of the quoted works of art into Strassheim's recreations -- for example, to connect religious references to the religious worldview prevalent in the milieu she is capturing. But her citations are too promiscuous, and too inconsistent, to bear such a reading. In *Untitled (Headlights)*, a young couple has apparently been surprised while making out in a park. A bare-chested boy disappears out of the right of the frame, his rapid exit transforming him into a semi-transparent ghost. Meanwhile, at the center of the picture, a young woman, leaping to her feet, skirt trailing from one hand, has been spontaneously captured in the posture of a semi-naked, crucified Christ, the headlights of a vehicle in the background seeming to flare from the stigmata of her wrist. The reference is clear, but the content and the form (Christ dying for man's sins = caught with your boyfriend) are thunderously out of joint.

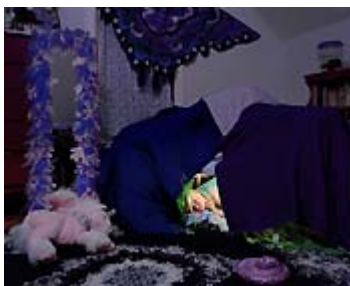
Art historical references are catnip for critics -- they serve as a lure, capturing immediate notice, drawing off attention. It's in this way that Strassheim puts them to work. Her debut show pinned her to the cross of her personal upbringing even as it reflected her sense of



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*Untitled (Hoola Hoop)*  
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**Angela Strassheim**  
*Untitled (Fort)*  
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**Angela Strassheim**  
*Untitled (Alexis Swinging)*  
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alienation from it. In the new work, if hints of percolating perversity and vice serve to crack open and subvert the cold surface of her subject matter, art-historical quotation serves as a kind of drug to dull its immediacy. The references are impersonal, almost clinical, and for this very reason broadcast a kind of low-level trauma -- they are a tool to dissolve a reality that is too close for comfort.

**BEN DAVIS** is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.



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