

Bill Henson and humble children

How children are 'displayed' in public terms is a significant question today in the western world. From debates about the appropriate age for models, the sexualisation of children through advertising, and the unrelenting stories of chronic physical and sexual abuse and neglect, never has the position of, and the rights of children, been so addressed and considered.

In Australia, the rights of children were raised recently in the context of a series of photos by Bill Henson. The initial debate started around a radio station presenter who had picked up on the exhibition at a Sydney Gallery and wanted to have a session about what was the difference between art and pornography, but as most people would know, the matter became a public forum, with leading art figures, the Prime Minister, and probably most parents airing their views, much of it ably facilitated by a salivating media.

Strangely enough most liberal Christians have been vastly silent on this matter. It is probably because they are caught between a rock and a desperate place. Many want to support the freedom to publish anything, and yet where children are concerned, they are wary, knowing full well the implications in the Church. How can you reconcile the use of children in this way when the Church has such a record of exploitation itself?

If a church minister took photos of children in various states of nakedness, and displayed them in a church for example, or was found with them on their computer, the association with paedophilia would be immediately raised. It is simply something that cannot be done (and should not be done). Why does society allow certain people or groups to display children in certain poses and states of undress? As someone who has been employed in various roles in two denominations for over twenty years, I believe the issue of children and exploitation is so sensitive a topic we need to come to a mutual agreement that it is time to say enough.

This issue has also seen a debate full of 'red herrings'.

Firstly, one of Henson's themes revolves around the blurring of the line between adulthood and childhood. While this is a significant theme, and blurring the lines may appear fine for artists, it opens the doors to revision of our long-established legal positions on the use of minors in certain situations. Australia has defined legal ages in Australia for certain activities and blurring lines will not help children as they move to adulthood. The risk for exploitation is too great.

Secondly, I know some people have raised the spurious issue that nudity is not obscenity. Of course, the naked body is not obscene, and again this misses the point. It is not about nudity, but the public display of images of naked children, those who are minors and are in general protected by the law from sexual exploitation.

Thirdly, it has been argued that the images were not sexualised, and I can accept this as the opinion of many well-intentioned people, but I am sure a paedophile would beg to disagree. While the intention of one person is not to exploit, there is always the potential for others to subvert the original idea. I know that some genius will now argue that we should ban the bible because certain explicit passages will encourage immoral behaviour, and again can I state, drop the red herring. The two issues are not comparable.

I come back to this basic point. Why place children in confronting positions, revealing their nakedness? I think we all know how vulnerable children are. Do we also really understand how special children are? I am hopefully preaching to the converted, but take time again to read how Jesus approached children.

1 About this time the disciples came to Jesus and asked him who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 2 Jesus called a child over and had the child stand near him. 3 Then he said: I promise you this. If you don't change and become like a child, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven. 4 But if you are as humble as this child, you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And when you welcome one of these children. 6 It will be terrible for people who cause even one of my little followers to sin. Those people would be better off thrown into the deepest part of the ocean with a heavy stone tied around their necks! 7 The world is in for trouble because of the way it causes people to sin. There will always be something to cause people to sin, but anyone who does this will be in for trouble.

(Matthew 18: 1-7. Contemporary English Version)

I want to raise a general policy for consideration. Do not use photos of naked children in any public way. I am someone who has worried in the past at certain depictions in Funniest Home Videos (though there is significant more hesitation now, or use of blurred images), or advertisements which feature babies fully naked (this is different to the usual guise of being in flowerpots or 'covering' items). I am not embarrassed, but rather so aware of the exploitation and abuse of children in the Church, and the fact that in society today anything you produce can be easily copied and put on a website for other purposes.

I simply cannot see this issue as a debate about art, freedom for advertisers, or even harmless entertainment, and no matter how hard I try to convince myself that it is wonderful we live in a country which allows such levels of freedom, I long for a common position that welcomes children without exposing them to exploitation, however noble the original intention.

In an age when we know much more now about the real abuse of children that is continuing to happen, I simply argue for the side of less exposure, and if the art community suffers a little humbling, I am sure it will cope.

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