Photographing Purity

Feast
Christy Johnson and 33 Confessors

I confess to being a fallen Catholic, one who can regale friends with stories of a Catholic girlhood: botched performances in Christmas pageants; Saturday night recitations of the rosary to the radio; spoiling her First Communion photographs with melodramatic affectations of piety. Such memories are elicited by *Feast*, a book of words and images by artist Christy Johnson and 33 confessors.

Feast is a collection of portraits of girls in their First Communion dresses – granted, there are nuns, priests, parents, and boys, but the vast majority are young girls, between the ages of 6 and 8. Black and white prints, some mounted on card, some with deckled edges, bespeak pastness, and not just technically. Most of Johnson's collection sends the reader back to a time when cameras were not welcome in church. Studio photographers benefitted accordingly, playing their solemn, directorial roles, or as circumstances might dictate, an amateur snapshooter leapt into the fray, restaging the sacrament in the family's back garden. But this is not a book about setting, except as it frames and sometimes comforts the protagonist-body – the body of a Catholic girl whose decisive moment has come.

There are two versions of *Feast*: a gallery installation and a book that divides pictures and texts into seven chapters. 'Wash Me Clean from Every Stain of Sin' gathers recollections of purity and impurity, especially the fears instilled by overworked mothers and satanic nuns of tearing, messing, spotting with blood, or *in any way* dirtying the white dress that symbolised purity, the absence of sin. 'This is My Body' is not really about the body, but its adornment for the event, and how women remember their anxieties over hand-me-down or home-made dresses, stockings and garter belts. 'Blot Out My Iniquity' deals with invisible acts of cleansing and desiring:

'Found' photographs from the Feast Archive Collection, 2007
Courtesy of the artist

First Confession, made when the Confessors reached the age of reason – SEVEN – and began to think about sex. 'Have a Foretaste of Heaven' shifts between opinions on the taste of communion wafers to the mental gymnastics involved with accepting that this thing sticking to the roof of your mouth is the body of Christ, but that you are not a cannibal. A remarkable story ends this chapter, as a Hispanic woman of New Mexico recalls the sacrifice of her pet goat to the First Communion celebration dinner. Unfazed by the prospect of eating her pet, the little girl shows her pretty new shoes to the roasting head, saying: 'I'm sorry that you had to die in order for me to get my name, but that must be really, really important or big that this had to happen.'

'From the Abyss of My Nothingness I Adore Thee' sets individual religious experience in a vast context of collective ritual. The First Communion veil excites a sense of destiny: will she become a bride of God (a nun) or of man (a wife)? Well it depends who's watching, or so it seems from the first confession of 'Print Deep In My Soul the Memory of Thy Bitter Pains.' This heading is a pun, for 'Print Deep...' deals with photographic objects and experience: the first communicant's memories of being gazed upon and photographed, or in some cases, not being photographed; the pictured ones' appraisals of their portraits in terms of affect or disconnect, truth or fiction (a missing tooth miraculously retouched; a drunken father's blurry snapshots). 'The Fruit of Each Mystery' surveys the material culture of First Communion – the harvest of gifts, including cold, hard cash, and more significantly, the attention paid, or sometimes grabbed, by mothers or pushy relatives.

Everything I've said so far relates to the oral history collected by Johnson, whose prompting, probing voice, is included in the text. That said, *Feast* is an artist's book, not an academic study. While the names of the 33 confessors are listed, their comments are not attributed, nor will the pictures give them away, because the link between stories and pictures is a sleight of hand. Johnson has made these connections. The method is not quite appropriation, nor should it be mistaken for collective authorship. Rather I find an emulative whiff of Christian dogma in this corpus – 33 memories in one artist's body of work. The pictures are very interesting – gathering them must have been fun. Johnson has a good eye and a light editorial touch that abjures irony or cheap shots. This sub-genre of portraiture, here limited to girls, is surprisingly varied – the lighting alone constitutes a photographic study. But this would be hard to do, for Johnson has withheld whatever histories she might have attached to the objects – undated, unplaced, unamed, they are floating signifiers of an artist's intentions.

Johnson's book contains three essays that deal from different perspectives with her project. For Margherita Spiro, Johnson's re-presentation of these images, while tinged with melancholy, extends the lives of the confessors in unimaginable ways; Johnson's intervention, seen through Nicholas Bourriaud's notion of

'post-production,' is redemptive. Catherine Clinger unpacks Johnson's process, interleaving it with Catholic history and mythology. She helpfully explains that Johnson built her collection from suppliers in New York, London, Paris, Rome, Prague, Berlin, Vienna, Los Angeles, and Santa Fe, New Mexico. She confirms what one already suspects, that the Confessors were not the source of the pictures; in fact, they never saw them. Feminist theologian Jenny Daggers deepens the theological reading by delving into the symbolism of whiteness, the entangled imaginaries of purity, sexuality and race.

The photographic imaginary is also nourished by *Feast*, and this is a good thing. Photographic theorists will need their strength. We need to look longer and harder at the transformation of vernacular photography into the raw material of global art projects – this authorship without borders is changing photographic experience.

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