Evoking the Fitful Passage to Womanhood

By ELIZABETH HAYT

THAT first teen-age kiss — the butterflies in your stomach, the sweaty palms. Most people remember the experience all too vividly. Today, several women artists are turning to those unforgettable moments, grappling with the painful and perplexing experiences of puberty in their work. "As you gain sexual knowledge, your understanding of your body changes," said one of the artists, Amy Jenkins. "There is a turning point between what you thought would be gross and what you discover is pleasurable."

Ms. Jenkins captures such a turning point in the lives of teen-age girls — when carnal knowledge is still both alluring and off-putting — in her latest video installations, on view at the Ana Kustera Gallery in SoHo through June 13.

Ms. Jenkins, 32, is part of a generation of women artists who came of age after the sexual revolution of the 1960's and are now making the loss of innocence and the sexual conflicts of adolescence the primary subject of their art. Sarah Jones, 38, an English photographer who depicts blasé-looking, casually dressed upper-middle-class teen-age girls in formal English dining rooms, observed: "I've noticed a lot of American and European artists working in this area. Now there are a bunch of artists in Britain doing it. It seems a part of a Zeitgeist, which is always uncanny."

Uncanny, perhaps, but still explicable. In the United States, teen-age girls are a powerful market force in popular culture (witness the Leonardo DiCaprio mania). They are the target audience for television shows like "Dawson's Creek," movies like "Scream" and "Buffy, the Vampire Slayer" and female vocalists like the Spice Girls and Fiona Apple.

Filmmakers have focused on female adolescent protagonists for adult audiences in a slew of recent movies like "Heavenly Creatures," "Welcome to the Dollhouse" and Adrian Lyne's 1997 remake of "Lolita" (which will be shown here on Showtime and Sundance cable channels in August).

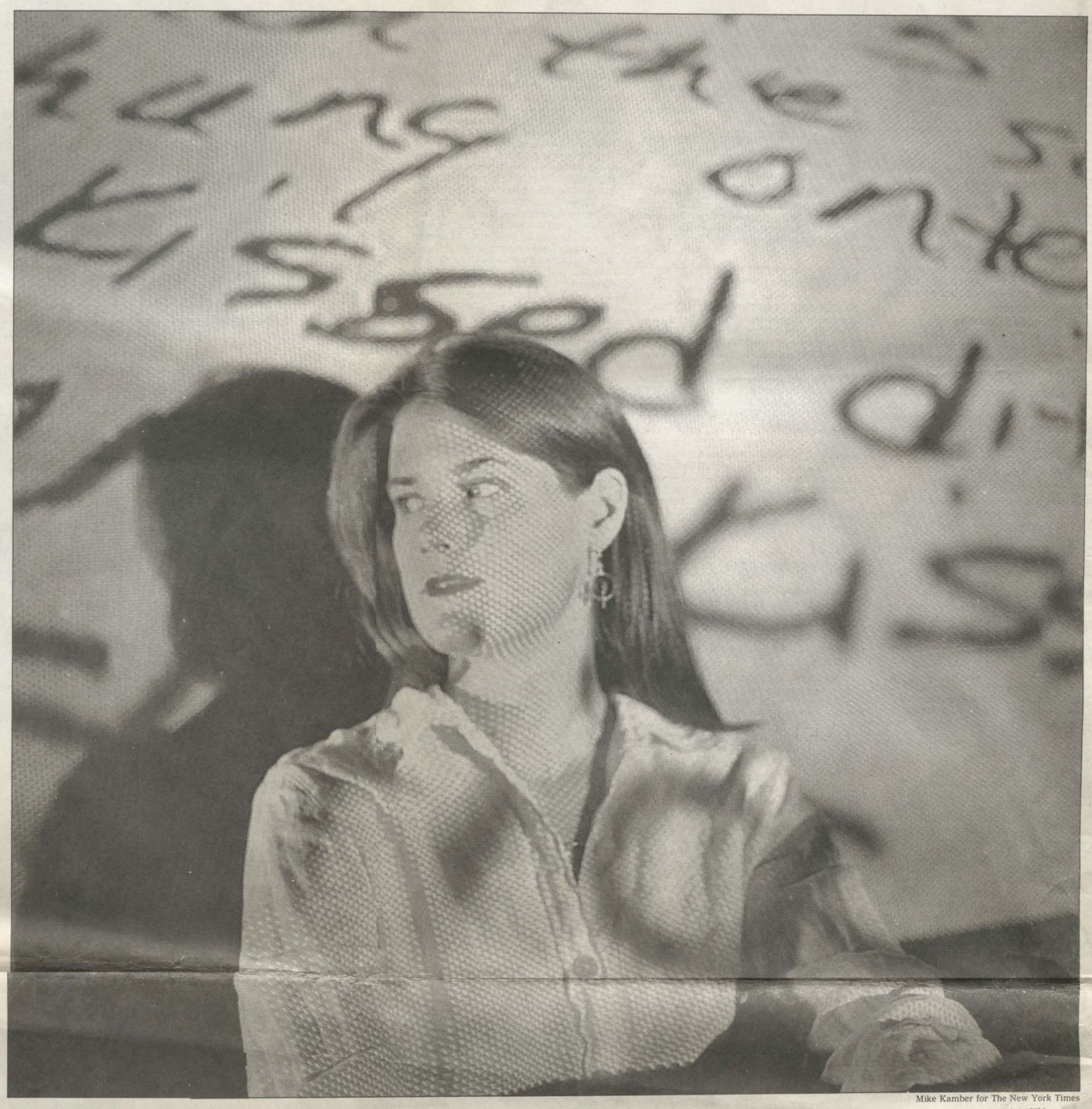
In addition, the proliferation of women's art dealing with intimate memories is the visual corollary to female personal memoirs, the literary genre of the moment. Finally, women artists, whether self-described feminists or not, continue to be interested in issues of female sexuality. Adolescence is a nostalgic and private rather than overtly political way of exploring definitive moments in the development of female identity.

Disavowing any political motivations, but emphasizing a personal fascination with the subject, Ms. Jenkins re-created her teen-age initiation into the rites of sex for "Pitch and Roll," one of three video works featured in her SoHo show.

Excerpting from her seventh-grade journals, Ms. Jenkins panned the pages in close-up video and projects the results onto the gallery walls in large-scale, handwritten "girlie" script. Aching with adolescent pathos, the words reveal an ordinary teen-age girl's quips and quandaries. After French-kissing a boy, she wrote: "He sticks his tongue in much further than most guys. It's not gross, like it sounds. It's pretty good actually."

She also laments that he was the last person to ride on her backyard swing set, which her father had recently given away. "Taking away the swing set is like stealing my childhood. I don't want to grow up!" the 13-year-old wrote defiantly.

Women artists are looking back to their adolescence to explore their identity.



Mike Kamber for The New York Times

DIARY ENTRIES *Amy Jenkins in front of projected pages from a journal she kept as a 13-year-old. They are part of her installation "Pitch and Roll," on view at the Ana Kustera Gallery in SoHo.*

Culling from her teen-age experiences, with one foot in girlhood and the other in womanhood, Ms. Jenkins recreates the predicament of youth in her work. To add visual symbols to its verbal elements, she positioned two four-inch monitors, mounted back to back and rotating on a metal stand, in front of the projected diary entries; one screen presents an open mouth with a swirling tongue, the other a suburban backyard viewed from a rocking swing. An audio track, heightening the sexual tension of the piece, resonates with the sounds of two people kissing, as well as the squeaking of the swing set. Having conjured the twin themes of sexual discovery and lost innocence, Ms. Jenkins said, "This loss can extend to actual objects and places."

Although she uses video — a medium usually associated with remoteness — to re-create intimate events in her life, Ms. Jenkins insists: "The work is not about me. It becomes a stand-in for the general experience of adolescence."

Women who were teen-agers in the post-sexual-revolution period of the 70's grew up in a confusing time when rules regulating female adolescent sexuality were (and still are) vague, being both permissive and prohibitive. As Naomi Wolf writes in her latest book, "Promiscuities: The Secret Struggle for Womanhood," women who were teen-agers in the 50's, brought up in a sheltered world of sexual repression, were expected to remain virgins until they married but rebelled during the era of free love, "finding themselves" by casting off their inhibitions.

Marianne Boesky Gallery

DISCOMFORT *In "Bad Baby," Lisa Yuskavage's girls seem sad, scared, confused and ashamed.*

But those who grew up later, after the pill but before AIDS, were no longer "frustrated virgins." They were expected to have sex, and yet if they did, they were branded promiscuous, and if they did not, they were labeled prudish.

The contradiction between promiscuity and prudishness, between coquetry and coyness, characterizes Lisa Yuskavage's soft-core paintings of teen-age girls. In the "Bad Baby" series of 1992, Ms. Yuskavage, 35, who shows at Marianne Boesky Gallery in SoHo, depicted portraits of pale, fleshy pubescent females gazing wide-eyed at the viewer. Wearing nothing but loose-fitting tops painted the same color — hot pink and grass green — as the backgrounds, the girls blend in with the settings, a metaphor for their frail, emerging identities. Their clothing, draped suggestively, doesn't quite cover their bare bottoms.

Standing in front of the viewer thus exposed, the girls seem sad, scared, confused and ashamed. "My work has always been about things in myself that I feel incredibly uncomfortable with and embarrassed by," Ms. Yuskavage said in a conversation with the painter Chuck Close, published in her 1996 catalogue.

AS the artist's work has matured, so, too, have her subjects. Painted in sugary colors, they now seem more like blow-up love dolls: their bodies have ballooned, their breasts have swelled, their eyes are vacant, their mouths are rouged and puckered. Like parodies of Penthouse pinups, Ms. Yuskavage's teen-agers appear to have internalized the act of being looked at to the point at which they are now only objects after all.

Because female adolescent sexuality is objectified and frequently put on display — in magazines for teen-agers at supermarket checkout lines, in Jenny Jones's television makeovers of "sexy-dressing teens" — pubescent girls have been invested with the power to titillate. In her work, the Los Angeles artist Amy Adler, represented by Casey Kaplan Gallery in SoHo, suggests the ambiguities surrounding sexually precocious young women, who are sometimes both reluctant victims and willing participants in adult fantasies.

In her 1996 installation, "What Happened to Amy?," Ms. Adler, 31, created a series of self-portraits based on snapshots taken of her by an anonymous photographer on a boardwalk when she was 13. In the images, she wears a sun dress, her long, thick hair cascading over her bare shoulders. Looking directly at the viewer, her expression is sometimes kittenish, sometimes bold. While there is nothing sexually explicit about her self-conscious, clichéd poses — balancing on a swing, crouching on the boardwalk or sitting on a toy wagon, knees apart — Ms. Adler conveys the uneasy awareness that here is a pretty young girl who has been coaxed into posing for an older man and is perhaps even flattered by the opportunity.

The exchange of power between the photographer and the subject is further complicated by Ms. Adler's technique: she first draws copies of the snapshots, feeds them back into a computer and then photographs the images, destroying the original drawings.

"My work is about psychology," said Ms. Adler. "The subject is objectified. I put myself in the third person. I'm interested in what the photographer was after, to retell the story by assuming the body of the aggressor." By creating self-portraits through role reversal, Ms. Adler is able to reclaim her teen-age identity, turning an experience of submission into one of control.

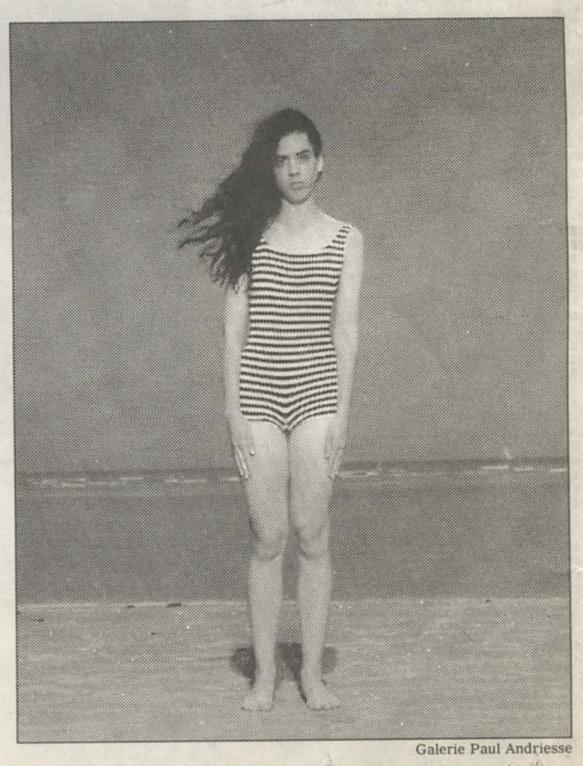
Casey Kaplan Gallery

KITTENISH OR BOLD? *For her 1996 installation "What Happened to Amy?" " Amy Adler created a series of self-portraits based on snapshots taken by an anonymous photographer.*

THE teen-agers in Rineke Dijkstra's large-scale color photographs (5 feet by 4½ feet) have no such luck. From 1992 to 1996, at beaches around the world, Ms. Dijkstra captured gangly girls, and occasionally boys, in full figure, facing the camera, wearing only bathing suits. Their expressions and body language convey either painful discomfort or cocky self-assurance — reactions to being the focus of attention, often wet and practically undressed.

"At a certain age, teen-agers become full of shame," said Ms. Dijkstra, 38, a Dutch photographer who lives in Berlin and is represented by the Paul Andriesse Gallery in Amsterdam. "You are so aware of your body. You don't know how to stand or what to do with your hands. Teen-agers begin to do what adults do, to protect themselves."

In fact, adult identification with adolescent vulnerability — with that first kiss — explains Ms. Dijkstra's interest in teen-age subjects, as well as their appeal to so many artists today. "We can recognize ourselves more easily in teen-agers than in adults because a teen-ager isn't so aware of how to present herself," she said. "It's a universal thing, how you feel as a teen-ager." □



Galerie Paul Andriesse

SHAME *A photograph from Rineke Dijkstra's "Beach Portraits" Jones, 1997.*