

Taking more than candy?

Jill Greenberg's photo technique has Internet bloggers up in arms.

July 24, 2006 | Steven Barrie-Anthony | Times Staff Writer

STEAL a toddler's lollipop and he's bound to start bawling, was photographer Jill Greenberg's thinking. So that's just what Greenberg did to illicit tears from the 27 or so 2- and 3-year-olds featured in her latest exhibition, "End Times," recently at the Paul Kopeikin Gallery in Los Angeles. The children's cherubic faces, illuminated against a blue-white studio backdrop, suggest abject betrayal far beyond the loss of a Tootsie Pop; sometimes tears spill onto naked shoulders and bellies.

The work depicts how children would feel if they knew the state of the world they're set to inherit, explained Greenberg, whose own daughter is featured in the show. "Our government is so corrupt, with all the cronyism and corporate lobbyists," she said. "I just feel that our world is being ruined. And the environment -- when I was pregnant, I kept thinking that I'd love to have a tuna fish sandwich, but I couldn't because we've ruined our oceans."

"End Times" debuted in Los Angeles in April (a portion was previously posted to the gallery site, www.PaulKopeikinGallery.com), and soon thereafter an Internet brouhaha broke out that has continued to this day. Bloggers such as Andrew Peterson called Greenberg's lollipop technique abusive and exploitative, while Greenberg, her husband, Robert Green, and gallery owner Paul Kopeikin defended the work, the process and one another. The conversation, cycling between rational and hyperbolic, says as much about Net communication as about the art in question.

"Jill Greenberg is a Sick Woman Who Should Be Arrested and Charged With Child Abuse," Peterson wrote under his pseudonym Thomas Hawk at ThomasHawk.com, a blog that focuses on new media and technology. For Peterson, Greenberg's technique was "evil."

"When the Michael Jackson trial was going on, people kept saying, 'What kind of parents would let their child spend the night alone in a room with Michael Jackson?' " wrote Peterson, an investment advisor from San Francisco. "It seemed absurd. And it seems absurd that any parent who loved their child would purposefully take their children to Greenberg's studio to then be tormented to the point of emotional outrage."

Green responded with an e-mail that Peterson appended to his blog: "I'm married to the artist in question. With that said, some facts: Jill did not 'abuse' the children.... The parents were there monitoring the whole time. This is the *exact* technique used in ads and movies and TV." Cordial at first, but later, on his own blog, AnotherGreenWorld .blogspot.com, Green wrote of Peterson: "He has no morals, no ethics, nothing that would make me recognize him as a fellow human being."

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'Much ado'

THE mixture of debate and invective spilled into the mass media -- the New York Times, the Sydney Morning Herald, Slate -- sidestepping the art world almost entirely. Few photographers or art experts, when questioned, seemed to take umbrage with Greenberg's technique.

"It's much ado about nothing," said CalArts professor of art and photography Jo Ann Callis. "Jill was trying to create a metaphor between a child crying, looking desperate, and the times. It's a perfectly logical thing to do. She should just have lied," Callis said with a laugh, "about how she did it."

But while the art academies slumbered, bloggers worked overtime, debating far and wide across the informal syndicate that is the blogosphere. Internet users without their own sites took up residency in the comments section of Peterson's and Green's blogs, often under the shroud of anonymity; some even found websites that Greenberg and Green had made for their children -- so that family could keep track of the kids' photos -- and wrote nasty comments in the guest books.

The anonymity of their opponents enraged Greenberg and Green. "What this has unleashed, this inchoate rage that's prevalent in the Internet atmosphere," Green said, "has a lot to do with anonymity and power, the ability to express sentiments online that you cannot express to someone's face." So Green did some Internet sleuthing using the "whois" database (accessible at Whois.net) to look up the registrant of the domain Thomas Hawk.com, thus unveiling Peterson as the man behind the pseudonym.

Green promptly posted Peterson's true identity on the relevant blogs, and then he took it further, noting that Peterson was writing blog posts during the workday and calling Peterson's employer to complain. Peterson reported the development on his blog, and super-blog BoingBoing.net picked up the battle cry. "Greenberg and her husband have threatened to sue [Peterson] for libel and called his employer," the post read. Peterson's "response is a good one: He argues that if they disagree with him, they should disagree with him, not attempt to silence him."