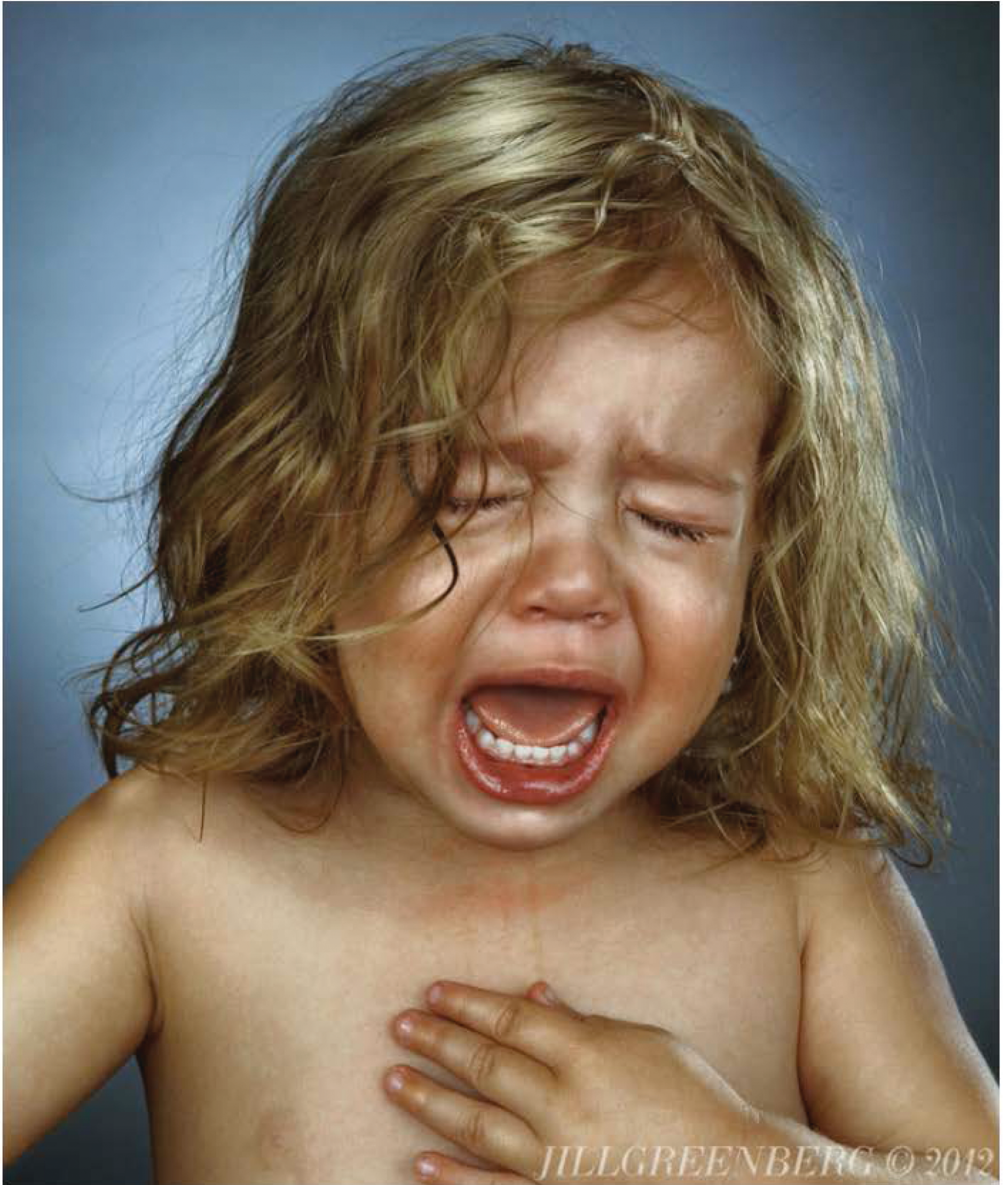


Jill Greenberg: It's Not Like Taking Candy From a Baby

By Chris Reid on June 4, 2013



Kids cry, as a parent that's a simple fact that you'll get to learn pretty fast. They don't do it cause they hate you or cause they're mad, they do it because, for them, talking is about the hardest thing they can imagine when all those emotions/desires come rushing through. So you get used to it, sometimes you laugh, you pick them up, give 'em a hug and keep on trucking. That's life for most parents, if you're lucky you get some great shots of them in all their craziness and they end up in a slideshow at their wedding.

Not for **Jill Greenberg**, as a mom and talented photographer, crying children are a much more interesting and complex subject. Since posting the **End Times** series on FullyM we've seen a visceral reaction from the interwebs (just read the comments below) with typical opinions landing squarely in two camps: she's mean or she's a great photographer shooting kids being kids. Her experience with this photo shoot reads almost like a hollywood plot, filled with conspiracy, intrigue, money, politics and threats. Before you tell us what you think read on.

Since the fine art series launched in 2006 and showed to rave reviews in NY, Toronto, Rome and LA it has become something of an internet sensation. Andrew Peterson a Bay area blogger under the pseudonym Thomas Hawk charged Jill as a **sick woman**, saying "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?' " continuing "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.". Everyone from the Guardian to ABC news, NY Time and the LA Times picked up on it and the opinions poured in.

Those strong words were echoed thousands of times and not just once but for the last 8 years the series has taken on a life of its own. The photos have been continually popping up around the interwebs with the mean spirited self-righteous masses piling on their distaste for Jill's photos of upset little ones.

It all started in 2005 when Jill was photographing a little girl, her brother was also at the set and Jill wanted some shots of him, problem was he had a dirty shirt, like everyone else his age, and wasn't set to be photographed. So they improvised, shirt off, lights on, camera ready and he cried, he didn't like it one bit. That spoiled old shirt was what he wanted to wear and he wouldn't have it any other way so he did what very little ones do, he cried, some photos were snapped, the shirt went back on and (I'm making this part up) Gelato ensued. When the contact sheets came back Jill had something special. A little boy, captured in Jill's trademark glossy lighting goodness looking about as sad as any human could be. When Jill looked at the photo she thought something funny, something sad, something that echoed the voice of liberal America: crap, another 4 years of GWB, it was like this child knew.

That was the inspiration for End Times, a fine art shoot that Jill would fund herself and hope to showcase around the world. She enlisted the help of her 18mos daughter and her friends and their children all aged 2-3 years old. The first shots happened in 2005, she was pregnant with her son, her son was shot 2 years later to be included in the set.

The problem with Jill's photographs aren't that she harmed children in the process or that's she's mean, and we'll get to the details of her shoot in a bit. Its that most people aren't used to seeing such graphic, glossy, ultra-real photos of a kid crying; we're used to the 20fps, tired mom and dad, blink of the eye, ear piercing version. We see, we forget and we move on. Even when we do manage to grab a crappy Instagram version of our kids, after we tell them that yes you need to eat your broccoli if you want a cookie, the photos we take simply suck. Jill's photos don't suck, they capture in horrifying detail a normal child crying and amplify it into a crazed, painful portrait of sadness that you can't take your eyes off. Thats the difference, that is why she is an artist and we use Snapchat.

In fact her photos have captured such raw emotion and such visceral reaction that she's not just getting hounded by the anonymous hoards at Reddit, or being emailed threats but also being ripped off left right and center.

First though, the photo shoot. Jill never took candy from her friends kids. The kids had candy given to them and it was requested back by the parents or the siblings. Requested back, not stolen but simply asked for; for many children that was all it took, the gentlest of suggestion that sent the kids over. Was it mean? As a parent of two I'm not sure it was, it wasn't nice in the right here, right now sense, but those are some amazing photos and I would love to have some great photos of my kid in every emotion, including being sad. I think that's maybe what's key here. People are taking these photos out of context like those are the only ones that will ever be taken of these children. These are a couple out of 10s of thousands of photos these parents will have, and they capture something very real about childhood, something worth keeping.

Many of the kids played it up, melodrama in overdrive and Jill was there to capture it all. Some though, didn't play along, they sat there and handed the candy back and forth like a hot potato all the while looking unimpressed. There was one wonderful little girl, Ava, who Jill hoped would be in the series, but even after two shoots the girl wouldn't budge. That was it, she didn't get featured and they didn't do anything mean to get her to cry. Of course most of the time the kids weren't crying they were just sitting there like kids do and when they did cry it lasted for a few second and then turned to smiles. Its hard to remember when you look at these photos that time passes but the contact sheets tell a different story.

When talking to Jill I had thought that would be it, cover the real backdrop and set the story straight, but there was much more to this story than I thought. Yes she had to deal with thousands of people calling her a child abuser, and the the constant reminder that the interwebs had forgotten that these were real kids with real parents. She even grew to understand that the news cycle thought it would be good for ad impressions to attack her and her photos even if it was unbalanced journalism. All of that hurt, and as difficult as it was she got used to the sad viral nature of today's buzzfeed journalism and moved on. Problem was no one else moved on, she had created was awesome and brands and ad agencies liked it, a lot.

Jill is a both a fine art photographer and a commercial photographer. She has some incredible commercial work, different and better in some ways than her fine art photography. There are lots of photographers who love commercial work and it provides a legitimate playground to showcase your style and get paid for it, but in the end commercial work pays the bills and fine art photography pays the soul.

The requests from ad agencies on all sorts of campaigns to use her crying kids started to come in. She got a call for one on child abuse. Imagine after all the nonsense surrounding the series and some ad agency thinks it would be a great idea to use photos of your friends kids as the poster child for abuse. The mockup featured one of the children being strangled, she refused and they ran ahead with it anyhow, paying an artist to imitate her work.

Ad agencies paying another photographer to fake the work of someone more talented is nothing new, often with much poorer results only to save a few thousand bucks. For Jill and End Times it became a bit of a problem, from anti-vaccination propaganda to Swiss and Estonian political campaigns, amusement parks and android apps Jill's series was a hot item that no one wanted to pay for.

For a fine art photographer who needs commercial photography income, you're left in a major conundrum. The ad agency makes 90% of the decision, the direction, the look and which photographer to hire. If they wanted the real Jill Greenberg lighting effect they have to pay, so instead they hire a copycat who will try to replicate her look. That's where it gets crappy cause that same agency that might rip you off is the same agency dangling next months potential contract in front of you. So you smile and pretend it's okay even when it's not.

In the end though Jill has created something polarizing, something beautiful. She set out to do something fun and memorable with her friends and her kids and it blew up in a bad way, that's the shit part. The good news is her work shines through, it's powerful, and although I can't talk about some of the brands that have ripped her off for legal reasons, I can tell you they should have gone with the real deal because the copied work kinda sucks.

Take time to debate on whether you would want these kind of photos as keepsakes for your kids, and be sure to checkout Jill's incredible art photography books and her [art](#) and [commercial](#) websites.

And here is the original article that appeared on FullyM on June 4th by Meredith Taylor that sparked the heated conversation.

We've all heard the expression, "...like taking candy from a baby", but we probably would never consider doing so.

Photographer, [Jill Greenberg](#) had no issues with teasing her child subjects with candy and then photographing their reactions after she takes the candy away.

The results are pretty predictable – crying children. The photo series called "End Times" seems a bit cruel and has caused some controversy for Jill. I know if I had children, I wouldn't let them participate in Jill's photo shoot. I must admit though, my sinister side laughed a little inside (just a little...).

I think the most interesting thing about this photo series is that Jill captures raw emotion, which is definitely a difficult task, that probably couldn't be achieved with adults.

What do you think? Is the series cruel or justified?

Update June 13th 2013 1:30pm: The photographer Jill Greenberg has contacted us to clear up some mistakes in our original article. She did not give these kids the lollipops personally, it was the children's mothers who asked for the candy back, gently. Jill only photographed their reactions.