

# THE SWEETEST TABOO

THE  
SWEETEST  
FRIEKE  
JANSSENS TABOO

# PREFACE

In this carefully conceived book, Frieke Janssens sequences images of stylish children undertaking adult behavior, befuddled animals in sad, awkward and funny tableaux, and the stunning alteration caused by a chalk bath to tidy boys. These quirky, emotional, and intentionally confusing presentations are tempered by cool gravestone portraits of people imagining their own death, followed by a cinematic series of sexualized huntresses in mythic pursuit of mates as prey.

All of these photographs arrest us. They literally stop us in our tracks, forcing a second look. They make us uncomfortable; they strike us with reminders of sex, death, and loss of control, presented in forms we could not have expected. The images are beautiful, faultlessly detailed, and more perfect than anything we could find in the world around us. They are piercingly, believably, heartbreakingly real, yet so patently imagined, envisioned and staged that they become art works for which the word “surreal” might have been coined.

The staged photograph has occupied a lengthy and significant place in the history of photography, employing photography’s appearance of truth to construct powerful fictions. Oscar Gustav Rejlander’s *Two Ways of Life* (1857), for example, assembled and printed multiple negatives of posed models to

construct a complex allegory contrasting a life of vice and dissolution with one of civic virtue and Christian charity, a common theme in the popular painting and writing of the period. Julia Margaret Cameron, on the other hand, adopted what would later come to be called the “directorial mode,” posing her costumed family members, friends, neighbors and servants in scenes from such works as Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1874). These early works are essentially literary, visualizing an imagined narrative based on bible stories, epic poetry and Victorian popular culture in the same way that recent work by Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall utilizes the contemporary visual vocabularies of film stills and advertising.

Janssens’ elaborate fictions combine their seductive appearance with unsettling subject matter. The familiar syntax of her perfectly lit, impeccably composed, carefully accessorized tableaux is one we know well from the image glut that inundates us in high-end magazines, billboards and the like. We have learned to receive pictures that look and feel this way with complacency and the lack of critical judgment such familiarity breeds, so we are doubly confounded when they portray shocking and counterintuitive subjects. This intentional disconnect empowers these images with a dynamism that forces us to look, look away, and look again. —>

Having forced us to pay attention, with both our intellectual and our emotional sensibilities, Janssens can then set about her real business as a storyteller. Even the stylized portraits of SMOKING KIDS —perhaps the stillest images in this volume— demand narrative explanation. We ask “Who are these little adults?” “What caused them to appear as they do?” “What are they performing/selling/imitating?” “What are they thinking?” “How should I think/feel about them?” Similarly, YOUR LAST SHOT combines the softened and perfected lines of conventional portraiture with a starker universal tale of mortality and its confrontation. By presenting forbidden subjects in this compelling way, Janssens gives us permission to look, and offers a fresh way to engage with dark and difficult ideas.

Alison Nordström

Freelance writer and curator,  
former Senior Curator of Photographs  
at George Eastman House

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# SMOKING KIDS

N°1 2011

"BETWEEN 80,000 AND 100,000 CHILDREN WORLDWIDE START SMOKING EVERY DAY."  
"A DEATH CAUSED BY TOBACCO OCCURS EVERY 8 SECONDS."

In 2010, Frieke Janssens stumbled upon a video posted on YouTube of a chubby Indonesian two-year-old smoking one cigarette after another, totaling an average of two packs a day. Recognizing the many socio-cultural differences between East and West, the artist's plan to confront the Western viewer with such conflicting, surreal images grew and she departed on her new artistic mission. *SMOKING KIDS* is the title of her somewhat controversial photographic project. Fifteen children aged between the ages of four and nine pose in a startlingly adult manner in front of the camera, each smoking a cigarette, a cigar or a pipe. They look as if they have stepped right out of a 1960s TV show, which lends the images a modestly theatrical, retro quality, but also something whimsical and otherworldly. The effect of these photos on the viewer has proved to be both overwhelming and diverse. Since their inauguration at the artist's representing Gallery Ingrid Deuss (ANTWERP, BELGIUM) in 2011, the art world has quickly responded with fascination and admiration for this bold series of photographs, resulting in consecutive exhibitions in Brussels (BELGIUM), Vladivostok (RUSSIA), Chicago and New York (USA). Simultaneously, the images traveled the web and appeared and reappeared in blogs, forums, and other open discussion websites where comments of disbelief and concern predominated. Unaware of the skilful Photoshop tricks the artist applied to the photos, once again, people condemned [THIS] contemporary art for being shocking and manipulative. Now it even appeared to drag children down the abyss of its sensation-seeking ambitions.

But Janssens' photographs are really anything but: they manage to hold an almost perfect balance between something we consider to be ugly and wrong (the habit of smoking and children who have developed that habit) and an aesthetically pleasing image. Although many among us will condemn and frown upon the pictured action, Janssens' SMOKING KIDS are likeable, clever and thought-provoking, as all good art should be. —→



AS A PHOTOGRAPHER, I AM ATTRACTED BY THE DARK BEAUTY AND SENSUAL GESTURES ASSOCIATED WITH SMOKING CIGARETTES, THAT ARE FREQUENTLY USED IN VISUAL CULTURE –FROM JAZZ ALBUM COVERS TO FILM NOIR AND THE GLAMOR DURING THE GOLDEN AGE OF HOLLYWOOD. WITH ITS ORIGINS IN MY OWN DESIRE AND PAINFUL ATTEMPTS TO STOP SMOKING, I CAME ACROSS A VIDEO POSTED ON YOUTUBE, OF A CHUBBY INDONESIAN TWO-YEAR-OLD WHO WAS SMOKING ONE CIGARETTE AFTER THE OTHER, TOTALING AN AVERAGE OF TWO PACKS A DAY. I RECOGNIZED THE MANY SOCIO-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST, MORE SPECIFICALLY THE ENDURANCE OF THE PHENOMENON OF SMOKING CHILDREN VERSUS AN ABSOLUTE TABOO. LOOKING AT THESE COMPLETELY DIVERGENT VIEWS THAT ARE SO DEPENDENT ON THEIR CONTEXT, IT REALLY MADE SENSE TO UNDERTAKE THIS SERIES.





The visual impact of a photograph can be potentially so intriguing that it has the capacity to challenge our personal and shared critical opinions. Parallel to working on her artistic projects, Janssens is a widely celebrated photographer of campaigns for diverse, nationally significant cultural institutions and projects. She is one of the few successful contemporary photographers who, assignment after assignment, have managed to stay faithful to their own artistic style and vision. The perfectness of the image in *SMOKING KIDS*, the care with which the artist selected the costumes, her sharp eye for details like accessories, the different hairstyles, the varied poses and the suggested emotions as well as the clever manipulations of the cigarette's smoke, again prove how Janssens strives for the creation of images that are as recognizable, as attention-grabbing and as perfect as possible. From her impressive engagement she exploits her growing artistic talent and technical expertise to produce images that make a difference and are truly intriguing. The ingenious ambiguities in the work of Frieke Janssens are an added value and clearly spark the curiosity of large groups of people both locally and worldwide.

Jan Van Woensel  
Independent curator and writer





















# COLOPHON



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Except for the photography mentioned under 'OTHER IMAGES' in the CREDITS section p.135

PREFACE Alison Nordström

ESSAY Patrick Baert

SERIES TEXTS Kung-Gene Chu, Sofie Crabbé, Jan van Woensel

BEYOND PHOTOGRAPHY TEXTS Sofie Crabbé

COPY-EDITING Kate Mayne

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If you have any questions or comments about the material in this book, please do not hesitate to contact our editorial team: [MARKEDTEAM@LANNOO.COM](mailto:MARKEDTEAM@LANNOO.COM)

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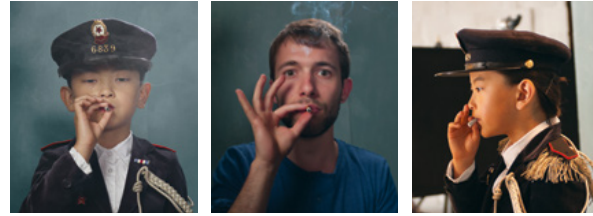
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# STATEMENT

Of the photographer  
about SMOKING KIDS



With SMOKING KIDS I wanted to raise questions about the meaning of smoking: what it meant in the past and what it will mean in the future. It is interesting to monitor the social change around smoking.

But the series is even more about context and contradiction. I took smoking out of its context. I suppose in some eastern countries it will be less surreal to see the SMOKING KIDS series, because they are used to seeing kids smoke, hence the image that triggered me for shooting the series.

There were no real cigarettes on set. Instead, chalk and sticks of cheese were used as props, while candles and incense provided the wisps of smoke. – FRIEKE JANSSENS