

## **The Integrated Families of *Mixed Blood*: More “At Home” Than Ever Before**

CYJO's *Mixed Blood* series depicts a waypoint in humanity's progress toward a more integrated society, with the family unit as its base -- as represented by specific families in two of the world's most influential nations.

*Mixed Blood* is a group of photographs and texts created by CYJO between 2010 and 2013. It portrays families with children of “mixed” races, ethnicities, and cultures in New York City and Beijing.

These photographs and narratives compel us to consider the distance our societies have traveled in our understanding of race, ethnicity and identity, as well as the distance we have yet to close, in our journey toward a more unified culture.

The families in *Mixed Blood* present the unprecedented diversity of human relationships, and the increased blending of races and cultures, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the same time, the series suggests the evolving role of individuals and families in defining their own unique identities and shaping their own values in ways that use race and ethnicity as a partial frame, but that also begin – literally and physically, but also mentally, emotionally, and socially – to blur traditional lines and create new categories and connections.

Certainly, the very subject of the series acknowledges that background, race, ethnicity and culture continue to be important factors in how individuals are assessed by society, and how individuals themselves explain their affiliations and experiences. At the same time, however, CYJO's series hints that, despite living in two very different hemispheres, countries, societies and cities, the urban families in *Mixed Blood* are experiencing a similar and growing autonomy -- a greater capacity for self expression and self-invention -- than those of previous generations.

Their eyes meet ours directly, without an oblique or downcast gaze. -Sons and daughters, ranging in age from infancy to adulthood. -Fathers, some barely men; others gray with age. -Mothers, some with infants in their arms, and others standing beside their grown children.

Some of these families appear to be missing one of the parents. Still, the presence of the family in CYJO's strong familial home environments contrasts with the work of photographers who have shown the home without the complete family unit - from the empty feeling of grand homes in Ireland, where the kids have long since grown up and left the parents alone in Andrew Bush's *Bonnettstown* series, to the made-for-TV fantasy of the modern home life in Miriam Bäckström's *Set Constructions* series.

CYJO's images capture the members of each nuclear family in their domestic environment – literally and figuratively “at home” with each other. Some were taken on or close to a special occasion, for example a second birthday marked by a

large silver cellophane balloon in the shape of the number 2 floating above the fireplace mantel in “The Valter Family,” 2010. In other instances, the family appears ready to turn in for the night: lights turned off, darkened windows in the background, as in “The Huang Rierson Family,” 2013.

The texts that were created with each photograph also allow these families to speak for themselves and tell their stories in an even more controlled fashion.

Taken together, the images and texts in *Mixed Blood* pose a series of compelling questions.

***Who watches us? Who do we allow into our space? Who frames us?***

The distance the photographer has selected could be considered a respectful, or at least an impersonal one: each individual is visible in his or her totality, from the feet up, with no cropping or close-ups.

In recent years, some photographers – notably Sally Mann in her *Family Pictures* series and Martine Fougeron with her *Teen Tribe* series, including “Sleepover Party” – have presented unsettlingly intimate, sensual portraits of their own children from youth to adolescence; images that raise questions about privacy and the risk of exploitation in the family environment.

In contrast, CYJO’s *Mixed Blood* portrays families that have agreed to open their lives to an outside artist, in order to capture a specific moment in time, and the camera in the series maintains the somewhat formal distance of a visitor.

The viewer will likely feel more comfortable catching these explicitly permitted glimpses into the lives of these family members, who are aware of being observed and who return our gaze directly. They have invited the artist – and, by implication, us – to examine the idea of mixed ethnicities and multi-cultural children, not in the abstract, but as exemplified by real lives.

Nor do they come across as the subjects of some ethnographic experiment, selected as “types” for study in the manner of the charged 19<sup>th</sup> century daguerreotypes appropriated by Carrie May Weems in her series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-96). That series used images originally commissioned by Louis Agassiz, a Swiss naturalist, who intended to use portraits of slaves in the American South to support a racist agenda and contend for the inferiority of Africans. Weems re-photographed and altered the images, adding color and text to undercut the original intent and change the narrative.

In *Mixed Blood*, CYJO makes it clear that she is interested in depicting individual examples, exploring current perspectives and charting possible trends, in opposition to the pseudo-scientific approach of previous centuries, where a

presumed expert from outside a race or culture set out to catalogue, define and often denigrate another group.

CYJO's work is not about capturing ethnographic archetypes or advancing ideological positions. Her work can be seen as part of a modern trend for artists to tell their own stories and construct their own narratives, providing a richer and more nuanced view of issues of race and identity.

With *Mixed Blood* and previous series, like the *KYOPO* project, she creates images and presents experiences in partnership with contemporary subjects, and amplifies the images with some explanatory text. *Mixed Blood* includes a series of brief interviews with representatives of each family, enabling her subjects to speak directly for themselves – to be, in some degree, the interpreters of their own experiences and to control in a significant measure how they are depicted and understood by viewers.

By appearing voluntarily in their home setting, surrounded by items of daily use and personal meaning, and in clothes they chose for themselves, these families had a greater role in how they are depicted than the standard “candid” images – although photographers always have played, and continue to play with what is candid and what is posed, staged, or otherwise manipulated. Contrast CYJO's approach to the work of other contemporary photographers who use the studio, props, or artificial backgrounds, such as Grace Lau's “21<sup>st</sup> Century Types,” 2005, or Colby Katz's “Rayne-Lin, Little Miss Firecracker, L.A.,” 2006.

The subjects of CYJO's series appear to be collaborators with the photographer, to a significant degree: to have played part in literally “composing” themselves for the camera.

***Who stands with us? What makes us who we are? Where are the borders of our lives?***

These images are just as arresting for what the subjects are *not* doing. Visually and metaphorically, each person stands apart in this series. Other than the five instances of mothers holding their infants, and one of a toddler crawling on the floor, all of the figures stand side by side, not touching. They are not pressed shoulder to shoulder; they do not embrace, overlap or hold hands.

In a series with a title that suggests consanguinity, heredity, inheritance, transmission – it is all the more striking that each image seems to consciously acknowledge that families are composed of distinct individuals. It would be difficult to come away from our visual encounters with these families convinced that race, culture or ethnicity, blood or biology, is the sole determining factor in an individual's maturity or development.

In previous centuries, societies attempted to categorize mixed-race individuals, depending on the proportion of the mixture, in order to apply associated rules, restrictions and layers of discrimination – leading to repugnant terms from mulatto and quadroon and octoroon for children of mixed Caucasian and African or Aboriginal ancestry, in places like the United States and Australia, to “half-breed” for children of American Indian and Caucasian parents.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such immoral policies have largely been struck down, but their legacy lingers, and while individual nations are advancing in the struggle for racial equality, the battle is far from over. And racial wounds reopen, and prejudices resurface with troubling regularity. By confronting us with real people, and multiple families, CYJO shows her viewers that mixed race families present as many differences as they do similarities. Her work serves to challenge the idea that similar circumstances – or similar blood – can be predictive across families.

In *Mixed Blood*, our eyes roam the backgrounds, searching for clues of affinity and connection: striking upon a girl’s fuchsia pink bicycle; a large horned taxidermy animal head; a hanging mobile; an electric red guitar. We see items on shelves and organized neatly in cubbies; toys laid out on a green play carpet; or an artist’s abstract painted canvas.

With the exception of a couple of male grins, the expressions on the faces are unemotional and unexcited. However, these parents and their children appear inquisitive, and their gazes are more than penetrating; they are asking us in; inviting a conversation with us; examining us, while we pore over the details not only of their homes but also of themselves.

Almost all are in socks or bare feet. Most of the men are in blue jeans or khakis, and most of the women are in dresses or skirts. The children are in a wide range of clothing except for one notable exception where two boys are bare-chested and one of them is in his underwear in “The Doyle Family,” 2010.

They are lit as if they are on a stage, with frontal lighting that highlights the figure, allowing the family to predominate the context. There is no sign of natural light. And because the lighting is coming from the photographer, no external influence of time can be found in the portraits. The images appear time-less: the viewer can't determine if it's morning, day, or night. CYJO frames the light, time, and text-creating a more intimate family setting with no other external influences.

Family members are posed in descending order of height, from left to right; with the exception of “The Malik Family,” 2013, where the individuals form a V-shape, with the shortest in the middle, flanked by the taller members on either side.

CYJO’s images, and the space between the individuals, suggest that the nature and boundaries of racial and ethnic identification are, incrementally, becoming more of a personal choice than a socially imposed condition in today’s society. There remain

countless instances of intense prejudice, racial injustice, and cultural insensitivity, but perhaps the families in *Mixed Blood* suggest for us that, as mixed families and individuals grow as a percentage of the world's overall population, their very presence may increasingly begin to disrupt and overrule those forces in an existential way – that the capacity for self-definition and reinvention may ultimately trump outworn modes and manners.

***Who loves us? Who accepts us? Where do we live? What is home?***

The people depicted in *Mixed Blood* appear fairly at ease with each other and confident in their own identities. As we look, we wonder how these families, apparently so willing to be captured on film today, might have looked and felt in 1920 or 1960? How many such families would have existed in New York and China, or elsewhere in the world? How have shifting racial attitudes, social values, and even legal codes, changed the life these families can create, enjoy, and share with us through their portraits?

Earlier depictions of mixed couples come to mind, like “Day Laborer and Wife,” 1936, by Carl Mydans. This migrant couple is walking on the road, carrying their belongings. Do they have a safe place to go? Is their transience the result of more than economic hardship; has their very love for each other, in the face of harsher prejudice, kept them moving from town to town?

In “Artisan and His Wife, Sonora Desert,” 1979, by Graciela Iturbide, another outdoor image recalls the mixture – and also the socio-economic stratification – of different races in the post-colonial Americas. CYJO's settled families at home are a far cry from these images.

CYJO's view from within the interracial nuclear family and the home-circle, is also interesting when juxtaposed with several generations' portrayals of women of color with the white children for whom they serve as nannies.

For example, in a series from the 1960s, David Goldblatt documented life in the apartheid-era South African townships. Several powerful images capture black women who are deeply responsible for their white charges, but without equal rights or social justice. Often, such caregivers have faced the heartbreaking dilemma of raising their employers' children in ways that required heartbreaking absences from their own sons and daughters.

It is likely that the parents in CYJO's series, whether pictured singly or together, and whatever other challenges they encounter, need face no such fraught relationships or painful choices.

In many places in the world, and until quite recently, men and women of different races were not allowed to socialize, much less to fall in love; to marry; to start a

family. The fate of some who defied those rules was grim indeed – for themselves and their children.

Encountering CYJO's images, we may wonder about the impact on today's mixed race children of being raised by families more secure in their differences and in cultures more prepared to accept them.

Looking from the *Mixed Blood* series to an image like Goldblatt's "The Farmer's Son with His Nursemaid," from 1964, we wonder how the children CYJO depicts may differ, in their sense of identity, from a child who grows up with a deep awareness of segregation, while perhaps also feeling closer to a caregiver on the other side of that racial divide than to his or her own parents? The same questions are posed by the work of numerous photographers, including Ernest Cole and Bruce Davidson, who documented race relations in the American south in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And, in her affecting recent series "Substitutes," the photographer Ellen Jacob shows how many wealthy U.S. families today still hire nannies of another race to raise their children, and how close the bond can be between these women and children.

In a world where more than half of the population is living in cities for the first time in human history, a safe and stable sense of home has never been more important. And yet so many contemporary artists depict a home life that appears fractured and fragile, as in Nick Waplington's *Living Room* series and Nan Goldin's deeply lonely autobiographical portraits of home and relationships.

In CYJO's work, however, home life appears largely placid and solid.

***Who are we? Where have we come from? Where are we going?***

*Mixed Blood* portrays families together, and reminds us of our shared journey.

CYJO's sitters' eyes stare back at us. Who are we? Where have we come from? What journey brought us face to face with these families? Where are we standing? Have we come into *their* homes? And do we now stand with them, part of their journey?

For centuries, human civilizations have grappled with the question of race. Some nations and cultures have maintained, at least on the surface, considerable homogeneity, while others, like the United States, have evolved some measure of pride in their designation as a "melting pot" – though the reality of the immigrant experience is always more complex.

But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, populations are more mobile than ever; technology enables instant communication with all corners of the globe in ways that can increase mutual awareness and understanding; and many racially restrictive barriers from Jim Crow laws in the U.S. to the apartheid system in South Africa have been outlawed and excoriated, paving the way for reconciliation and the truer realization of equal justice and social mobility. And historically racial, tribal and cultural

affiliations have just as often served to divide humanity as they have to protect values, preserve cultures, and unite peoples.

Nonetheless, CYJO's work makes us consider what might happen as more and more people gain the freedom to choose who to love, where to live, how to raise their children, and how to define their identity in ways inconceivable in the past.

By documenting the current state of this evolution in two major international cities, the artist makes us question whether we may yet reach a point where our sense of integration, of community, of connectedness reaches even farther than the sense of a melting pot neighborhood or nation, to a radical new sense of the *family* and the *individual* as the point where race and culture and a host of other influences can combine in transformative new ways.

In short, the questions inherent in CYJO's *Mixed Blood* series – some of which are explored above – lead to a final one:

Where might we, the human family, go *together* from here?

- Nik Apostolides  
*Curator*