

Touch Grass: A Review of *Liz's Childhood Computer: 2003 – 2005* at Prairie

After recovering photographs, school assignments, videos, and digital collages from her childhood computer, artist Liz Vitlin reflects on girlhood, consciousness, and online image-making.

By Emeline Boehringer | November 21, 2022



Image: In a corner of the gallery, a Sony CRT monitor plays a video of a figure wearing jeans, a purple shirt rolled up to reveal their stomach. The figure's head is out of frame. Image courtesy of Liz Vitlin and Prairie.

Before 18 months of age, infants are generally unable to recognize themselves in a mirror; their reflection has spatial depth and visual presence, but isn't connected to an inherent "me"-ness. In Western psychology, the arrival of self-awareness is measured by the "mark test," in which a baby is plopped down in front of a mirror with a colorful post-it affixed to her forehead. If the baby, seeing her own reflection, reaches up and grabs the post-it, that piece of paper transforms into a one-way ticket from the world of the infant to the world of the child, a budding self-consciousness that latches onto predictable routines: school, play, family.

But when do we begin to recognize ourselves in all of our other reflections, the non-*irl* ones? A good question for Liz Vitlin.

Vitlin's exhibition at Prairie, *Liz's Childhood Computer: 2003 – 2005* (September 24 – November 6, 2022) is composed of photographs, school assignments, videos, and digital collages made by the artist as an 8-year-old, recovered from the hard drive of her childhood computer. Selected by Vitlin as a grown-up artist, these artworks represent an "engagement with the digital archive of her younger self," according to the exhibition's accompanying essay, giving the impression of a collaboration across time. Vitlin, curating and interpreting her childhood artwork, presents a selective portrait of her younger self exploring the virtual "mirror stage," trying on different costumes, poses, expressions, and mannerisms in the reflection of the personal-computer seeing eye. The images retain just enough peculiarity — the traces of child Liz's personality, likes, dislikes, and humor — to prevent dissolution into a sociological study of white, middle-class girlhood, and return always back to the uncanny sensation of watching the artist converse with herself.

Think about it for a while and the exhibition begins to recall *Being John Malkevich*: adult Liz watching little Liz watching... computer Liz. At the heart of this rabbit hole is not the distilled essence of Vitlin's adult or childhood self, but a third person, as the exhibition essay notes, located in "a computer somewhere in-between."

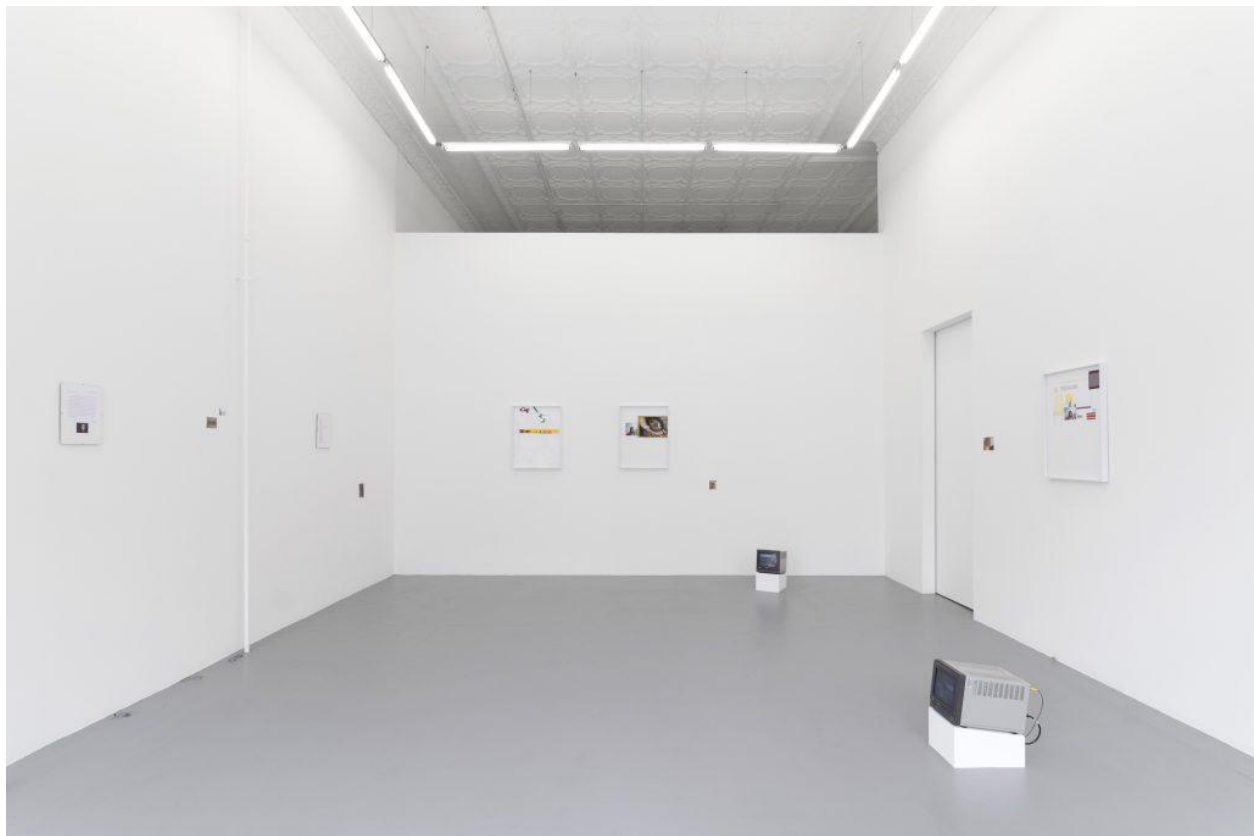


Image: Installation view of *Liz's Childhood Computer: 2003 – 2005*. A white-walled gallery space with several framed works hung on each wall and two CRT monitors on the right side of the room. Courtesy of the artist and Prairie.

Case in point: *Doc5.doc [March 22, 2003], 2002*, a Word composition that pairs a self-portrait of a downcast child Liz in a blue and white shirt sitting on a floral bedspread with a large swamp-green rectangle framing a pixelated, wide-eyed bushbaby. The bushbaby furtively peers out of a tree cavity, its amphibian hands grasping the outer edge of the den and supporting an ear so alert that the anticipated next moment, the light speed flee of a small mammal seen or startled, feels already imminent.

The tense bug-like attention of the bushbaby is, at first, contrasted by the gentle Sad Portrait. Child Liz casts her gaze downwards, a perfect introspective pout. Vitlin's expression, however, has the amateurish, staged quality that all classic, irresistible pouts do — the same way I, in my girlhood, could only hope to look before being scolded and left in time-out, teeing-up the imagined, euphoric moment in which a parent, suddenly overwhelmed by my essential sadness and smallness, would renounce a punishment entirely and forget the terms of my wrongdoing. Vitlin's gentle frown, relaxed arms, and dejected gaze all seem calibrated to cue this parental response. Her computerized reflection becomes an experiment in seeing and being seen, her self-portrait containing both the bushbaby's furtive bravery and instinctual fear. Vitlin reflects herself peering out into the world from deep inside her shell, on high alert, sincere and watchful.

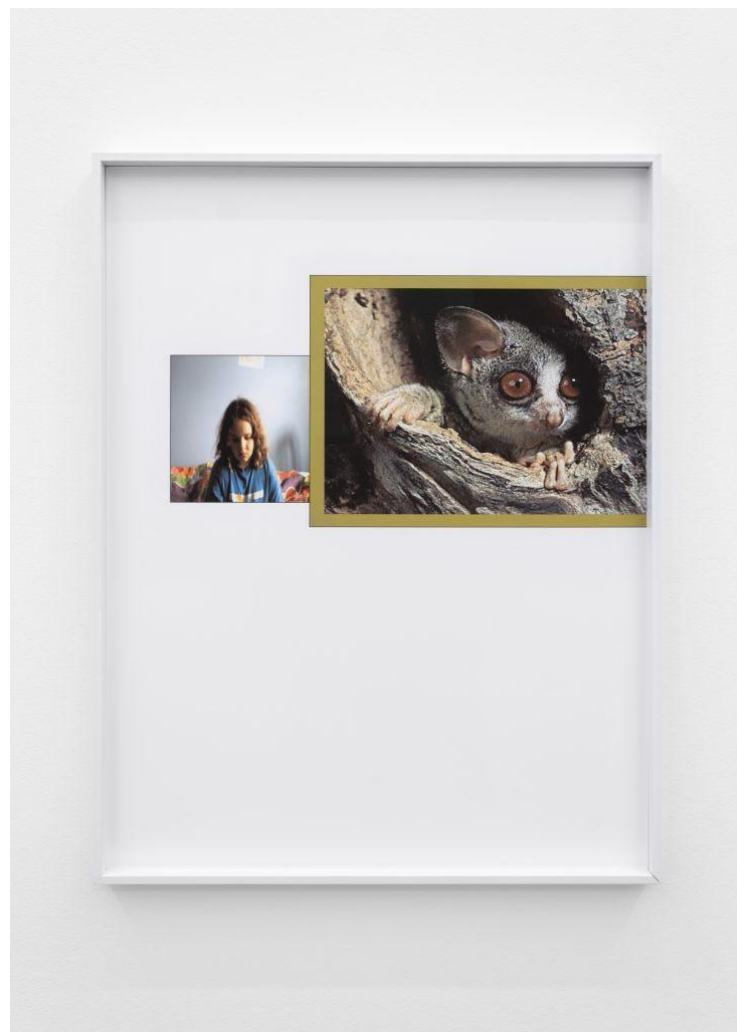


Image: Liz Vitlin, *Doc5.doc [March 22, 2003], 2002*. Inkjet print. A rectangular inkjet print pairs two images. The right image, which is slightly larger and has a green border, features a bushbaby peering out of a tree cavity while the left image features a self-portrait of a downcast child Liz in a blue and white shirt sitting on a floral bedspread. Courtesy

of the artist and Prairie.

The sincerity that Vitlin draws out of her personal archive feels both endearing and painful— leftover from an era of girlhood now gone. We are now all too aware of the harsh effect of computer-life on the images children make of themselves, visible in [leaked dossiers](#) detailing upticks in anxiety and depression for girls online as well as the popular perception that young girls look older than they used to (an online tabloid article, for example, titled [“Do pre-teens still exist, or did social media wipe them out?”](#)), and the curious biological observation that [puberty starts earlier](#) now than it did in the early 2000s. Child Liz’s disarming gaze and adult Liz’s presentation dredge up a well of affect mired in the fleeting privilege of childhood, preserved by durable hard drive memory.

Not all of Vitlin’s images feel so distant. One of the more enduring and elemental childhood experiences stored in Vitlin’s hard drive is a fascination with animals. Along with the bushbaby, three of the seven inkjet prints hung around the gallery feature pets or stuffed animals, a live chinchilla and well-loved silver teddy bear posed in a pale yellow scarf and gloves. Though small animals are a recognizable childhood fixation, Vitlin’s photographs appear slightly off-kilter; the teddy bear, for example, is awkwardly propped in a standing position in one photo and about to keel over in the other, silhouetted against a white background by an uncomfortably bright flash. *DSC01195.JPG [August 19, 2004], 2022* evokes the 2010s fascination with [‘cursed images’](#), a gray chinchilla standing on its hind legs reaching up towards a bouquet of red-tinged roses perched on a wood ledge next to a pink bubblegum roll. The bright red timestamp marking the left side of the photograph (could it really have been taken after midnight?) recalls the deep psychic twilight of the childhood pet, a formative platonic attachment and a cruel lesson in the brevity of life.

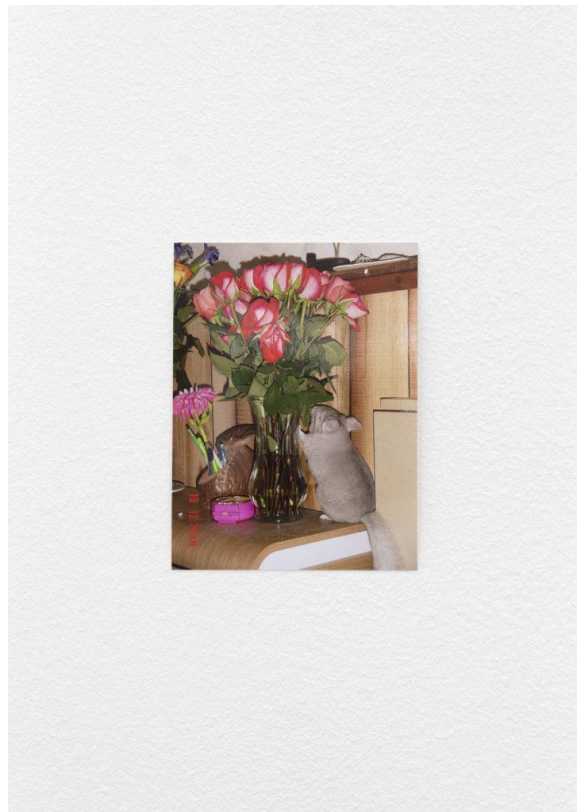


Image: Liz Vitlin, *DSC01195.JPG [August 19, 2004], 2022*. Inkjet print. A rectangular inkjet centers an image of a chinchilla standing on its hind legs reaching up towards a bouquet of red roses perched on a wood ledge next to a

pink bubblegum roll and a pencil holder. The image has a bright red timestamp that reads, “12:18am.” Courtesy of the artist and Prairie.

The exhibition essay diagnoses the strange atmosphere of Vitlin’s images as a symptom of the “uneasy suspicion that they were never intended for our eyes,” productions of a developing mind offloading a mechanical creative impulse. Another uneasy suspicion, perhaps, is that the images did serve some function for the child Liz — the talismanic photograph of a pet, for example, becomes a functional memento mori.



Image: Liz Vitlin, *Synonyms #1.doc* [February 24, 2005], 2022. Inkjet print. A rectangular inkjet print features a two-column list of 25 pairs of synonyms in light blue and cherry-red. Courtesy of the artist and Prairie.

Less morbid, on the other hand, are the works that were meant for some eyes, if not ours. The exhibition includes the school assignment *Synonyms #1.doc* [February 24, 2005], 2022, a two-column list of 25 pairs of synonyms in light blue and cherry-red. The contrasting colors make the word pairs seem more antonyms than synonyms, disrupting a basic cognitive association between color and language — similar to the [Stroop Color and Word Test](#) (familiar to any player of Nintendo’s *Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!* video game, released in May 2005). Some word pairs are philosophically intriguing (is “goodness” the same as “virtue?”), others evidence of knowledge but not comprehension (“paleness” and “feeble”), evoking yet another assessment: the Turing test, meted out to AI programs at a feverish pace to catch the moment of passage between computer and human comprehension. Descriptions of programs

claimed to have passed the Turing Test often turn to anthropomorphic comparisons between advanced AI and human children. [Blake Lemoine](#), a Google Engineer who went viral for claiming that a chatbot had achieved human-like consciousness, noted, “If I didn’t know exactly what it was... I’d think it was a 7-year-old, 8-year-old, kid...” Vitlin’s synonyms gesture towards the function of childhood as a threshold between human and computer, a proxy for technological optimism and anxiety. These big feelings seem empty next to the inimitable inventiveness of young Vitlin’s child mind, her charming curly-cue Lucida Calligraphy font and precocious protest that a synonym for “government” is “not in the dictionary.”

Doc2.doc [March 16, 2003], 2022, a Word picture of an elementary school classroom led by a stick-figure teacher with a messy yellow ponytail and crescent arms. The teacher seems subordinate to a large yellow computer and gray TV screen bracketing her chalkboard, capturing a transitional phase in public education towards screen-based learning such as the advent of typing class and computer lab time (often dominated by early drawing software, like Kid Pix or MS Paint). The Sad Portrait appears again on the teacher’s body and lectern, suggesting a strong attachment to or identification with the teacher and her lectern, crowned with a cartoon apple, absent in the blank computer and TV. Further, it seems, the Sad Portrait has been transformed into a surface, an image fill for Vitlin’s computer world — the externalization of the reflection projected onto the environment, itself a screen to be manipulated.



Image: Liz Vitlin, *Doc2.doc [March 16, 2003], 2022*. Inkjet print. A rectangular inkjet print features a Word picture of an elementary school classroom led by a stick-figure teacher with a messy yellow ponytail and a self-portrait of a downcast child Liz as the teacher’s podium. Courtesy of the artist and Prairie.

In the center of the gallery, three Sony CRT monitors play GIF-like videos on loop of Vitlin and friends or family members playing, all filmed with a shaky child's hand. The videos recall familiar domestic scenes and girlhood activities: sleepovers, dress-up sessions, dance practice. Here, more than anywhere else, the girls seem trapped by the screen, their movement limited, suspended in mid-action. In one of the videos, a girl in a pink crop-top and jeans performs stiff pliés until the recorder drops to the ground, sending the dancer into a washing-machine spiral before she appears again on screen, beginning the routine over. The endless repeating of the scene feels claustrophobic, and the girl's body is pinned to a screen too small to show her head and feet.

Metaphorically, I see the dancing body's instability on loop as a harbinger of our age of computer adolescence, in which the computer is no longer a space of childlike play and possibility, but a space of constriction to social norms and regulations— especially in the mass allegiance to ways of presenting ourselves that carry online currency: think the contained, rhythmic choreography of a TikTok dance routine or [gen Z and the 0.5 selfie](#). Vitlin is not the only one to graft onto this phenomenon, and some of the objects on display called to mind certain virtuosos of girlhood and adolescent online despair, [Bunny Rogers](#) or [Petra Cortright](#). Vitlin's childhood images cut close to the quick of image-making online, the irrational mind of the child perfectly suited to reveal the deep unsettled nature of the self through the screen.

More than any of the other works on view, Vitlin's shivering gifs made me want to log off, touch grass, delete my account; to sit in front of a mirror, put the yellow post-it back on my forehead, and leave it there, forever.