

A Dissertation on
Jack Smith's, *Child Walking with Wicker Stool*, (1954): A Re-
evaluation

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Abstract

With reference to artistic discourse of the mid twentieth century in post-war London, when Jack Smith produced this painting, this study aims to re-contextualise and re-evaluate the work appreciating the philosophical attitudes of existentialism and phenomenology as relevant to the painting's formal appearance. It shows that Jack Smith's work is comparable to the work of prominent London artists of this period whose work was affiliated with these philosophies and that this painting is a stylistically curious departure from the traditional representation of children which may meaningfully embody the *zeitgeist* of post-war years.

Reading and studying the contents of the curatorial file led me to discover that this work had been understood only within the limited terms of 'Kitchen Sink Realism' thus necessitating proper critical engagement and broader contextualisation. After reading through another student's dissertation on John Bratby that highlighted the over-emphasis of the political social realist element to his work, I realised that this too applies to *Child Walking with Wicker Stool*.

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Abbreviations

V&A	Victoria & Albert Museum
BMAG	Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery
RCA	Royal Academy of Art
ICA	Institute of Contemporary Arts
<i>Child Walking</i>	<i>Child Walking with Wicker Stool</i>
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

Introduction

Child Walking with Wicker Stool (fig.1) was painted by Sheffield artist Jack Smith (1928-2011) in 1954. Depicted is an ashen-faced toddler aged approximately three years, precariously stepping towards the viewer, arms outstretched with a fixed gaze.¹ The representation of the limbs is geometric and the white oil impasto accentuates light caught on the arms, fingers and torso. There is a stool behind the toddler who stumbles towards the viewer, both encompassed in a spacious bare, grey, interior.

The work was purchased by the BMAG in 1996 from The Mayor Gallery, London with grants from the Museum and Gallery Commission/V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Public Picture Gallery Fund². Given the lack of a catalogue *raisonné*, with the exception of a list of exhibitions on the invoice cited, it is difficult to discern where the painting was first exhibited. As far as documentation is concerned, it first appeared in the Beaux Arts Gallery at some point between 1954 and 1956 but it is not revealed exactly when. However, it is likely to have featured in either or both of Jack Smith's individual exhibitions of 1952 and/or 1953 at the Beaux arts Gallery in London.³ Accompanying it, there is a preparatory sketch (fig.2) that resembles more closely the figure of a real toddler than the final painting.

¹ There is no record documenting who this child is, but it is likely to be one of Jack Smith's, Derrick Greave's or George Fullard's children, could be sister-in law Barbara Smith's child as noted in

² Invoice for the purchase of *Child Walking with Wicker Stool*, received by the BMAG from The Mayor Art gallery, 1996, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery archive

³ *Jack Smith: catalogue of an exhibition of paintings, drawings and reliefs from 1949-1959*, Whitechapel Gallery, exhibition catalogue, May-June 1959, Whitechapel, London. Differing dates are documented for Jack Smith's first one-man exhibition, Adrian Lewis cites 1953 but this Whitechapel exhibition catalogue cites 1952.

A myriad of reasons formed the motivation for investigating this painting. Firstly, the unusual appearance of the child seems to contrast with images of children both historically and presently. A further impetus was discovering perceived socialist political motivations in the painting connoted by the label 'Kitchen Sink School'. However, I later discovered that these leftist political connotations were, although not entirely redundant, over emphasised and perpetuated by contemporary critics and the press.

Typical of the pictures produced by Jack Smith before 1958, this painting can be located amongst the contemporary London figurative art scene.⁴ Smith was one of the Beaux Arts Quartet associated with the Beaux Arts Gallery in the 1950s and early 1960s along with Derrick Greaves, Edward Middleditch and John Bratby. Together they were popularly known as the 'Kitchen Sink School'. This label was coined by David Sylvester in his infamously disparaging 1954 article in the magazine *Encounter* in an attempt to describe at shorthand the commonly treated domestic subjects of family and the home.⁵ As a result of the journalistic agency Sylvester had at the time, other media then adopted this label to connote the four artists linked to the Beaux Arts Gallery. Subsequently, their style and choice of subjects became known as 'Kitchen Sink Realism' which also encompassed the literary and theatrical works of John Osborne and other writers deemed 'Angry Young Men' who embodied leftist dissatisfaction after the war and the fall of the Soviet Union.⁶ Critics and contemporary media associated

⁴ James Hyman, 'Social Realism and the Young', *The Battle for Realism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2001, 113-132; Martin Harrison, *Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties*, Barbican Art Galleries: Merrell Publishers, 2002, 11-21; Ingrid Swenson. "Kitchen Sink school." *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 5 February. 2014.

<<http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T046760>>

⁵ David Sylvester, 'The Kitchen Sink', *Encounter*, December 1954, 61-63

⁶ John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: a guide to the new British drama*, London : Eyre Methuen 2nd rev., ed. 1977

Kitchen Sink Realism with the active political discontent of the working classes.⁷ In part this accurately describes some of their depictions of domesticity, but is grossly reductionist and misleading when analysing the Kitchen Sink School artists' works especially considering that the artists themselves refuted these political grounds. It is under the general term 'social realism' of post-war austerity that John Berger argued the works of these artists fitted, but academics since have tended to acknowledge that he exaggerated the existence of leftist political content.⁸ It is this exaggeration of political undertones in the Kitchen Sink School's work that will form the basis for my re-consideration of this painting by Jack Smith amongst a culturally diverse London art scene in the early fifties.

Approaching this painting from a socio-historical angle, I suggest that it should be re-evaluated within the social, political and cultural climate of post-war Britain and that these elements can help to understand formal aspects of the picture. The attribution of the label of 'Kitchen Sink realism' has limited subsequent readings of the work. Berger's promotion of the four artists under the denomination 'social realists', whilst gaining them publicity and notoriety, at the same time seems to have historically perpetuated the inaccurate paradigm to which it is tied. Indeed, it has been noted by numerous authors that firstly, there was no coherent ideology between the members of the group; that secondly some of the Beaux Arts Quartet were opposed to Berger's ideals, most famously Smith, and that thirdly more generally, art in the fifties may not have had particular political affiliations.⁹ Furthermore, it has also been noted that of the four artists, Smith

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸Hyman, *op. cit.* 'Staying Socialist:Attacks on Social Realism', 178-181, Martin Harrison, *op.cit.*, 11-21; Ingrid Swenson. *op. cit.*

⁹ Martin Harrison, 'Introduction', *Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties*, Barbican Art Galleries: Merrell Publishers, 2002,11-21, Juliet Steyn, 'Realism versus Realism in the British Art of the 1950s', *Third Text*, vol.22, Issue 2, March, 2008, 145-156, Ingrid Swenson, *op. cit.*

was the only one to depict interior domestic subjects, albeit in his early career.¹⁰ Therefore, this study aims to examine wider influences that may have affected the content and style of *Child Walking* other than the obvious readings presented by current art history.

With the persistence then and now of the popular label Kitchen Sink realism and more broadly social realism, I believe that the scope of analysis of this painting has been restricted. Other London-based figurative artists during the early fifties, most notably artists of the so-called ‘School of London’, and the artists associated with the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) have received much more cultural and historical interpretation than any of the Beaux Arts Quartet artists. It is likely that the reason for this is reducible mainly to the prevalence of this label, but also as a result of what Hyman calls emerging Modernism; ‘[...] those realists who have achieved the greatest reputations, both in Britain and in the West, are those whose work has been most amenable to readings informed by Modernism.’¹¹

Current understandings that underpin this work broadly include the influence of artists John Minton, Carel Weight and Frank Auerback of the 1940s and Berger’s notion of the inherent political content of social realism. These elements have been illustrated most thoroughly in James Hyman’s *The Battle for Realism* in which he contextualises the work of the Beaux Arts Quartet as part of a dialectical distinction between two different emerging strains of realism at the time, ‘Modernist realism’ and ‘Social realism’; the former characterised by the movement away from left politics and towards international abstractism and the latter by a figurative British

¹⁰ Harrison. *op.cit.*, ‘New Realisms’, 72-71

¹¹Hyman, *op.cit.*, ‘Introduction’, 7, Hyman states that this is clearly evident from consulting the purchases made by public institutions in Europe and America and was demonstrated by the exhibition in *British Art in the Twentieth Century: The Modern Movement*, Royal Academy, London, 1987 which included the ‘School of London’ as part of the ‘modern movement’ but omitted the ‘kitchen sink’ painters.

preoccupation with daily life. Those artists he deemed working to Modernist realism were broadly speaking the artists of the School of London and those of social realism artists associated with the Beaux Arts Gallery.¹² Hyman's analysis of the art scene at this point in the fifties has made an invaluable contribution to what is an understudied period in British art history, but his analysis of the Beaux Arts Quartet is not as thorough as that of other artists of the 'School of London'. This current perception of these artists as a group has inhibited a more accurate portrayal of their varying styles and subjects. Problematically, Hyman advocates for the rather reductive categories of 'Social Realism' and 'Modernist Realism' whereby the social realism of the Beaux Arts Quartet he considers not part of the 'Modernism' of the 'School of London'.

Perhaps questionably, Hyman's notions of Modernist realism and Social realism at the core of his historical mapping derive from an essay by Andrew Forge from 1958 entitled 'Since the War'¹³. Given the date of writing, it is clear that the author was denied historical perspective usually required for impartial and reflective analysis. Therefore, Forge may have conceived these two forms of realism according to the economic, social or political bias and influences of what was a highly complex and turbulent decade in which neo-liberalist thinking began to influence art potentially.¹⁴ Therefore, it is possible that although Hyman provides examples of Smith's, Greaves', Middleditch's and Bratby's work of a non-domestic nature, the re-iteration of the term 'Kitchen Sink realism' under Social realism does seem to have categorised these artists' work

¹² Hyman, *op. Cit.*, 'Introduction', 2-9

¹³ Andrew Forge, 'Since the War' in *The Arts Council Collection of Paintings and Drawings: Part 4 Since the War*, Arts Council, London, 1958

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

within what has always been the complex and highly ambiguous notion of realism.¹⁵

Martin Harrison provides a different approach to the British art scene in the 1950s.¹⁶ Harrison mainly focuses on the cultural complexities of this post-war period rather than drawing on pre-existing concepts of realism, and is careful to acknowledge the metrocentric nature of art in this period, rather than expanding what predominantly was a *London* period of artistic activity as opposed to a wholly *British* one. Whilst he acknowledges social realism as an entity he does not mention the Modernist realism of Hyman but instead discusses a wide range of cultural influences on various styles of newly emerging art work; immigration, photography and threat from international nuclear annihilation. Unlike Hyman, Harrison is concerned more with the tumultuousness of the post-war art scene in London, rather than the synthesis of cogent styles or forms of art. With *Child Walking*, I have taken example from this more eclectic attitude, choosing not to take a categorising approach, instead considering wider cultural influences on this particular painting in contemporary London.

Smith's RCA tutors John Minton, Ruskin Spear and Carel Weight undoubtedly influenced his choice of quotidian subjects, the muted, dark tones and the painterly quality of his works during the fifties.¹⁷ It seems that the period immediately after his studies at the RCA from 1950 until 1953 was when Smith's work became associated with Kitchen Sink realism.¹⁸ Fresh from art school, these formative years could still have been a period of artistic development for him.

¹⁵ Imogen Wiltshire, 'Introduction', *A Dissertation: John Bratby 'Courtyard with Washing' (1956)*, March 2010

¹⁶ Martin Harrison, *Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties*, Barbican Art Galleries: Merrell Publishers, 2002

¹⁷ *Jack Smith: catalogue of an exhibition of paintings, drawings and reliefs from 1949-1959*, Whitechapel Gallery, exhibition catalogue, May-June 1959, Whitechapel, London.

¹⁸ Adrian Lewis, "Smith, Jack." Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online. Oxford University Press. Web. 2 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T079308>>.

Thus, Berger's subsequent enthusiastic promotion of Smith as associated with social realism and the other three artists at the Beaux Arts Gallery unfortunately may have contributed further to the lack of interest he received during the late 1950s, 60s and 70s.

Information published or not, on both Jack Smith and *Child Walking* is very scarce. He features in numerous exhibition catalogues, some of which present his individual shows but there has been no attempt to present an in depth overview of his *oeuvre*. Perhaps the most indicative factor that highlights the need for a serious reading of *Child Walking* is the inaccurate description of the painting on the BMAG gallery label which at present evokes the political ideology and intentionalism of Berger:

The broad brushwork and tilting lines capture the awkwardness of the child's first steps. In just a few brushstrokes, Smith conveys the child's concentration, dabs of paint indicating the fingers outstretched for balance.

Smith is one of the group of artists known as the 'Kitchen Sink' painters, the Angry Young Men of the 1950s who deliberately chose raw domestic and working class themes in defiance of the 'highbrow' approach to art.¹⁹

The selection of the word 'deliberately' in this description distorts historical evidence whilst simultaneously reiterating the Kitchen Sink label without considering the fallaciousness that this term has brought to understanding the work of this group of artists and their works.

This dissertation will focus on the post- Hegelian existential and phenomenological influences on this work that arose as a result of post-war uncertainty. Referring to the cultural climate and artistic discourse in London after the war, I hope to demonstrate how these philosophies are

¹⁹*Child Walking with Wicker Stool, Jack Smith, 1954 archive label, BMAG, Birmingham*

pertinent to understanding this painting. Although existentialism and phenomenology have been explored in relation to School of London artists such as Francis Bacon, Paul Klee, André Masson, Lucian Freud, Graham Sutherland, Alberto Giacometti, Eduardo Paolozzi, Reg Butler, Lorenza Mazzetti and others since the writings of David Sylvester and Patrick Heron, these notions have not been considered seriously with respect to the Beaux Arts Quartet. This is despite ample discourse on the cultural pervasiveness of existentialist and phenomenological thought in England at the end of the 1940s and the reflection of this in Social realism and the realism of the School of London concerned with the human condition.²⁰ Martin Harrison acknowledges that the Kitchen Sink School were ‘informed’ by existentialism but does not delve any deeper to analysing this statement.²¹

Existentialism and phenomenology shall be examined first in chapter one in relation to *Child Walking* in the context of post-war artistic and cultural London. Broadly speaking, existentialist thought pertains to solitariness, the experience of being separate and autonomous in the world whereas phenomenology denotes the experience of being in relation to one’s surroundings. The two are closely linked. Although I will not be discussing them as synonymous with one another, I regard them as inter-relational concepts that are linked in Jack Smith *Child Walking* and in other works by him. For this reason I shall refer to the notions alongside each other.

The work of Francis Bacon, Derrick Greaves, and Edward Middleditch along with sculptors Alberto Giacometti and Reg Butler has been influenced by existentialism and phenomenology, recalling the notions of solitariness and vulnerability of the body in space. To explain and

²⁰ William McBride ‘Existentialism as a cultural movement’, in Steven Crowell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012, 50-69; Hyman; *op. cit.* ‘A Modernist Road to Realism’, 13-37. James Hyman in *Derrick Greaves –From Kitchen Sink to Shangri-La* mentions briefly existential evocations in a painting entitled ‘The Waiting Room’, 1951 by Derrick Greaves.

²¹ Harrison, *op. cit.* 82

analyse how these notions underpin *Child Walking I* will draw comparisons between works of art that have already been analysed in relation to existentialism and phenomenology and draw new analogies between this painting by Jack Smith, other applicable examples of the artist's work of this period and the work of Edward Middleditch.

Chapter two will focus on the discussion of phenomenological and existential examples of child figures in art history and 1950s contemporary photography. These images will attempt to demonstrate how *Child Walking* is a formal departure from conventional images of children which make is analogous to existential and phenomenological readings.

Analysis and comparison of these images will explore the emotional representation of these children and their collocation in the spatial surroundings. Exploration and contemplation of the body and its affinity to space was a phenomenon born out of phenomenological philosophy that was, like existentialism, academically and culturally diffused in Paris and London from the 1930s onwards and became known in artistic circles in the 1950s and 60s. Hence, like existentialism it has been considered an influence on many artists of this period.

Before analysing these philosophies in an English context, it should be noted that with regards to existentialism, rather than being directly engaged with its pure academic ideology the artists and artworks in question are likely to have been conceived through a diluted understanding of the original ideas. Indeed, existentialism became a movement amongst the art scene, a cultural attitude in which artists were 'associated' with it.²² Existentialism's original connotations as describing the individuality of human existence became distorted in its widespread use as a synonym for nihilism. The association of Bacon with existentialism only served to perpetuate the

²² Steven Crowell (ed.), 'Existentialism and its Legacy', *op. cit.*, 15

distortion.²³ It is possible that *Horizon's* conflation of these two concepts aided this misjudgement, along with the fact that copies of key texts such as Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and Albert Camus's *The Outsider* were not translated into English until 1956 and most other earlier works of Hegel were not translated until the late sixties, seventies and eighties.

Primarily, this dissertation aims to explore the extended influences on the appearance of the figure and representation of space in *Child Walking* to afford it a more eclectic and comprehensive reading other than simply the constraints of Social realism. A re-evaluation of the likely stimuli and influences within the British art scene after the war and in the early fifties will help to demonstrate the limited nature of the Kitchen Sink School label.

²³ Hyman, 'The Human Condition', *The Battle for Realism*, 151

Chapter One

Immediate European post-war climate fostered a cultural attitude of auto-reflection on behalf of academics and artists which centred on the contemplation of individual existence in the world. This gave rise to a renewed interest in the academic philosophies of existentialism after Hegel and the phenomenology of Husserl.²⁴ Existentialism can be defined as ‘a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will’²⁵ whilst its derivative, phenomenology as ‘the science of phenomena as distinct from that of the nature of being, an approach that concentrates on the study of consciousness and the objects of direct experience.’²⁶ Both concepts had their epicentre in Paris in the 1930s and 1940s which then migrated gradually to other areas of Europe.

Existentialism and phenomenology were pervasive ideologies within British academic and artistic culture at this time. After the Second World War there was a vulnerable sense of uncertainty in Britain. Immediate post-war austerity, devastation, increasing immigration challenging national collective identity and the constant threat of nuclear annihilation were all factors that contributed to this. Martin Harrison notes that the 1950s provided a ‘[...] resplendent

²⁴ Steven Crowell (ed.), ‘Existentialism and its Legacy’, *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012, 3-26

²⁵ “existentialism”. Oxford Dictionaries. Oxford University Press, n.d. Web. 05 January 2014.
<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/existentialism>

²⁶ "phenomenology". Oxford Dictionaries. Oxford University Press, n.d. Web. 06 January 2014.
<<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/phenomenology>>.

art environment in London: in shabby, grey, austerity-era Britain.²⁷ Intrinsically, artists' work was affected by the political and social climate of the time. Even more than a decade after the end of the war Jack Smith, in 1961 said in an interview when asked about life in the provinces of London said, '[...]I feel that the wilderness starts ten miles from the centre of London in any direction.'²⁸ This clearly indicates the desolation of the city during these years and Smith's disparaging attitude towards the London environment.

Horizon art magazine was the most influential publication in the cultural scene in post-war London. Literary contributions were made by French existentialist writers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty.²⁹ These articles generally combined nihilistic despair with a sense of individualism.³⁰ The surrealist Michel Leiris, friends with Merleau-Ponty wrote an anthology of essays on the violent artwork of André Masson, *André Masson and his Universe* (1947) that were published in the journal and convey a strong sense of the prevailing pessimism of these years; 'the perpetual flux of the world; the meteoric flash of existence against the blank page of nothingness; man's bitter privilege to carry within him a world of which he too is a part.' The insularity, vulnerability and angst expressed through existentialism and phenomenology in *Horizon* is seen as a reflection of the troubled and unsettled post-war climate.³¹

David Sylvester too wrote for *Horizon* and published a book, *Abstract Art and Existentialism* (1949) which served to increase the profile of this ideology. Francis Bacon, condoned and supported profusely by Sylvester became an influential figure in London in the late 1940s. His

²⁷ Martin Harrison, 'Introduction', *op.cit.*, 11-21

²⁸ Noel Barber, *Conversations with Painters, London : Collins, 1964, 111*

²⁹ Hyman, 'European Roads to Social Realism', *The Battle for Realism, 67-88*

³⁰ *Ibid.* 67-88

³¹ *Ibid.*

unsettling work gained popularity and he consequently became seen as the emblematic protagonist of nihilist existentialism.³² Bacon's large, painterly visual representations show the angst, suffering and individuality of the human condition and evoke the sentiments of French existentialism, albeit with an emphasis on nihilistic elements.

It is known that Bacon frequented the Beaux Arts Gallery often and became good friends with the director Helen Lessore which led to an exhibition there in 1953.³³ Furthermore, Bacon had a studio at the RCA between 1951 and 1953 and came into regular contact with younger artists of the Beaux Arts Quartet and others such as Eduardo Paolozzi and Michael Andrews whose work was 'most amenable to an existentialist reading'.³⁴ Therefore, in addition to the omnipresent influences of existentialism and phenomenology, it is possible that Bacon met Smith and the other Beaux Arts Quartet artists and saw some of his works.

There is much in common between *Child Walking* and many of Bacon's paintings from the years before and during 1954. *Two Figures* (1953, fig.II), *Two Figures in the Grass* (1952, fig.III) and *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953, fig.IV). All show figures collocated in a vacuous expanse of indeterminate space. Whilst the bodies exude more anguish and are more violent than the child in *Child Walking*, what is most striking between all of these paintings is the effect the large area of dark space has on the figures. This enveloping, black space that surrounds the forms renders them vulnerable and exposed, reminiscent Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas that 'Man is a being of distances[...] it is in nothingness alone that being is surpassed...'.³⁵ Elicited here is a sense of isolation inherent in human existence, an idea that is

³² *Ibid*, 151

³³ *Ibid*, 133-155

³⁴ *Ibid*, 151

³⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Origin of Negation', *Being and Nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*,

consistent with the nihilist perception of existentialism elicited in contemporary discourse and in these works by Bacon.

Existentialist thought in Sartre and Heidegger regards the human being as ‘[...]the locus of the constitution of meaning.’³⁶ Hence, spatial representation in Bacon’s *Two Figures* paintings and *Child Walking* presented here seem to have rendered the bodies misshapen, as if the very space within which they are collocated has oppressed or distorted them. In Bacon, the bodies are suppressed and squashed down into themselves whilst the figure in *Child Walking* is presented as angular and fragile; prevalent visual representations of the angst and detachment of existentialism and phenomenology of this period,. Akin to Bacon’s work, the body is distorted and angular; the reaching arms of the child are unfeasibly aligned at an angle towards to viewer, almost like the wings of an aircraft, whilst the legs do not appear to be consistent with the line of the upper body; the left leg is acutely straight and angular. It could be said that the ambiguous and threatening space surrounding the child, together with these unusual aspects of the body collude to present a disturbing and unsettling impression to the viewer.

It is the vulnerability of these figures within space that makes these paintings analogous to Smith’s painting in which the figure of the child is fragile and awkward. Arguably, in each of the Bacon paintings a similar visual representation of existential and phenomenological ethos is portrayed whereby the individual is threatened by and characterised by their surroundings. Likewise, in *Child Walking* a non-descript and haunting setting surrounds the figure where the only aspect indicating the existence of a domestic interior is the stool, rendering the body fragile

trans. Hazel E. Barnes, London : Methuen, 1969, 79

³⁶ Crowell, *op.cit.*, 26

and exposed. The nature of the body in space and as *determined* by that space is a concept explored by phenomenology. Paul Crowther writing on Phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception writes that the body affirms itself through relational setting because 'The body does not find meaning pre-existing in the world...'³⁷ Merleau-Ponty affirms that the body's ability to internalise an external sentiment; which he calls 'body schema' refers to 'the ability we have to incorporate the world in our actions and dispositions'. Bodily habit, is not cognitively controlled because 'it is the body that 'understands' in the acquisition of habit'.³⁸ In other words, through our senses and our bodily experience of the world, we unknowingly absorb mood and ethos. The viewer observes the body of the child as subject to, and defined by, its bleak surroundings. Confronted by the empty black eyes of the staring child, the spectator is put in a position where they are forced to consider this vulnerability absorbed from the looming greyness. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest that this function is amplified in relation to children, 'illness, like childhood and the state of the "primitive", is a complete form of existence...'³⁹ Therefore this could signify that within art, children are subjects more amenable to expressing emotion and sentiment, particularly that inferred by their surroundings. *Child Walking* may be a pictorial manifestation of phenomenological discourse whereby the figure reflects the sobriety of its surroundings.

Child Walking with Check Tablecloth (1953 fig. V) affords a similar unsettling effect on the viewer but through a different rendering of the body in conjunction with the setting. Although the figure of the child is not particularly angular or misshapen, it is, as mentioned previously,

³⁷ Paul Crowther, 'Merleau-Ponty: Perception Into Art', in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 22: 2, 1982, 138-149

³⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Sense Experience', *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, 2005 (1945), 270-271 ; Taylor Carman, 'Merleau-Ponty on Body, Flesh and Visibility' in Crowell, *op.cit.*, 274-288

³⁹ *Ibid.* 123

miniscule and isolated from the other objects in the painting therefore drawing attention to the same solitariness characteristic of existentialist and phenomenological readings.

The futility of the moment and of the changing nature of day to day existence was a consideration of existentialism. David Sylvester in an existentialist themed lecture, 'Towards a New Realism' emphasised the futility suggested by existentialism. Commenting on painting he said it '[...] must show that experiences are fleeting, that every experience dissolves into the next...' and '[...] must be images in which the observer participates.'⁴⁰ *Child Walking* portrays the momentariness that Sylvester expresses here, as the child appears frozen from one moment into the next, captured in a precarious pose. Jack Smith himself echoes this notion stating, 'States of mind, changing from day to day, influence the individual forms within the painting...'⁴¹ In presenting here a fixed moment, the moment's futility is naturally emphasised, thus laying claim to existential influence. *Child Walking with Check Tablecloth* similarly presents a transient scene of daily life. This painting too features a child surrounded by greyness. It is clear that this is a composition and subject explored extensively during these years. *Child Walking with Check Tablecloth* shows a child, perhaps the same child, staring out at the viewer, minute and physically isolated by greyness from anything else in the interior, the spatial arrangement thus also portraying the body as vulnerable in the context of its surroundings.

The asymmetrical spatial composition here may also be significant. Curiously, the distorted arrangement of the tablecloth and the inconsistent perspective serves to unsettle the tentative motion of the child. Harrison notes that this representation of space puts emphasis on the

⁴⁰ Albert Herbert; *Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue by J. England, London, England & Co, 1991, 7.

⁴¹ Jack Smith, 'Notes on Painting', *The London Magazine*, March 1965, 68

peripheries of the canvas thus heightening '[...] the tension of the sombre, ostensibly mundane scenes.'⁴² The author's analogy of the impact of asymmetrical space strongly echoes the considerations of phenomenology outlined. Similarly, also depicting the same asymmetry, *Interior with Child* (1953, fig. VI) and *Child Writing*, (1954 fig. VII), show again a comparable scenario where the body of the child is solitary and surrounded by muted tones, thus emphasising its vulnerability, although unlike the other two paintings, the figure does not look out to connect with the viewer.

Fragility and portrayal of the body in space as existential has been discussed considerably regarding the sculpture of Giacometti, Butler and Paolozzi who exhibited at the Hanover gallery in London; they too emulated the insularity of existentialism and phenomenology. During this period the gallery had a preoccupation with metamorphosis and the body.⁴³ Hyman suggests this was exemplified by Giacometti's, *The Square* (1948, fig. VIII) which presented a new portrayal of the body in space.⁴⁴ Like *Child Walking*, *Child Walking with Check Tablecloth*, *Child Writing* and *Interior with Child*, *The Square* similarly presents a large area of undefined space relative to the occupation of bodily space. Dramatic tension is created through this relative relationship of figures to space, which is either explicitly or implicitly permeated with a sense of threat.⁴⁵ Here the attenuated figures are presented as fragile, narrow and minified compared to the spaces in between them. *Child Walking* too portrays excessive ambiguous space and therefore is arguably comparable with the existentialism of Giacometti sculpture. Given that this was commonly depicted motif at this time similar analogies can be drawn in the works of Reg Butler. *An*

⁴² Harrison, *op. cit.* 88

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Hyman, 'European Roads to Social Realism', *The Battle for Realism*, 67-88. Giacometti was friends with Jean-Paul Sartre.

⁴⁵ David Sylvester, 'Round the London Galleries', *Listener*, 24 July, 1952, 48, 1221, 150

Unknown Political Prisoner, (1952-3, fig. IX) clearly a product of wartime trauma shows a structure emphasising the inordinate distances between it and the small figures beneath it.

At the Beaux Arts Gallery the work particularly of Middleditch from the early fifties is amenable to similar readings as the artworks discussed above. Middleditch's *Sheffield Weir*, (1954 fig. X) even though the subject is different, is strikingly similar to *Child Walking*. In this case, it is existentialist overtones that these paintings share. Each painting shares the same pervasive drab greyness that seems to have permeated every form, and expanses of agitated dark indeterminate space, thus recalling the melancholy and reflectiveness of existentialism. White paint emphasises the obscurity animating the water in *Sheffield Weir* in the same way that it highlights light caught on the precarious body of the child in *Child Walking*. Spatially, the weir painting conveys a sense of vulnerability and loneliness in a different manner to that of Smith's painting; the acute perspective of the landscape that departs from the position of the viewer has the effect of emphasising subjectivity of the onlooker. However, the pair both emphasise spatial aspects, albeit in diverse ways; in Middleditch, the exaggerated perspective emphasises the sombre space whereas in Smith it is the strips of tonally diverse shadows and the stool that fulfill this function.

Pigeons in Trafalgar Square (1954 fig. XI) also by Middleditch employs a similar use of exaggerated perspective to elicit a feeling of emptiness but with the inclusion of two remote figures in the distance. Here, the vacuousness of the square save for a few pigeons in the foreground and the two black, distant figures in the background make for a painting preoccupied again by considerations of space in relation to forms and bodies. Hence, here too Middleditch seems to have been influenced in some way by the arguably pervasive philosophy of these years.

Chapter Two

This image by Jack Smith is a highly unconventional, ethereal depiction of childhood that is highly relevant to arguments made by art historians about the capacity for the images of children to be loaded with meaning.⁴⁶ Unusual images of children potentially evoke reflections on the self and identity which recall phenomenology and existentialism. These notions could be helpful to understanding this painting within the wider cultural climate of the time in a rapidly changing Britain. Rather than just ascribing Socialist ‘Kitchen Sink School’ meaning to this painting in the context of post-war austerity, further analysis incorporating these ideas could aid a more thorough comprehension. Historically, artistic and photographic pictorial representations have portrayed children as innocent.⁴⁷ *Child Walking* provides a stark contrast to the canon of child imagery that is either sentimental and ‘innocent’ or elicits an emotional response in the viewer.⁴⁸

The representation of this child in terms of its distorted, stiff body, ashen complexion and melancholic surroundings is a grand departure from traditionally sentimental images of children. As Higonnet notes, as of around mid- eighteenth century, the paintings of artists Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough set the western trope of the ‘Romantic child’ image. Since then, these sentimental depictions of children have dominated imagery of children and became more frequent with the commercial appropriation of ‘endearing’ images to sell products to the emerging British middle-class. Images such as *Bubbles* (1886 fig. XII) by John Everett Millais

⁴⁶ Susan Sidlauskas, ‘Prologue: The Body in Place’, *Body, place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century painting*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2000, 7-19;; Marilyn Brown (ed.), ‘Baudelaire between Rousseau and Freud’, *Picturing Children: constructions between Rousseau and Freud*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, 2002, 1-26

⁴⁷ Anne Higonnet, ‘Introduction’, *Pictures of Innocence*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1998, 7-14

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Photographic evidence will be used to support this idea in chapter two.

were used by Pear's soap company to market their product.⁴⁹ The use of child-centred imagery increased during the post-war years due to a number of factors, notably the baby-boom, which created a new preoccupation with motherhood and babies,⁵⁰ and a new interest in child psychology and child protection.⁵¹ Looking through images of children from *Picture Post* magazine of 1954, it is striking to see the frequency with which pictures of children are either used to sell products through connoting innocence, see the adverts for Andrex Toilet tissue (fig. XIII) or to elicit empathy in the viewer, see the advert for NSPCC donations (fig. XIV).

Throughout the issues of 1954, almost without exception children are portrayed as *accompanied* either by adults or by products. In the Andrex Toilet tissue image, similar to the Millais painting, the child is presented as rosy cheeked, smiling and is visually associated with the comfortable and cosy domestic product it is promoting. In comparison, in the NSPCC donation advert the largest photograph shows a child crying alone. It is not associated or accompanied by anything, thus its detachment is emphasised. Adjacent is the photograph of the supposed happier child after intervention from the NSPCC, portrayed as content and smiling.

Central to understanding this uncustomary representation on a deeper level is the idea that;

‘Children are understood to be simple, uncomplicated subjects to which our common humanity gives us ready access. Empathy takes the place of analysis, and common sense is the most frequently invoked

⁴⁹ Higonnet, *op.cit.*, ‘A Golden Age’, 51-71

⁵⁰ Peter Lewis, ‘A Woman’s Place’, *The Fifties*, The Cupid Press, Suffolk, 1978, 2-64; Nell Dorr published *Mother and Child* in 1954 that contained sentimental, idealistic mother and child images.

⁵¹ Harry Hendrick, *Child Welfare: England: 1872-1989*, Routledge London & New York, 1994, 1-15; Peter Lewis, ‘A Woman’s Place’, *op.cit.*; The Children Act 1948 outlined and centralised and a coherent child care structure. Children no longer just Children of the Welfare State but children of ‘the family’. Dr. Bowlby and Dr. Spock published *Child Care And The Growth Of Love* (1953) that popularised the theory of Maternal Deprivation.

strategy.⁵²

Because of this pictures of children ‘can raise as many questions about the childhood of the spectators as they do about the childhood of the subject.’⁵³ Thus, adult ideologies and concerns are projected onto and expressed through images of children. For this reason, *Child Walking* may be imbued with philosophical meaning of the cultural climate. The desolate grey face of the child and the black, empty eyes that stare out dehumanise the figure, refuting conventional representations of children. The viewer is affronted with a different and more reflective vision of childhood, one that I think that contemplates identity and the individuality of existentialism. The post-war climate and influence of artists associated with existentialist philosophy may therefore be key in the formal manifestation of this painting in terms of the rendering of space and figure.

Likewise, the representation of space in relation to the body here also emulates phenomenological connotations since it has been argued that;

‘Space, in most contemporary discourse, as in lived experience, has taken on an almost palpable existence. Its contours, boundaries, and geographies are called upon to stand in for all the contested realms of identity, from the national to the ethnic; its hollows and voids are occupied by bodies that replicate internally the external conditions of political and social struggle, and are likewise assumed to stand for, and identity, the sites of such struggle.’⁵⁴

Considering this, the unsettled political and social climate that gave rise to existentialism and phenomenology may have impacted the form this painting has taken as discussed. The bleak

⁵² Marcia Pointon, Chapter 7, in *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven London: Yale University Press, 1993, 177, 200

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays on the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, MIT Press, 1992, 167

pictorial voids in *Child Walking* could reflect the political, social and cultural uncertainty of these years that more discreetly manifested in existentialism and phenomenology rather than blatant socio-political propaganda.

Representation and collocation of bodies in space is the focus of Susan Sidlauskas in *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century painting*. Sidlauskas maintains that the body has the ability to internalise a sentiment in conjunction with its spatial setting and has had a tendency to do so in depictions from around mid-nineteenth century onwards. The child in *Child Walking* is an unusual depiction. It seems that the pervasive empty grey has overwhelmed the body and face of the child, carrying with it the same haunting sentiment. Moreover, the awkward stiffness and deformed legs of the child almost seem to be dictated by its vulnerability in an ambiguous space and its precarious posture as it quivers towards the viewer. Sidlauskas's ideas are supported by an exhibition catalogue of 1959 that infers phenomenological overtones in relation to Smith's various paintings of children walking. It details that during a visit to Spain in 1954 he painted some bullfights that '...recalled earlier sketches made of children walking. e.g. An interest in rendering a sensation of movement by one body through or via or against other objects.'⁵⁵ Despite being vague with regards to which paintings in particular this concerns, the statement probably includes this painting. It suggests the expression of the child's vulnerable and tentative movements through and in relation to the stool in its immediate surroundings. Overlapping the leg and sea of the sturdy stool, the child is presented as supported by it, unstable and exposed. Further reinforcement of this idea comes from Roskill who states that the same 'intellectual tendency', this painting, and other later paintings treat, '...figures also in the total

⁵⁵ Author either Bryan Robertson or Mark Roskill, 'Biographical Note', *Jack Smith: catalogue of an exhibition of paintings, drawings and reliefs from 1949-1959*, Whitechapel Gallery, exhibition catalogue, May-June 1959, Whitechapel, London.

character of the composition...a purposeful bringing together of a collection of elements, in the same sense as in the *Child Walking* child and stool are synthetically combined.⁵⁶ Being a fairly nebulous phrase, it is not clear what ‘intellectual tendency’ refers to, but it does insinuate some kind of contemplative approach to the painting, whereby the child and its surroundings are meaningfully woven together in the fabric of the painting. Considering the context outlined, it would not be elaborate to suggest that the child’s melancholic emotional representation is reflected in its surroundings that in turn reflect that same listlessness.

Photography should not be overlooked as an important influence on the art emerging from London at this time. Bacon is known to have used it as a direct source, as did the neo-realist tutors of Smith;⁵⁷ Ruskin Spear based his compositions on photography whilst John Minton bemoaned the influence he perceived it had had on painting.⁵⁸ It is not known if Smith used photography as part of his working methods but the momentarily fixed posture of the child does seem to be influenced by it.

Various exhibitions, books and journals began to feature photography in a renewed upsurge after the war.⁵⁹ Roger Manvell published *Film* (1952), the Art Council organised *Masterpieces of Victorian Photography*, there was a Henri-cartier Bresson show at the ICA in February 1952 and his photographs appeared in East London journal *Illustrated* in 1951. In 1954 the ICA also held *The Wonder and Horror of the Human Head* exhibition where the stimulus of photography was reportedly evident in the work of Freud and Bacon. The Independent Group and lots artists at the

⁵⁶ Mark Roskill, ‘Foreword’ *Jack Smith: catalogue of an exhibition of paintings, drawings and reliefs from 1949-1959*, April 1959, Whitechapel Gallery, exhibition catalogue, May-June 1959, Whitechapel, London.

⁵⁷ Harrison, *op.cit.*, ‘Introduction’, 11-21; Hyman, ‘The Human Condition’, *The Battle for Realism*, 150

⁵⁸ Harrison, *op.cit.*, ‘Transition’ pp.11-21, ‘New Realisms’, 16

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-21

ICA held photography exhibitions and were obviously greatly influenced by the medium.⁶⁰

As with painting, the concept I wish to draw attention to regarding photography during the early 1950s is the ability of the setting of a landscape photograph to infer meaning on the figure(s) within it. Increasing widespread use of photography during the 1950s⁶¹ created new artistic possibilities and dynamics that influenced conceptions of space and the figures assembled within that space. Artists and photographers were able to frame and capture more quickly and easily than with paint and preserve more accurately particular sections of the world in a process of selection, at macro and micro scales. Despite it being unknown if Smith used photography in his work, he would feasibly have been aware of photographic sources exploring the representation of the items within it, for example, Bacon used '[...]framing devices to draw attention to the apparently infinite 'psychological space' around his sitter'⁶²; something photographers have experimented with since the origins of photography in France. Considering that photography was a mode for the experimentation with subject, object and space, examples of photography can be viewed in relation to both phenomenology and existentialism in relation to Jack Smith's painting.

Picture Post ran from 1938 until 1957 and was the most influential photo journal of the twentieth century with notable photographers such as Bill Brandt shooting for it. It was immensely popular into the early fifties having a large readership that reached its peak at 80% during the war years.⁶³ Therefore it seems probable that the artistic community would have consulted this

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 11-21; Hyman, 'The Human Condition', *The Battle for Realism*, 150

⁶¹ J. P. Ward, et al. "Photography." *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 12 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T067117pg1>>. The Golden Age of Capitalism and mass media.

⁶² Hyman, 'The Human Condition', *The Battle for Realism*, 151

⁶³ Sarah McDonald, *Hutton Archive: History in Pictures*, October 2004, 1-3, <http://corporate.gettyimages.com/masters2/conservation/articles/HAHistory.pdf>

publication. The *Best and Worst of Britain* series ran throughout 1954 and is particularly unsettling as a theme highlighting much of the devastation of the war, whilst also attempting to ‘mitigate’ this emphasis with more uplifting stories. As discussed, photographs of children from *Picture Post* show either happy and innocent children or distressed, sad children. However, amongst photographs from this series, two landscapes that feature children depict them in a different manner altogether. Photographs of Manchester (fig.XV) and Birmingham (fig.XVI) show groups of children in desolate and bleak post-war devastation. Although *Child Walking* is a portrait and these two images landscapes, it is the impact of the spatial arrangement within the pictures that I suggest has an effect on the bodies of the figures. In comparison to the rubbly terrain surrounding them, their size is small, the landscape dominates them, imbuing and associating them with the surrounding desolation and austerity. As suggested, the interior of *Child Walking* renders the body vulnerable in a similar way. A characteristic that both these images have in common with Jack Smith’s *Child Walking* is solitariness, as with the other grey and spatially ambiguous paintings discussed in this essay. In each image, the children although in groups are presented as alone in a vast and desolate space. The space and emptiness surrounding the figures allows for individualistic contemplation of the self and identity on behalf of the viewer thus paralleling existential and phenomenological sentiments explored in this essay.

Conclusion

In Chapter one I presented new possible ideas for interpreting this painting alongside other works by Jack Smith, Edward Middleditch, Francis Bacon, Alberto Giacometti and Reg Butler. I have sought to present the ideologies of phenomenology and existentialism as significant to the formal aspects of this painting in a post-war climate. Discussion of existentialism departed from the work of Bacon whose work was hailed as existentialist and promoted as such by Sylvester, for which he became known. Hence, using the premise of existentialism, comparisons were made between Jack Smith's *Child Walking* and Bacon. Expansion of this interpretation led me to examine possible phenomenological readings in both Bacon's and Jack Smith's works that looked at the relationship between the body and space and the body as affected by large expanses of space within a picture. Using these ideas, sculpture from the late 1940s and early fifties already linked with these philosophies was analysed to show how existentialism and phenomenology may be pertinent to *Child Walking* and other works by Jack Smith.

Chapter two focused specifically on analysis of *Child Walking* with regards to art historical images of children and the potential for this ethereal image to evoke existentialist and phenomenological sentiments in the context of traditional childhood imagery and contemporary photography. Argument has centred on two main aspects; bodies as the recipient sites of projection of strife in painting and, the depiction of space as reflecting post-war cultural anxieties and how the body interacts with this space as a pictorial whole.

Overall, I have not argued that this painting portrays any kind of post-war psychological child struggle but rather the projection of adult experience, emotions and ideology onto and into the

figure and setting of this painting. The work of Jack Smith from these years seems to have been subject to the same influences as the work of his peers and other prominent artists working in London between the end of the war and around 1954.

Comprehensively, I have attempted to show that current readings of this painting have been limited. The politics it has been assigned have dominated public perceptions of this artwork which may have led to its undervaluation and prevented analysis that has addressed interesting pictorial philosophical qualities. Examples of this are clear if the Wikipedia 'Kitchen Sink School' page and the BMAG label are consulted. Furthermore, this study has aimed to present that the individualistic philosophies of existentialism and phenomenology that arose from cultural, social and political insecurity after the war. These notions can be seen as relevant and useful to understanding the relationships of body and space and the apparent synchronicity linking the two in terms of the representation of temperamental disposition. All the contextual issues discussed in this dissertation embody the *zeitgeist* of post-war years that I believe may have influenced this painting.

Jack Smith's work throughout his career deserves more in depth academic and public attention as it does not accord with the social realism to which it has been ascribed as wholly or simply as it been portrayed, Smith's work even moved into abstraction at the end of the 1950s. This study may have provided useful insight into wider possible influences on the artist's work that merit further exploration as influential ideologies on other later works.

What I think must be understood about the 'Kitchen Sink School' is that their works should be

given more individual consideration and not be branded with the same label. Instead, further study of the work of Jack Smith and the Beaux Arts Quartet is needed beyond the scope of this denomination.

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Illustrations



Fig. 1 Jack Smith, *Child Walking with Wicker Stool*, 1954



Fig. 2 Jack Smith, *study for Child Walking*, 1954



Fig. 3, Francis Bacon, *Two Figures*, 1953



Fig III, Francis Bacon, *Two Figures in the Grass*, 1952



Fig. IV, Francis Bacon, *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953



Fig V, Jack Smith, *Child Walking with Check Tablecloth*, 1953



Fig. VI Jack Smith, *Interior with Child*, 1953

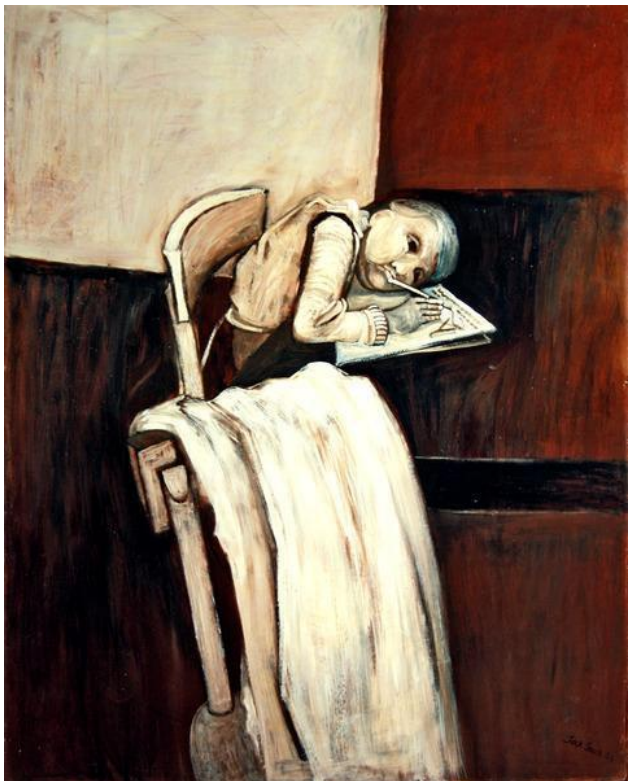


Fig. VII Jack Smith, *Child Writing*, 1954



Fig. VIII, Alberto Giacometti, *The Square*, 1948



Fig. VIII Reg Butler, *An Unknown Political Prisoner*, 1951-2



Fig . X, Edward Middleditch, *Sheffield Weir*, 1954



Fig. XI Edward Middleditch, *Pigeons in Trafalgar Square*, 1954



Fig. XII, John Everett Millais, *Bubbles*, 1886

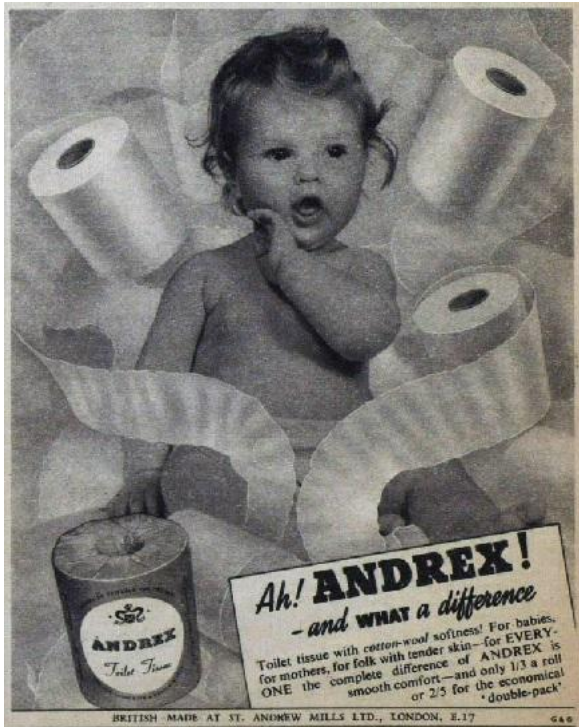


Fig. XIII Unknown photographer/illustrator, *Andrex Toilet tissue*, 1954

YOU can help to work a miracle like this—

These two photographs are of the same child. The first shows Catherine as the N.S.P.C.C. found her; the one below was taken after only two months in good care. It is hard to believe this is the same little girl—harder still to realise that parents can so neglect and ill-treat their own children.

Every year the N.S.P.C.C. helps nearly 100,000 unhappy children. It costs £3. 10 to help each child, and the Society needs money urgently. Please will you send a donation?



Fig.XIV, Unknown photographer, NSPCC advert, 1954



Fig. XV Unknown photographer, *Manchester*, 1954



Fig. XVI Unknown photographer, *Birmingham*, 1954

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