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PORTFOLIO

Tokyo Girls

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Hellen van Meene is one of a handful of Dutch photographers who are currently enjoying something of an international vogue for their portrait work. From the glamorous and theatrical celebrity photographs of Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin (seen in the [Great Performers](#) portfolio in our Feb. 27 issue) to the stark, intently observed subjects of Rineke Dijkstra's pictures ([one of which](#), as it happens, appears in this issue), there is no single Dutch style; there is only a shared taste for original portraiture. Van Meene, for her part, has developed a characteristically small, square and intimately composed portrait shot -- most often of pubescent girls, soft and languorous and at times, she observes, innocently erotic.

When the magazine decided to commission a portfolio of photographs of young Japanese women, van Meene's work immediately came to mind. In today's Japanese youth culture -- or at least in the forms of it that have international cachet -- innocence is pulled in multiple directions: exaggerated into mere cuteness in the kitsch of Hello Kitty; mock-heroically ennobled by the child heroes of manga (comic books); even distorted and sexualized in the submissive schoolgirls of the country's anime, or cartoon, pornography. Lost in these extremes but captured in van Meene's work is the less stylized (but still stylish) vernacular of everyday Japanese girlhood. It is a look at once fashionable and ingenuous, tender but not without the occasional flush of teenage allure.

In February and March of this year, van Meene approached girls and young women on the street in Tokyo and shot them in casual 10-minute sessions against the backdrops at hand. Van Meene says she does not conceive of her portrait photographs in the traditional documentary way: while she does not exactly "stage" her subjects, neither does she try to capture their true, underlying personality or state of mind. Instead, she chooses to see her subjects as the raw material of her own fictions. "This is not just you, now," she explains. "This is a sense of you, created by me."



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Photographs by Hellen van Meene that capture the vernacular of everyday Japanese girlhood.

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