

GRAHAM OVENDEN

British photographer, 1943-

The first of Ovenden's major areas of artistic achievement is represented by the body of photographs which he began work on as a teenager in 1957 and continued with intermittently until 1964. These images of the East End of London, recorded with a box camera, show the streets and the street life, which had hardly changed in a century, but which were now on the verge of being swept away. Ovenden not only described his subjects among the buildings and people, but also captured their spirit, including an intimate sense of the ways in which children of that period occupied the streets in parallel with, but separately from, the adult world.

Then there is the work which Ovenden produced from about 1975 as a founder member of the Brotherhood of Ruralists, which owes its ethos both to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and also to the Brotherhood of Ancients, of whom William Blake was a member. In part, Ovenden's contribution was in the form of what might, albeit inadequately, be called realist or

sophy which has its root in the delight in and respect for the physical and spiritual human body enunciated by William Blake. However, there is another world with a different view, tainted by the remnants of puritanism, which is fearful of sexuality and any other aspect of life that is resistant to prescription and regulation. This world impacted upon the Ovendens when the police, who were investigating the photographer Ron Oliver and the artist Brian Partridge, discovered that they were friends and colleagues of Graham Ovenden. They then considered Ovenden's work, and, because some of it involved images of nude children, they assumed that they could bring charges under the Protection of Children Act 1978 against the making and possession of indecent images of children.

Early in the morning of 10 March 1993, Ovenden's house was raided by a number of officers, some of whom were members of the London Metropolitan Police Obscene Publications Squad, who had travelled from London to participate. Of the



OVENDEN: One of the nude studies of children taken by Ovenden which were confiscated by the London Metropolitan Police Obscene Publications Squad from Ovenden's home in March 1993. His collaboration with the artist Brian Partridge and the photographer Ron Oliver on an *Alice in Wonderland* exhibition alerted the police to his subject matter, which they assumed would lead to an indictment under the Protection of Children Act 1978. Ovenden remained on bail for two years after the raid but no further action was taken and most of his work was returned.

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Much police effort was put into interviewing the now young adult models who had worked with Ovenden. Detailed reports of the interviews, and some independent interviews conducted later to cross-check the facts of the case, show the use of leading questions and frank intimidation, to the extent that it might be thought that the police were attempting to suborn the witnesses. Ovenden believes they had the impression that they were on the track of a paedophile "ring", because Ovenden, Oliver, and Partridge had collaborated on an *Alice* exhibition which had travelled internationally.

Ovenden remained on police bail for approximately two years before he was advised that no further action would be taken. During that time, he and his supporters took every opportunity to expose the legislative and judicial defects that had led up to his situation. One of the most significant events in this anti-censorship campaign was the Channel 4 film *For the Sake of the Children*, screened during 1997 in their "Films of Fire" series.

PHILIP STOKES

Writings

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Editor, *Victorian Erotic Photography*, London: Academy Editions, 1973

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The Marble Mirror, 1984

States of Grace, 1992

The Obscene Publications Squad versus Art: Scotland Yard Declares Child Nudity a Crime and Raids Artist/Photographer Graham Ovenden, with Rhona Rimmer, Philip Stokes, and A.D. Coleman, 1994

Street Children, 1998

Further Reading

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Bellos, Alex, "In the Eye of the Beholder?", *The Sunday Telegraph* (2 January 1994)

Elliott, Valerie, "Artist Hounded over Nude Child Pictures", *The Sunday Telegraph* (12 November 1995)

Gale, Iain, "Portrait of the Artist as an Accused Man", *The Independent II* (15 February 1994)

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O'Toole, Laurence, *Pornocopia: Porn, Sex, Technology and Desire*, 2nd edition, London: Serpent's Tail, 1999

Stokes, Philip, "When Indecency Is in the Eye of the Beholder", *LM*, 108 (March 1998)

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