Childhood Streets
Graham Ovenden
Introduction by Martin Golding

Ophelia Editions, New York
118 Pages, Hardbound, $50.00

Successful child photographers are a rarity in the history of photography. Other than Lartigue, whose boyish wonder at the age of mechanical inventions gave us a fresh perspective, there aren't others of note. On the other hand, photographers who document childhood are more numerous. Jacob Riis, Izis, 'Chim,' Helen Levitt, Wayne Miller, and Sally Mann all readily spring to mind.

Graham Ovenden's *Childhood Streets* makes an interesting conjunction here. As a boy growing up in England in the 1950s, he photographed other children in the streets of London's East End. Well-known today as a painter and historian of Victorian photography, and the author of several important monographs on early photographers, Ovenden studied at the Royal College of Art.

But before he had chosen his life's path, Ovenden was drawn to London and, as a teenager,„would travel from his parents' home in Southampton to the metropolis and sleep rough in order to immerse himself in the street life. Using a simple fixed focus Brownie camera, he photographed other children playing. This was a time before the motor car forced children off the streets and before television lured them indoors. Children were not the focus of marketing that they later became, and their clothing styles and games had not changed much in fifty years. With candor, uncanny timing and a great eye for spontaneous composition, Ovenden documented a moment when children were not little adults — they had their own identity and their own world. These photos are all the more poignant because we know childhood is fleeting, but here is a whole era, a whole kind of childhood that has vanished in the march of consumerism.

The children in these photographs are poor, not poverty stricken, working class kids struggling in the post-war reconstruction, but they have something valuable that is gradually being lost by children: imagination and a delight in simplicity. This is shared by the invisible 13-year-old boy with his Kodak camera, ignored by other children, snapping happily in the markets of Portobello Road or in the cobbled streets of Stepney

What's astounding is the visual comparisons to major photographic visionaries that couldn't have been known by the young Ovenden: *Whitechapel Shoe Shop 1963* hearkens back to Atget *Block of Flats, Shoreditch, 1960* screams Bill Brandt, while *Whitechapel Scullery, 1956,* has the qualities of a Woodburytype. The sugary grain also informs other images. A product of the plastic lens of the Brownie, it is now endowed with much aesthetic appeal since the documentation of early photographic techniques. (Ovenden himself is drawn to Calotypes and has subsequently produced another body of work using Victorian methods.)

The final image in the book, *Old Woman, Stepney, 1957.* so strongly echoes the famous image by John Thompson, *The Crawlers* from his 1876 series. *Street Life in London,* that I had to compare them side by side. It looks like the same doorway and the woman radiates the same sense of isolation and pathos.

Near Archway, 1962, would work as a classic demonstration of Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment': what are the children on the curb doing? Are they about to leap into the street, are they looking at something in the road? The shots of the children skinny-dipping in Victoria Park would be impossible to take today for obvious reasons. But

Paddling. Regents Canal, 1957. Toned GSP

Paddling, Regents Canal, 1957, my favorite image in the book, presents a very different treatment of the theme that is unlike anything else I know in the history of photography. In the foreground is a girl in the water, holding up her dress to keep it dry, her belly and thighs are exposed. Intent on her situation, she is oblivious to the camera. The camera is so close in fact that the girl is out of focus. In the background, in focus, another girl stands on the bank observing the scene. Her pose is defensive and yet engaged. She is half pondering and half posing. Several other pictures in the collection have similar complex dramas going on. *Science Museum, 1983,* shows a lad scaling a drainpipe while two other children watch him. The girl has one leg on the wall, ready to follow, the other boy seems less certain and sits on the wall apprehensively. *Demolition Site, Stepney, 1959,* has two figures, one playing in the sunlight, the other lurking in the shadows. It's such a forceful pairing, it looks like a collage. Ovenden says he didn't even notice the girl in the shadows when he took the picture. Of the many other photographs here that are layered with meaning, either through multiple activities or background detail such as graffiti or chalk drawings, there is another complex tale in *Mile End, 1961.* In the foreground a girl passes before a shop window: there doesn't seem to be much for sale — razor blades and watch bands. Behind her, in focus but in the dim doorway, another girl examines her bare chest. It's a startling composition and like many other images in the book is worth studying for the symmetry. The balance is there, but in the details you are caught off-guard and the composition switches to being unbalanced. This shifting focus and the narrative details are what makes this a book worthy of study. It is truly an important document of a lost culture: British childhood in a more innocent time. •

Above. Review of *Childhood Streets* from Photo Metro, San Francisco, which is the foremost photographic journal published on the USA West Coast, showing the international respect Ovenden's photographic work is held in.