

The music video for Madonna's glitch-pop synth single *What It Feels Like For A Girl* (2001) is a girlyfied version of Jonathan Glazer's *Sexy Beast* directed by her then-husband, Guy Ritchie. I found Madonna's character far more effective as a motivator than the complex female characters presented to me by great millennial champions. Don't shoot me for saying it, but complex female characters can't really ever be girls, apart from *Bonjour Tristesse* or *Justine* (1791).

The song opens with a sample by Charlotte Gainsbourg from the 1993 film *The Cement Garden*. She coos in a high-pitched cockney accent – “GIRLS CAN WEAR JEANS, CUT THEIR HAIR SHORT, IT'S OKAY TO BE A BOY” in a moment of surreality, as Gainsbourg's real-life persona typifies boyish charm as coquettishness. In Baby Reni Foundation, the show incorporates art that is literal and non-literal. *What it feels like for a girl* doesn't answer her own question but skirts around it, conceptually, like a scared little mouse, or a girl.

I find Girlhood's intersection with the art world as exhausting as it is titillating. It plays into the perpetual commodity fetishism of identity and gender that has slowly infiltrated all aspects of consumption. Girlhood, when treated as both object and subject, has the ability to create art that reiterates these tropes rather than subverting them.

But Baby Reni curates a show that is subtly adjacent to girlishness. In Bruno Zhu's work, *Lesson For Two Months To Two Years Old* (2025), children's onesies are laid out into a literal, if magical, installation piece: each letter “G”, “I”, “R”, “L” formed by a tiny bundle of infantile fabric. Zhu makes girlhood a total non-entity that can be applied to anything saleable. Take Pam Virada's work, *Descendant (autumn notes)* 2025. Necklaces the artist has worn from childhood into womanhood are stretched from floor to ceiling, a lifeline to her own adolescence. I often, reluctantly, try to ascertain what it feels like for a “Girl” at the quarter-century mid-point. It is a sarcastic, ironic feeling, summarised by Fernanda's highly ephemeral wall plaque: “You can't spell *ghost* without *host*”. She is right, to be a girl feels like being nothing, a perfect plastic container of nothing.

Modernism loved that womanhood could be personified into a disaffected hairy object. The hinted at absence of woman formed by one of her affects, as in *Bless Beauty Hairbrush*, was typified by Meret Oppenheim with *Le Déjeuner en Fourrure* (1936). *Axis Mundi* (2025) typifies the artwork that plays with girlhood's psychic dismantling through the tools of her own liberation. The girl blushes, revealing her morally pink complexion.<sup>1</sup> Rendered in wood, the sculpture reminds me of the famous girl-lover Balthus's brother, Pierre Klossowski.<sup>2</sup> High heels are ingrained into the floor on which they stand – it's as if Klossowski's sexually indentured protagonist, Roberte, had up and left without her soles.

1. Preliminary Theory of a Young-Girl, Tiqqun (1993)

2. Roberte ce Soir (1980)



# What it feels like...

What it Feels Like

by baby reni foundation

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What it feels

Like...