

What Are We Looking at?

WHEN WE LOOK at Abbruzzese's image of the girl with the butterfly on her shirt and the boy wearing his Nikes, I think we can recognize immediate association of symbols. From the Greek legends to the butterfly effect we are reminded of actions and consequences, conflict and responsibility, intention and helplessness. Recognition abounds, yet the true dynamic at work remains a mystery. This leaves plenty of room for contemplation and emotional access for the viewer.

The girl seems pragmatic in dealing with her apparent supremacy, though a bit conflicted. She is enigmatic, strong, and supine across multiple steps, claiming space even outside of the frame of the photograph. Her arms folded behind her head suggest that she is here to stay. She will see through whatever problem has arisen with the boy.

The boy is fully covered by the frame. Yet, he seems small and hurt. His body language is the opposite of the girl's. Where she leans back, he leans forward; she reveals her face with an inscrutable nuance while the boy's face, and his likely tears, are hidden from view. Though he appears to favor his right elbow, as if possibly injured, the pain seems to emanate from his whole body suggesting that this is a deeper, emotional, pain.

How Can the Image Be Interpreted?

While he is wearing the brand of shoes that is named after the Greek goddess of victory, Nike, the real Nike is sitting right next to him. Her prone elbows reinforce this image of the winged goddess, as does the butterfly appearing on her chest. In the way the boy's shoes identify her, the butterfly seems to identify the boy—a butterfly with a broken wing.

They are seated on concrete stairs leading the viewer diagonally up and down out of the frame. The girl's head is inclined upward and the boy's downward. We have no idea where either direction leads. We don't know whether this is a public or private place. Nature, or the nature of things, is where each rung disappears in a lush canopy of diverse leafy plants or a natural stone retaining wall next to the boy. In the other direction, the steps flare out towards the viewer. Again, we don't know for how far and whether we are on the steps with these children or beyond them.

Conditioned as we are in the West to read from left to right, the natural progress would be to go down. But the girl's eyes look up, whether out of exasperation or on the basis of a determined wisdom we can't know. Since we are guided most by Nike, it is her and her mythology that we must surrender to. She had three siblings—Zelos (Rivalry), Kratos (Strength), and Bia (Force). Nike and her siblings may be on their way to Mount Olympus to join Zeus in his battle against the Titans. This

could be an outtake of her and her brother Zelos (etymology jealous or zeal).

It so happens that I knew that this was an image Abbruzzese took of her siblings, which would make her Bia. Now, I must discover whether there happens to be another brother. If so this would be quite the example of how what we learn in school, what informs our culture, what is emblazoned on our clothes conflates and conspires again and again to tell a variant of the same story.

The above is one way to look at the image. As mentioned in the foreword, this book aims not to suggest the most obvious interpretation, nor to make any claim to a right or wrong way of looking at and experiencing a picture. I encourage you therefore to take a fresh look at this image through your own eyes. The story you bring to this image is as valid as anyone else's. Never forget that. The feminist lens would be important to consider more closely here. In an overt way, the image empowers a girl and disempowers a boy. Until Disney truly catches up to this concept, the image will retain a primary power for blatantly contradicting the still-prevailing stereotype of an empowered boy and disempowered girl.

Conclusion

Allegations of using child labor in sweatshops to produce the famed shoe brand have gained traction in recent years; they have become another inescapable aspect of this photograph, least of all because a sad child is wearing shoes that may have been made by another sad child, albeit their sadness exists for very different reasons. Whether we are considering social justice for women, or children, it is still the mythology of ancient Greece that is the foundation for our contemporary culture's ethical identity.

Assignments You May Want to Challenge Yourself With

- Mythology
- Gender roles
- Environmental portraiture
- Emotional dynamics