We are a long way from the days when naked children were considered the safe stuff in art, writes **SARAH MILROY**, judging by the troubling questions raised by the work of artists such as Lyla Rye and Sally Mann

DONALD WEBER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL LYLA RYE

Artist Lyla Rye (above left) playing with her daughter in Toronto last July: At the time, Rye was at the centre of controversy in Halifax for her video-loop installation Byte (above right), which showed her and her baby singing into each other's open mouths. On the screen, however, their actions are ambiguous. Are they kissing? Fighting? 'I wanted to maintain that moment of uncertainty as long as possible,' says Rye.

The mother of all controversies

ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

Paul Peel's After the Bath (1890): Today, the Peel painting provokes giggles, perhaps even denigration, from gallery viewers.

CAMBRIDGE, ONT.

When one raises the subject of children in art, many Canadian art-history buffs will think first of Paul Peel's *Venetian Bather* of 1889, a painting now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. A sinuous and silky rear view of a naked boy, it was the first nude to be exhibited publicly in Canada. While portraits of women (or men) in the buff were still considered too outré, naked children were considered safe stuff.

Today, however, the painting provokes giggles, perhaps even denigration from gallery viewers. Kiddie porn! And that's nothing compared to Peel's works in the Art Gallery of Ontario, like his 1890 painting *After the Bath*, depicting two chubby cherubs warming themselves in front of the fire. Or *The Tired Model*, a studio scene in which a naked tot hides weeping behind the easel, his Cupid's quiver fallen to the floor. The artist, a kindly looking figure with a long white beard, peers around the canvas edge, cajoling the boy to resume his model's duties. "That's the picture that draws the most comment," says Toronto artist and AGO docent Lyla Rye. "All the teenagers see it as sexual abuse."

Rye is watching their reactions with special attentiveness these days, given her own wrangles with censorship. Last July, Rye found herself in the centre of controversy in Halifax for her video-loop installation titled *Byte*, which presented her and her baby daughter engaged in a sensual mother/child game — singing into each other's open mouths — a game abruptly terminated when her daughter bit her mother's lower lip.

On the screen, however, their actions are ambiguous. Are they kissing? Fighting? "I wanted to maintain that moment of uncertainty as long as possible," says Rye, who deliberately escalated the viewer's anxiety by pixilating and blurring the image. Just what is going on here?

It was this uncertainty, and the unease it engenders, that no doubt led to the confiscation of the tape by the Halifax authorities, prompted by the alarmed response of two teenaged girls. The police retained the video until after the end of the exhibition's run, returning it with a warning: "We won't be pressing charges, but we may press charges if she persists in showing it."

A number of viewers apparently share their concerns. The comment book at the Cambridge Galleries in Cambridge, Ont., where a small selection of Rye's recent work is being shown, speaks volumes about the generational shift that has occurred in the perception of appropriate adult/child interaction. If one can judge the age of the writer by their handwriting, a pattern seems to present itself — teens responding with comments like "gross" and "sick," while older gallery visitors seem cautiously supportive. "I am impressed and intrigued with the levels of intimacy into which you are plunging," writes one woman; another writes, "Mothers and babies have always interacted in this physical way. The sense of touch is integral to emotional growth."

Perversion, it seems, is in the eye of the beholder. While the law is quite specific on what constitutes child pornography — the depiction of under-18-year-old children's genital or anal regions, and the explicit sexual activity of minors (not including hugging, kissing and touching) — widespread public opinion is considerably more conservative.

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It's the rare artist, these days, who will even stick a toe in these troubled waters, for fear of either being accused of predatory inclinations toward children, or of fostering such inclinations in others.

But how justified is the big chill? Judith Levine, the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based author of *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* (published last year), maps out the wide discrepancy between perceived and actual instances of pedophilia in North American society and argues that, from a purely statistical standpoint, "our fear of sexual assault far exceeds the actual need to feel fearful." But in Anglo-American culture, she argues, we tend to sexualize our general anxieties about social change. These days, she says, "much of our anxiety is centred around the impact of the media, the Internet and the commercial marketplace in general, which uses kids as both its target and as its sales force. These vehicles," she adds, "engage kids in previously adult activities and give kids access to images and ideas that we were previously able to barricade from them. It represents a perceived loss of control over children's lives — which was a little illusory to begin with."

Whatever the roots of the unease, there is no doubt that our culture is riven by a deep contradiction: aggressively asserting the precocious sexuality of children in mainstream culture on the one hand, while reflecting terror about its implications on the other. As AGO contemporary art curator Jessica Bradley puts it, "What interests me here is what kind of visual imagery we will accept in any other domains — like music videos, advertising, cinema, magazines — that we will not accept in art. I think this reveals some of our notions about what art must be. It's a very conservative clinging, perhaps, to a notion of art's social duties."

Can art help us to unravel these contradictions? There have been a few pioneers — most of them women — who have ventured into this dangerous territory. In the United States, photographer Sally Mann is the most striking exemplar, defiantly continuing to photograph her children — often nude — as they go about their lives in rural Virginia. No adult can look at these pictures and not feel the rapturous lens through which Mann sees her children, or not envy the lazy, sensual lifestyle of children who can run around naked, swim in the river and play in the mud all day. "Many of these pictures are intimate," Mann wrote in the preface to her 1992 book, *Immediate Family*. "Some are fictions and some are fantastic but most are of ordinary things every mother has seen — a wet bed, a bloody nose, candy cigarettes. They dress up, they pout and posture, they paint their bodies, they dive like otters in the dark river."

But my children, confronted with these images (including one called *Popsicle Drips*, which shows her son's nude torso spattered with dark Popsicle juice stains), reacted with an appeal for the privacy of the child. How will they feel about these pictures when they grow up, they asked? Why couldn't the mother just keep the picture for herself, instead of putting it in a book where strangers could see it? To what extent, I wondered as I listened to them, can Mann's children truly be considered partners in the art-making process, as she asserts them to be, when they cannot possibly understand the adult context in which the work is to be received?

I found myself weighing the same questions looking at Rye's most recent work in the Cambridge show. Provocatively titled *Carnal*, the video projection starts small on the wall — we see her daughter, now four years old, licking the melted ice cream off a spoon — but the image grows and grows until it envelops us, bringing us closer to her tangled thatch of blond hair, her pearly, luminous skin and downturned lashes, and her glistening lips and delicate, slithery pink tongue, which works its way methodically around the spoon. Rye has slowed the image down, heightening the sensuality of the moment.

The work, she says, records her daughter's total absorption in her innocent pleasure and her mother's pleasure in watching. "I wanted a deeply saturated, luscious colour," says Rye, and she got it. But how will this imagery be received by others who visit the gallery? Is she not leaving her child open to danger by placing her loveliness on public view?

When it comes to liberalism, this is where the rubber meets the road. Does our fear of how such an image might be interpreted entitle us to remove it from public view? The answer must be no; all images of innocence could then be censored as enticements to depravity.

That's not to say that the choices for the artist are made without trepidation and human cost. Lyla Rye recalls the aftermath of the Halifax episode: "We decided to hire a social worker to come and do an assessment of our home, and of my relationship with my daughter, just to be prepared, in case of the worst. I wanted to know: If they come for her, I know they will come unannounced. But will they come at night? How many will there be?" So far, thank God, there has been no knock at the door.

In the end, works like this may help us to sort through our own feelings about the parent/child bond, about sensuality, innocence, trust and maybe even the betrayal of those things. One note inscribed in ladylike cursive in the exhibition's comment book spoke volumes about the complexity of audience response. "I need time to process the pieces here . . . " wrote this visitor. "As a past survivor of sexual abuse at the hands of my own parents, I can say that watching the images surfaced in me anger and hostility similar to others who have commented here. Perhaps if I had had a more 'pure' childhood I would be less disturbed?"

But, she adds, "I'll probably be back again."

Lyla Rye continues at Cambridge Galleries in Cambridge, Ont., until Sunday (519-621-0460).