In “Reviving Ophelia,” her groundbreaking 1994 study of adolescent girls, psychologist Mary Pipher wrote of her subjects that “life is either marvelous or not worth living. School is either pure torment or is going fantastically. Other people are either great or horrible, and they themselves are wonderful or pathetic failures.”

No doubt, it’s that dramatic psychology – with the potential for very high highs and very low lows – that’s drawn many talented photographers to study adolescent girls. Sally Mann, Lauren Greenfield, Jock Sturges and Rineke Dijkstra have all offered very different takes on the subject. Now comes Blake Fitch, whose show “Expectations of Adolescence” is on display at the Light Work gallery in Syracuse, New York, from April 1 to July 30, 2008.
Layered and intensely personal, Fitch’s work follows two female members of her family – her sister Kate and cousin Julia – over a decade, as they move through childhood into adolescence and young adulthood. The warm, intimate images were mostly shot in two locations in upstate New York: a family summer home and the girls’ grandparents’ house, whose Old World furniture and flower-papered rooms offer a striking counterpoint to the girls’ contemporary auras.

Speaking from her home in Boston, Fitch says she began the project thinking she’d photograph different adolescent girls, then decided her connection to Kate and Julia was more interesting. “It’s these girls I really care about, growing up,” she says. “We’re really close, so it’s not uncommon to be just chilling out with them and observing whatever is unfolding.”

This close, easy relationship has produced a set of luminous, unpretentious images. We’re offered a window into the lives of two attractive, privileged American girls as they swim, sunbathe and wait for grown-up life to begin. The girls come across as self-possessed, but they’re also fragile and mysterious: images like “Kate at Window, 1997” and “Julia on Radiator, 2005” make it clear they’re leading rich inner lives at which we can only guess.

Fitch, who was geographically separated from the girls by divorce (Kate is the child of her father’s second marriage), says she often found herself capturing an alternative vision of her own adolescence. “They were growing up with a family and in a lifestyle that I only got to visit,” she says, a touch of wistfulness inflecting her voice. “In a way, I think I was asking myself how I fit into this family that I was close to, but didn’t grow up with.”

The fact that her grandparents’ house offered such a wealth of richly textured backdrops, from carved wooden furniture to flowered wallpapers, was a definite bonus. “Photographically, it’s an interesting backdrop, and it also shows a connectedness from one generation to the next,” Fitch says. In one room, she discovered that Julia’s mother had picked the wallpaper because it reminded her of seaweed at the family’s vacation home on the St. Lawrence River. “We’ve all had these seaweed fights at the river, and knowing that she had a strong association with the seaweed was one more thing binding us together,” Fitch says.

Her own adolescence, living with her mother in North Carolina, was less golden than the one depicted in her images, she says. In high school, photography provided an outlet for someone who “felt like a quirky girl who was trying to fit in.” Posing her sister and friends, she shot moody photo essays with titles like “A Day in the Life of a Teenage Kid.” In college, she studied...
with documentary photographer Philip Perkis at Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute, and traveled to Cuba to shoot her senior thesis – an act of daring that she marvels at now. “I didn’t speak Spanish and I was winging it, on a bit of grant money,” she says, adding, “I think I made some pretty good images there.”

Though Fitch was always intent on becoming a photographer, her career took a tangent in the late 1990s when she studied Arts Administration at Boston University, then scored a job as the executive director of the Griffin Museum of Photography in Winchester, Massachusetts. She held the position for five years, standing down last summer. “It was great to put all my effort into figuring out how to put this small museum on the map,” she says. In the summers, she’d visit her father’s family in upstate New York and continue working on her images of Kate and Julia.

Fitch says that “Expectations of Adolescence” has evolved over time, her own style becoming more distinct as she’s matured along with the girls. One of the first images she shot, “Katie in a Red Towel, 1997” reminds her of Sally Mann’s images of her children, she says, but that’s a happy correspondence, since “I think Sally Mann’s a fabulous photographer.” Inevitably, some of the later images have an erotic charge, highlighting the girls’ burgeoning sexuality (art critic Andy Grundberg has called “Kate in Orange Bikini, 2006” “dauntingly sensual”), and Fitch admits this could unnerve some viewers. But at the same time, she says, she thinks American culture has moved on since the 1990s culture wars ensnared Mann. “To me, ‘Kate in Orange Bikini’ is an image about a beautiful, confident, dynamic young woman,” she says. “After photographing her all these years, it’s pretty amazing to see the woman she’s become – from her dynamic personality to her career as a graphic designer.”

Most importantly to Fitch, the girls themselves – and her wider family – appreciate the images, both as family documents and works of art. At the opening of her show at Light Work, family members clustered around the images, sharing their memories of when the images were shot and revealing stories behind them. “They’re quite excited about them,” Fitch says. “I’m hoping Kate and Julia will look back at these images at some point in their lives and will be really proud to have this chronicle of themselves growing up.”