

stranger than fiction

The transition to digital technology represents just one of the changes that have occurred since critic A.D. Coleman published his influential article "The Directorial Mode: Notes toward a Definition" in the 1970s, asserting the place of staged photography within the larger pantheon of photographic practice. A.D. Coleman noted that this process involves "treating the external world... as raw material," while these images "use photography's overt veracity against the viewer." ¹ After almost 35 years of experimentation, this exhibition reviews the work of artists who continue to explore photography's tenuous connection to the real, in a world where the distinction between fact and fiction, between pure record and staged event, has become increasingly blurred.

These eleven artists merge photographic reality and the fictional aspects of staged photography through their role as director. Scott Hilton's elegies from battlefields, Jo Whaley's delicate insect studies, Carlo Zinzi's floating fast food, and Amy Stevens' wildly decorated cakes reinvigorate and reinvent the conventional still life, while they often invoke references to mortality. Artists continue to mine narrative tableaux, subtracting from and adding to their photographic source material, as in Susan kae Grant's haunting silhouettes and Dwayne Carter's repainted comics. Marcy Palmer and Kerry Hennigin employ doubling as they explore self as subject. They fuse past and present in their re-creation of everyday domestic scenes, resulting in confusions between photographic document and childhood memories, direct experience and the phenomenon of the supernatural, autobiography and fantasy. Stephan Hillerbrand & Mary Magsamen and Kenda North embrace the expressive nature of the body, expanding upon the practice of performance art and ritual, as they use the camera to record studio actions. These photographs and videos occupy a space that lies somewhere between what we see and what we can imagine.



Amy Stevens, *Confections (abroad) #6*, Archival inkjet print, 33"x 22", 2010

dwayne carter
kerry hennigin kenda north marcy palmer
stephan hillerbrand & mary magsamen
scott hilton amy stevens
jo whaley carlo zinzi



Stephan Hillerbrand & Mary Magsamen, *Four Place Setting*, single channel video, trt 14:00, HD NTSC, 16:9, 2010

artist talk: Stephan Hillerbrand & Mary Magsamen
Thursday, January 20, 7:30 p.m., Visual Arts 1.105

artist talk: Susan kae Grant
Thursday, January 27, 7:30 p.m., Visual Arts 1.105
curated by Marilyn Waligore

artist reception: Friday, January 21, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

January 14 - February 12, 2011
Visual Arts Building, The University of Texas at Dallas



Carlo Zinzi, *Insect*, Ultrachrome print, 24" x 16", 2010

Domestic diaries function as a point of departure for many of these artists, as they amplify everyday actions for their lens-based experiments. Distortions of family rituals transform **Hillerbrand & Magsamen's** home, where swirling fog overwhelms parents and children gathered around the dinner table in chapter 2, *Whether*, in the video trilogy *Four Place Setting. Accumulation*, chapter 1, documents an embarrassing cornucopia of toys, garden tools and picnic plastic, which towers above the garage floor. This one-story sculpture reflects our consumer economy and its aftermath. Our collective practice of collection happens often within the home of the individual or family, behind closed garage doors, while the public evidence appears curbside in the mounds of post-Christmas trash pickup, visits to Goodwill drop-off locations, and displays at summer garage sales. From the video, the auctioneer's voice echoes online sales, where products of buyer's remorse can be resold at half-price, to continue to fuel the frenzy.

Amy Stevens subverts the best intentions of Martha Stewart through the artist's misplaced domestic efforts. Her studio events result in uncanny culinary constructions with blaring, saturated reds and yellows, blues and greens, embellished with textures that only a cake decorator could achieve. In *Confections (abroad) #6*, repetitive bands of color fill the background; the lines and white netting reappear in three-dimensional form. The photograph documents a cake that could be molded using Play-Doh®. Stevens takes a cue from Miriam Shapiro's pattern painting and 1970s feminist embrace of women's creative practices. She designs food to be looked at, rather than eaten. Perhaps these sugar-laden sweets allude to American waistlines that are out of control.

Carlo Zinzi similarly explores imagery of food and excess, as the American barbecue and backyard unite in a new juxtaposition. Hamburgers and hot dogs, the mainstay of summer outdoor festivities, float above a lush foliage comprised of pansies and the occasional pesky fly. Primaries of red, yellow and blue suggest childhood, and underscore the fact that this hand-held food is kid-friendly. The burger oozes with red ketchup in *Insect*, while a short fuse threatens imminent destruction. The viewer is left to wonder whether the ground beef, the garden oasis,

or everyone in the vicinity is threatened. The image suggests that time is running out, and that our relationship to our environment, and to our health and survival, is tied to our food consumption.

Jo Whaley investigates the tension between nature and culture in her pairing of an uncommon white and black patterned beetle and deteriorating book pages in *Plectrodera scalator*. The unfurled pages suggest animal burrows or insect infestation among the thick tomes of a library. Fragments of words, *Spirit, Nature, future, recognize, scientific, keep*, lead the viewer into a dark passageway through the printed sheets. In *Coleoptera*, a monstrous black beetle confronts the innards of a discarded timepiece, and appears to function within a larger clockwork mechanism itself. We reflect on our blindness to the phenomena of natural clocks due to our obsession with time in seconds, minutes and hours, rather than moons and tides. The patterning of mildew behind the framed oval evenly mars the paper surface and resembles the patterning of clouds in the sky. An inconsequential detail references the universe.

The life of the table becomes a point of departure for **Kenda North** in her series "Notations of Beauty and Loss." Her animated, topsy-turvy tabletops reveal the physical support of the female body. Alternating between saturated and achromatic color schemes, the decorated tables glow, orange with pomegranate, gold and pink. The blurred color suggests instability and movement, while the tan legs of the figure, punctuated by the patterned orange and pink pumps, imply both strength and sensuality in *Pomegranate*. The juxtaposition is amplified as the table, tilting downward to the left, is balanced by the pomegranate, a symbol of fertility, which leans to the right. Curvilinear markings on the table drape represent cyan, white and yellow stems connoting growth. The table's wide girth replaces the slender form of a female torso. The female body is represented through absence; shielded by the table, the body is larger than life.

Kerry Hennigin's autoportraits document acts of levitation, defying the laws of gravity. Her multiple personas take on various roles from observer to enchantress during these household magic tricks. Hennigin embraces Jonathan Lipkin's concept of the "indecisive moment"²² as it applies to digital photography merging multiple events into one, to emphasize

Jo Whaley, *Plate 42 Plectrodera scalator*, Chromogenic color print, 18.5"x 22.25" framed 27"x 32", 2003





Kenda North, *Pomegranate*, Iris Giclee print, 47" x 35", 2010



Marcy Palmer, *Talk*, archival digital print, 11" x 12", 2008

simultaneity through montage. In *Julia Child*, three figures are lost in reverie and meditation, which is undercut by the red-capped bottle of syrup, floating against the white kitchen with its matching appliances—blender, microwave, oven and refrigerator. The hand gestures direct invisible energy; a chef's knife hovers in front of the freezer; and a syrup bottle floats near the stove. The traditional depiction of the magician or sorcerer as male—Merlin, Prospero, Daedalus, Oz—is abandoned. The banalities of an apartment interior, along with the warm tonality of the print, foster suspension of disbelief. These events take place in a world just slightly removed from our daily existence.

Marcy Palmer also explores a doubling of the self in her reinvention of scenes from her childhood. Culling images from her own family photographs, she crafts new moments in *Jumping*, as she observes a child, around five or six years old, transforming a bed into a trampoline. She recalls childhood mischievousness as well as a sense of boundlessness and freedom. She embraces memory, reconfiguring the experience of the past, as she performs the role of mother and child simultaneously. In *Talk*, the artist suggests the tension between parent and child. Frozen snow-covered ground extends back toward a distant mountain range. The little girl's pink dress and frilly apron stand in contrast to the stark winter landscape. The mother raises her hand to comfort the child. The implied narrative places the center of focus on the double self-portrait while the rest of the scene remains blurred.

Kerry Hennigin, *Julia Child*, Ultrachrome print, 16" x 24", 2010



Using photographic and digital processes to subtract or limit the amount of information presented in a photograph is a strategy embraced by **Susan kae Grant** in *Seeking Refuge*, from the "Night Journey" series. Grant's ethereal shapes, created in the studio through experiments with light and shadow, resemble delicate drawings. Two young women, caught in a veiled web defined by tree branches, exit the frame followed by a pack of five hyenas in close pursuit. Grant's narrative tableaux, with the implied interaction of characters, shares the dramatic qualities of ancient shadow puppetry practiced in Asia. Her staged theatrical scenes vary from romance, as in *We Found Each Other's Secret Place*, to threatening moments of vulnerability demonstrated by *Seeking Refuge*. Grant mines her dreams to create these nocturnal episodes. Her personal experience connects to memory, psychological fears and fantasies, while she draws in her viewer through references to perplexing visual clues and implausible juxtapositions.

Dwayne Carter uses digital montage to merge multiple events within a single frame in *Rescue from Rationalism*. Using painterly techniques, he alters photographic elements to suggest a state of limbo positioned somewhere between political reality and dream-like escape. He elevates everyday individuals, the models for his scenes, to the status of comic-book characters. Dramatic posing and extreme facial expression foster a sense of urgency, as these figures act out scenarios involving a power struggle. He references Goya's *Los Caprichos*—specifically the etching entitled "The sleep of reason produces monsters"—to create a similar ironic series. His narrative photo novella *Midway to Madness* includes *Rescue*; the larger work serves as a commentary on the limited options available to us as we strive to locate our place within society.

Scott Hilton's wet collodion tintypes resemble historic artifacts, recalling 19th century photographic processes while marking the introduction of industrial technology into modern warfare during WWI. His elegy, commemorating the loss of life during trench fighting, is filtered through his visual translation of poetic fragments. An abandoned boot is upturned in *Chapter 2: Pity, limped on, blood-shod*, the title borrowed from poetry by British "Trench Poet" Wilfred Owen.³ Hilton's references to the horrors of past wars prompt reflection on the present. He acknowledges a conflict that occurs on a distant continent and the traumas inconceivable to those who have not shared directly in that experience.



Susan Kae Grant, *Night Journey Series, Seeking Refuge, #040*, Giclee, 35" x 23.5" & 47" x 35", 2006

Dwayne Carter, *Midway to Madness (Rescue from Rationalism)*, Ultrachrome print, 20" x 30", 2010



The practice of living in denial or in a state of fantasy, where the demarcation between fiction and reality blurs, seems to occur more often in contemporary life, beyond the frame of the illusory photograph. However, our explorations of fantasy perhaps allow us to consider new possibilities. In "The Full Circle," photographer Diane Arbus describes "five singular people...author and hero of a real dream by which our own courage and cunning are tested and tried; so that we may wonder all over again what is veritable and inevitable and what is to become whoever we may be."⁴ Although Arbus documents the lives of individuals on the margins of society, she reminds us of photography's potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video: to realize internal thoughts and dreams; to challenge conventions regarding the visual representations of a moment in time; to use media that retain connotations of veracity in order to instill wonder; and to prompt us to reconsider what is deemed to be "veritable and inevitable."

— Marilyn Waligore, 2010

¹ Coleman, A.D. "The Directorial Mode: Notes toward a Definition." *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*. Ed. Vicki Goldberg. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981. 485.

² Lipkin, Jonathan. *Photography Reborn: Image Making in the Digital Era*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005. 93-103.

³ Hilton, Scott. Artist Statement, 2010.

⁴ Arbus, Diane. "The Full Circle." Diane Arbus: Magazine Work. Eds. Doon Arbus and Marvin Israel. New York: Aperture, 1984. 14.



Scott Hilton, *Chapter 2: Pity, limped on, blod-shod*, Wet Collodion Tintype, 6" x 8", 2010



The University of Texas at Dallas
Visual Arts Building, Main Gallery

Gallery Hours: Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m.- 10 p.m., Sat. 9 a.m.- 6 p.m., Sun. closed.
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