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.” 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 potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real. The artists in this exhibition explore staged photography and video to realize internal potential to challenge our notions of the real.

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 “creating the external world… as raw material,” while these images “use photography’s overt veracity against the viewer.” After almost 35 years of experimentation, this exhibition reviews the work of artists who continue to explore photography’s tenuous and ambiguous 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 involve 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.

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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 Hiltbrand/Brand & Magasnaro'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 collectible 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 subtends the best intentions of Martha Stewart through her pairing of an uncommon white and black patterned beetle and deteriorating book pages in her series “Rescue from Rationalism.” Grant’s etched references to the horrors of past wars prompt us to remember that time 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 in terms of full days or months, 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 series “Notations of Beauty and Loss.” Her animated, tosty-tury tableaux reveal the physical support of the female body. Alternating between saturated and achronic 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 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, girl 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 Hennigem’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. Hennigem embraces Jonathan Lipkin’s concept of the “indestructible moment”3 as it applies to digital photography merging multiple events into one, to emphasize simultaneity through montage. In Julio Chad’s three figures are lost in reverie and meditation, which is underscored by the red-capped bottle of syrup, floating above 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—Marvin, Prospero, Daedalus, Oz—is abandoned. The banalities of an apartment interior, along with the warm tonality of the paint, foster a sense of dependency. 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 scene from her childhood. Cutting images from her own family photographs, she crafts new moments in jamming as she observes a child, around five or six years old, transforming a bed into a trampoline. She recalls childhood mischiefiveness as well as a sense of boundlessness and freedom. She embraces memory, reconfiguring the experience of 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 a collage from Racionalism. 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 Roosevelt, the larger work serves as a commentary on the limited options available to us as we strive to locate our place within society.
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Amy Stevens subverts the best intentions of Martha Stewart through the artist’s mislabeled domestic efforts. Her studio events result in uncanny culinary constructions with blazing, saturated reds and yellows, blues and greens, embellished with textures that only a cake decorator could achieve. In Construct (almond #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 Plectrodera scalator, Chromogenic color print, 18.5” x 22.25” framed 27” x 32”, 2003. 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 life of the table becomes a point of departure for Kenda North in her series “Notations of Beauty and Loss.” Her animated, topsy-turvy 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 mischieffulness as well as a sense of boundlessness just slightly removed from our daily existence.

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Using photographic and digital processes to subtract or limit the amount of information presented in a photograph is a strategy embraced by Susan Sze 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 defied 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.
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— Marilyn Waligore, 2010