

Education
Guide

CONSTRUCTED AND STAGED IMAGES



Jennifer Greenburg
*Something funny happened in the
kitchen, 2011*

This print viewing introduces a range of staged and constructed photographic images that utilize a variety of techniques, including **photomontage** and stitching together multiple images in the darkroom or digitally. Artists presented create narratives by carefully composing their settings, altering photographs, or going to more elaborate ends to construct images and **tableaus** based in imagination rather than a record of “real” events.

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Clarissa Bonet

American, b. 1986



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Fortress, 2016
2018:3

Perpetual Shadow, 2014
2016:90



For her *City Space* series (2011–16), Clarissa Bonet observes and takes note of chance encounters and interactions she witnesses between strangers on the streets of downtown Chicago. Initially recording the interactions with her iPhone, in what she calls sketches, Bonet later restages the moments, carefully setting up her location, lighting, and models to recreate the scene. The resulting pictures portray mundane exchanges as dramatic, with individuals anonymously and solitarily navigating a confounding urban terrain.

Questions for looking

- Where does your eye go first when you see these images? What is Bonet doing in the composition to lead your eye there first?
- How has she used light and shadow? What impact does her use of light and shadow make to the overall mood or feeling?
- What clues does the artist provide to help us understand the staged nature of these images?
- Do you consider these images to fall into the genres of **street** or **documentary** photography or something else? Explain.

Philip-Lorca diCorcia

American, b. 1953



New York, 1997

Philip-Lorca diCorcia's photographs are dramatic witnesses to the spontaneity and reality of urban public spaces. His images, many taken on busy streets in cities throughout the world, use complicated cinematic lighting effects to record seemingly spontaneous, sometimes eerie moments of self-absorption or connection between people. In New York, for example, diCorcia captures the intimacy of a couple's gaze on a busy street corner, illustrating his interest in revealing, in his own words, "that which was never really hidden, but rarely is noticed."

Questions for looking

- Notice the lighting in this image. Is it natural or unnatural? Where do you think the source of light is coming from? Why?
- Should photographers capturing images in public spaces notify their subjects that they are being photographed? Why or why not? What expectations of privacy can you have in a public space?

Deeper Reading: Nussenzweig v. DiCorcia (2005)

Seven years after this image was taken, Philip-Lorca diCorcia and his gallery, Pace/MacGill were embattled in a lawsuit in New York Supreme Court with Erno Nussenzweig, a subject in one of his photographs taken on the streets of New York City. Nussenzweig, a practicing Klausenbourg Orthodox Jew, discovered his face in one of diCorcia's works on display and for sale in the Pace/MacGill gallery. Nussenzweig believed this violated a Commandment in the Torah and against his religious beliefs. diCorcia argued that being able to photograph in public spaces is important to protect artistic expression under the first amendment. diCorcia and the Pace/MacGill Gallery won the case, paving the way for photographers in the future to photograph freely in public spaces.

Dana Fritz

American, b. 1970



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Wart Bark Elm, n.d.

Windswept, Mansei-en, n.d.
Collection of the Midwest Photographers Project



Japanese Black Pine, n.d.
Collection of the Midwest Photographers Project

Dana Fritz's *Views Removed* series (2014) uses photography to mimic the long tradition of East Asian ink paintings of the landscape dating back to the fifth century to ponder real versus idealized representations of nature. Fritz combines imagery of trees and rocks, obscuring scale and perspective by combining negatives to create entirely fabricated places. The images are heavily saturated, creating sharp black and white contrast, eliminating imperfections or and presenting nature as minimalist, clean, and untouched.

Questions for looking

- What role does negative space have in these images? How does the white space effect the mood of the picture?
- Compare these gelatin silver prints with Jennifer Greenburg's black and white inkjet prints. What differences can you see in the tonality and details of the images? How could these images read differently if they were printed digitally?
- If a photographic image is composed by the artist's hand and is not documenting a real space, can it be classified as a painting or drawing? Why or why not?

Daniel Gordon

American, b. 1980



July 22, 2009, 2009



Salmon Skin, 2010

Daniel Gordon's artistic practice oscillates between photography, collage and sculpture. Typically, he works with cut-and-paste technique, combining the analogue with the digital and merging 2D and 3D. His visual language draws upon the rich history of collage, photo-montage and appropriation art while also referencing traditional genres like still life and portraiture. Gordon uses found footage images, spending hours on google image search and flipping through magazines. He handcrafts cut-out pictures into three-dimensional objects or collages, assembling the pieces into a still life scenery in his studio.

With an 8x10 large format camera Gordon photographs these spatial **tableaus**, transferring them once again into the two-dimensional. This multi-level process is a very important aspect in Gordon's work. The rough edges and folds of the paper cut-outs are visible in the final photographs as well as his use of digital image editing. Gordon changes the color of objects, **collages** them, adds noise, and these steps are not hidden, but become part of the work. For the photographs *Salmon Skin* (2010) and *July 22, 2009* (2009), Gordon focuses on the human body. **Collaging** printed and cut-out images of body parts, he pushes the idea of portraiture while also addressing the topic of vulnerability and vanity.

Questions for looking

- Gordon is interested in pushing the boundaries of portraiture—and photography at large. Would you consider these images to be portraits? Why or why not?
- Gordon works heavily with Photoshop to enhance colors and then transforms prints of his altered photographs into handmade paper **collages**, playing with a balance of **digital** and **analog** techniques. Why might he choose to compose his images by hand instead of continuing to work in Photoshop? What effect does hand construction add to the images?

Jennifer Greenburg

American, b. 1977



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Their Wedding was a lot of fun, 2011
Our Favorite Restaurant, 2011

Using digital technology, Jennifer Greenburg interjects herself into scenes of mid-century America. Her series *Revising History* (2010–ongoing) seamlessly incorporates photographs of Greenburg and her husband within the compositions of anonymous vintage negatives. The resulting black and white images look like those found in a family album, featuring domestic activities, quaint suburban backdrops, and happy family moments. Greenburg states: “I believe the post-war era in the United States was a grand era in American history.... I feel that currently we have lost a lot of that hopeful idealism.” *Our Favorite Restaurant* (2011) speaks to Greenburg’s sense of nostalgia and longing for a more optimistic and manageable existence. Although the shot seems to document a special evening—with the photographer donning a mink shawl while her husband escorts her to the Rib Pit—the relatively small scale of the couple’s surroundings recall a kind of restraint that contrasts with the over-stimulating experience of much contemporary nightlife. By implicitly drawing comparisons between the present and a perceived yet unknowable national past, *Revising History* underscores the camera’s ability to restage both personal and collective memories.

Questions for looking

- Greenburg believes the post-war era in the United States was a grand era in American history full of idealism. Do you see this sense of idealism in her pictures? How or how not?
- What role does photography have in interpreting or telling history? How does a constructed image change that story?

Sarah Hobbs

American, b. 1970



Untitled (Fate Compulsion), 2004

For her *Small Problems in Living* series, Sarah Hobbs researches phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorders to stage scenes to photograph in her home studio that picture distinct human behaviors. Ranging in subjects from claustrophobia to vanity, Hobbs constructs acute **tableaux** within domestic settings. Obsessiveness is seen as a room painted in chocolate with the empty candy wrappers clustered in a mound on a drop cloth. Insomnia is pictured as a bevy of yellow note cards suspended just above an empty bed, indicating the presence of an individual occupying the late hours of the night with endless thoughts. These neuroses and mental disturbances manifest themselves in objects cluttering otherwise sparsely furnished rooms, multiplied to overtake if not quite overwhelm the space. There is just enough space left to allow the room an occupant, though one is never pictured. Hobbs leaves small clues to give away the constructed make-up of the images. Bits of string and tape are left included, showing the hand of the creator and serving as a metaphor for a mind at work.

Questions for looking

- Why might artists who work in the constructed medium choose photography as their final product instead of working in sculpture or installation where their constructions can live on past the studio?

Cindy Sherman

American, b. 1954



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Untitled (Cosmo Cover Girl),
 1990–1991
Untitled, 1983



Working with what some critics have labeled the “self-portrait of performance,” Cindy Sherman nevertheless insists that her works—from movie stills to modern portraits—are not self-portraits, although they all feature her as the main character. Instead, the photographs are studies of many different women, broadly drawn and bordering on caricature, but still possessing the delicate details that identify them as familiar types. Made famous by her series *Untitled Movie Stills* (1977–80), Sherman is represented in the Museum of Contemporary Photography’s collection by her series *Untitled 2000*, which depicts women posing for the camera, appearing at once vulnerable and flamboyant. Sherman achieves these images after hours spent changing her costume (including prosthetics at times), hair, eyebrows, makeup, and lip shape. Only her green eyes remain constant from photograph to photograph. Touching upon gender roles and the female façade, Sherman’s photographs examine the societal and cultural roles that we assume, making life simultaneously easier and harder to navigate.

Questions for looking

- Compare the two pictures together. What aspects of each portrait adds to a confusing sense of identity?
- Sherman once said in an interview about her work: “We’re all products of what we want to project to the world. Even people who don’t spend any time, or think they don’t, on preparing themselves for the world out there—I think that ultimately, they have for their whole lives groomed themselves to be a certain way, to present a face to the world.” Do you agree or disagree that people often create characters or masks for their identities through clothing, makeup, and posturing? Why?
- How would this work be different if Sherman used models instead of posing for the camera herself? Would you consider this work to be performance art or strictly photography? Why?
- Consider the title of the series *Untitled 2000*. Now knowing more about why the artist is creating this series, why would she choose this title?

Sandy Skoglund

American, b. 1946



Ferns, 1980

Sandy Skoglund laboriously constructs **tableaux** for the camera. Skoglund's staged, fantastical images typically present wacky situations in color-infused environments such as a flood of orange-red foxes in a restaurant, dozens of babies dropping from the sky, or the eerie pallor that permeates *Ferns*. With their unnerving proliferation of out-of-place objects, creatures, and colors, Skoglund's images open a dialogue between the natural and the artificial as they blend photography, sculpture, and installation art.

Questions for looking

- What words would you use to describe this photograph? Why?
- If there are elements that are disorienting, what makes the image feel that way?

Deeper Reading: Surrealism

In his 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freud discusses the sense of unease people can feel when they are looking upon things that are both familiar and unfamiliar. This sense of juxtaposition or dislocation is a key attribute to surrealism, which is a genre of artmaking that began in the 1920s. A few examples of artists working in surrealism in the MoCP's collection are **Emila Medková**, **Jerry Uelsmann**, **Philippe Halsman**, and **Kahn & Selesnick**.

Wendel A. White

American, b. 1956



LEFT TO RIGHT:

School, Harveysburg, OH, 2007

Summer High School, Cairo, IL, 2007

For his *Schools for the Colored* (2007) series, Wendel A. White depicts the buildings and sites of historically segregated schools for African Americans, focusing primarily on locations in the so-called “free states” along the border of the North and South, which had a larger concentration of African American communities. White directly references a well-known passage in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) by W.E.B. Du Bois in which the author describes an experience he had among white classmates as a child: “Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others, or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.” White visualizes Du Bois’s notion of this veil of prejudice, using digital imaging software to mask out the landscape around each of the schools. The effect is to isolate the “schools for the colored” from their surroundings, which then remain only partially accessible to the viewer as well. White also adopts different **vantage points** when photographing different buildings, a choice that subtly stresses an implied viewing position in architectural or landscape photographs. White encourages us to think about our position in relation to the building, and thus, possibly, to its history or how it relates to social conditions today.



Questions for looking

- Imagine what this picture would look like with the background left visible or in color. What changes in your perception of the building with or without these details?
- Why might the artist have chosen to print these images in a sepia tone? What effect does this tonality have on the mood or story?
- How else might the notion of race and power manifest in the built environment?

Joel-Peter Witkin

American, b. 1939



John Herring, *Person with AIDS, Poses as Flora with Lover and Mother, New Mexico*, 1992

Joel-Peter Witkin's dark imagination is fueled by art history—from Courbet to Seurat and Caravaggio to Dali—which he visually quotes in his photographic tableaux. He considers issues of morality as central to his work. Drawing from a rich body of sources—literature, myth, Renaissance and Baroque painting, and his own personal background—Witkin creates elaborate images that address the morbid, the perverse, the erotic, and the religious. In nearly all his works, these moral issues are acted out by social outcasts, pariahs, human oddities, and even cadavers. In *John Herring, Person with AIDS, Poses as Flora with Lover and Mother, New Mexico*, (1992), Witkin composes a mythological spectacle using elements from two paintings: Titian's *Rape of Europa* (1559-62) and Rembrandt's portrait of his wife, *Saskia van Uylenburgh in Arcadian Costume* (1635). In his construction, however, Witkin reveals the boundaries of a painted backdrop, alluding to the illusion of representational painting as well as the early **tableaux vivant** genre in the history of photography. His darkly fantastic vision is shaped by deliberate manipulation of the photographic surface to make it appear aged, an act that further comments on the nature of the photographic image by calling into question its permanency.

Questions for looking

- Look closely at the objects in the image. What objects might serve as symbols or metaphors for a larger narrative? Why?
- What might Witkin be saying about the two paintings he references (below)? Is Witkin effectively interpreting these works into a photographic **tableau**? Why or why not?



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Titan, *The Rape of Europa*, 1559-62
Rembrandt, *Saskia van Uylenburgh in Arcadian Costume*, 1635

Glossary of Terms

Montage or Photomontage

An artmaking technique in which many images are combined into one composition to appear as if a singular image. Montage is commonly used by filmmakers and photographers.

Tableau or Tableaux vivant

Translated from French, “tableaux vivant” means “living picture.” Tableaus will include at least one model or actor posed carefully and unmoving into an arranged—or staged—setting.

Collage

A visual art piece comprised of elements assembled from any number of sources—from photographs to found imagery, such as magazines and newspapers—that has been cut and affixed to a surface to create a new whole.

Digital

In relation to cameras, this term refers to those that do not use film but rather save images onto a memory card. In relation to printing processes, this term means prints created by a printer rather than being printed in a darkroom.

Analog

This term refers to the use of cameras that use film or in printing onto a material directly through alternative processes such as cyanotypes, tintypes, ambrotypes, etc. Analog images are typically created in a darkroom by hand.

Vantage Point

Where the photographer stands in relation to their subject. This can also refer to the photographer’s view or opinion of that subject.

Documentary photography

A genre in which a photographer is working to document aspects of reality, whether for storytelling, activism, or reportage purposes.

Street photography

Photographers working in this genre spontaneously capture candid moments in public places, often with small hand-held cameras.

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in This Guide

Visual Arts Standards

VA:Re7.2.K–12

Responding: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: Visual imagery influences understanding of, and responses to, the world.

VA:Re8.K–12

Responding: Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

VA:Re9.K–12

Responding: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: People evaluate art based on various criteria

VA:Cn11.K–12

Connecting: Relate artistic ideas and works with social, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Enduring Understanding: People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.