

Larry Lytle

“When I began the project, I was afraid to let the work be as direct as it is now. I am no longer concerned with coming from a place of anger.”

Over the past decade Jennifer Greenburg has been hard at work creating a series, titled *Revising History*, which comments on our perception of the past by using vernacular imagery. In her conceptually smart, ironic and complex photographs we find a female protagonist (Greenburg herself) navigating the shoals of being a woman in 1950s America. Though her protagonist has no name, the captions cleverly underline her societal conflicts, as well as the general zeitgeist of being a woman in that era.

Greenburg painstakingly researches images, gathers clothes and props and performs a part, which she photographs and expertly inserts into the found photograph. We last saw her images in *Black & White* in the December 2014 issue. As the political climate has changed, the #MeToo movement has grown and the politics challenging LGBTQ and women’s rights have intensified, Greenburg has taken on these issues in a more direct way. That is to say her work, already infused with social/political commentary, has evolved and expanded. We thought it might be interesting to check in and see how time and events, both political and photographic, have changed *Revising History*.

How did you arrive at Revising History from your series The Rockabillies? Are



She made sure to tell me to keep smiling, 2018

there any points of connection between the two?

When my monograph [*The Rockabillies*, 2008] was published, I logically stepped back to assess my work. I noted that each picture had come out exactly the way I wanted. Rather than patting myself on the back for all my hard, careful work, I began to question the nature of documentary photography. I had embarked on what I thought was an earnest pursuit—I had tried to tell a truthful story. But if everything had gone according to my plan,

then how truthful were the pictures really? Like all image-makers, I can only tell a story through the lens of my own experiences. Therefore, I decided to make a project about the way we faithfully believe in photography.

How has Revising History transformed for you over these past nine years? And, how have you transformed, if at all, through working on this project?

When I began the project, I was afraid to let the work

Pop Quiz

Continued...

"I do not have the luxury of ignoring the social and political climate."



I have never been good at handling unwanted attention, 2015

be as direct as it is now. I am no longer concerned with coming from a place of anger. America's past was only "great" for educated white men. Opportunities for women and minorities were limited, yet the sartorialism and glamour present in the visuals of that era lead us to believe otherwise. And as the rights of women get rescinded each day in 21st Century America, I grow more desperate to have this conversation with my audience. I was afraid before, but now I am afraid of what will happen if I do not facilitate

this dialogue. When the project began I felt, in my everyday life, like I was a tax-paying equal member of my country. Now I feel like a second-class citizen. I think this now shows in my work. As hard as the situation is to handle, I am happy to be more authentic in my pursuits.

Do you feel that Instagram is changing the way that culture uses casual and/or memorial (vernacular) photography?

At first, Instagram functioned as a way to share a

personal diary to the world. And that was really a lot to think about. Do I need to see a photo of your birthday cake? I probably do, but most people probably do not.

But now, all we are doing is image crafting in order to present ourselves, or our brand, in the most positive light. After all, no one wants to hear anyone else's hardships, and the casual photographs are not usually very captivating. Plus, being "honest" could cost us future opportunities since we now know everyone is watching. Instagram probably

Pop Quiz

Continued...

"...creating a dialogue that allows a person to step outside their own existence, and see the world from someone else's point of view, can cause great change."

distributes more false images than anything else. And, yes, spreading false images certainly changes our culture, thus changing photography. But then again, everything changes everything else.

Will digital images on social media platforms, like Instagram, inhibit the way that artists like you use vernacular imagery?

Only time will tell.

What place does social, political or even cultural commentary hold in your art making?

I do not have the luxury of ignoring the social and political climate. I am consumed, through no choice of my own, with both because my daily life is being impacted at a steadily increasing rate. I have no choice but to make work that comments on the cultural realities of the present time. It would be irresponsible for me to do anything else.

Can photography still foster social change, or has it been relegated to cultural critique?

I am hopeful that art, photography, literature, film, etc., can make an impact and create social change in a multitude of ways. Sometimes cultural critique can be a better tool because it asks questions rather than gives orders. No one wants, especially now, to be scolded. However, creating a

dialogue that allows a person to step outside of their own existence, and see the world from someone else's point of view, can cause great change. I am hopeful contemporary artists can do this as well as our predecessors.

Is the way you think about photography influenced by the way you teach photography? (Greenburg is an Associate Professor of Photography at Indiana University Northwest.)

For as much as I teach my students, my students also teach me. I learn about their struggles, their fears, their hopes through their work and through Socratic-method critiques. Their concerns change the material I present in class, therefore I change our conversation each semester. This keeps me interested, engaged and allows me to ever-evolve. I refuse to become one of those stale professors hitting the rewind and play button each semester.

Do you see a day when exhibitions will be online? Is the age of the photographic print coming to an end?

I do not. And no.

You've started on a new series, Colored Stories. Where is it taking you visually and conceptually?

I am always working on many projects and bodies of work at once, but I have been apprehensive to share more than one pursuit at a

time. This, I think, has been a mistake. *Colored Stories* reduces images down to pure aesthetics—just blocks of attractive colors sampled from postwar domestic photography. Since I am interested in the way aesthetics lure us into idealism, I made this incredibly beautiful set of objects that are referential to the ugly methods used in advertising to make us into consumers. I am probably more susceptible to this construct than anyone, so make no mistake—I am criticizing myself, through my work, more than anyone else. I continue to make pieces for *Revising History* and work on a few other small bodies of work that haven't quite come together enough to be named. In this time of deep unhappiness, I am finding a lot of inspiration. That's my silver lining.

(Images copyright Jennifer Greenburg, 2019. Be sure to check out jennifergreenburg.com.)