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A Substitute World

Photographs by Jennifer Greenburg

July 3 – August 31, 2020



Obviously, the Sealord pool is closed. 2004

The photographs in *A Substitute World* by Jennifer Greenburg were culled from 15 years of her personal archive. These images have haunted her from the moment they were made – the weight of these spaces inspired the uncanny necessity to make the image. Today, these works feel eerily relevant devices to experiencing the impermissible.

As an artist whose typical practice involves elaborate image construction, Greenburg recognizes indulging in the compulsion of image making does nothing to advance the media. However, she also acknowledges the feeling is only satiated by the act, and *sometimes* time sharpens relevance.

We have arrived. In this time of quarantine there is much about this work that feels sensical. Jennifer Greenburg’s images are solitary and still. We feel at once alone with ourselves and knowingly connected to the world. As always, aesthetics plays a role in the Artist’s work. The images capture an undeniable beauty: they are formally well-framed and have lush palate. The scale of the works pushes their monumentality and reveal their true façade. They exaggerate and satiate our desire to indulge in fresh experiences, yet we know images are not real, rather proxy. Deeper reads reveal further nuance: subtle jabs at un/acceptable societal and photo-conventions surface.

These images are splendid, grand, painterly depictions of social places- interiors and exteriors. Courtyards, pools decks, hotels, public baths. That these places are somewhat taboo these days is not the only reason the works lace with a dis-belonging tension. The Artist feels guilty in a way for creating these images; on one hand they are superficially indulgent and trite yet could not and would not have been made by anyone, and are not, in her estimate, generally accepted to be made by just anyone.



What fog looks like flooding through open windows (in Japan), 2015



You probably cannot trust people near the edge, 2019

The Artist, having now rejected documentary work, has dedicated over 10 years to studying the role vernacular images and raw aesthetics have in establishing cultural norms; her sensitivity to these underpinnings is acute. The truth explored and exposed by her other work (*Revising History* and *Colored Stories*) is that there are deep (possibly) subconscious frameworks embedded in all of our personal images, and that aesthetics easily mask oppression. Our proliferation of harmonizing “type” images proves our own participation in and celebration of social-cultural expectations fitting the prevailing white-male perspective. These new works play into and counteract these same themes.

Solitude in these works speaks to the maker as much as the frame, collectively, working against cultural subtext that instructs that women are of two types, and that the respectable sort should be guarded, reserved, quiet. Women may be alone in the home only. Women may not travel, eat, or go to “strange” places or anywhere “public” alone. Danger may be lurking, and she should remain fearful of what others could do to her.

Greenburg cannot help remarking that society and mainstream art history desire and canonize women who expose themselves intimately and explicitly before the camera (interior/nude/family/relationships/peep show). This feels more dangerous, invasive, and permanent to Greenburg than wandering down the proverbial lonely alley at night. Hers are a play on the sort of images either a male artist in her footsteps has or could be celebrated for or that otherwise speak back to societal “supposed not to-s.” Greenburg leans on the arguments of Susan Sontag: photographs “support [the] maker’s own notions,” and can “lay claim to” or “help build a nascent” reality.

Works in *A Substitute World* do not only transport us, allowing us to engage the sort of places we may not physically engage for some time, they more importantly embrace a future visual substructure without implied gender hierarchies and boundaries. In keeping with her greater practice, this work calls for reassessment of our belief in the image’s ability to embody reality, asks for more rigorous evaluation of the substructure of visual idealism, and implores us to enact a new visual order.

About the Artist: Jennifer Greenburg holds a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and an MFA from the University of Chicago. In her most well-recognized work, *Revising History*, Greenburg uses a multi-disciplinary performative process whereby she replaces the figure in a found vernacular image (late 1920's – late 1960's) with herself. She dons period costume, fixes hair and makeup to match, gets into character, and photographs herself doing what they were doing- exactly, in the original. She photographs herself playing "them" for a moment. Her final step is to merge the two images- the old negative and the new (full-figure) portrait.

Greenburg's work is in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Museum of Contemporary Photography and Midwest Photographers Project, Chicago; The Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego; and Light Work Syracuse.

Expanded citations from *On Photography* by Susan Sontag :

From the *Plato's Cave* Chapter:

The immensity gifted members of the Farm Security Administration photographic project of the late 1930's (among them Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee) would take dozens of frontal pictures of one of their sharecropper subjects until satisfied that they had gotten just the right look on film- the precise expression on the subject's face that supported their own notions about poverty, light, dignity, texture, exploitation, and geometry. In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, the photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects.

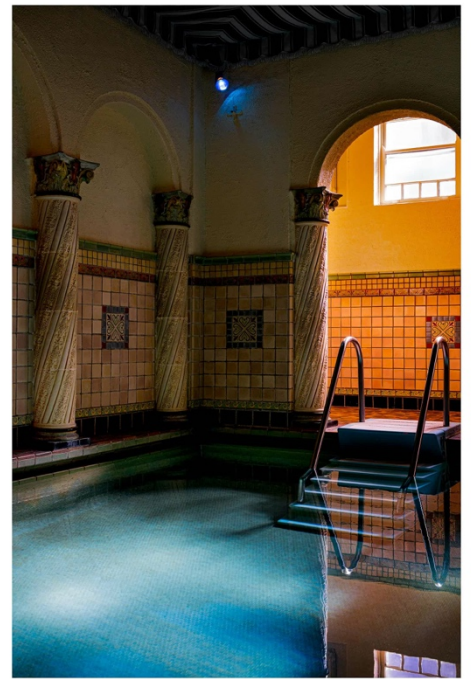
The lover's photograph hidden in a married woman's wallet, the poster photograph of a rock star tacked up over an adolescent's bed, the campaign-button image of a politician's face pinned on a voter's coat, the snapshots of a cabdriver's children clipped to the visor- all such talismanic uses of photographs express a feeling both sentimental and implicitly magical: they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality.

Photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can reinforce one- and help build a nascent one.

From *The Image-World* Chapter:

Instead, reality has come to seem more and more like what we are shown by cameras.

It is as if photographers, responding to an increasingly depleted sense of reality, were looking for a transfusion- traveling to new experiences, refreshing the old ones. Their ubiquitous activities amount to the most radical, and the safest, version of mobility. The urge to have new experiences is translated into the urge to take photographs: experience seeking a crisis-proof form. As the taking of photographs seems almost obligatory to those who travel about, the passionate collecting of them has special appeal for those confined- either by choice, incapacity, or coercion- into indoor space. Photographic collections can be used to make a substitute world, keyed to exalting or consoling or tantalizing images.



Baronial clarity. 2015.



I doubt the EXIT will work, 2020

About jdc Fine Art: (est. 2011) dedicated to content-driven contemporary art by established and emerging artists who specialize in photography. We champion those making art to serve a higher purpose.

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