



Jennifer Kodak Greenburg
REVISING HISTORY

This catalogue coincides with the exhibition, “Jennifer Greenburg: Revising History,” which has been organized by The Art Gallery at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. The exhibition was on view from April 23 - May 20, 2015.

The Art Gallery at Kingsborough Community College,
City University of New York
Brian E. Hack, Gallery Director
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All images courtesy of Jennifer Greenburg.

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Jennifer Greenburg

REVISING HISTORY

THE ART GALLERY AT
KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



Jennifer Greenburg, *That Christmas I Watched Skiing on TV*, 2011.

Snapshots and the Silence of Time

Within each photograph resides a silent but ever-present guardian, *Time*. Arguably the underlying objective of photography is nothing less than the capturing of time, the seizing of a moment before it dissipates. Often overshadowed by concerns over form and content, time—and its all-too-willing accomplice, death—lurk beneath the surface of every photograph, tempting us with the eternal in an all-too-temporal world.

Perhaps more than other forms of photography, however, snapshots urge time to the surface. As bookmarks of our memories, they hold our moments in place until we are ready to revisit them. Yet like all photographs, snapshots are but a shadow of existence, ghosts of moments winnowed to a single reflection which may or may not possess a degree of accuracy. Light reflected through a lens, exposed on an emulsified negative—that is all. But in those emulsified moments we see lives lived, loved, and lost. Those who spend time perusing piles of old snapshots in flea markets or thrift shops know the tinge of melancholy that accompanies these images, regardless of their content—for ultimately these photographs were abandoned upon the

passing of their owners, or of their descendants. Found snapshots become memorials of the unknown and unnamed.

Rather than objectively examining these images aesthetically, we tend to see them as ephemeral cultural remnants, no doubt a reflection of our privileging of the professional photographer with artistic vision while assuming the amateur snapshot photographer to be unskilled and purely random in his or her aesthetic choices. Our collective faith in artistic intention is the only obstacle in adopting a more scholarly approach. While admittedly easy to use, the point-and-shoot camera nevertheless fostered a *snapshot aesthetic* that influenced professional photographers such as Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand and Nan Goldin.

Snapshots survive as emblematic vestiges of eras we've packaged in our collective memory as *The 1950s* or *The 1960s*. Even if we were not physically there, we understand, or believe we understand, a historical period through its abridged photographic simulacrum. Snapshots tend to embody those simplifications, taking on the morals and mores of that period; our interpretations of images are often clouded by our preconceived notions of an era. In this way, too, snapshots seem to hold time hostage—a most comforting delusion.

In her series *Revising History*, Chicago-based photographer Jennifer Greenburg has chosen to enter and inhabit this ethereal world, to vicariously live in the otherwise time-specific space of the snapshot. Using vintage negatives as a starting point, she upcycles these small, once-private images into large prints in which she plays the starring role—a dancer, a bowler, a fashion model, a singer, and even a corpse. The real-life moments captured in these snapshots become imagined moments for Greenburg, scenes replayed in a parallel universe of her design. Greenburg appropriates the pedestrian, popular snapshot and transforms it, like an alchemist, into high art.

Viewed together the *Revising History* series is hauntingly unified—it is clear the original snapshots were carefully chosen by the artist, as a unique visual style or look is evident throughout. She is equal parts Walter Mitty, Leonard Zelig, and Jeanne Carmen (or Donna Reed, or Jayne Mansfield, or a dozen others from the age of Hollywood glamour). While there is a performance element to her work that may evoke Cindy Sherman or Claude Cohun, Greenburg—more or less herself rather than in disguise, even when adopting a persona—enters far different, and in many ways more interesting, territory. She doesn't create another world as much as invade it, redefine it, repopulate it and reassign it with



Jennifer Greenburg, *Napping with Floyd*, 2011.

previously unintended meanings, not the least of which are the banality of middle-class ambition, the petty jealousies of daily life, and the innate dishonesty of most “candid” snapshots. Reading like the hand-scrawled descriptions often found on the back of photos, her poignant and often revealing titles revive and give new narratives to these forgotten moments of a distant era.

In some photographs she skewers the traditional subjects of snapshot photography, such as bridal showers or the ubiquitous office holiday party. There is always an unsettling aspect, such as that found in *That Christmas I Watched Skiing on TV* (2011). Clearly, it's *not* a wonderful life in that particular room, and we are left with the task of imagining why it's not. Equally disconcerting is *Napping with Floyd* (2011)—Floyd presumably being the cat nestled atop her hip, but possibly a nickname for the handgun inexplicably resting on the coffee table. The backstory, as with all found photographs, is ours to generate.

My Funeral (2012) not only examines the strange history of post-mortem photography but also addresses the nature of death, a final moment in a life of captured moments. For Greenburg the event becomes another photo opportunity, no more unusual than bowling a



Jennifer Greenburg, *My Funeral*, 2012.

perfect game or receiving a bridal shower. In one sense a commentary on our current propensity for online overshare, *My Funeral* speaks to the universality and common banality of death, approaching in spirit the realist message of Gustave Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans* (1849-50, Musée d'Orsay).

Revising History is just that—a rewriting of historical events, culled from different lives, to assemble another trajectory of history, a parallel universe where lives interchange and events are permuted to fit the life of the artist. Tellingly, Jennifer Greenburg's other major photographic project to date, *The Rockabillies*, explores those who live the rockabilly lifestyle. Dissatisfied with the present cultural offerings, they create their own through the adoption of vintage clothes, pomade, and music made in, and influenced by, that of the late-1950s. By contrast her *Reviving History* takes the idea a step further—not simply retroactively living a revival lifestyle but creating one's identity through immersion into the actual—albeit customized—historical past.

Brian Edward Hack, Ph.D.
Gallery Director

Artist Statement

R*evising History* is a series of manufactured images that I have created by replacing the individuals in vintage found-negatives with images of myself. I commandeer source material from someone else's life, thus taking over their memories to call my own.

The work is a performance that results in a series of photographs that are entirely counterfeit. I reference the gestures within the original image as a means to take ownership of that moment. I appropriate the mood and emotions, or lack thereof, of each event. In the decisive moment, I become a musician, a mother, a corpse— even though I am none of those things.

There is something inherently false in most snapshots. The moments captured are often idealized. And when we look back at our own images, we co-opt the fantasy that the photograph has created for us. We replace our original memories with something photography has sold to us. Reality is replaced with a nostalgic appropriation. It is with this in mind that I have created a body of fictitious images that depict counterfeit memories.

Jennifer Greenburg

REVISING HISTORY / EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

*That Christmas I Watched
Water Skiing on TV*
2011, Archival ink jet print
31 x 31

*Studying Piano Is One of My
Favorite Hobbies*
2012, Archival ink jet print
28 x 37

Gifts for the Bride
2011, Archival ink jet print
28 x 34

When He Was a Baby
2011, Archival ink jet print
28 x 34

The Office St. Pat's Party
2012, Archival ink jet print
34 x 28

Finishing School Graduation
2011, Archival ink jet print
28 x 34

Napping with Floyd
2011, Archival ink jet print
31 x 31"

*Something Funny Happened
In the Kitchen*
2011, Archival ink jet print
34 x 28

*Of Course We All Wanted
to Be Peggy Castle at the
Wagons West Party*
2014, Archival ink jet print
28 x 34

*I Have Always Preferred My Own
Birthday*
2015, Archival ink jet print
28 x 34

***Two Years Later, I Was Drunk
Enough to Sing at the St. Pat's
Party. How Embarrassing!***
2014, Archival ink jet print
34 x 28

***I Met My Best Friend Dottie
When I Was a Nurse***
2014, Archival ink jet print
28 x 34

***Sadie Cohen Was Very Upset
That I Got to Model in the
Hadassah Fashion Show. She
didn't Speakto Me for Weeks!***
[Triptych]
2015, Archival ink jet print
Each print 23 x 23

***Our First Task as a Married
Couple [Octet]***
2013, Archival ink jet print
Each print 19 x 23

***My Dreams Came True the Day I
Did Hair for a Fashion Show***
2013, Archival ink jet print
28 x 34

***My Co-Worker Was Always
Jealous of My Blonde Hair***
2013, Archival ink jet print
28 x 34

My Funeral
2013, Archival ink jet print
28 x 34

When I Posed for a Camera Club
2012, Archival ink jet print
28 x 34

The League Night I broke 200!
2012, Archival ink jet print
28 x 34

I Loved Demonstrating Aerials
2013, Archival ink jet print
28 x 37



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