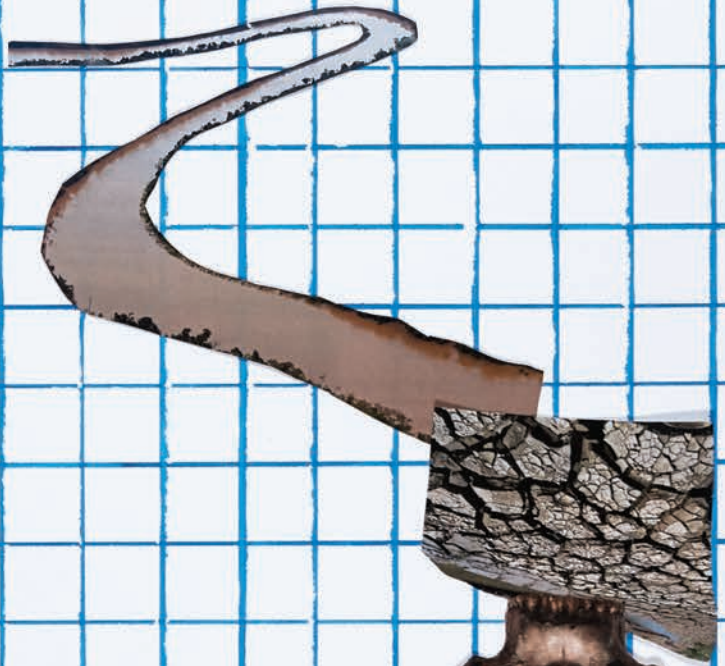
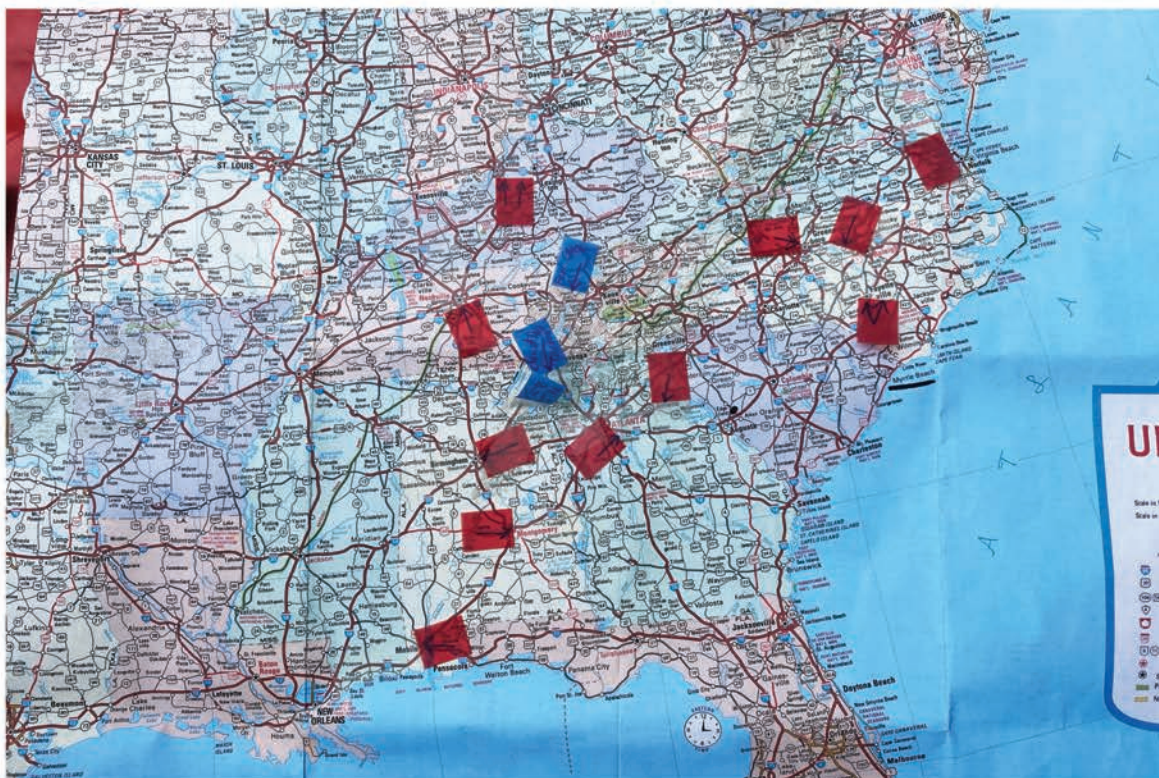




Catherine Opie
In Dialogue



Catherine Opie
In Dialogue



Introduction

Catherine Opie is one of the most important photographers of our time. For more than three decades she has used her camera to help us see people, places, and subcultures that are often overlooked or ignored. Opie has created seminal portraits of the LGBTQIA community, as well as images of high school football players, California surfers, protesters, and tender portraits of herself, friends, and family. She has also drawn our attention to both the natural and built environments, capturing domestic interiors, mini-malls, monuments, freeways, national parks, memorials, and swamps. In her role as a witness, Opie has equally presented back to us the good and the bad, the losses and the gains, the constructive and the destructive.

In Dialogue presents four series from 2016–2020. The title, as Charlotte Cotton mentions in her illuminating essay, reflects not only the way Opie’s works engage with each other as part of her oeuvre but also the artist’s broader role in helping us interpret and navigate the current cultural moment.

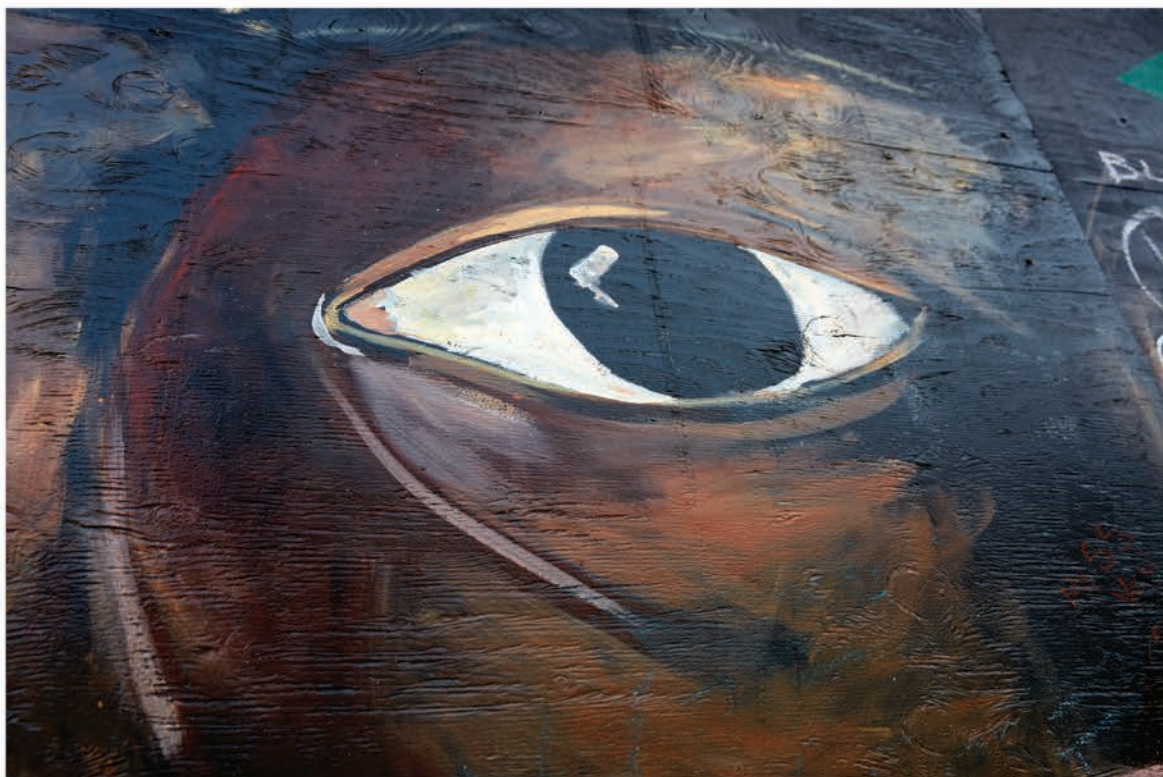
The Modernist, Opie’s first foray into film, is a haunting narrative composed of more than 800 black-and-white photographs that speaks to the unattainable utopian promises of modernist architecture in Los Angeles. While *The Modernist* was constructed from cut outs of newspapers, printed photographs, and drawings, Opie’s *Political Collages*, animations made solely from magazine clippings, draw on the film’s visual aesthetics. These quirky animations about serious issues, including gun control and environmental catastrophe, are presented on oversized monitors that reference iPhones, a primary way many of us now take in news. Her seven-part work, *monument/monumental*, along with photographic diptychs from her 2020 series, capture the socio-political landscape during an unprecedented year, shot while on a road trip from Los Angeles to the southeastern United States. Through poignant juxtapositions of images highlighting the COVID-19 pandemic, police shootings, the removal of Confederate monuments, the 2020 presidential election, protests, and more, Opie captures the complexities of a nation divided.

Opie’s work is as vital as ever, and we are delighted to present it to our community. This exhibition opens as the 2024 election looms, and the personal freedoms of women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and people of color are particularly under threat. But, the exhibition remains on view beyond the election, and none of us can predict what will happen in the days and months following. Cotton reminds us that Opie’s work not only offers us a view of rapid change, profound uncertainty, and instability in a challenging moment but is, at heart, about self-reflection and responsibility.

Opie’s work always—but especially in times of tumult—reminds me of the importance of visual artists and the potential power of their work. She invites us to really see the moment, in all of its complexities. Art is what I know, so I often turn to it in difficult times, as a way of remembering that art can *do* something. In helping us see, can Opie’s artwork lead us down a path of empathy? Discussion? Collective action aimed at fostering a more inclusive and thriving society?

This exhibition would not have been possible without President Emerita Carol Quillen, who graciously invited me to accompany her on a photo shoot with Opie for her official Davidson College presidential portrait. Funds from the Herb Jackson and Laura Grosch Gallery Endowment, Davidson College Friends of the Arts, Davidson College’s Public Lecture Fund, Charles N. Williamson Fund, the Department of Art, and the Humanities Program helped support our endeavor. Deep gratitude also to Jennifer Loh and the team at Regen Projects; Nancy Magoon for her loan to the exhibition; David Sackett, our department technician; Marisa J. Pascucci, Gallery & Collection Coordinator; our dedicated gallery interns, and so many others who made this project possible. Special thanks to Charlotte Cotton for her insightful essay, Graham McKinney for her beautiful design, and Stephanie Cash for editing. And of course, heartfelt thanks to Catherine Opie for her important contributions to the field of photography and art over the last four decades.

—Lia Rose Newman
director/curator



In Dialogue

Catherine Opie’s photographic practice and expansive projects over the past four decades hold an enduring human desire to question the structures and comprehend the contexts within which we live. They are testimony to the multivalent ways in which Opie is present in her chosen community and how she chronicles and articulates America’s wider sociopolitical landscape. An overarching and continued throughline in many of Opie’s bodies of work since the 1980s concerns the conditions, negotiations, and changes within American life as they unfold. She provides visual entry points through which to think about our current condition. Acute but not didactic, her photographs create dialogues and the space for reflection where we can acknowledge and internalize our own realities. Opie’s photographic questioning and investigation of what constitutes our social actuality pivots on her deeply held belief in what photography can do, and the purpose of visual storytelling in response to the urgent need for us to make sense of the complexities of our contemporary existence. She believes in the camera as the device through which we can account for the breadth and granular specificity of lived experience, indexing points in time to which we can keep returning to contemplate how history intertwines with our present.

The hope that photography can prompt our deepest reflections is central to the intention and effect of Opie’s series of diptych photographs titled *2020*, shown here at the Van Every/Smith Galleries for the first time as an exhibition. Along with *monument/monumental*, *2020* was made by Opie during the summer of 2020, while living in an RV and traveling through Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, returning to her home city of Los Angeles through Texas, and then onwards to Portland, OR. Her mode of travel was partially chosen for its expediency in the challenging context of cross-country travel during a pandemic, after the first COVID-19 lockdowns in the US were lifted in late May 2020. Beyond the substantial and immediate practicalities, journeying in the RV allowed Opie to return to the photographic strategy of the road

trip for close engagement with places and communities along her route at a remarkable moment of social upheaval, racial tension, and political division. The journey structured Opie’s methodical approach to making visual sense of the predominantly peaceful uprising of Americans across the country under the banner of Black Lives Matter, which increased to the millions following the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Michael Chauvin on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, and the amplified reckoning with the still-pervasive presence of Confederate monuments that had become renewed political and racial flashpoints, especially in the American South.

This was not the first time that Opie used the structure of the road trip to make a photographic project. For *Domestic*, she traveled more than 9,000 miles traversing America over the course of three years beginning in 1995, photographing lesbian couples and families. This was both a personal quest to be bolstered and inspired by encounters with families outside of mainstream heteronormativity but also indicative of Opie’s striving to create environmental portraits that would offer an undeniable visual account of queer existence that could occupy space on gallery walls and within museum collections in perpetuity. The photographic premise of Opie’s next road trip, entitled (and undertaken in) *1999*, was bookended by the US Senate’s not guilty verdicts that concluded President Bill Clinton’s impeachment trial in February 1999 and global anxiety over potential digital and infrastructure malfunctions as the year changed from 1999 to 2000. The series knowingly claims the road trip as a well-trammeled template for photographic storytelling, primed by Opie to articulate a moment of social anticipation of impending ruptures at the turn of the millennium, and as a frame within which to map the collective fear at that moment of calamitous obsolescence of American identities, cultures, and voices. While *1999* centers on what Opie has retrospectively described as a “now-quaint” anxiety about Y2K, *2020* is an intentional return to the historical idea of





Opie has drawn from a range of documentary and conceptual photographic approaches, eschewing a “signature style” that can often interfere with the creation of open and dialogical space for us—as viewers—to deeply and unexpectedly question our experience of the political landscape. For her CalArts MFA graduation project, *Master Plan* (1986–88), Opie photographed new-build housing developments in and around Valencia and their inhabitants with a visual respect and quietude that makes it possible for us to consider,

the photographic road trip as an erudite strategy for witnessing how human society reveals itself at points of crisis, and its capacity to give a crucial point of view onto a society experiencing profound uncertainty and the instability of rapid change. Concomitant to this photographic frame for storytelling is the commitment that the artist/photographer needs to make by continually asking the question within their observations: “Where am I within this?”

Such factoring, figuring, and delineation of political landscapes in America have been a hallmark of Opie’s practice since its beginnings in mid 1980s San Francisco. Her art school training was underpinned by the traditional photographic discipline of making constant observations of the real world. For a year of her BFA program at the San Francisco Art Institute, “New Topographics” photographer Henry Wessel, Jr. instructed her to shoot five rolls of film every day—an exercise that naturalized taking pictures into almost a prosthetic action of observation that has echoed through Opie’s photographic practice ever since, recalibrating as she has manifested her most urgent and rapid documentation of American society. Her regular return to the documentary roots of her practice is the basis for many of Opie’s most political narratives, including her *Inauguration* series of a hundred photographs shot on the National Mall in Washington, DC, where she witnessed the massive celebration of the inauguration of President Barack Obama on January 20, 2009. From the outset,

without prejudice, the relationship of these new communities to the concept of “white flight” from Los Angeles to the suburbs, which has heavily impacted the city’s infrastructure, identity, and racial politics since the 1950s. With a parallel economy of means, Opie’s 2019 gorgeous, hyperdetailed, large-format photographs depicting the impossibly vast, kudzu-shrouded Okefenokee Swamp that straddles Georgia and Florida richly responds to the Trumpian political language of “drain the swamp” and the precarity of the physical environment—the ecological majesty at stake—in the American South.

This exhibition’s title—*In Dialogue*—is multi-referential. It acknowledges the ways in which four bodies of work with different visual strategies are activated by each other and form a constellation that foregrounds the role photography has played in the construction of American identity. Opie’s *monument/monumental* installation of seven large framed photographs features at its center the towering, early 20th-century statue of Robert E. Lee on horseback that stood for a century in Richmond, Virginia; its dismantling in February 2022 was one of the ultimate symbols of both the literal deconstruction of the Confederate “Lost Cause” ideology in the era of Black Lives Matter and the continuing pressure to adequately address the nation’s legacy of slavery and the systemic racism re-established with Jim Crow laws. The setting sun that begins and ends the sequence of achingly out-of-grasp and out-of-focus American landscapes of *monument/monumental*

is the same sunset shot by Opie from two different vantage points, the final photograph’s horizon appearing lower in the frame. This gesture metaphorically speaks to the forward and backward steps that happen simultaneously along the paths of social change and reckoning with history—a state of oscillation that Opie has known all too well since her direct action calling for the rights of LGBTQIA+ people during the AIDS crisis as part of Act Up in the 1980s and Queer Nation in the 1990s.

The exhibition title *In Dialogue* points directly to Opie’s use of the diptych form for 2020, where she pairs photographs made on her road trip, and additionally in Los Angeles during the tense build up to the 2020 presidential election. Each diptych has its own internal dialogue that collectively builds through the course of this body of work into Opie’s mapping of America’s identity at the beginning of this decade, activated by the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement, the COVID-19 pandemic, and America’s intensely schismatic party politics. Opie makes visual connections in these diptychs between the still-visible marks of America’s history and her astute observations made along her 2020 journey. The pictorial dialogues of 2020 reveal profound divisions and contradictions, as well as connections in the political and actual landscape of America and the layering of new forms of memorializing this extraordinary moment in America’s story upon the very sites of its Confederate history.

Within this dialogical exhibition context, Opie’s screen-based sequence of eight stop-motion digital collages from 2019 deconstruct mass media’s visual vocabulary that informs our reading of this present moment, drawing attention to how images play such a crucial role in the delineation of our political landscape. The foundations of this project started in the mid 2010s when Opie began to cut out and archive every headline image from her daily newspaper, the Los Angeles Times. This visual cache soon grew as she pulled more widely from diminished mainstream “picture press” subscription magazines such as *Time*, *Architectural Digest*, and *National Geographic* that had defined the visual language of news media through the 20th century. Opie’s eight animated sequences organize her found picture “library” onto a gridded image plane, into themes that range from gun violence to the climate crisis. The long-standing role of artists in the rethreading of mass media imagery to reveal their subtextual and hidden narratives is intentionally called forth by Opie. She channels the spirit of Dada collage artists such as Hannah Höch (1889–1978) and John Heartfield (1891–1968), as well as British filmmaker and collage animator Terry Gilliam (b. 1940), who used mass media imagery as their source material for critiquing their contemporary societies and points of political crisis.



The role of the artist and their navigation of America’s present-day political landscape is another throughline of *In Dialogue* and is the most prominent theme in *The Modernist* (2016–17), Opie’s 21-minute, black-and-white film in which Opie’s long-time friend and collaborator Pig Pen plays an artist living in Los Angeles. The film’s narrative centers upon a failing utopian vision of both the City of Los Angeles and the lives of artists within it. We watch *The Modernist* as they reckon with how they can respond to the political climate, to the overwhelming affect of fake news, the realities of gentrification, and the ungraspable behavior of our image environment. They deliberate on whether to create or destroy, or create through destruction, culminating in an open ending to *The Modernist* and the protagonist-artist’s journey that invites us to continue to be in dialogue with the ways in which history unfolds and the roles that artists may play in its chronicling.

—Charlotte Cotton



TOP: Little Pee Dee State Park, South Carolina
 BOTTOM: Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park, Middlebrook, Missouri
 from 2020 series

2020
 Pigment print, 49.75 x 39 in.

TOP: Shrouded Monument, Fork, South Carolina
 BOTTOM: Richmond, Virginia
 from 2020 series

2020
 Pigment print, 49.75 x 39 in.



TOP: Oxford, North Carolina
BOTTOM: Stonewall Jackson, Richmond, Virginia
from 2020 series

2020
Pigment print, 49.75 x 39 in.

TOP: Breonna Taylor Memorial, Louisville, Kentucky
BOTTOM: Family Portrait, Robert E. Lee Monument, Richmond, Virginia
from 2020 series

2020
Pigment print, 49.75 x 39 in.





LEFT: *Three Rivers, California*

RIGHT: *King Louis XVI statue, Louisville, Kentucky*
from 2020 series

2020

Pigment print, 39 x 49.75 in.



TOP: Robert E. Lee High-school, Millbrook, Alabama
 BOTTOM: Robert E. Lee High-school Football, Millbrook, Alabama
 from 2020 series

2020
 Pigment print, 49.75 x 39 in.

TOP: U.S. Highway 412, Hindsville, Arkansas
 BOTTOM: Manson, North Carolina
 from 2020 series

2020
 Pigment print, 49.75 x 39 in.



TOP: R. E. Bob Woodruff Reservoir, Millbrook, Alabama
 BOTTOM: Okra field, Mentone, Alabama
 from 2020 series

2020
 Pigment print, 49.75 x 39 in.

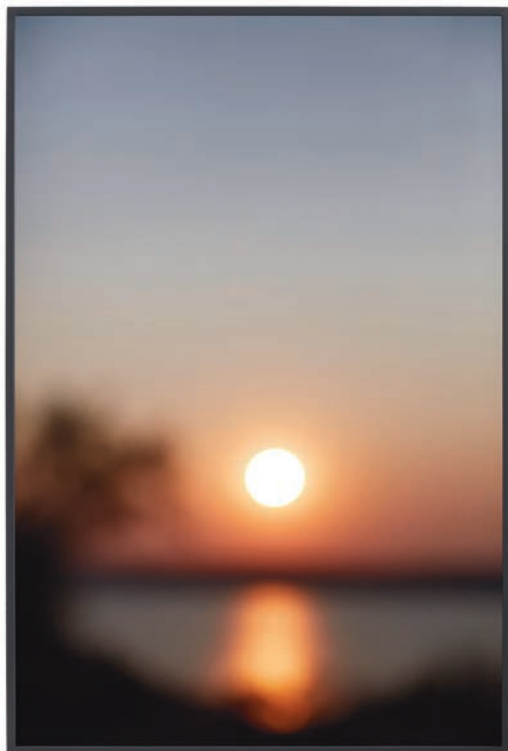
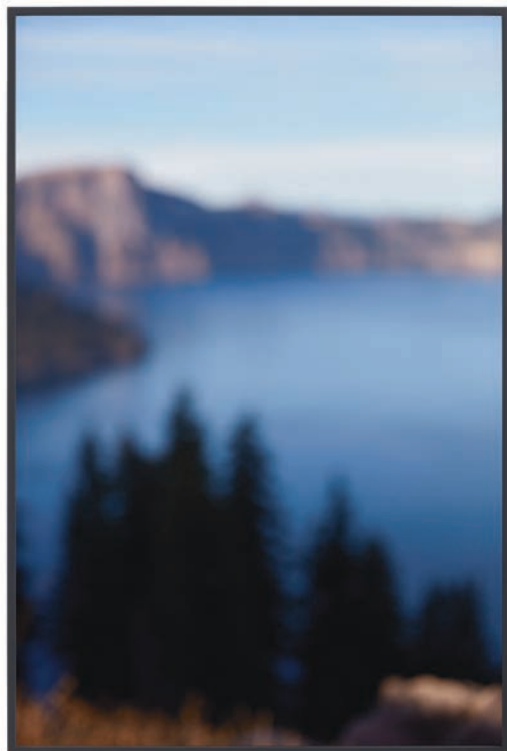
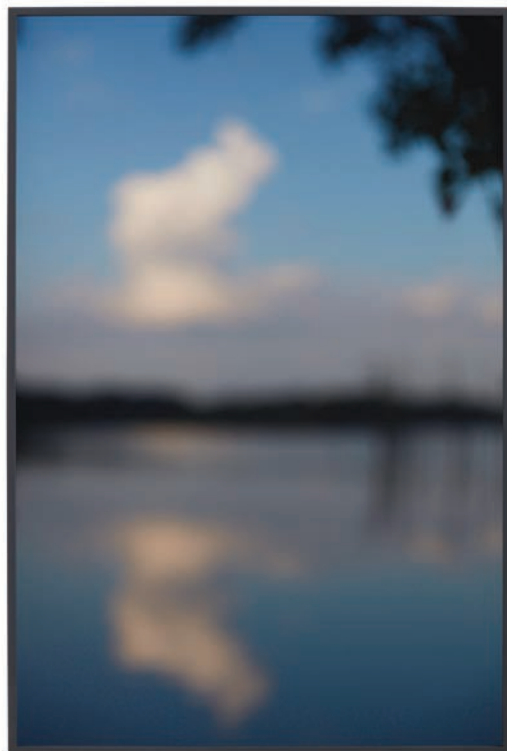
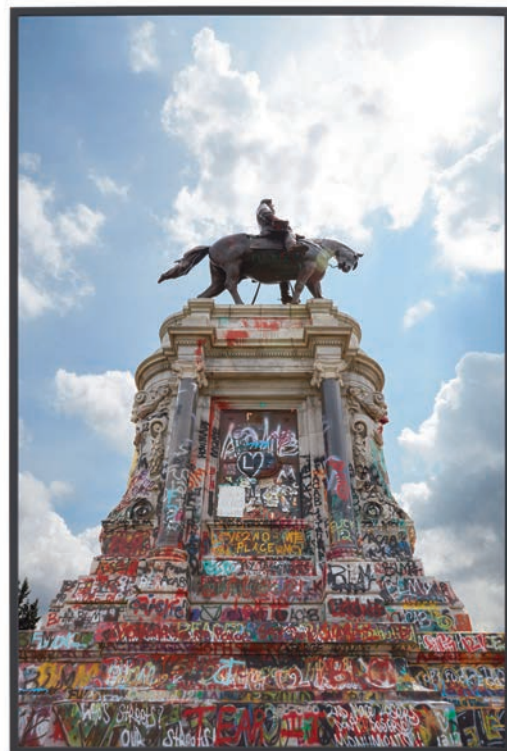
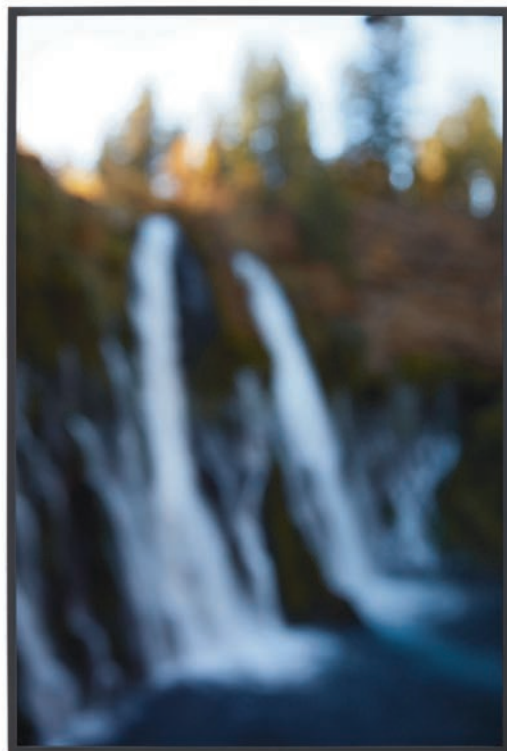
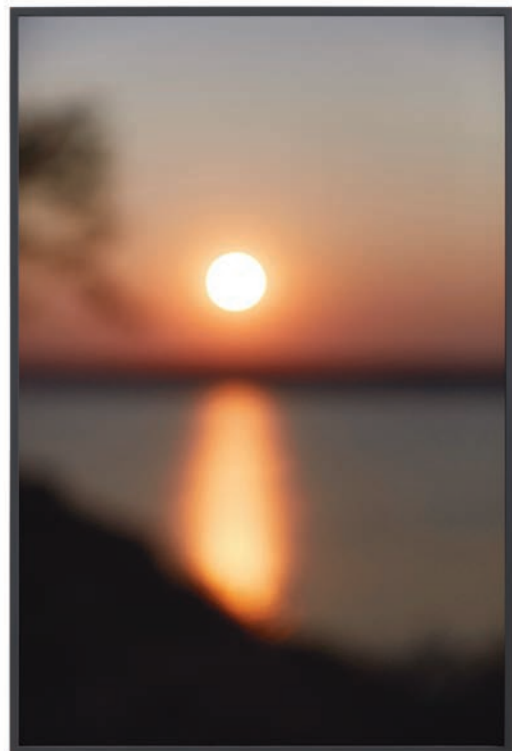
TOP: Mobile, Alabama
 BOTTOM: Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument, Richmond, Virginia
 from 2020 series

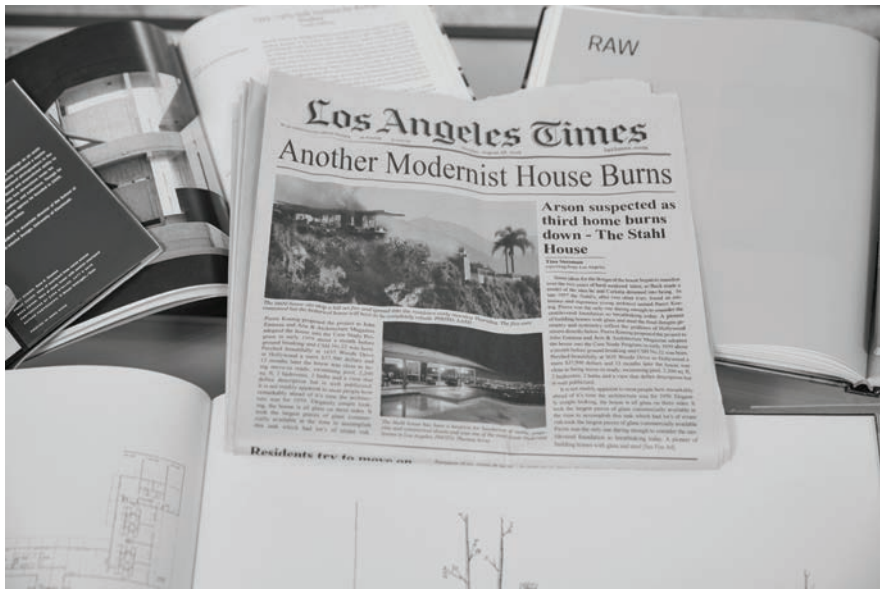
2020
 Pigment print, 49.75 x 39 in.

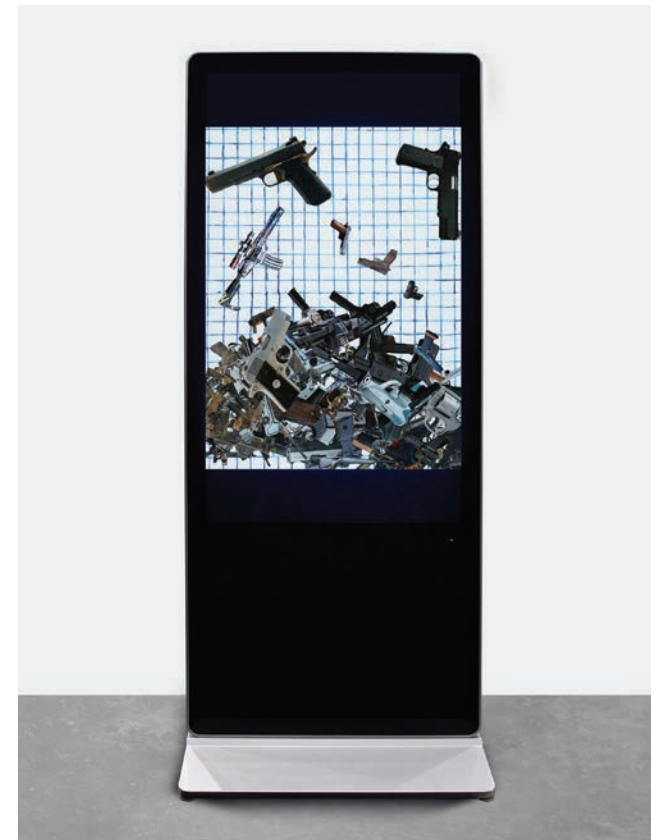
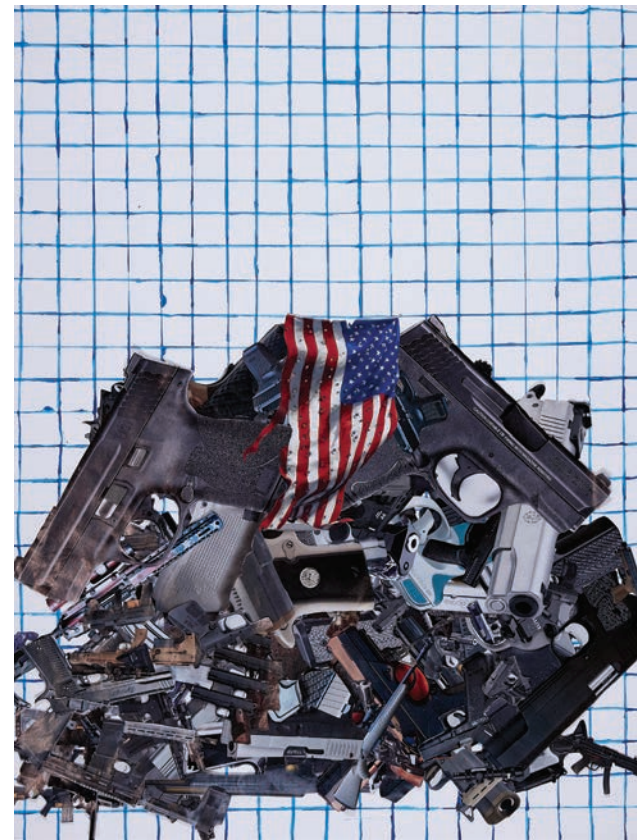
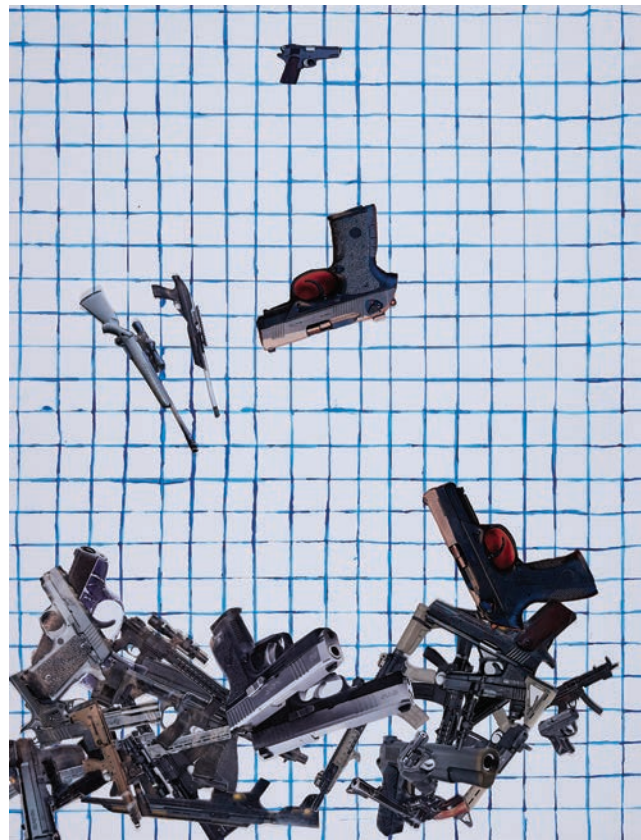


LEFT: *Alexander Cockburn's home, Petrolia, California*
 RIGHT: *Smith Rock State Park, Terrebonne, Oregon*
 from 2020 series

2020
 Pigment print, 39 x 49.75 in.

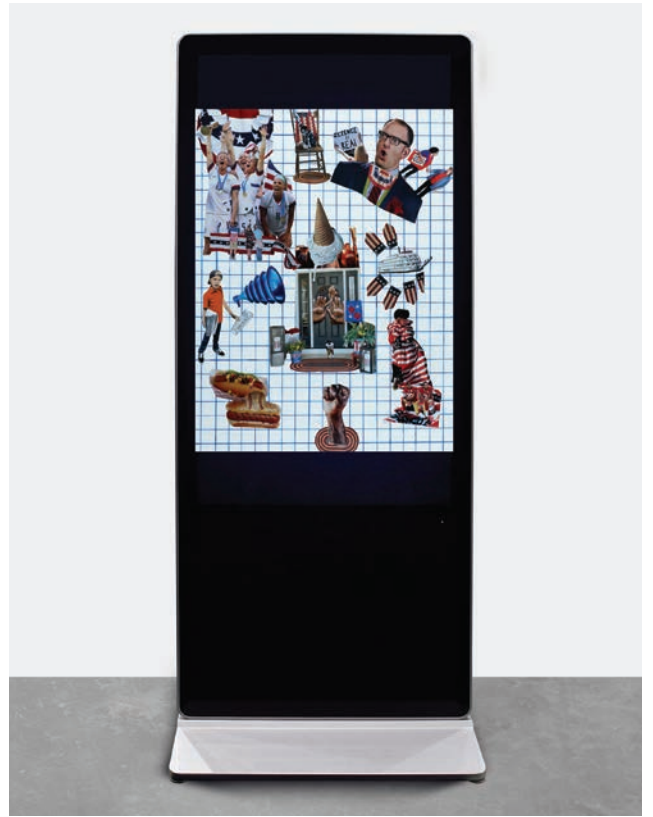
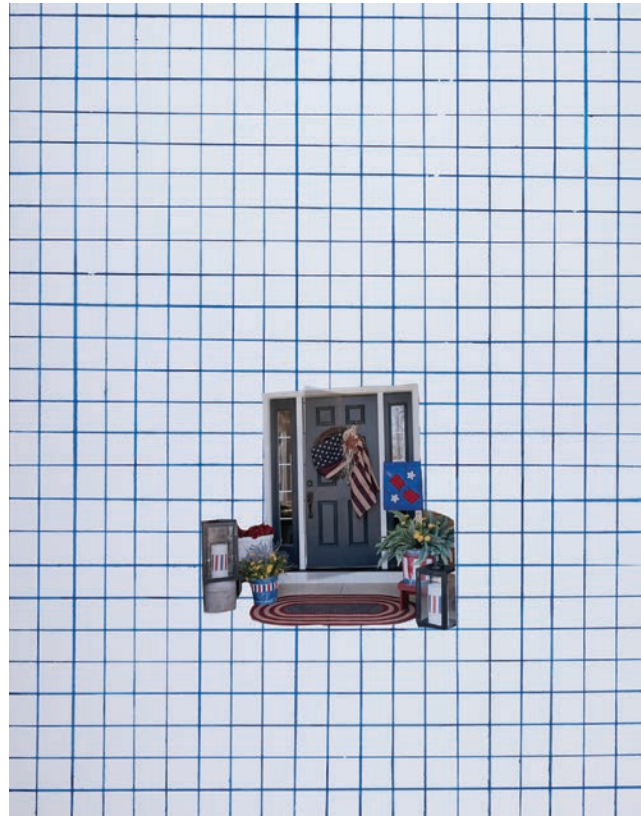






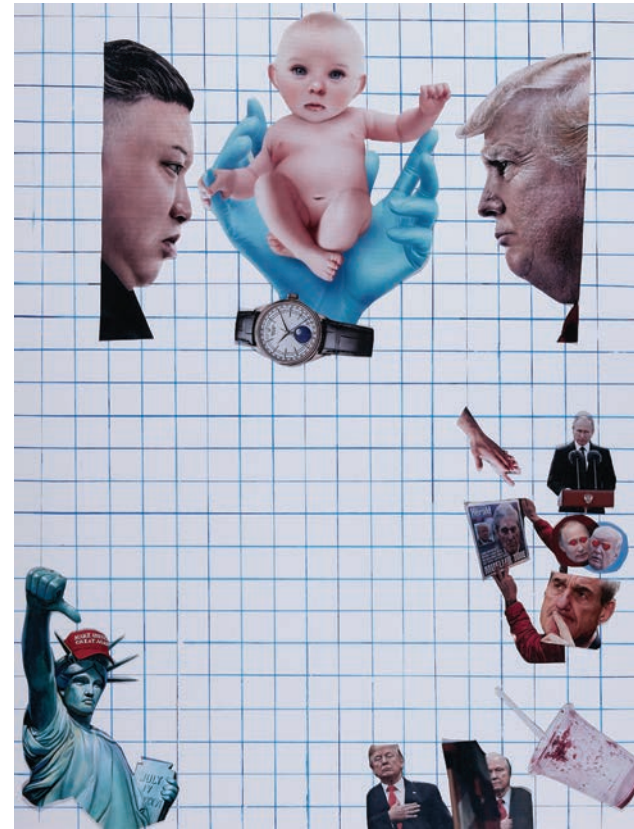
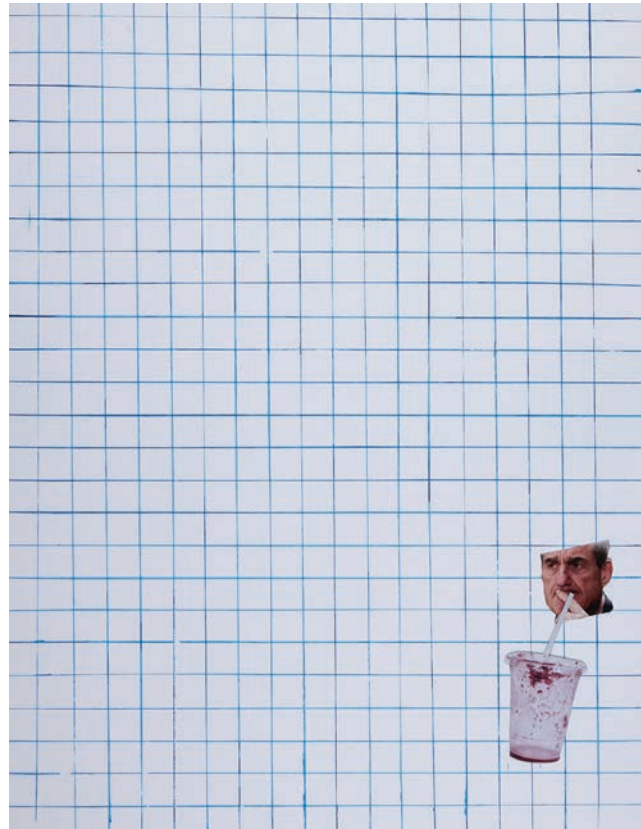
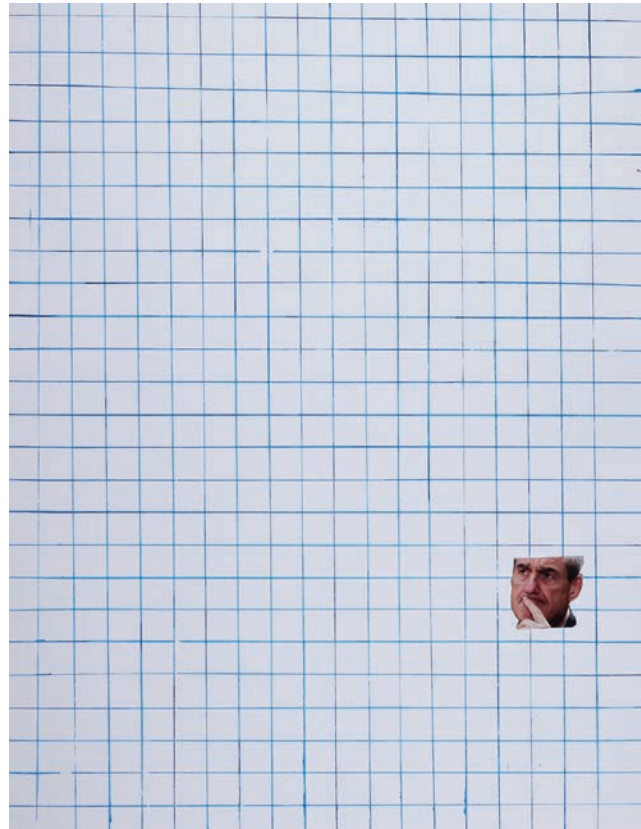
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2019

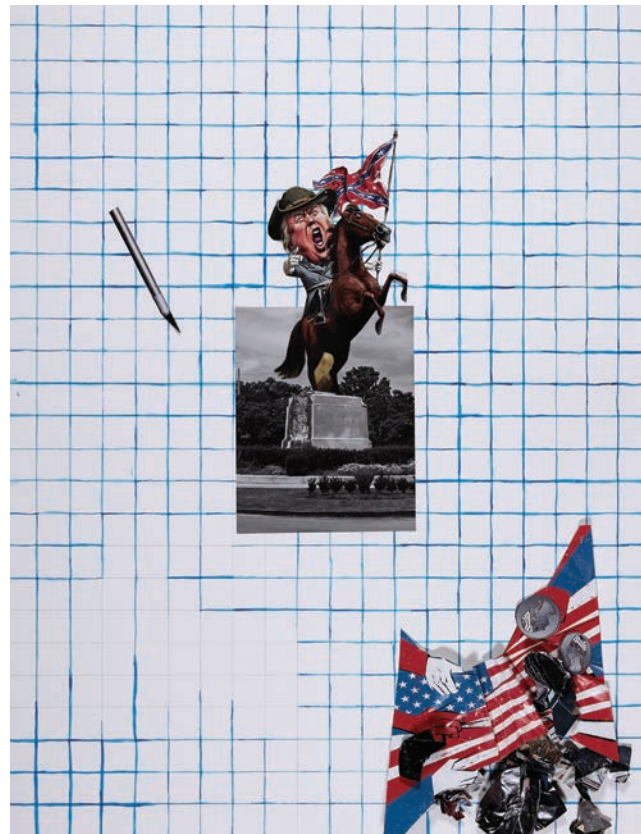
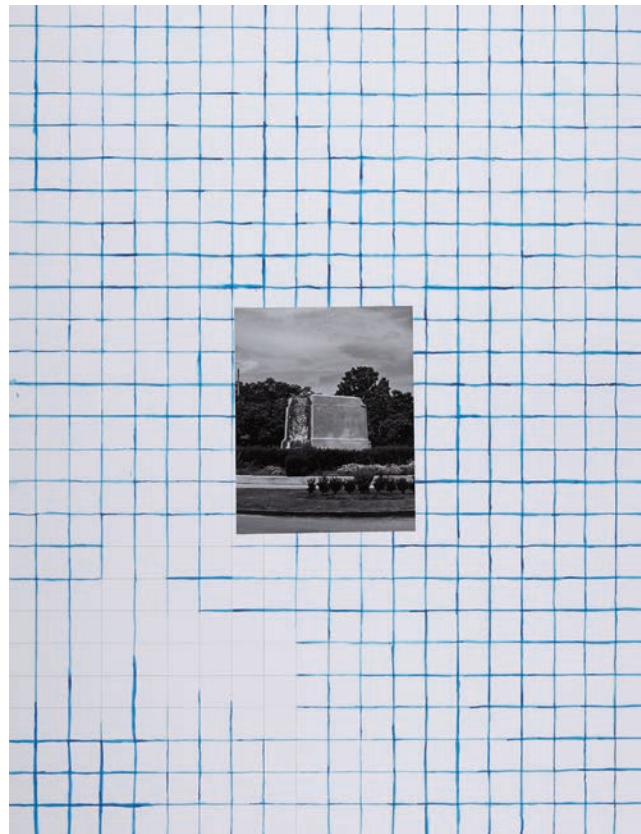
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Digital video on monitor
75.25 x 31.5 x 17 in.



Untitled #2 (Political Collage)
2019

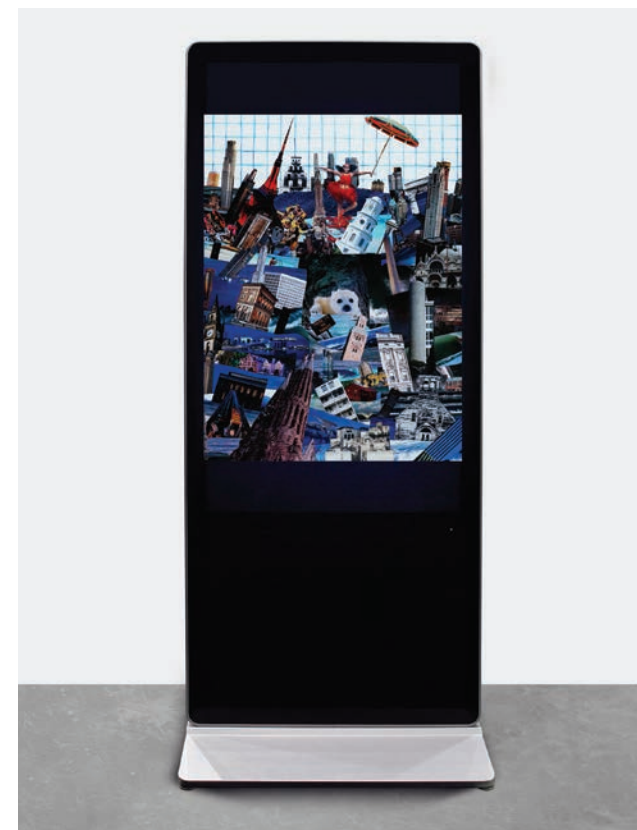
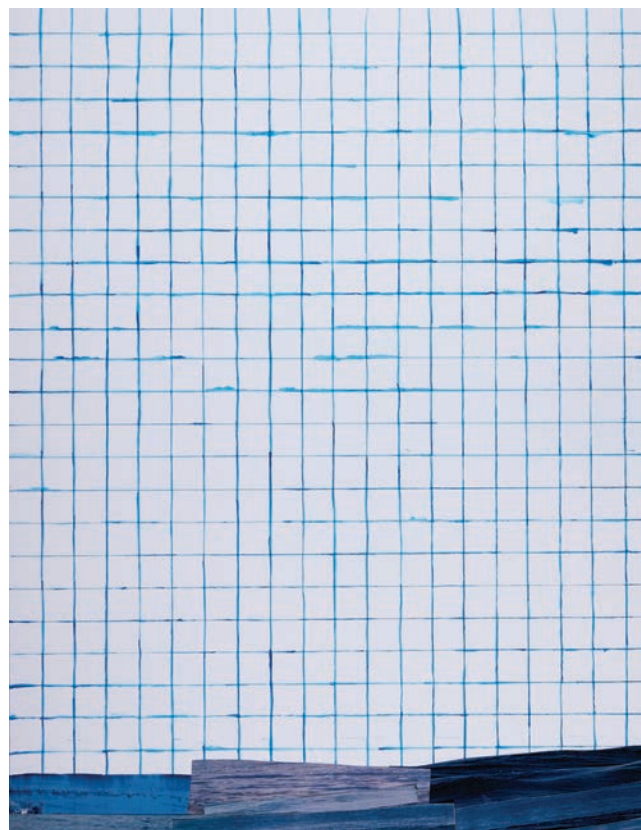
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Digital video on monitor
75.25 x 31.5 x 17 in.





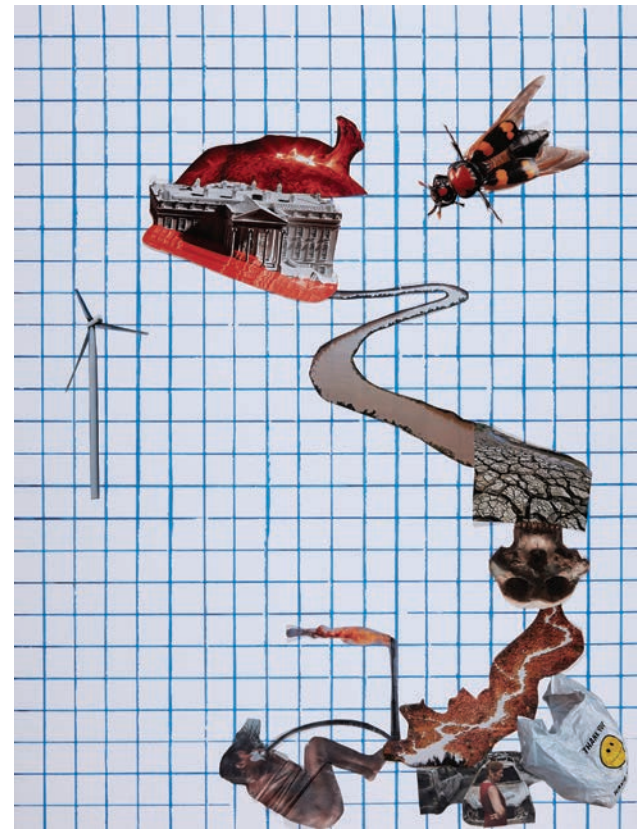
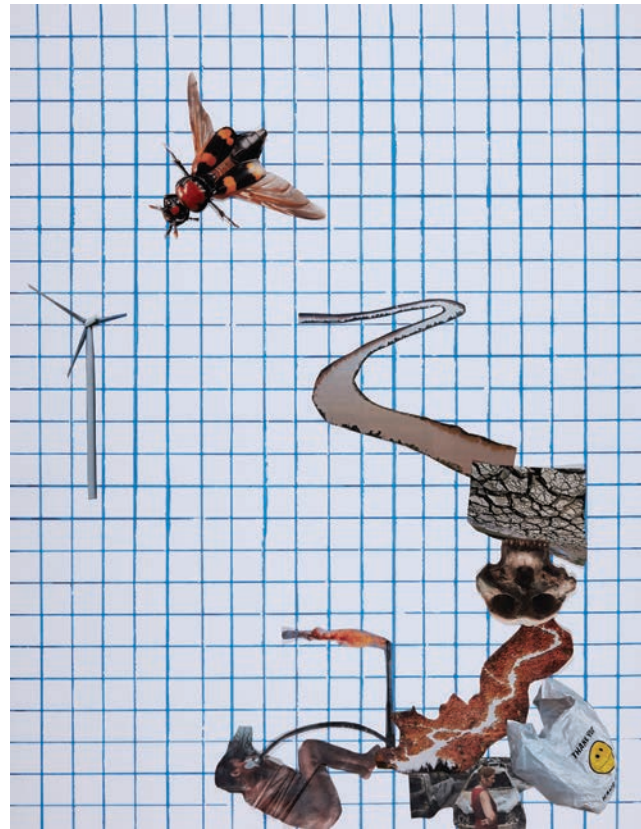
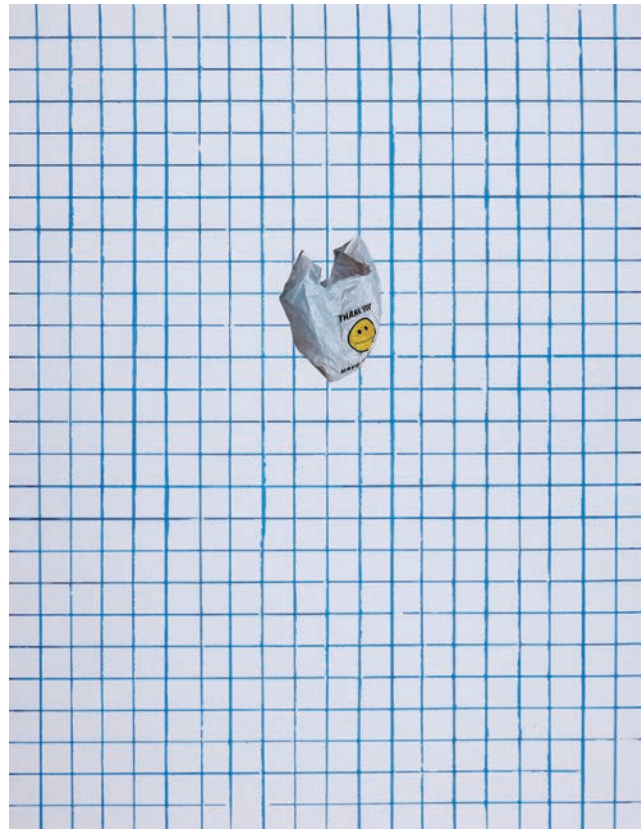
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2:45, looped
Digital video on monitor
75.25 x 31.5 x 17 in.

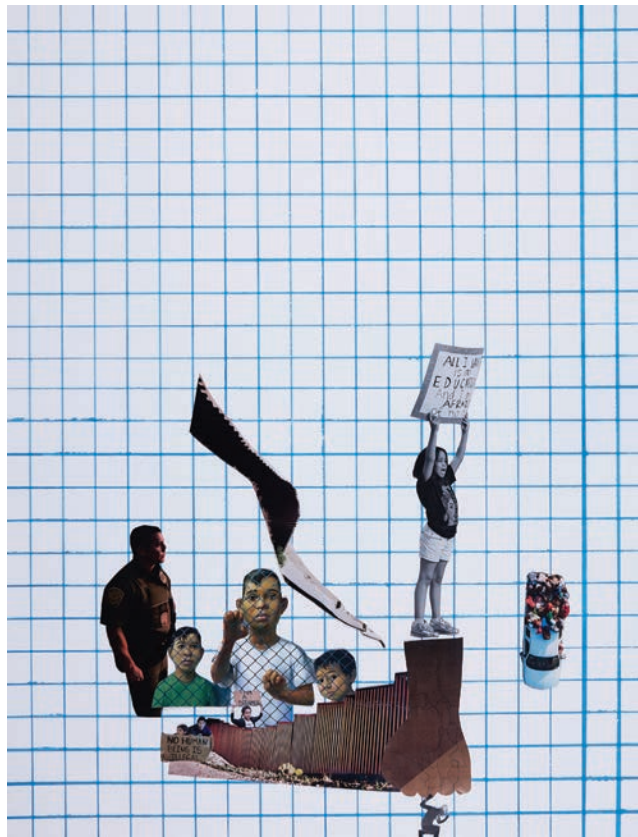
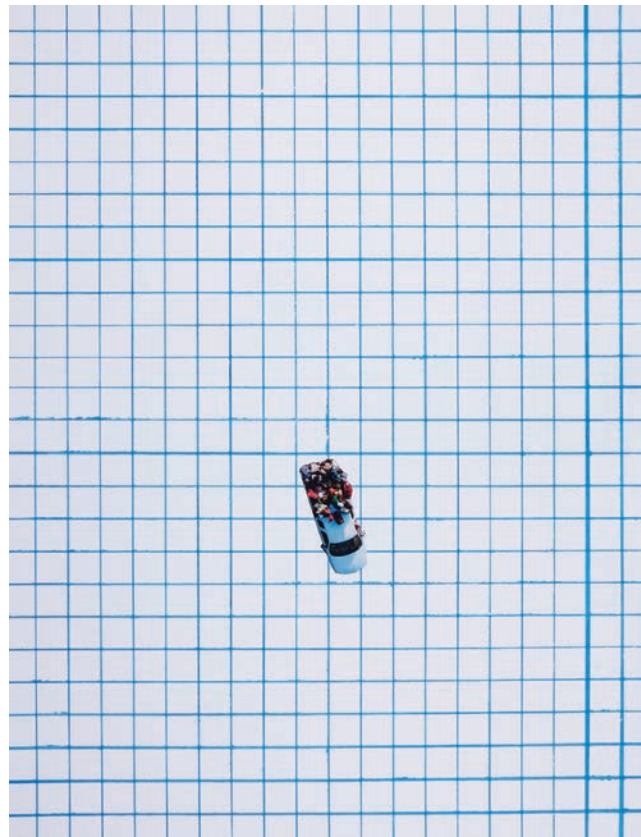


Untitled #5 (Political Collage)
2019

1:52, looped
Digital video on monitor
75.25 x 31.5 x 17 in.

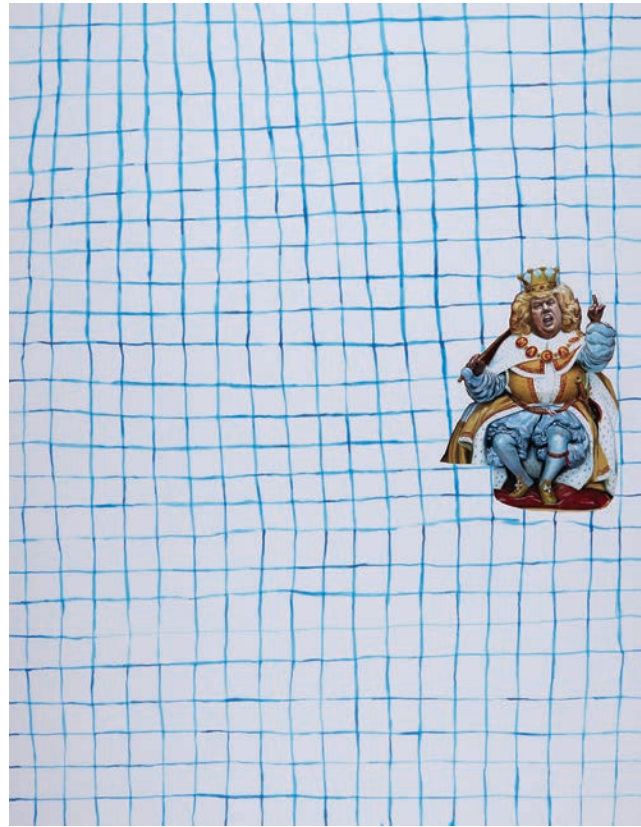


Untitled #6 (Political Collage) 2:23, looped
 2019 Digital video on monitor
 75.25 x 31.5 x 17 in.



Untitled #7 (Political Collage)
2019

3:00, looped
Digital video on monitor
75.25 x 31.5 x 17 in.



Untitled #8 (Political Collage)
2019
2:55, looped
Digital video on monitor
75.25 x 31.5 x 17 in.

Biographies



Catherine Opie

Catherine Opie (b. 1961 Sandusky, Ohio) received a BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and an MFA from California Institute of the Arts. For over thirty years, Opie has captured often overlooked aspects of contemporary American life and culture. One of the most important photographers of her generation, her photographic subjects have included early seminal

portraits of the LGBTQ+ community, the architecture of Los Angeles’ freeway system, mansions in Beverly Hills, Midwestern icehouses, high school football players, California surfers, abstract landscapes of National Parks, the Bel-Air residence of Elizabeth Taylor, among others. In 2018 Opie debuted her first film, *The Modernist*, a dystopic view of Los Angeles, a city that has figured prominently in her work over the years. Her complex and diverse body of work is political, personal, and highly aesthetic—the formal, conceptual, and documentary are always at play.

Her work has been exhibited extensively at institutions worldwide including MASP, São Paulo (2024), Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen (2023); Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo (2017); Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2016 and 2010); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2016); MOCA Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles (2016); Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus (2015); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2014); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2011); Portland Art Museum (2010); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2008); Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2006); Saint Louis Art Museum (2000); The Photographers’ Gallery, London (2000); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1997); among others. In 2016 she completed a monumental installation for the new Los Angeles Federal Courthouse.

Opie was an Honoree at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden New York Gala (2019) and was the recipient of numerous other honors and awards including a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Guggenheim Fellowship (2019); Smithsonian Archives of American Art Medal (2016); Julius Shulman Institute Excellence in Photography Award (2013); Women’s Caucus for Art President’s Award for Lifetime Achievement (2009); United States Artists Fellowship (2006); Larry Aldrich Award (2004); Washington University Freund Fellowship (1999); and the Citibank Private Bank Emerging Artist Award (1997).

Her work is included in the permanent collections of many museums worldwide, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; and Centro Cultural Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City; among others.

Opie lives in Los Angeles, CA, and is Professor Emeritus at UCLA. She is represented by Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Seoul, and London.

Charlotte Cotton

Charlotte Cotton is a curator, writer, and creative consultant who has explored photographic culture for over twenty-five years. She has held positions including curator of photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum, head of programming at The Photographers’ Gallery in London, curator and head of the Wallis Annenberg Department of Photography at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and curator-in-residence at Katonah Museum of Art, NY; International Center of Photography, NY; and California Museum of Photography. Her book, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, is published in over ten languages and has been a key text in charting the rise of photography as an undisputed art form in the 21st century. Her book, *Photography is Magic* (2012–15) surveys over eighty artists whose photographic practices shape the possibilities of our contemporary image environment. *Public, Private, Secret: On Photography and the Configuration of Self* (2016–2018) addresses the complex intersections of our rights to be seen and heard while claiming the privilege of privacy. From 2019 to 2024, she was the founding Artistic Director of the Tasweer Photo Festival Qatar, establishing grant awards for photographers in the SWANA region, and creating biennial exhibitions and events programs that present multivalent, internationally-resonant proposals for the future of photography and image-making in the region.

Lia Rose Newman

Lia Rose Newman has held the position of Director/Curator of the Davidson College Art Galleries since January 2013. From 2002 to 2012, Newman was Director of Programs and Exhibitions at Artspace in Raleigh, NC. She earned a BA in Art History and a BFA in General Studio with concentrations in sculpture and photography from Winthrop University and a Master of Arts from Duke University. Newman provides leadership for the advancement of visual art at Davidson College, overseeing all administrative and operational activities of the Galleries and providing strategic vision to create an inclusive, interdisciplinary center of learning. She is responsible for curating exhibitions and developing exhibition-related programming. With specific interests in socially and politically engaged art practices, Newman’s curatorial projects have explored an array of topics, including HIV, climate catastrophe, immigration, and more. Newman is also responsible for overseeing the development and growth of the Davidson College Art Collection. Over the past ten years, she has helped the college acquire nearly 1,000 works of art, including significant sculptures and commissions focused round diversifying the collection. Newman also serves as an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Art Department, teaching a course that centers student voices in the acquisition process.

This publication was produced in conjunction with *Catherine Opie: In Dialogue*, presented in the Van Every/Smith Galleries at Davidson College, Oct. 14, 2024–Feb. 2, 2025.

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FRONT AND BACK COVER: Detail of *Political Collage (Untitled 6)*

**VAN
EVERY | SMITH
GALLERIES**
AT DAVIDSON COLLEGE

