

‘Down the Rabbit Hole of Photography’

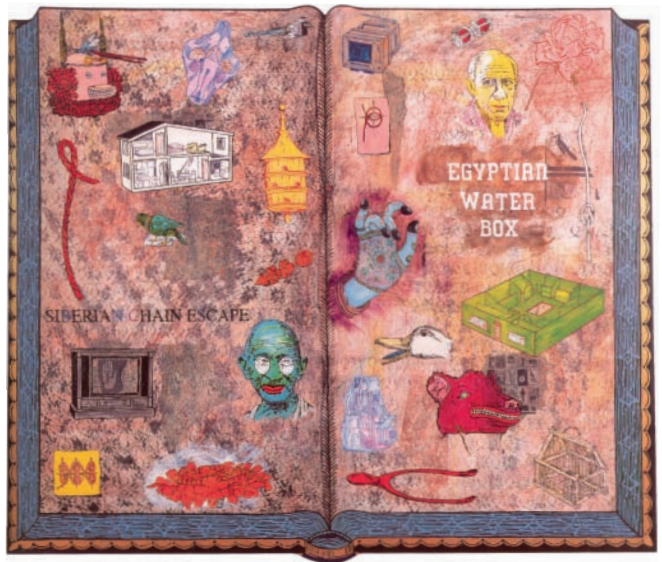
Using snapshots, her own family photos, and digital tools, Jane Hammond creates surreal and sometimes literally dazzling images

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS



Jane Hammond, *Wish I May, Wish I Might*, 2006, oil and mixed media on canvas.

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Hammond in front of *All Souls (Plateau des Petrels)*, 2012, from her series of butterfly maps (left). *Irregular Plural #3*, 1995, a painting with motifs lifted from printed matter and a title provided by poet John Ashbery (above).

In the 116 assorted snapshots laid out across the huge wall piece *Album (Madeline Tomaini)*, 2007, a dancing Eskimo, a stripper, a nun, and a hunter who has just killed a fox are among the range of characters assembled, all bearing the face of Jane Hammond. Using Photoshop, the 62-year-old artist seamlessly inserted her face—mining her own albums for photos of herself from babyhood through middle age—into the pictures of all these other women, working or playing, sexy or maternal, from various places and times. “It’s about effacing the difference between other and self, and seeing the elasticity of all these lives you could have led,” says Hammond, who in recent years has become admittedly obsessed with collecting vernacular photography and now owns well over 10,000 images that find their way into her art. “It’s like wearing a costume, too. You’re inhabiting this other realm.”

A few years ago, Hammond watched as people gathered around the piece and pointed back and forth between the pictures at a new-acquisitions exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. She realized she had unconsciously tapped into the zeitgeist of looking at images on small screens now commonplace in social media. “It’s absolutely fascinating to look at and feel yourself responding, ‘That’s funny, this is scary, this one’s strange, this one’s familiar,’” says Peter Galassi,

MoMA’s former chief curator of photography, who acquired the piece for the collection. “It has all the psychosocial content of snapshots in general, which is huge, especially when you have a bunch of them that are not related to each other and almost represent a whole community or nation. It’s like this huge library of human experience that Jane has then insinuated herself into.”

Since her first show, at New York’s Exit Art in 1989, Hammond has been expanding and reshuffling her deck of found imagery. Early on, she created a visual language of 276 categories by lifting images from printed sources—Girl Scout tourniquets, Mayan knots, invalids playing with puppets, medieval hats, her own face—that she mixed and matched in collage-like paintings that are by turns humorous, mysterious, nostalgic, and sly. “When she used the 276 images as a set vocabulary, that was an extension of conceptual systems-based work but on her own terms,” says Adam Weinberg, director of the Whitney Museum, which has collected her work since the early ’90s. “She personalized it by selecting images that had a connection to her and combined them with incredible playfulness.”

In a series of hand-painted and collaged monoprints on view through March 2 at Pace Prints in Chelsea, Hammond redefines a Renaissance-style room with a

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checkerboard floor framed by arches, which she has populated with her eccentric company of stock objects and figures—including a jester, a bear, and Einstein wearing a bear costume. “It’s like a mash-up between paper dolls and semiotics,” she says.

Hammond first added found photography to her repertoire ten years ago after searching online through such categories as frogs, ventriloquists, hands, and bears. She was intrigued when these keyword searches would turn up, say, a 1930s photo of a man in a polar-bear costume accompanied by a woman in a bathing suit on a beach in Germany. “I’m interested in finding something in the world, the constellation of thoughts that immediately goes through my mind when I see it, and what I can make it mean in another setting,” Hammond says.

“Light Now,” her 2011 exhibition at Galerie

Lelong in New York, where she has shown for 12 years, included a number of surrealistic gelatin silver prints all made that year by digitally collaging elements from as many as 31 old photographs. When she first started collecting these materials from eBay, Hammond would spread out hundreds of images and rearrange them by different criteria: Chinese things together, women together, people coming in from the left together. She found she would later misremember certain pictures, which gave her the idea to weave together her own fictional narratives.

She prints them in black and white at 11-by-14-inches to play with the assumption of photographic truth associated with that format. Her piece *The Time Game* shows a naked woman holding an hourglass and kneeling on the front lawn of an imploded house as a swirl of mayhem breaks loose in the background: kids are shown riding tortoises, wearing traffic-light costumes, and dancing in girly dresses, and a man can be glimpsed running behind the house. “I had the idea that the woman was organizing these children in this dilapidated place,” Hammond explains. “It’s based on the kind of game where I’m still and turned away, and you are in a constant state of motion—then I turn around suddenly, and you have to freeze.” Hammond owns 35 books on games and has made numerous paintings with dice and cards suggesting games of rule and chance.

Also on view at Lelong were hybrid “dazzle paintings”—literally dazzling combinations of painting, photography, and optical devices. For these, she chose snapshots that summon something of a collective past: a little girl being thrown in the air

by her father or climbing a jungle gym, coeds goofing around for the camera. She blew the photos up in scale and transferred them in black acrylic to sheets of mottled translucent mica. Behind the mica, encased in wooden stretchers, she built chunky, faceted terrains of highly reflective materials—metallic leaf, jewels, crystals, and the silvery Mylar that Warhol used for his balloons. As viewers stared into the images and moved around them, a radiant and flickering glow emanated through the mica and created a visual corollary to the mercurial quality of memory itself.

“The snapshot is a frozen moment in time, plucked out of a stream of moments where the wind is blowing and the leaves are moving and sunlight is dappling,” says Hammond, noting that the technique returns the snapshot to a visceral sense of a present moment. “I fell down this rabbit hole of photography. And between this process of being out in the world finding pictures and the screen experience of building them, I wanted something that was faster, glassier, more liquid.” These paintings sell for up to \$50,000 at Lelong, while the gelatin silver prints go for \$3,500.

If the images she chose for the “dazzle paintings” have a kind of upbeat nostalgia, there’s also a sinister undertow to them. Why are the two laughing young men in *Puppets* pretending to lynch each other? Is the American tourist in *Snake Charmers*, with a snake around her neck and surrounded by leering Indian men and American G.I.s, in a vulnerable situation? Perhaps most ambiguous is *Girl Lying Down*, of a lithe, fair-haired teen in a bikini—looking not unlike a younger incarnation of Hammond—lying supine on the ground. The legs and shadow of a man hover over her, and



***Girl Lying Down*, 2011, a “dazzle painting” made of acrylic on mica over Plexiglas with silver, gold, copper, and palladium leaf.**

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A detail of *Album (Madeline Tomaini)*, 2007, for which Hammond digitally inserted her own face into 116 found snapshots.

empty work boots sit upright by her side. Hammond denied any resemblance between herself and the girl, pointed out by several people, until her mother reminded her of the scrapbook made the year Hammond built a house on Nantucket, in which every picture shows her in a bikini and heavy work boots.

Hammond found the original snapshot for *Girl Lying Down* while crawling under a table at a photography fair in France and instantly knew she'd hit the jackpot. Her fascination with vernacular photographs—for which she pays anywhere from 50¢ to \$75 each—has led her into a global subculture of people who deal in snapshots. It appeals to her natural scavenging skills.

To illustrate her intensity as a forager,

Hammond describes a summer spent on Nantucket when she and her mother made 63 jars of jam from wild berries they'd picked themselves. "We found this place in a dump that was so brambly that we had to get heavy rain gear at the thrift shop to walk through the brambles," she recalls. "We took a big two-by-ten to cross the stream, which we'd pull up on the other side so no one else could come in. It was like Viet Cong berrying."

An only child until the age of nine, when her parents had the first of three more children, Hammond grew up in Connecticut and spent much of her formative years

with her grandparents. She always did projects with her grandmother, who made her memorize the Latin names of 100 flowers at age six and took her to museums in Europe. "Twenty-nine Annunciations, 46 Crucifixions," chimes Hammond, bursting into a song she made up after their visit to the Uffizi. "My grandmother is probably the reason I'm an artist."

She liked to dress up the pheasants her grandfather had shot and wheel them around the property in a baby carriage, and she once surveyed a 50-by-50-foot patch in the woods, cataloguing every rock, beetle, and leaf in a little book. "I would do things that I now see were art-related, but nobody called it art at the time," Hammond says. She was always studious and interested in science and went to Mount Holyoke College, intending to be a doctor.

Her conversion to art happened in a studio class with a teacher who was passionate about group projects. "Had he won the lottery, he would have continued to do what he was doing with the same zeal," Hammond says. "I fell in love with that as much as anything."

Hammond went on to get her M.F.A. in sculpture from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1977. She moved to New York, after her house-building project on Nantucket, and, lacking the space for a workshop, started to make drawings in oil stick. She commuted to Baltimore three days a week over the next ten years to teach at the

Maryland Institute College of Art. With nothing to do in the evenings, she camped out in the library, researching random topics as the idea for building a lexicon of Xeroxed images took hold. "I wanted to do something kind of linguistic, and I've always been attracted to games where there's a set number of parts," she says.

Using printmaking techniques, she started making high-key colored paintings with imagery lifted from illustrations, cartoons, tattoos, tarot cards, and stamps that she layered and juxtaposed with her quixotic sense of association. In 1993, she had the idea to add a new rule to her game of using found materials by commissioning poet John Ashbery to provide her with found titles. Ashbery, who in a catalogue essay once compared Hammond to Robinson Crusoe because she makes do with what she has, sent her 44 titles, including "Midwife to Gargoyles," "The Wonderfulness of Downtown," and "Irregular Plural." Over the next eight years, she used them to jumpstart her prodigious imagination, making a total of 64 paintings. "Irregular Plural," originally one of her least favorite titles, ended up yielding five paintings once she got the idea to paint an open book, with two types of matching motifs on the facing pages—including jesters, breathing masks, and cages—chosen to highlight their sameness and differences.

That eventually prompted her to make scrapbooks of her constellation of images, which then gave her the idea to research photographs. "One thing leads to another to another," Hammond says. Still, her work in different mediums doesn't necessarily look as though it comes from the same artist, even as her interest in collecting and collaging remains consistent.

A case in point is her large war memorial titled *Fallen* (2004–12). It comprises 4,487 unique hand-made autumnal leaves, each inscribed with the name of a U.S. soldier killed in Iraq and gathered on a long, low platform. "It's a very simple idea well executed and has a mesmerizing effect, something like the Vietnam Memorial," says Weinberg of the Whitney. The museum acquired the piece in 2007 with the help of Werner Kramarsky, one of Hammond's earliest and most steadfast collectors, and the installation has since toured five

art spaces in Missouri, Ohio, California, Virginia, and New York. "The difference is the random order," Weinberg continues. "There's a system, one leaf for every person, and it does unfold in time, but unlike the Vietnam Memorial, where it's categorized, *Fallen* is wherever the leaves happen to fall each time."

Hammond dreamed up the piece before a weekend trip to the country in the fall of 2004. "I was braiding together autumn, the anticipation of taking a walk in the woods, and all the late-night television I was watching with the bombing of Iraq from an aerial perspective," says

Hammond, who describes herself as a John Cage devotee and acknowledges the vestigial influence of systems-based work by Richard Serra and Barry Le Va.

Years ago, she never would have anticipated she'd be making a memorial to dead soldiers or working with photography, but she is committed to exploring paths as they appear to her. An avid cook, as was her grandmother, Hammond sees parallels between shopping at the green market with no preconceived idea of what she'll make and her approach to art. She began her series of butterfly maps after a mass of Monarch butterflies visited the flower boxes on her SoHo apartment's downtown-facing windows on the afternoon of September 11, 2001. "I had never seen more than

one at a time, and it's never happened since," she says. Lelong will show four of Hammond's maps with fluttering mock butterflies in April at the Art Brussels fair in Belgium.

For now, Hammond continues to wade deep into the brambles of photography. A gelatin silver photo composite in the New York Lelong show titled *Self-Portrait with Twin* does not in fact show Hammond's face, but rather two blond German boys posing on the beach with two giant stuffed donkeys. (The artist had found several snapshots of a boy and a donkey and, in a Diane Arbus riff, built a picture of identical twins.) She decided to place in the hand of one boy a squeeze ball, barely noticeable, used to trigger the shutter of a camera, thereby making him the photographer of his own self-portrait. "Because I work in a largely camera-less way, there's a kind of irony about creating not only the subject matter but the photographer as well," Hammond muses. "I think 99 out of 100 people will miss it, but sometimes you do things just for yourself." ■



All Souls (Playa Guayabo), 2012, one of the artist's butterfly maps.



Self-Portrait with Twin,
2011, selenium-toned
gelatin silver print.



Fallen, 2004–12, a monument with the name of each American soldier killed in the Iraq War printed on a faux leaf.