

Eileen Cowin: Between Panic and Paradise

Artworks are listed in clockwise order.

Eileen Cowin (b. 1947, Brooklyn) uses photography, video, text, and installation to create emotionally rich and provocative narratives. Over the last fifty years, the Los Angeles–based artist has investigated the relationship between fiction and non-fiction, and the way meaning is constructed. Often calibrating the personal and the political, Cowin explores romance, confrontation, and mortality, as well as the monotony and mystery of daily life. True to its title and to the reality of moving through the world today, *Between Panic and Paradise* contains both anxiety and hope, apprehension and gratitude.

Associated with the experimental ethos of Southern California photo-based art since the 1970s, Cowin has always challenged the medium's boundaries, infusing

photographic images with elements from cinema, television, literature, poetry, and painting. In some series, she alludes to popular genres such as film noir and melodrama; other works are more intimate in tone. With carefully crafted titles, subtitles, and other text components, Cowin frequently brings language and wordplay into dialogue with visual imagery.

Perpetually innovative, thoughtful, and rigorous, Cowin's work continues to evolve. This survey exhibition brings together early layered collages, staged domestic dramas, sequential “strip” compositions, single- and multi-channel videos, and recent photographs and video that address aging and death. Throughout, Cowin deploys her instinct for storytelling and performance, shaping messy experience into resonant

images. In so doing, she considers the nature of acting and art-making, and probes the possibility (or impossibility) of representing subjectivity. As she says of herself, “I'm not an in-your-face artist. I'm an under-the-skin artist.”

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The exhibition catalogue is available for purchase at the LACMA Store and online at thelacmastore.org.

Visual descriptions read by the artist and curators are available for six photographs on our digital guide.



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The Unforeseeable Future

In her most recent work, Cowin reflects on the passage of time and the process of aging. Addressing mortality with candor and wit, she considers the body, memory, and the stories people construct to make sense of their lives. Speaking in the first person, she evokes the ways experience is filtered through an anxiety-tinged inner voice and how we search for palatable answers to life's most difficult questions. At the same time, she brings a lifetime of artistic practice to bear, revisiting familiar strategies—such as wordplay and personal anecdote—while experimenting with new ones, including animation.

The enlarged photographs of book spines in this gallery point to the central role of

language and literature in Cowin's work. Words appear in titles, subtitles, voiceovers, and images of books, creating a dialogue between visual and verbal storytelling. Though conceptually layered, her compositions are formally controlled and precise—almost minimalist. In these works, Cowin centers on one or two figures or objects. Such clarity reflects her deliberate process, through which photographs become constructed spaces for reflection rather than documents of spontaneous events.

The Uninvited Visitor, 2025, printed 2026
Dye sublimation prints
Courtesy of the artist

The Uninvited Visitor, 2025, printed 2026
Dye sublimation prints
Courtesy of the artist

The Uninvited Visitor, 2025, printed 2026
Dye sublimation print
Courtesy of the artist

Listen to a description of this work.



The Uninvited Visitor, 2025, printed 2026

Dye sublimation prints

Courtesy of the artist

On monitor:

Another Year Closer to Death, 2026

Single-channel video

Courtesy of the artist

On wall:

Burn, 2018

Digital file courtesy of the artist

Killing Time, 2018, printed 2026

Inkjet print (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

Waiting, 2018, printed 2026

Inkjet print (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

Lost in America, 2018, printed 2026

Inkjet print (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

In the Midst of Things

As a young artist committed to working with a camera but uninterested in documentary objectivity or darkroom virtuosity, Cowin sought to redefine photography on her own terms. Early on, she employed collage, multiple exposure, and alternative processes, aligning herself with contemporaneous efforts to expand the medium's parameters. While she explored photographic means with skill and rigor, Cowin's vision did not crystallize through technique alone. The ideas always come first, then the methods needed to give them visual form.

The works in this gallery—the earliest from 1967 and the latest from 2020—combine images in different ways, but all deal with

feelings of individual and societal dislocation. Coming of age as an artist during the Vietnam War and later witnessing profound political upheavals, including the recent pandemic, Cowin has remained acutely aware of the cumulative effects of cacophonous public discourse, perpetual conflict, and sensationalized media. In quiet resistance to this atmosphere of noise and urgency, her work seeks meaning in silence and stillness.

No One Is Sleeping, 2020

Two-channel video

Courtesy of the artist

Bride, 1971

Photographic transparency and magazine transfer

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the artist

M.2014.227.7

New Hampshire, 1971

Photographic transparency and magazine transfer

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the artist

M.2014.227.9

Listen to a description of this work.



Chicago, 1971

Photographic transparency and magazine transfer

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the artist

M.2014.227.11

Untitled, 1967

Photographic transparency and magazine transfer

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the artist

M.2014.227.1

Untitled, 1967

Photographic transparency and magazine transfer

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the artist

M.2014.227.2

Still Life, 1968

Gelatin silver print

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles,
gift of the artist

2015.15.5

Still Life, 1970

Gelatin silver print

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles,
gift of the artist

2015.15.1

Returning to Ordinary Life, 1997

Inkjet prints (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

A Sudden Sense of Dislocation, 2019

Inkjet prints (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

The Slippery Nature of Language

Something Out of the Ordinary is a colossal “self-portrait” made up of 352 photographs of Cowin's personal items, including report cards, datebooks, faculty IDs, keys, maps, gloves, and makeup. In this abridged selection, the apparent mundanity of these objects is shot through with a current of anxiety about the nature of identity given that all of us have versions of these same everyday items. Here, each object is photographed against a white background, a significant anomaly within the artist's oeuvre that connotes a more scientific presentation.

This gallery features works that explore combinations of image and text. Cowin pursues wordplay in two Polaroid pairs,

Shot (1976) and *Dive* (1977), focusing on words that are both a verb and a noun, and pictured accordingly. We are confronted with the slippery nature of language and the way we read images versus words. *Don't Ever Lie* (1994) is a collaboration with the Pulitzer Prize–winning author Louise Erdrich. With this piece, Cowin added the grid to her repertoire of structural devices designed to expand the single image.

Wedding Diptych, 1986

Dye diffusion transfer prints

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, gift of the artist

2014.55.49a, b

Don't Ever Lie (with Louise Erdrich), 1994

Inkjet prints (pigment based)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the artist

M.2014.227.47a–e

Pants on Fire, 2004

Single-channel video

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the artist

M.2014.227.51.1–.2

Mirror of Venus, 1988

Dye destruction print

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Museum

Purchase with funds provided by the Wallis
Foundation

2006.13

Magritte with Easel, 1988

Dye destruction print

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles,
gift of Jay Brecker

2015.54

Listen to a description of this work.



Something Out of the Ordinary, 2006

Inkjet prints (pigment based)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the artist

M.2014.227.52.1—.352

Shot, 1976

Internal dye diffusion prints and graphite on paper

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, gift of the artist

2015.15.29

Dive, 1977

Internal dye diffusion prints and graphite on paper

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles,
gift of the artist

2015.15.24

Breaking Your Heart, 1977

Internal dye diffusion print

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles,
gift of the artist

2015.15.33

The Cinematic

Cinema has long provided Cowin with both a visual vocabulary and a conceptual framework. Many of her photographs are shaped through processes of research, note-taking, and planning that resemble film production. Cowin casts family members, friends, and professional actors to inhabit psychologically charged situations, directing their gestures, gazes, and relationships within the frame. These figures function simultaneously as individuals and as archetypal characters, allowing the artist to explore themes of intimacy, vulnerability, and social roles in staged encounters that evoke genres ranging from melodrama to film noir. Rather than quoting specific films, Cowin draws on these shared cultural grammars to guide viewers' expectations

while leaving narrative meaning deliberately open.

From the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, Cowin worked with Polaroid materials, ranging from small conceptual pairings to large-format instant prints. Polaroid's immediacy and shallow depth of field pushed her to experiment with color, gesture, and performance in new ways. The resulting photographs have the intensity of film stills. Their physical presence also heightens the sense that each image is part of a larger unfolding story.

Cinderblock Wall/Man Facing Wall, 1988

Gelatin silver print

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, gift of the artist

2014.55.42

Cinderblock Wall/Blind-Folded Man, 1988

Gelatin silver print

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, gift of the artist

2014.55.41

Fear Itself, 2014

Five-channel video

Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
purchased with funds provided by the Ralph
M. Parsons Fund

M.2014.144.1.1–.3

The Unknown Unknowns, 2003–4

Inkjet print (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

Listen to a description of this work.



Untitled, 1991

Dye destruction prints

Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
purchased with funds provided by the
Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation and
Playboy Enterprises, Inc.

M.91.180a–b

Untitled, 1985

Dye diffusion transfer prints

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of
the artist

M.2014.227.41a–b

Rocks and Fog, 1991

Dye destruction print

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of
the artist

M.2024.178

Experience Versus Memory

This gallery features two early series that were widely published and exhibited. *One Night Stand* (1977–78) was made in a Culver City storefront where Cowin lived and worked in the late 1970s. She accumulated a collection of night stands upon which she set up and photographed scenarios that include coffee cups, ashtrays, alarm clocks, and telephones. Casually placed Polaroids point outside the frame—a woman taking off her underwear, a man lowering his pants—inviting an imaginary narrative between the figures and the objects. Purposely unromantic with flat, all-over lighting, the series highlights relationships, intimacy, and wordplay.

Arranging objects for the camera led directly into staging actors for the purpose of photographing them as seen in her highly lauded body of work, *Family Docudrama* (1980–84). Appropriating the look of theater sets and television soap operas, Cowin and her husband attempt intimacy—a candlelit dinner, a physical encounter by the car—while two children appear in the background changing the TV channel, doing homework, or stumbling into the garage. The series evolved over four years, in black-and-white and color, initially prop-heavy, then pared down to a focus on gesture. Although the couple dominates the series visually, it is not about them but an illustration of conditions, situations, and attendant emotions.

Three Men, 1987

Dye diffusion transfer print

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of
the artist

M.2014.227.45

Three Women, 1987

Dye diffusion transfer print

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of
the artist

M.2014.227.46

Untitled, 1980

From the series *Family Docudrama*, 1980–84

Gelatin silver print

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, gift of the artist

2014.55.27

Untitled, 1983

From the series *Family Docudrama*, 1980–84

Gelatin silver print

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, gift of the artist

2014.55.32

Untitled, 1984

From the series *Family Docudrama*, 1980–84

Gelatin silver print

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, gift of the artist

2014.55.35

Untitled, 1984

From the series *Family Docudrama*, 1980–84

Gelatin silver print

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, gift of the artist

2014.55.38

Untitled, 1984

From the series *Family Docudrama*, 1980–84

Gelatin silver print

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, gift of the artist

2014.55.46

Untitled, 1980, printed 1999

From the series *Family Docudrama*, 1980–84

Dye coupler prints

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Norman Starr

M.2001.222

Listen to a description of this work.



I Give You My Word, 2002

Single-channel video

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of
the artist

M.2014.227.50.1–.2

Untitled, 1985

Dye diffusion transfer print

Courtesy of the artist

Untitled, 1977–78, printed 1999

From the series *One Night Stand*, 1977–78

Dye coupler prints

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of
Norman Starr

M.2001.222.9, .10, .11, .14

Mangling the Narrative

Where a single photograph makes a statement, two or more can make an argument or pose a question. This editorial logic lies at the heart of Cowin's practice, transforming images into syntax while retaining the narrative ambiguity that characterizes her work. In this gallery, Cowin exercises the editorial act of inclusion and exclusion to highlight the provisional nature of narrative structure.

Russian film theorists Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein, and Dziga Vertov argued that meaning does not reside *within* images alone, but *between* them: context creates meaning and visual collision synthesizes new ideas. As she increasingly engaged with the moving image as a medium, Cowin

extended the logic of cinematic editing to the still photograph. Here, she compresses the temporal rhythm of editing into a single field of view, as seen in *The Exercise of Doubt (Yes...But)* (2014) and *Now You Know* (2019), compelling the viewer to physically traverse the length of these panoramic image strips in order for their obscure narratives to unfold.

Cowin insistently circles themes of darkness and revelation, attachment and alienation, intimacy and distance. In her multipart compositions, she embraces the liminal space between images, creating a stage where the full spectrum of the human experience—grief and love, joy and pain—is neither fixed nor foreclosed, but suspended in collective memory somewhere between panic and paradise.

On monitor:

Neither Here nor There, 2008

Single-channel video

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of
the artist

M.2014.227.53.1–.2

On wall:

No Matter What II, 2022

Digital file courtesy of the artist

Mad Love/Only a Vague Hope, 2015

Inkjet print (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

Mad Love/Merely an Episode, 2016

Inkjet print (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

Mad Love/The Possibility of Regret, 2014

Inkjet print (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

Mad Love/Self-Inflicted Wound, 2014

Inkjet print (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

Mad Love/The Knife Edge of Dread, 2014

Inkjet print (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

Mad Love/Natural Causes, 2014

Inkjet print (pigment based)

Courtesy of the artist

Now You Know, 2019
Inkjet print (pigment based)
Courtesy of the artist

The Exercise of Doubt (Yes...But), 2014
Inkjet prints (pigment based)
Courtesy of the artist

Listen to a description of this work.

