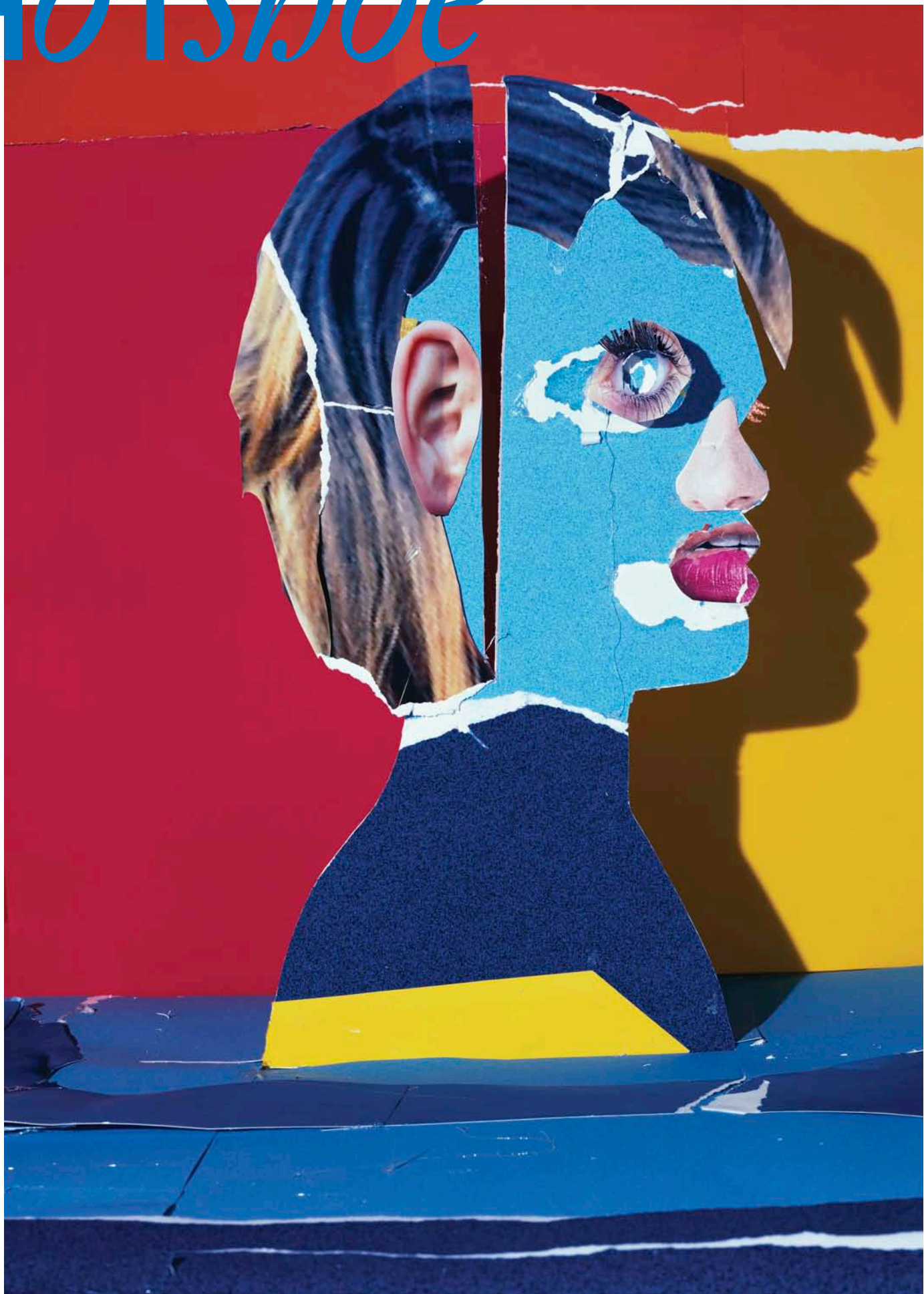


CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

FEBRUARY-MARCH 2013
UK £6 / EUR €9 / USA \$12

HOTshoe



THE GREEN LINE

DANIEL GORDON

Daniel Gordon sources his paints and fabrics, wallpapers and patterns on the internet – his purpose not home decorating, but the gathering of the raw materials for his complex paper and glue assemblages. Some are turned into exuberant still life of fruits and flowers; others disturbing deconstructed portraits suggesting the skull beneath the skin.

Gordon stages his tableaux in his Brooklyn studio, lighting and photographing them. It's a patently fabricated world which makes no attempt to disguise its homespun construction. It's a conceptual paradox that Gordon's images exist in some nascent sense in the real world as scissors and paste constructions, but only become "real" when staged, lit and recorded by his camera on a two-dimensional plane. As Gordon puts it: "when the totally impossible becomes possible through the medium, then that thing I made becomes real".

Gordon's work is complex and layered in both conception and production. Take *Portrait in Orange and Green*, which presents a series of profile cut-outs of a woman's face – there's a latent suggestion of a flip book paused, of movement arrested, the orangey-reds and greens evoking visual perception tests. The graduated silhouettes set-up an alternation between the raw "ugly" elements and the "perfect" profile; the cut-out body parts – the ear, the lip, the blonde locks, the blue eye – suggest fetishised "bits" of female beauty. There's something of the anatomy textbook too, which Gordon ascribes to growing-up with parents who were surgeons.

He explains why this construction is literally "made" for the camera: "The shadow in all of the profile pictures is 'real', or the actual shadow produced by the profile or silhouette. I shoot with a large format view camera, and *Portrait in Orange and Green* is a perfect example of the use of this camera because I could not have made the same image with a camera that has fixed film and lens planes. In other words, in order to line up all of the parts and include the shadow I had to use the lateral shift – moving the film plane to the right while the lens remained in its original position."

Midnight Blue Bust is suggestive of a studio tone study. The face, with its partially rendered features, hints at the dream and dread images of de Chirico and Magritte. It's an image that might at first glance appear colour-tinted using Photoshop. But from his earliest series – *Flying* – (literally photographs of the artist caught in an airborne instant, hurling himself into space before crashing to earth), Gordon's practice expressly eschews after-the-fact digital manipulation of the image.

So in this image the various shades of blue are obtained by printing internet images, then ripping them, the white tear edges used to model the features of the bust. "The rips, tears and drips of glue are an essential part of the understanding of the process as well as the composition", says Gordon. "I'm not pursuing seamless perfection, but rather the parts that make an image human. To me, fiction is not compelling unless it connects to our movement through the world and our understanding of it".



Tropical Still Life, 2012

Midnight Blue Bust is intended to form the left side of a diptych with *Anemone Flowers and Avocado*, suggesting “Joy and Sorrow” to Gordon, his work characterised by dualism – the play between the decorative and the disturbing, the grotesque and the beautiful. “The idea of transformation has always been important to me – the raw ugly bits are transformed through light (and shadow) into an idealised form”. Illumination allows the moment of perfection to be recorded in the photographic instant, whilst simultaneously capturing its imperfect antithesis.

In *Shadows and Pears*, Gordon pushes further his study of how we read what is “real” in a photographic image. Here he devises “pictorial” shadows rendered by yellow and brown decoupages that mimic the shadows that would be made by an actual light source. Then Gordon layers the reading of the image still further by having actual shadows cast by a light source incorporated as well.

The purple pears are a nod to the Fauvists, the apples directly quote Cezanne and the flat patterns of tablecloth and backdrop reference Matisse’s graphic planes. Gordon explains that the gladioli flowers are 2-D photographs printed and glued onto a cylinder acting as a “stalk”. These 2-D images are well focused and printed with a high enough resolution that they create the illusion of space. A painterly vocabulary confidently co-exists with the hyper-realism associated with photography and plays tricks with the brain and the eye.

In his essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, T.S. Eliot said that as principle of aesthetic criticism “you cannot value him [the artist] alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead”.

Collage is an intrinsic part of Gordon’s practice, so his images trigger associations with other artists using the medium like Hannah Hoch, Juan Gris and John Stezaker. But Gordon is not interested in using pre-existing imagery and iconography for quotation, irony or surreal slippages. The source of his raw stuff remains largely impersonal and unidentifiable. There’s no discourse on commodification – in fact his world seems culturally non-specific with generalised signs and signifiers of gender and beauty and body parts, foodstuffs and generic domestic objects. The aesthetic – his use of patterns and colours in particular – suggests a Caribbean or Latin American vivacity, the pop of sunlit places; the would-be historic period redolent of the late ‘50s or early ‘60s.

Gordon readily acknowledges Matisse as a key influence and the Cubists in general, but also invokes other large format masters of photography such as Stephen Shore. Gordon says he does not see himself as a collagist, affirming himself first and foremost as a photographer. “I am much more interested in colour, space, light, and form – and photography’s ability to transform these elements into something that is both a record of what was in front of the lens, and a fiction simultaneously.”



Pink Onions, 2012

Daniel Gordon's work has a gestural quality. It's not a Post-Modernist sensibility nor does it offer-up a deliberately impoverished reference to the original source inspiration. His is in many ways a painterly eye that finds photographic equivalences for the brush stroke, the density of paint, the inflection of light to depict the natural world and the human form.

"The idea of appropriation not as a critical tool, but rather one of optimism is very attractive to me. I have been exploring traditional modes of portraiture and still life through the filter of contemporary image culture and technology. Hopefully, in some way, using all of these found images reflects back on the greater world, and explores tradition without trashing it."

But for Gordon the gestural impulses go hand in hand with a laborious method. Starting with a general idea for a picture, he begins the process of making by printing found images, as well as using "recycled" materials from past pictures. Inevitably, the picture changes from the initial intention, and starts to develop into something new. At some intuitive moment, Gordon decides to frame and eventually set the picture with the camera. Constantly moving from the computer/printer, to the debris on the studio floor, to the camera, to the tableau, to the lights, Gordon over and over again adjusts, adds, subtracts. And when the picture is complete, he shoots a large format transparency. This print is laminated and framed so that there is no glass in front of the image, making the print into an object.

John Stezaker, an artist whose collagist practice conjoins appropriated images in what seems an overtly intentional manner, rather surprisingly says: "I see my work as quite impersonal because I don't know where the work comes from. That's the whole mystery to me." Gordon identifies with Stezaker's words – his own practice a constant oscillation between purpose and accident, intention and chance: "I try not to create and analyse at the same time. This way I can improvise within a general structure."

Daniel Gordon's work manifestly embraces the intellectual and aesthetic tradition to which it belongs. But, like a great jazz player, his riffs and improvisations take flight in a uniquely new way – a delicious tension between the familiar and the unexpected, a fabulous construction of his own devising.

— Sophie Balhetchet

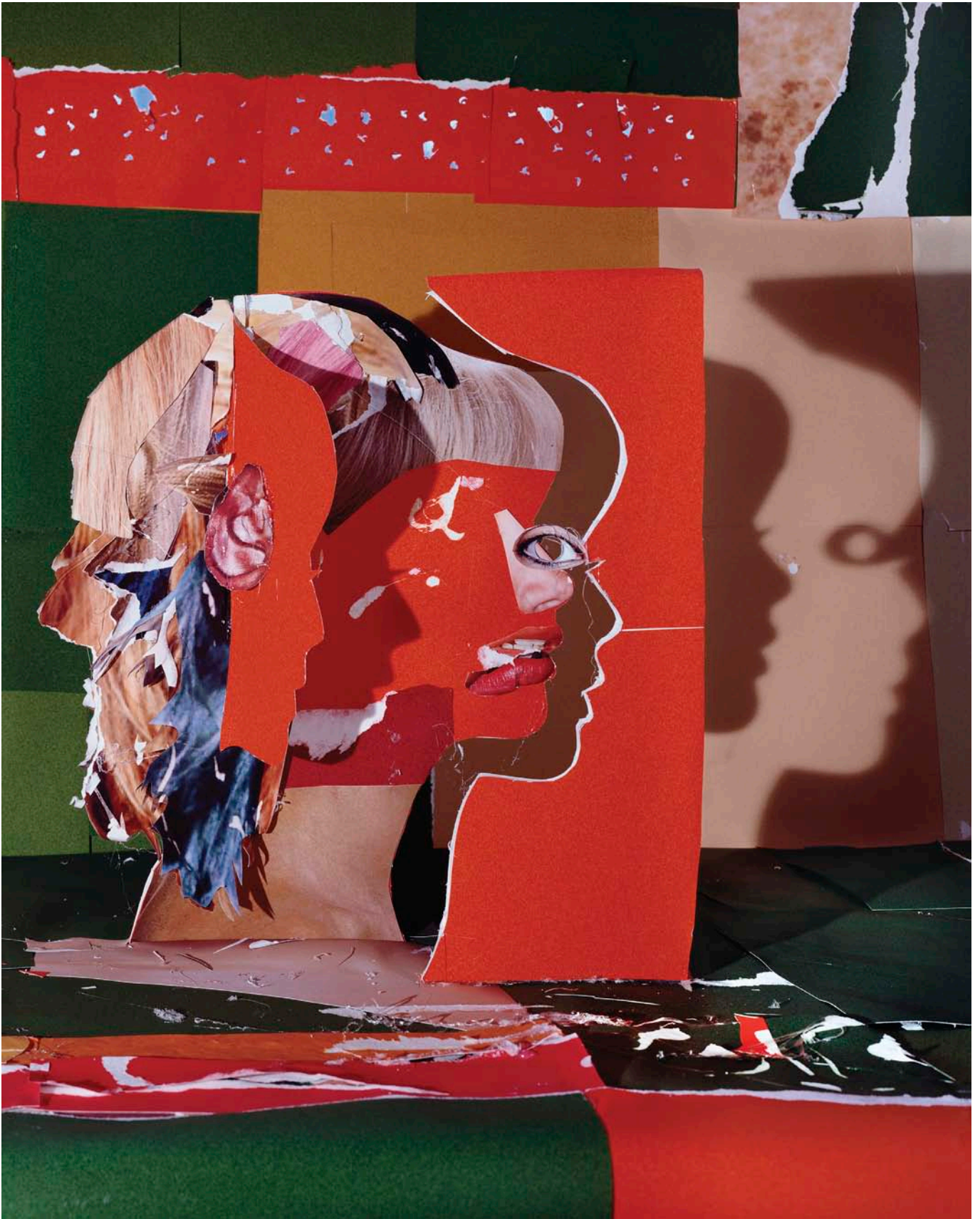
A monograph of Daniel Gordon's work is set to be published by Mörel books in 2013.



Portrait in Yellow and Blue, 2012



Crescent Eyed Portrait, 2012



Portrait in Orange and Green, 2012



All images © Daniel Gordon (Courtesy Wallspace, NY). Midnight Blue Bust, 2012



Anemone Flowers and Avocado, 2012



Shadows and Pears, 2012



Blue Face II, 2012



Portrait in Ruby and Blue, 2012



Pink Eyed Portrait, 2012