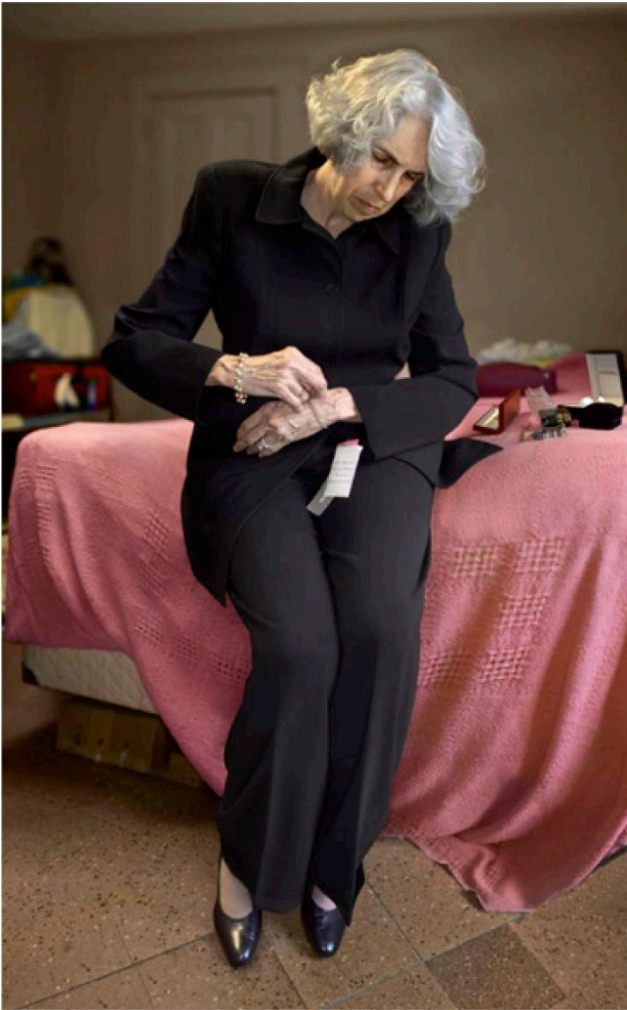


BEN GEST

Renaissance Society, through Dec 22.

★★★★★



The woman in the large color photo *Jennifer in her Rooftop Garden* looks less than pleased to be watering her plants. She's wearing pointy heels, a cocktail dress and a shawl, so maybe she's in a hurry. Then again, it's the middle of the day. Where could she be headed dressed like that? But the main question we want to ask Gest's subjects is, Hey, what's the matter?

Caught in the middle of routines like taking out the garbage, digging through a purse or exiting a Volvo, every one of them appears to be knee-deep in an existential crisis. Distant eyes, furrowed brows and telling body language all play a part in creating a sublimely desperate mood, but what seals the deal is what's going on behind the scenes -- namely, the hours Gest spends building each photo on his computer by manipulating and layering numerous frames. As we move closer to each of these life-size prints they seem to come alive. There are multiple planes of focus,

and items slightly blurred in the background appear prominently rounded. Combined with the size of the image, the visual trickery yields huge floating portals into other people's mundane misery. Not that we necessarily want to step into a sterile employee break room to visit *Joe Finishing his Lunch*, but we practically can smell the mayonnaise on the wadded up wax paper in his hand