

Michele Abeles wondered out loud to me recently: "Besides street photography, what photograph isn't arranged?" That's a loaded question, especially coming from a graduate of Yale University's MFA photography program, the mecca for setup photography. Abeles worked as an assistant to another Yale alumna, Katy Grannan—and posed for her—and soon Abeles formulated her own visual language. She had been taking photographs of people, but became increasingly interested in making pictures that weren't *portraits*; she wanted to shed all the psychological associations that come with the genre. So she sought bodies that were somehow "neutral," bodies that would function like the other props in her photographs—wine bottles, terracotta pots, newspapers, printed fabrics—artifacts that are familiar, timeless, even generic and bland.

After sending out a casting call via Craigslist, Abeles found her neutral bodies in the form of white men who were not too thin or too heavy, not too hairy or too waxed, and whose faces she rarely shows. With them, she creates elegant studio constructions that confound the eye with arrangements of truncated bodies and objects, flattened, condensed into the photographic plane. Her listlike titles, such as *Red, Rock, Cigarettes, Newspaper, Body, Wood, Lycra, Bottle* (2011), inventory the objects in the photograph according to a seemingly arbitrary order, emphasizing that the pictures are of accumulations or groupings: a constructed world within a world, a space that is represented but not real.

Michele Abeles

Re:Re:Re:Re:Re

Eva Respini

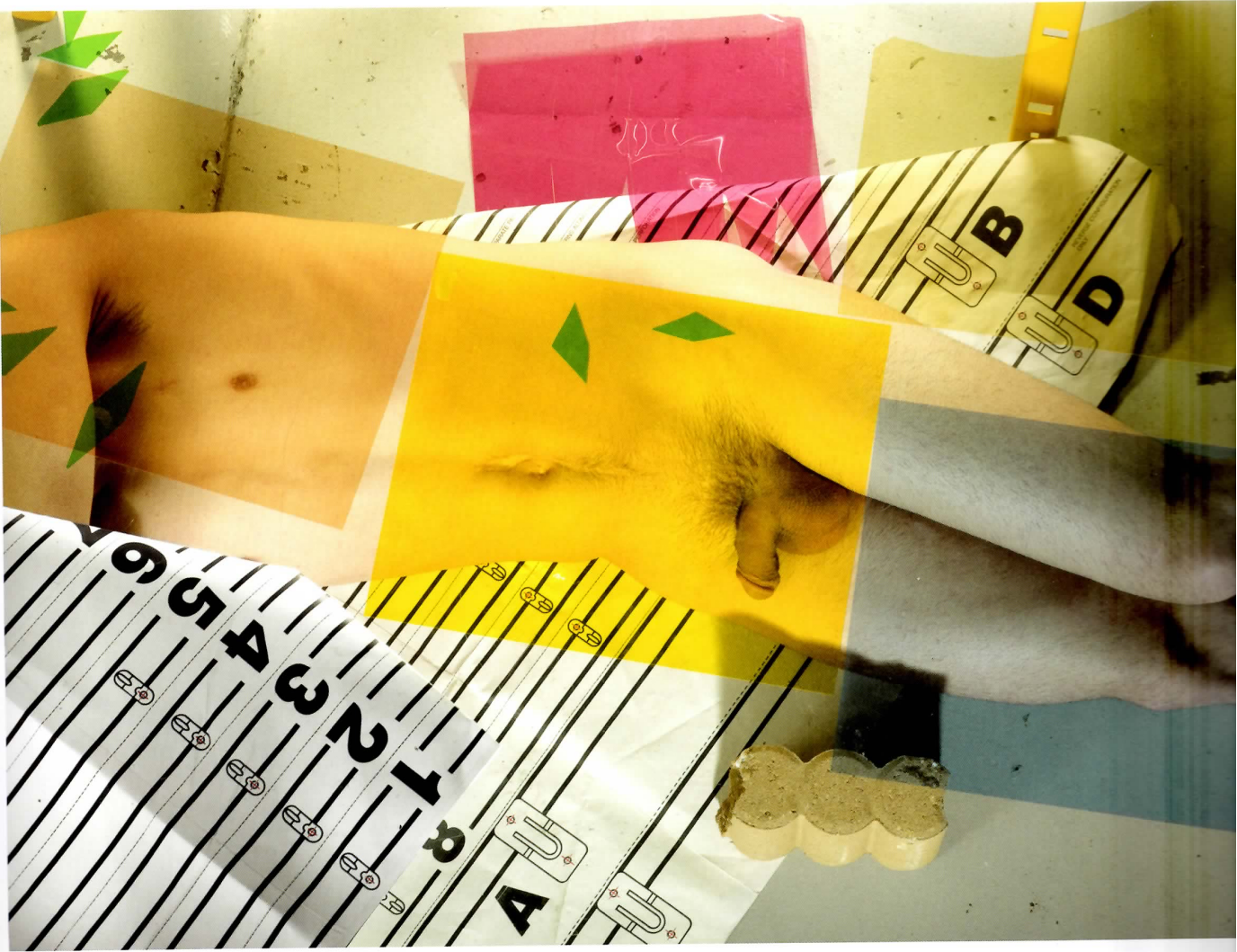
These days, any consideration of photographs includes an inevitable (and—let's face it—boring) inquiry about digital enhancements. In Abeles's pictures, space appears flattened: scale and spatial relationships are confusing. Until recently, a lot of the trickery occurred in the studio and in camera; in some cases, Abeles used time-consuming analog means—such as placing colored gels or Plexiglas in front of her lens—to do what Photoshop could do far more easily.

In 2012 her in-camera compositions gave way to digital manipulations. Now she deploys all the tools available to her, without much regard to whether they are digital or not. Her recent works refer to how we view images today: often on a computer screen, a two-dimensional space cluttered with layered windows. For Abeles (as for many of us) the screen is another world we inhabit, and she uses familiar digital signs, such as drop shadows that are found in many digital graphics, to evoke this "space." Her piece #4 (2012) recalls the swipe mechanism on an iPad or iPhone, as a cropped image on the left suggests a picture in midswipe or an image outside the photographic frame.

The title of Abeles's 2011 first-ever solo exhibition, *Re:Re:Re:Re:Re*, at the New York gallery 47 Canal, suggests a long email thread without a subject, and confronts the absurdity of endless permutations possible in the digital realm. Playing off the idea of the recirculation of pictures today, Abeles essentially borrows from her own images to make new ones. In *Progressive Substitution Drills* (2012), for example, elements from earlier photographs reappear: a rock, printed fabric, a newspaper scrap. Thus old and new works are bound together.

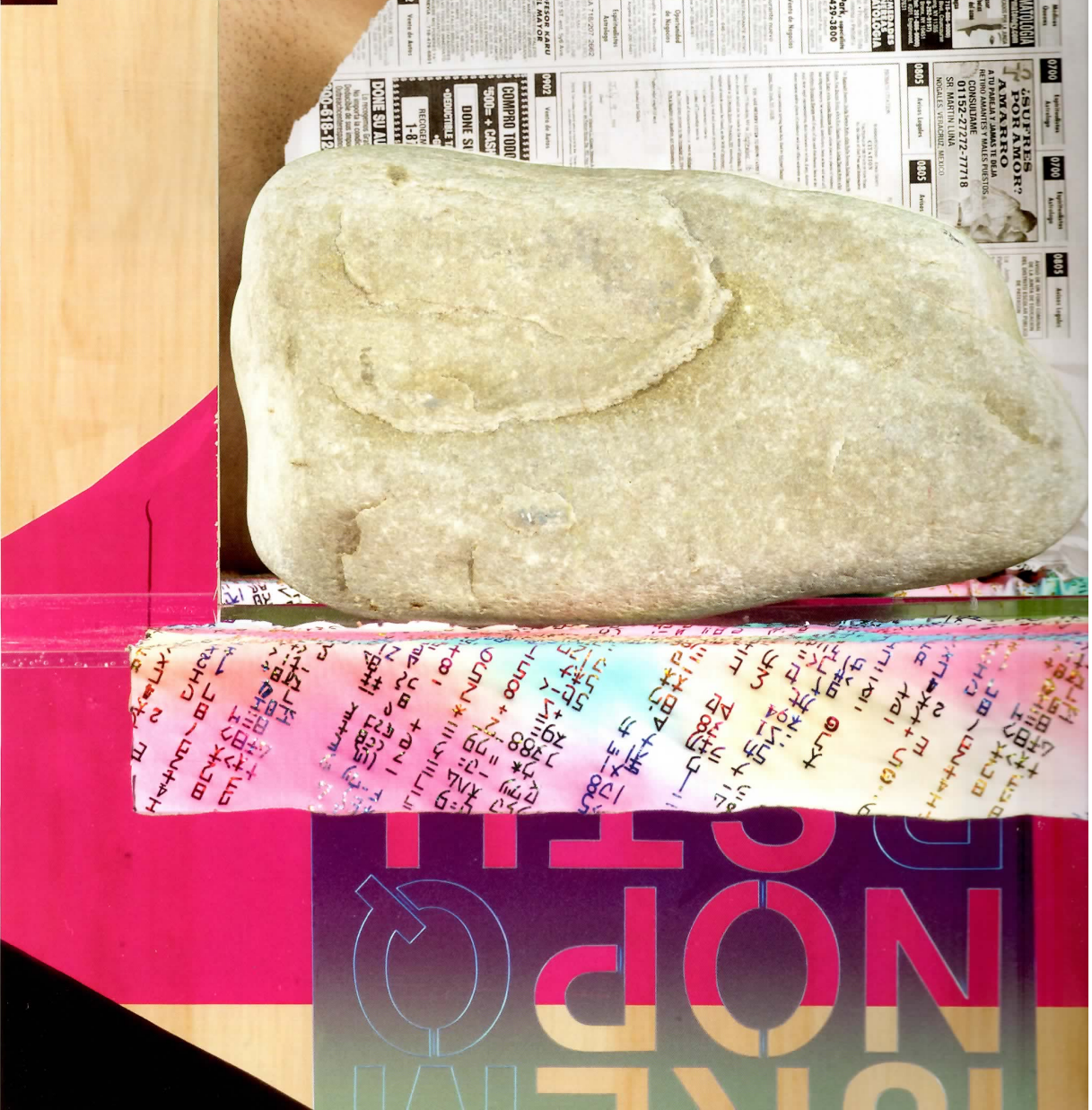
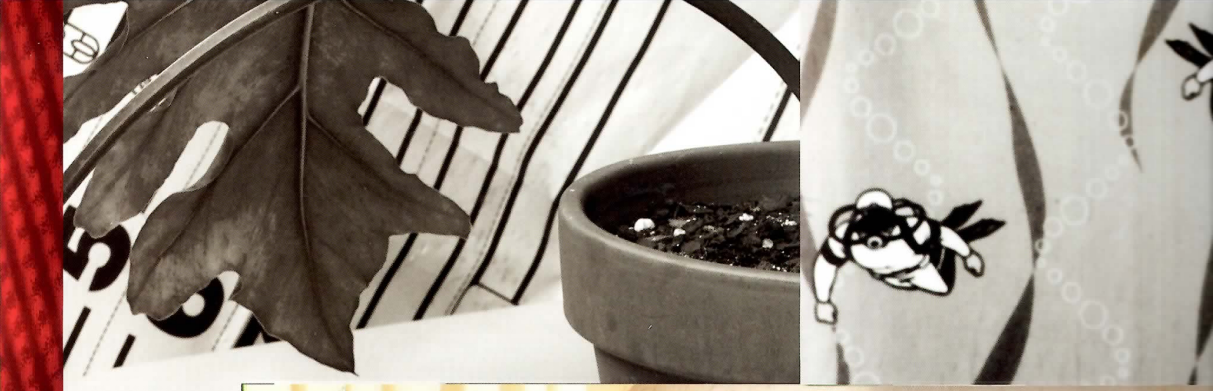
Abeles layers and builds space to think about the interstices between things, and ultimately between pictures. By withholding characteristic frameworks of meaning to expose our dependence on and deference to such structures, Abeles joins a rising number of contemporary photographers concerned with the systemization and consumption of images in a media-saturated twenty-first century.

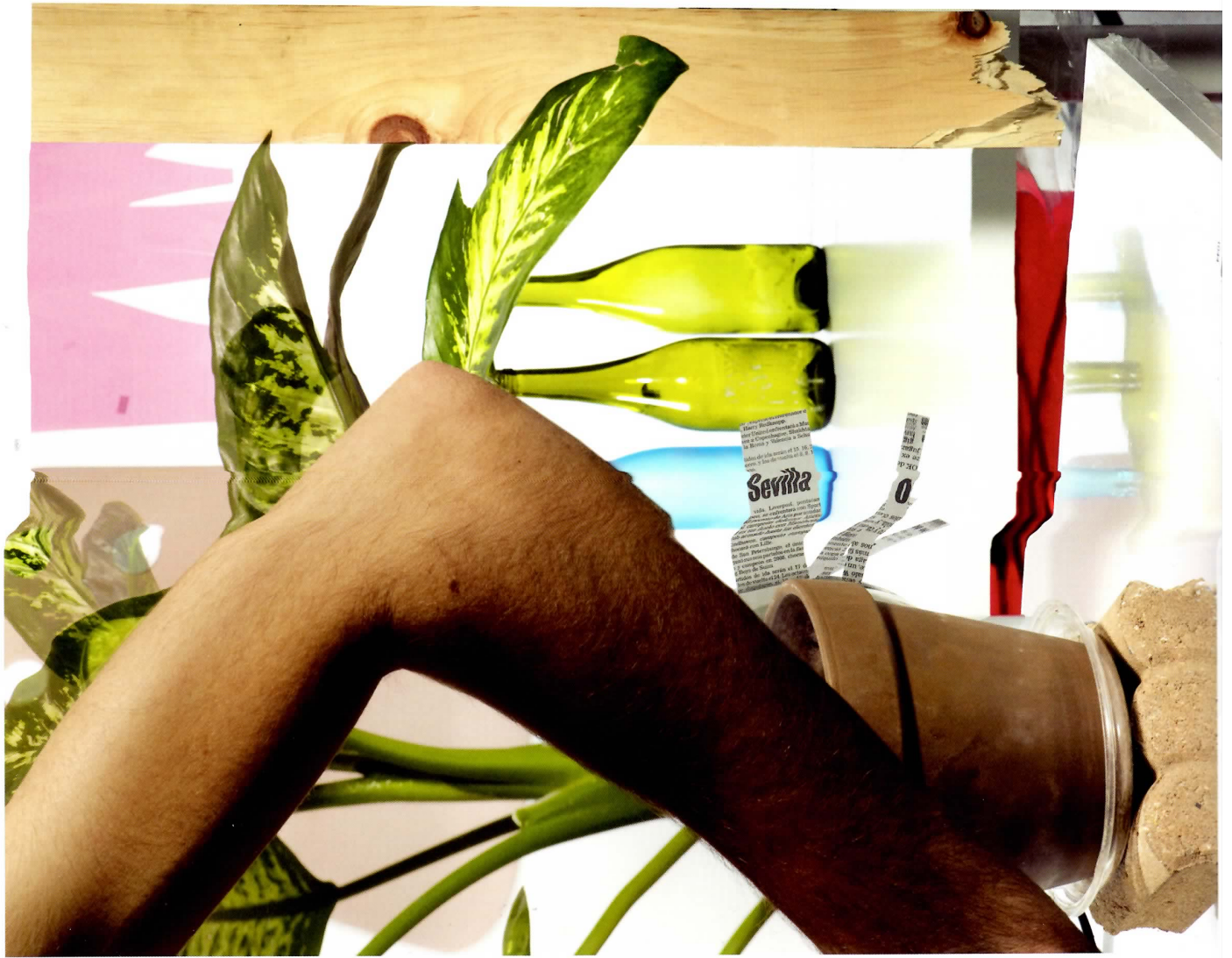
Eva Respini is associate curator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. She has organized numerous exhibitions on contemporary art and photography, including MoMA's recent Cindy Sherman retrospective.

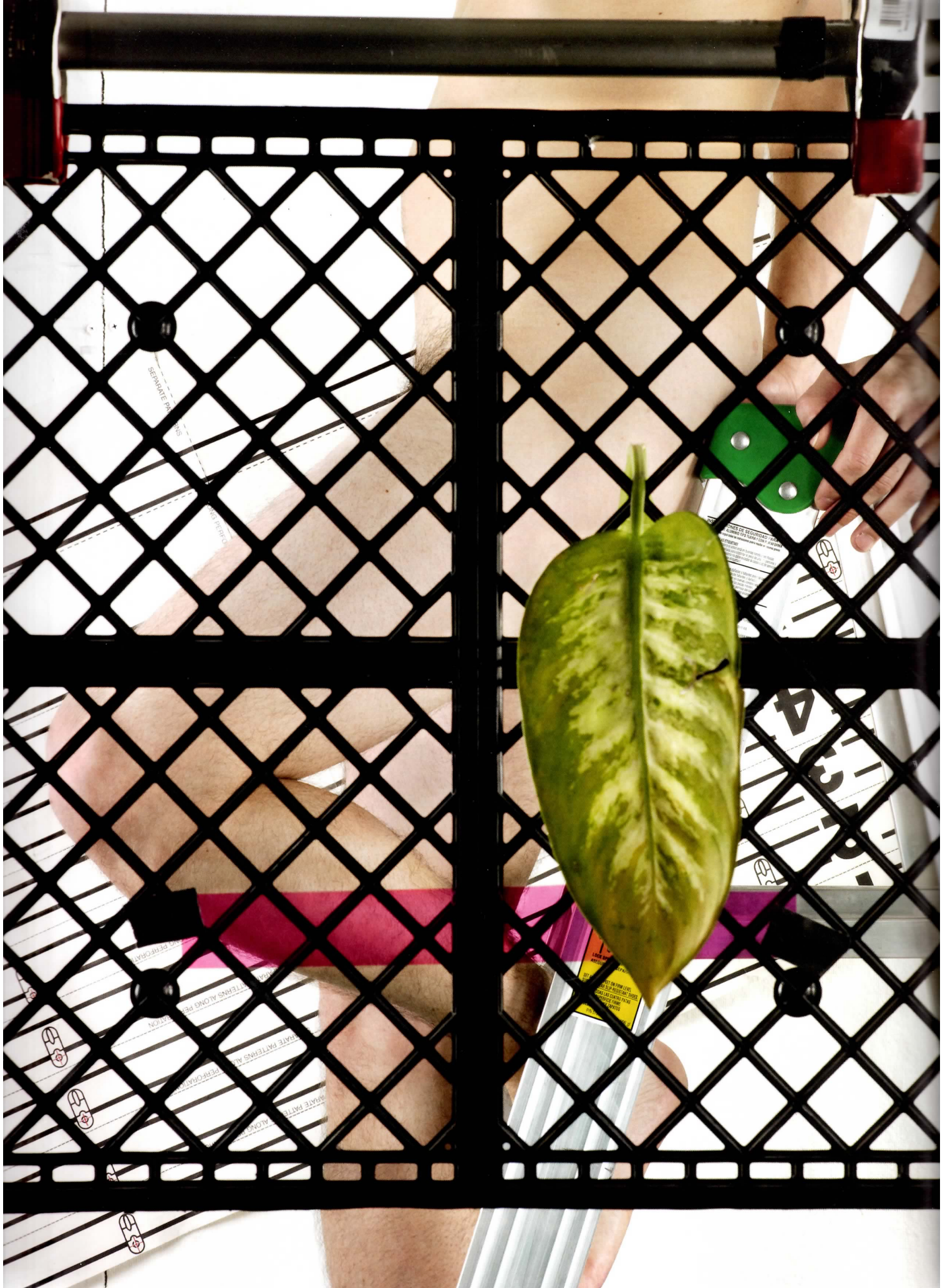


Fuchsia, Yellow, Green, Blue, Numbers, Men, Cement, Paper, 2010











Opposites: Leaf, Card, Ladder, Block, White, 2011

The paper: Red, Book, Cigarettes, Newspaper, Red, Wood, Lyras, Bottle, 2011. All photographs courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York