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Lauren Greenfield: 'Social Studies'
Looking at the Influence of Social Media on Teens
Fahey Klein Gallery
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by Jody Zellen



Lauren Greenfield is a photographer who works in the social documentary tradition. While she turns an investigative and often critical eye toward her subjects, she also befriends them so they begin to feel comfortable with her presence and her camera. Today's teens are used to posing for and performing in front of a camera. Greenfield's current project looks at this generation — those who grew up engaging with social media.

Greenfield makes still photographs, as well as films, and according to the press release, is considered one of the “*preeminent chroniclers of youth culture, gender and consumerism.*” She has directed the award-winning films *Queen of Versailles* (2012) and *Generation Wealth* (2018), in addition to publishing numerous books that explore youth culture, among other things. She recently directed the five-part series *Social Studies* (which airs on in FX/Hulu) and her exhibition, also titled *Social Studies*, serves as a companion to those episodes.

Within the gallery are framed color photographs of numerous teens posing with their phone cameras. Each image is accompanied by a caption that identifies who is in the picture, where it was taken, and a bit about the circumstances. For example, in *Making TikToks* (2021) Greenfield captures two girls smiling as they tilt their heads together to make a selfie set on the front stoop of a large home with ample foliage. One girl wears a black t-shirt with the text “*I’m Not Sorry*” while the wall text reveals “*Holly and Bella, both 17, Pacific Palisades. Bella, left, was slut shamed on social media to the point where she didn’t want to leave the house.*” *Sofia and Fiona* (2022) is an image of two sisters with very different appearances and ways of dressing, and cuddling platonically on a bed. Together they hold a cell phone towards the viewer showing a beautiful wealthy woman who perhaps they aspire to emulate. The caption reads, “*Sofia, 18, and her sister, Fiona, 15, both feel social media contributed to their struggle with eating disorders.*”

Many of Greenfield's pictures are about self-image, class and the desire to be noticed. The individual photographs portray relationships and events that are commonplace for those depicted, yet may come as a surprise for those outside this demographic. These

images resonate while also posing questions about friendship and manufactured desires.

These notions are further explored in more recent composite images where Greenfield combines photographs she made with screenshots of posts to social media. In Greenfield's photo that comprises the top half of *#Kinktok* (2025), two teens embrace in front of a landscape filled with orange poppies, their hair blowing in the wind. Stella rests her chin on Joey's shoulder, gazing into the distance, her expression complacent — neither happy nor sad. The caption reveals, *"Social media and pornography are the new sex education with BDSM as a popular teen trend. Since violence is normalized on social media, Stella didn't realize that her first relationship before Joey (pictured) was abusive."* Three cell phone screenshots below this photograph present images that suggest sexual violence against young women.

Similarly, in *Mental Illness is Trending* (2025), Greenfield juxtaposes a candid portrait of Ella (age 17) sitting on her bed with her phone. She is surrounded by stuffed toys, games and colorful wall decor. The three cell phone screenshots below the portrait show selfies by anguished teenage girls from TikTok or other trending sites. In the caption, Greenfield acknowledges, *"Teenagers post their mental health struggles which have risen sharply with smartphone use and addictive social media. Ella, 17, said, 'My social media consumption was like 12 hours a day. I fell into a rabbit hole. Depression, anxiety, eating disorders... I found myself comparing to people online that I didn't even know.'" In Crying Selfies* (2025), Greenfield constructs a screenshot grid of six participants in the *Social Studies* series with text that reads, *"Photographing oneself crying is a popular social media trope for teenagers."*

There is no doubt that teens document and share every aspect of their lives online, or that the fact that they feel pressured and compelled to share what they are doing is problematic. Greenfield documents these revealing and disconcerting situations and presents them matter of factly. Perhaps the takeaway is to contemplate the image *Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge* (2025), a grid of close-ups of more than 600 pouting lips — all shapes and colors — the result of a social media challenge that went viral comparing lips emulating Kylie Jenner's "famous full pout" which was the most requested UK make-up look of 2018.

In *Social Studies*, Greenfield looks at the influence of social media on teens and uses images and texts to document the dangers of wanting to be like someone else — someone pictured in the media — that forces teens to grow up too quickly. They leave their childhoods behind before they are ready to embrace adulthood. By contrasting depictions of teens with their friends, the compulsion to become sexier, as well as make confessions on social media, Greenfield presents an honest portrait of the difficulties this generation has navigating today's world.

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