

Eileen Cowin: Between Panic and Paradise

By Jody Zellen

Eileen Cowin's thoughtful, intimate, and arresting retrospective *Between Panic and Paradise* prompted me to take Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* off the shelf. His complex reflections on the essence of photography resonate with Cowin's exhibition. Cowin stages intimate private moments and frames them with precision and exactitude. Blending reality and fiction, she seeks to document the emotional connection that forms with her subjects — be it her family, herself and her twin sister, or actors for hire — as they reveal aspects of themselves in front of her lens. That these scenarios are staged and not candid is key to Cowin's explorations.



Eileen Cowin, *Lost in America*, 2018, printed 2026, © Eileen Cowin, courtesy of the artist

Cowin's retrospective unfolds thematically rather than chronologically. Viewers first encounter a trio of mural-sized photographs that depict book spines floating in black grounds. Although they date from 2018, they were printed in 2026. The books hang from the ceiling and were chosen for their titles — *Killing Time*, *Waiting*, and *Lost in America* — that subtly foreshadow themes to come. Adjacent color photographs from the 2025 series *The Uninvited Visitor* are self-portraits that do not feature Cowin's face, yet suggest emotional states like anguish or love. In one close-up, the back of the artist's head fills the frame, her long, curly hair blowing erratically upward. Control, or lack of it — or perhaps more specifically the desire to take control of something that is not within our power — is the theme of Cowin's haunting video *Another Year Closer to Death* (2026). In this ten-minute piece, Cowin speaks to the viewer about her fears and anxieties around aging. Not without wit, and including clever inserts from the TV series *The Golden Girls*, Cowin muses about growing old and dying. She asks ChatGPT to describe a ninety-year-old woman, then hires a makeup artist to depict her at that age. The title of the piece comes from a birthday card she happened upon that proclaimed "Happy Birthday! Another year closer to death." Cowin is dubious about the humor in that sentiment.



Eileen Cowin, still from *Another Year Closer to Death*, 2025, © Eileen Cowin, courtesy of the artist

While *Another Year Closer to Death* focuses on the present, the exhibition includes works spanning the artist's entire career. Though best known for staged photographic works, Cowin is also an accomplished filmmaker. Numerous single and multichannel videos complement the display of still photographs. Moving through the exhibition, one becomes aware of Cowin's interests in cinema, art history, and storytelling, as well as depicting not what happened, but what might be missing or inferred. Cowin is fastidious about details. Every aspect of her imagery is precisely composed. The exhibition walls are carefully chosen tones of lilac, navy, and salt that accentuate the hues within the images.

In her early series *Family Docudrama* (1980–1984), she sets up scenarios that describe two different but simultaneous narratives: romantic interactions between a couple and the analogous interactions of what we assume to be the couple's children. These images are charged with implied emotional tension. Unspoken feelings also resonate in the five-monitor video display *Fear Itself* (2014), where Cowin asked twenty-three actors to portray a deep internal fear through body language only. Filmed against a black background, Cowin's camera positioned their head and shoulders to fill the frame. This iteration cycles through individual clips as a five-channel installation.



Eileen Cowin, *Untitled*, 1980–83, printed 1999, from the *Family Docudrama* series, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Norman Starr, © Eileen Cowin, digital image courtesy Museum Associates/LACMA

While Cowin often looks inward, she also gazes out at the landscape, including several images of nature in the exhibition as large wallpaper murals. It is hard not to be awed by a gigantic image of flowers that fills a freestanding wall in *No Matter What II* (2022). Though photographed at the height of their beauty and set against a black ground, their eventual decay is implied because it shares the wall with *Neither Here nor There* (2008), a short video about the memory of Cowin's father.

Cowin's works can be puzzling. It appears as if their meanings sit on the surface, that what you see is what they are about, but there is often more to the story. She creates fully developed narratives, but only depicts fragments and aspects of them, keeping the works open ended. As the title suggests, the works and the themes are often opposites — what lies between *Panic* and *Paradise* is all the stuff of life, and Cowin, throughout her fifty-plus-year career, has ingeniously crafted a way to get at the core of human emotions and relationships. This well-deserved retrospective is a celebration of her accomplishments, her struggles, and the hardships of being an artist as well as a human being.

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