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## Ben Gest's vision of upper-middle class angst

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Two years ago photographer Ben Gest was digitally constructing pictures that gave the illusion of people interacting as if they were part of a family. The settings were domestic and familiar so that the small imprecisions telling a careful viewer the scenes were composed from several images made for a low-voltage undercurrent that tingled but did not jar.

Now, in his exhibition at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Gest attempts something more difficult: apparent slices of life from the upper middle class populated almost entirely by single figures. The settings extend beyond home to roads and driveways, waterways and the workplace, and they too, are familiar but also disquieting because Gest's pieced-together images emphasize the solitude that inventions such as the cell phone are supposed to keep at bay.



Unlike some of the earlier pictures, there is no suggestion of homey bustle here. Everybody, even when engaged in some activity such as trying on bracelets or watering plants, looks lost in thought that furrows the brow or gives a dead stillness. We do not know what the people think because Gest doesn't plant enough clues to imply a narrative. But whatever it is, they sometimes appear stricken, numbed, helpless.

Gest's digital color prints are large – around 5 feet high by more than 3 feet wide – so most of their subjects are shown anxious and retreating into themselves on a human scale close to that of the viewer. This perhaps leads to closer identification with the existential doubt that we all, at times, suffer. But Gest also constructs little mysteries that make his mundane scenes elusive.

Take "Laura on Her Side," one of only two horizontally disposed pictures, in which a young woman reclines on a couch before some windows. One hand rests on a swollen belly, the other holds a handkerchief or tissue. What takes place here? Is the woman pregnant and resting or is she undergoing some medical or psychological trauma? Gest is careful to show wedding rings on the fingers of several of his subjects. But I can't quite tell what this woman's ring signifies, marriage or engagement. Is she relaxed or brought low by worry.

In "Mom on the Beach in Belmar," the only images showing human interaction, a woman with a bleak expression is led by the hand of a person just outside the frame. Is her look because of being dragged along or because of the gray day? If the former, is her disposition particular to only that moment or does it suggest something larger, even going beyond her to many, if not all, relationships?

Documentary photographers are not often kind to people at higher economic levels. But Gest is not a documentarian recording the anxiety of the upper-middle class. He constructs what appears to be the reality of his subjects, and the emotional part of it probably would be similar for people on different social strata. Here the harness of life does not intervene, yet there's still trouble. What a piece of work is man.

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