



Ben Gest searches for meaning in the mundane

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Updated: 2006-11-28

The first thing you notice about the photographs of Ben Gest, the artist at the focus of the Renaissance Society's newest solo exhibition, is that they are confrontational and slightly jolting. Their large size is perhaps the most obvious, although certainly not the only, reason for this: Gest's finished digital prints tend to measure at least five feet by three and a half feet.

The almost showy dimensions magnify the content of Gest's images and emphasize the importance he wants us to perceive in the moments they depict. These are moments that recur every day: A man eats lunch in a posh office break room, a woman walks on the beach in full rainy-weather regalia while holding a hand whose owner stands outside the frame. They are the instants in between those more commonly caught on film—there are no celebratory kisses or pleased smiles in Gest's photos.

Instead, Gest dramatizes actions that go undocumented in the albums of snapshots belonging to his subjects' friends. To merit record in such an album, the events captured in these prints would have to seem less repeatable and more emotional, more individual, more celebratory. They would have to be more memorable, and Gest demonstrates to his viewers that because the most commonplace actions are deemed so unmemorable, people are least familiar with the events that they participate in or observe most often. You realize as you look at these prints that you are not entirely sure how people appear while they are on their own—Gest's figures are always solitary—whether they are putting things away, searching for misplaced possessions, waiting for something to happen or someone to arrive, or distracting themselves.

Gest uses a restrained palette to portray these in-between moments, aware that poignant colors would seem out of place in these prints of such ordinary instants in his subjects' lives—the moments that are so routine that it would seem out of place and artificial if they were to be self-conscious while being photographed. In acknowledgment of this, Gest's models pose as if unaware of the camera, rarely facing the lens directly. One only looks a camera lens straight-on if one has just performed an action one is proud of, or if some significant event is going on in one's life; these are candid photos of people who are too used to their actions to think them worthy of being photographed.

While walking through the Renaissance Society's single gallery, one starts to notice common characteristics of Gest's work other than the similarly banal and transitional situations portrayed. The figures all seem to belong to a comfortably high socioeconomic bracket. Gest communicates this demographic information through the props, which tend to be expensive material possessions. Every photo seems to include a shiny sedan, a spacious motorboat, pointy-toed leather heels, or suburban real estate. Most of Gest's figures are dressed formally, generally in all black or very dark shades of gray, as if on their way to exclusive dinner parties you'd never be invited to. All of Gest's models are Caucasian, and none are depicted as being particularly good-looking, although we get the impression that some of them would undoubtedly look gorgeous in other lighting situations or from other angles.

Yet, despite their material wealth and almost-good looks, Gest's subjects still appear severely discontented, as if they are perhaps the sort of people who avoid photographs at social functions at almost all costs, veering into or already submerged in what might be neverending midlife crises. Perhaps they are trapped in tense in-between moments and will never make it to the times that compose snapshot-quality memories.

Gest doesn't entirely answer this question; the closest we get is the lines of the photographs, which tend to point toward their subjects' heads, indicating that this is the anatomical location where their problems are contained. His subjects suffer from ailments that are quite possibly unreal and certainly not physical. It's possible that you'd have to be depressed to chart melancholic uncertainty the way Ben Gest does, and that perhaps Gest thinks of himself as being caught in a state of uncertain transition just like the people he photographs. I'm not sure I like his work—I don't think I do—but its appearance at the Renaissance Society is certainly timely. The mild despair he captures mirrors the stress of not knowing how things will turn out—a feeling that has already started to pervade campus on this tenth week of the quarter.