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## Parallel Lives

*Author:* Fred Camper *Date:* December 3, 2004 *Appeared in Section:* 2 *Word Count:* 793

A middle child of four, photographer Ben Gest says, "We used to joke about how I kind of fell through the cracks. I think I always felt conscious of how people dealt with each other." Growing up with three siblings and an attentive mother - "She was happiest when we were all together in the house, and my older brother and I were always out doing something"- gave Gest a keen sense of how the people one loves can impinge on one's freedom.

All ten of Gest's large color prints at Stephen Daiter show two or three people in close proximity but disconnected from each other; many are of his mom, dad, or sister while others show Gest and his girlfriend. Each print has been assembled digitally from 6 to 20 separate photos, and each person is a composite of different images. Working this way allows Gest to remake rooms into oddly sized and angled spaces and to photograph his subjects separately, deepening the sense of their being in different worlds. Sam & Jessica shows Gest's mom, Jessica, standing before a bathroom mirror fixing her hair while his sister, Samantha, sits on the edge of the bathtub blow-drying a gray dog. ("We used to tease that my mom and the dog have turned into the same person--they have the same hair," Gest says.) The sink's unnatural angle to the tub calls attention to the space.

Gest, who grew up in a New Jersey suburb of New York City, sustained a basketball injury in seventh grade that kept him in bed for four months, which allowed plenty of time for reading and drawing. That same year, after a growth spurt, he became very self-conscious about his body - he was six-two and 120 pounds--and began staring at other kids, noticing "how they stood in their clothes." Gest started college, at Rutgers, as a biology major but ended with an art degree. One of his professors, figurative painter Joan Semmel, made him realize that making art could be an intellectual pursuit. She kept asking him, "What are you making pictures about?" I thought painting class was about painting the figure as best you could," he says. "She'd yell at me, "Think about what you're doing!" In his last semester Gest had a class with portrait photographer Dawoud Bey and started making portraits of people he met on the street, and later of housing-project residents. He came to Columbia College to study with Bey, receiving an MFA in 2002.

After some experiments, including emulating the delicate style of photographer Roy DeCarava, Gest had a breakthrough on a vacation in Florida with his parents. He'd been isolated by choice in Chicago: "My whole day was about doing exactly what I wanted to do - no one else was there to influence me. But I started to think about how my parents affect each other." He took photos of each separately that he combined months later, in spring 2001, into an image of his father spraying a chemical to lubricate a sliding door while his mother was eating. "I felt for the first time I was making a photo that started to express some of the subtle

dynamics of relationships. It made me think about how there can be things that you do, even if not intentionally, that can affect other people, maybe not in a positive way." Jessica & Samantha is an image of his mom and sister climbing the stairs side by side, but each looks down, seemingly unaware of the other. By combining images taken from different angles, Gest made the stairway and room in the background seem larger than they actually are - and the seams are hard to detect. The effect is of greater distance between the two women. "I have complicated siblings and parents," Gest says. "There were confusing things growing up, but nothing overly traumatic. My parents were a good starting point, but I don't think it's about them." In fact looking at these images caused me to reflect on my own family and close friends, not to wonder about his.

Gest didn't know the people in Chuck, Alice & Dale well; in a book-lined room, each leans forward and reaches for something, and again each seems oblivious to the others. The poses rhyme, suggesting that people repeat one another's actions unconsciously. One man's reaching arm is too long, the result of digital pasting, and the room's walls are angled strangely, increasing our sense of the subjects' separateness. "I'm interested in directing the way you actually see a photograph," Gest says. "The way you become concerned with the individual parts is very similar to what the figures are doing - they're involved with their own emotional moments."

***Ben Gest***

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