

Capturing Still Life, a Bit Askew

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The Chicago-based photographer Ben Gest doesn't set out to disrupt our sense of equilibrium, but he does. Just as Cezanne tipped the tabletop and the apples stayed put, Gest creates impossible scenarios, rich with unresolved narratives, which seemingly defy the laws of gravity.

Through July 27, a selection of Gest's life-sized portraits will be on view at Light Work in the Menschel Media Center on Waverly Avenue. These large works (approximately 40 by 60 inches) explore individual moments of transition, those existing in the space between private and public life when we are still.

Gest's vivid portrayal of his subjects will be your initial draw, but as you explore each photo, you'll begin to realize the environments in which his subjects exist aren't quite right. Edges blur in unexpected places, extremities are out of proportion, and surfaces tip at obscure angles. Gest uses a digital Camera to achieve these effects, taking 20 to 30 different shots of a single subject, usually a friend or family member. He continually shifts focus, utilizes a range of exposures and ultimately engages the assistance of computer software to piece the dozens of individual photos together into an unsettling, but unified, whole. The works tend to be monumental, yet there is a voyeuristic tone of intimacy to them.

All of Gest's images address some unmemorable act of everyday life, such as watering plants, dressing for a night out, taking out the garbage or simply taking a nap. But Gest implies these acts exist on the fringe of something far more exciting or significant.

These may be trivial acts of the everyday, but Gest raises them to heroic stature through scale and by simply recognizing them. In the captivating photo "Margaret With a Smaller Purse (2005)," Gest portrays a middle-aged woman dressed for an evening out. She's well off; her jewelry and well-appointed kitchen provide the clues. We see her standing by a kitchen counter moving the contents of a large leather shoulder bag into a small, velvet evening clutch. She's pensive. In her focus on the task at hand, or is she considering the evening that awaits her?

As you examine the photo more closely, you'll notice things don't quite fit together. Margaret's head and hands take on the exaggerated proportions of a Mannerist figure. The kitchen floor rises at an impossibly sharp angle, as does the countertop she's standing beside. With these inconsistencies, Gest transforms what could be a simple portrait into a far more compelling photograph.

Ditto with the darkly toned "Eric in His Volvo, (2005)." Eric faces us, but looks down toward the brick driveway where the car is parked. His right hand, which is resting on the car's frame, is too large in relation to the rest of his body and his other hand. His polished boots rest awkwardly on the oddly angled brick driveway. Any second Eric will step out of the car and re-engage with something or someone, yet he exudes deep introspection and profound solitude.

The other images create similar ambiguities. Gest's subjects wear expressions of deep concentration, yet engage in menial tasks. "Jennifer" waters her patio plants in satin pumps and a sequined shawl and with a deeply furrowed brow. "Jessica" in her new black suit works diligently to clasp a pearl bracelet on her wrist. "Eric" leaves a rain-soaked patio with the determination of a mind reader.

Gest shows us multiple perspectives of a single subject, just as Cezanne did in his gravity-defying still lifes. But more importantly, he draws our attention to the magical space between our private routines and public encounters, a place worthy of lingering.

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