

**OUT OF THE VOLVO, INTO THE DARK**

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by [Kevin Nance](#) Art Critic

At first glance, the people in Ben Gest's enigmatic and anxious new show of photographs at the University of Chicago's Renaissance Society appear to be living what the TV prosperity preachers call a "blessed life." Although not rich, they drive higher-end cars, ride around in pleasure boats, and wear well-cut (if safely conservative) clothes and expensive jewelry. But you get the feeling that they're relatively new to the upper-middle class and, from the intensely introspective looks on their faces, the idea that they're worried that they might not be able to stay there – or, perhaps, that the consolations of status have proved somewhat less than satisfying.

It's a theory, anyway. Gest, a Chicago artist whose large-scale digital images are heavily manipulated in the computer -- each seemingly straightforward portrait is actually a collage of multiple shots of the same scene – is telling a story about the psychology of class here, but his stage-directed narrative is intentionally ambiguous. Gest's work has been compared to that of Tina Barney, whose photographs of her wealthy family can be seen in the ongoing "So the Story Goes" at the Art Institute of Chicago, but it's never as on-the-nose as hers; he has as much in common with another of that show's featured artist, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, who revels in keeping the viewer guessing.

But that doesn't mean that Gest's lockbox of a show is entirely without keys. This series of inscrutable people (who we increasingly suspect are actors of sort) is eloquent enough for us to piece together a coherent meaning based on the visual cues that Gest has strewn about like a trail of crumbs. And the woods into which it leads is decidedly dark.



"Jennifer in her Rooftop Garden" (2006) by Ben Gest

**ART REVIEW****BEN GEST****RECOMMENDED****When:** Through Dec. 22**Where:** The Renaissance Society  
at the University of Chicago, 5811  
S. Ellis**Admission:** Free**Phone:** (773) 702-8670

It wouldn't be accurate, for example, to describe the subjects' faces as blank, daydreaming or in anything approaching pleasant reverie. They seem instead pensive and quite focused, concentrating with the inward gaze of a Hamlet. What mysteries are these people so fiercely contemplating? We aren't told explicitly, but what we're shown is legible enough. Their lives, however comfortable, aren't exactly making them happy.

Certainly there is no joy in Gestville, instead there are raging insecurities and existential brooding. The trappings of material success are tellingly, poignantly overdone – that squeaky-clean car in "Erick in His Volvo," those obsessively polished shoes -- and the subjects' costumes, almost all black, dark blue or somber gray, are as funereal as they are smart. Many of them seem to be heading to a party, but it might as well be a wake.

*Kevin Nance* Art Critic © 2006 *Sun Times*