

A PORTRAIT OF HUMAN SPACE

Pioneering video artist Nam June Paik once proposed that “the real issue implied in ‘art and technology’ is not to make another scientific toy, but how to humanize the technology and the electronic medium... and also, simulate viewers’ fantasy to look for the new, imaginative and humanist ways of using our technology.”

Chicago’s Ben Gest alters the boundaries of photography. He used the digital camera and computer software as tools in a highly complex and laborious creative process that ultimately flees the motion of the picture and lands on new grounds of aesthetic inquiry. Gest works with numerous shots, shifting focus and wide range of exposures and constructs pictures of unity from the multiplicity. He accomplished this through synthesis and analysis of fragments, probing concepts of perspective and reflection.

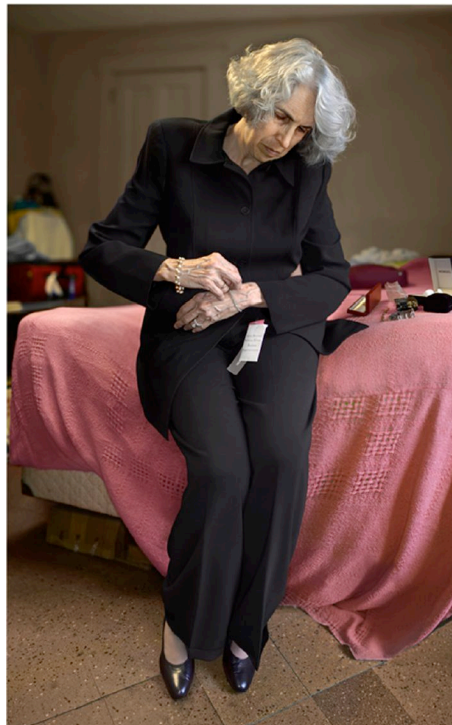
Gest received his MFA in photography in 2002 from Columbia College, where he currently teaches. In the early 2000s, Gest’s work dealt with photographic images of everyday human interactions. His friends and relatives became his objects, players and subjects, captured and reinterpreted in a contemporary social framework. He shot each subject separately at different times and digitally composed them together, staged in a single frame. The scenes show domestic tranquility, routine activities set in the kitchen, bathroom, library and the familiar outdoors. To the viewer, the pictures initially look seamless, but a closer inspection reveals certain isolation. Within the appearance of close proximity, each figure is in his or her space.

The meaning of personal space, the space that we do not share, even with those closest to us, is explored and revealed. David Travis, curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, writes about Gest, “he likes to determine a figure’s coordinates precisely and at that same time explore his or her personal moment in space – that inwardly wrapped world that his characters create for themselves. It is analogous to the feeling we sense when we each take time out to muse on our own particular existence. Because of this and the nature of their assemblages, there is a slightly

hesitating fluidity to Gest’s compositions. Although his pictures are unforced and nearly seamless, Gest retains in his format a quiet, unspoken tension between his characters and the space of others that is true to life.”

For the past two years Gest has been developing a new and more intimate body of work that he crafts in the form of portraiture, which is on display in a solo exhibition at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago until December 22. The stunning portraits are quite large (40” X 60”) and processed by the artist through archival inkjet. For the viewer, each portrait becomes a story, and the reading process is magical.

“It is impossible to know exactly what is on his sitter’s minds,” writes Hamza Walker, curator at the Renaissance Society. “The photographs illustrate a state of revelation taken to be psychological as the machinations of thought and feeling correspond to a downcast stare lacking an object of focus. The sitters’ faces are drained of expression, revealing nothing about their personalities. But it is less about knowing them through their physiognomy and more about recognizing and empathizing with the moment of reflection in which the sitter can only be known through her immediate surroundings, compartment and task. Who Gest’s sitters have become is dispersed over and reflected in their accessories, their jobs, their shoes, the unwatered garden, the granite counter top – in other words, the mundane trappings of self.”



The portrait entitled *Jessica and her Jewelry* (2005) is monumental. Jessica exists in a room of her own. Her sharply focused physicality is penetrating. Elegantly clothed in a new black suit, she sits on her ordinary bed covered by unvarnished pink linen, while putting on her collection of fine jewelry. The composition’s richness of color, clarity and beauty is similar to Mannerist paintings, but unlike the Mannerist tendency to conceal human emotion. Jessica’s deep contemplation inspires a feeling of dignity and a sense of the sublime. Similar to *Madame Cezanne*, Jessica is portrayed with tilted head that evokes tenderness and an ascetic mood of self-concern. Gest’s sitter for this piece is his mother. He shows us her hands, focusing on the humanity of her veins. The moments we as viewer spend with Jessica, reading her portrait, studying its simple elements and complex layers, allow us to confront the digital oeuvre with emotion, wisdom and the powerful sense of being human.

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