

Disturbances in the Field: The Photographs of Ben Gest by Corey Postiglione

It is a great pleasure to introduce to you the photographic works of Ben Gest who is relatively new to the Chicago Art scene and who is, I feel, one of the most interesting and talented young photographers I have come across in a while.

Ben Gest received his MFA from Columbia College Chicago in Photography and has had an auspicious beginning to his career: in the last few years he has had many solo and group shows such as the *12x12 New Artists-New Work*, a one-person at the MCA in 2003, group shows, *Not Just Another Pretty Face* at the Hyde Park Art Center, *About Face* at the Art Institute in 2004, and the same year a Solo show at Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago where he is currently represented. And for the last five years has taught as an adjunct professor in the Photography Dept. at Columbia College.

I can't remember exactly where I saw Ben's work for the first time but I do remember being immediately impressed with not only the scale of the work (these are quite large pictures) but even more his subject matter and his use of space. I remember being moved by the domestic scenes that reminded me in an odd way of surrealist paintings of renowned Chicago painter Seymour Chwast. It probably was the deep pathos Gest created between his figures. But more importantly was that I saw these photographs more as paintings. If one can transpose the photographic to the condition of painting, Ben Gest's work comes closest to doing just that. And this was not an attempt to privilege painting but rather just an interesting aspect of his work. What I mean by this last remark is that Ben's process is more like that of a painter than a photographer for me. The photographic image traditionally has always been considered an index of the real rather than an image built up slowly through a mediated activity such as painting or drawing. Ben's working methodology is more iconic in that he rigorously builds his images digitally, constructing the final work from as many as 60 individual exposures. Of course many photographic artists have been using digital image technology for at least the last decade. Such figures as Jeff Wall, Andreas Gursky quickly come to mind. But unlike these artists who strive for a mythical theatrical fiction as in the case of Wall or Gursky's large format images that embrace the spectacle, Gest's work remains about the everyday--the small moments of existential reflection. It is also centered on the figure or figures usually set in domestic situations. However, on closer inspection and with time the ordinary begins to dissolve. If I had to title this talk it would be: "Disturbances in the Field." For subtle changes in perspective or shifts in view point create a certain mood or unexpected response. The picture that at first appeared so seamless and logical has now become a more complicated spatial experience. Let's examine some work.

In Ben's earlier work he mainly set figures in interior scenes. There was always an interesting interplay between the characters that prompted different readings--I purposely referred to the figures as characters because there seemed to be some narrative suggested here much like there is in many of Eric Fischl's paintings (an artist Gest admires).

In his more recent work, mainly from this summer, he has explored some new visual ideas within his established themes. What is new here is that Gest has been focusing on one figure set often outside. Where before the disjunctions in the pictures were more overt--the perspective plays especially-- these new works are much more subtle with fewer obvious distortions of figure and space. But having said that, with a closer look we begin to see odd manipulations of the figures--multiple viewpoints appear--also the settings have degrees of strangeness and artificiality about them. Time is also a critical factor: A longer scanning of the pictures reveals what the eye did not see at first or what we took to be "real," at least as real as a photograph can convey.

This is actually an one of the most interesting and important features of Gest's whole enterprise: He uses the reliability of the photographic information to suggest something that exists in the life-world and then manipulates--bends it, warps it, reconfigures it--to arrive at another truth--one possibly deeper and richer, that reflects our everyday existence. This last is Ben Gest's real subject and his real achievement.

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