

The Human Presence

Curated by Dawoud Bey



The Portraits Show by Dawoud Bey

Ben Gest's photographs appear to describe ordinary domestic events. His pictures contain brief narratives of day-to-day human engagement and disengagement at close proximity to the photographer. Indeed, Gest is often one of the subjects in his own work. Through his careful attention to these human non-events, Gest appears to exalt in his role as a quiet witness to the human experience. But appearances are deceptive. The events that seemingly transpired before the camera never actually took place. The people who appear locked in intimate contact were never together in the space where they seem to have been photographed. Instead, the photographs are elaborate fabrications, narratives stitched together from several individual images to form a seamless whole. Gest's photographs illustrate the rather tenuous state of truth in photographic representation. There is, of course, a long history of photographers staging events for the camera. Photographers have sought to describe a world that lies beyond reality from the staged genre scenes of Gertrude Kasebier and Henry Peach Robinson in the nineteenth century to the more recent staged images of photographers such as Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson. Gest builds on this tradition by confounding the viewer's sense of space by photographing individual images from different perspectives before combining them into a single composition through the computer. The result of his method – intimate photographs of human engagement – separates his work from earlier digital art making that sought to find meaning in merely manipulating the pixels to form a type of visual surrealism, which spoke more about the machinery of the process than about seeking relationships to the larger social world.

Dawoud Bey

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