

Ben Gest by Peter Bacon Hales

Ben Gest's recent pictures mark a significant shift in his work, a broadening and deepening of themes, a greater economy of method, and a somber, even plangent mood. They are dramatically more ambitious than their predecessors, and they indicate something of the incaution of Gest himself. He has turned away from a path that had garnered him early praise in order to pursue questions that could not be phrased with the language he'd made his own.

Gest's first mature body of work took on photography's transition to digital processes as its subject. Gest was interested in the philosophical implications of this disruption of representational traditions. Using those very methods, Gest produced a body of mock-documentary pictures of an ingratiating sort. Intimate tableaux of families or friends stopped in the midst of small, domestic events (cutting hair, cleaning up, putting away, heading upstairs to bed), they invoked the familiar casualness of snapshots, but also the long tradition of documentary photographs that drew from or responded to the amateur's archive. They were, in a way, artistic and photographic parlor tricks of the highest order, in which the magician did some alluring sleight-of-hand while simultaneously explaining it away. You looked, torn between skepticism and nostalgia.

Those were pictures masquerading as photographs, and through them Gest urged the corollary: that photographs had always been pictures in disguise. They seemed like cemetery monuments to the death of the medium, and on their surfaces were carved the references to its long and troubled life. Daguerre's bootblack, Talbot's glassware, Rejlander's tableaux, Riis' constructed documentaries, Arbus' portraits, even Jeff Wall's grandiloquent allegories echoed in the pictures.

The new pictures, though, do not seem to be good evidence for the death of the medium. They seem instead to signal a way out from the steadily narrowing corridor of photography's history. Gest has gone beyond the subtle but deliberate artificiality of the earlier pictures in part because changes in the last two or three years make this no longer necessary. When science journals require affidavits that submitted illustrations have not been digitally enhanced, few think of a photograph as document.

For some, this dispossession of photographic authority is a tragedy. Not Gest. He has buckled down to the task of rebuilding pictorial authority. His new pictures are liberated from the necessity of technical laboredness, to be deeply convincing, compelling, disturbing. They portray

individuals in moments of transition. Stumbling on the cracks in the paths laid out for them, Gest's people have stopped and, stopping, discovered that they are in danger of losing everything. We know their lives were meant to unfold faultlessly, because they are handsome and substantial people, prosperous, well-dressed, getting into or out of late-model cars that gleam with recent waxing, pausing for a moment in circumstances that reek of safety and privilege. The younger ones seem favored by destiny, while the older ones maintain a certain perfect agelessness-not artificial youth, but the cosmetic and sartorial gloss that comes as the benefit, or perhaps the goal, of a life without danger or inconstancy. Their surfaces glisten as if polished; they wear their clothes perfectly; their hair, their skin, their limbs are perfect, too.

But these figures are alone-or at least, they seem that way at first glance. The pictures are large, just under life-size. You want to back up when first you see them; then you want to lean in. Your attention shifts from point to point in the picture; the body moves a bit, forward, backward, side to side. A certain uneasiness replaces the sense of privilege traditionally afforded the spectator to a photograph.

These images are examinations of the psychology of doubt, and they reflect something close to the way we see in dreams, epiphanies, or moments of intense loss. A hand gripping the side of a car is impossibly detailed; the face is at eye level but we can look down and see the feet, peer inward and examine the interior of the car as if the entire scene has been frozen but we are not.

And then we know. We can see everything except the one thing we want to see most of all: what it is that has stopped these people in the midst of unreflected lives, and revealed to them, and us, the perils of reflection.

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Ben Gest participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in August 2005