



ARTIST

Ben Gest

TITLE

Jessica and Her Jewelry

DATE

2005

DIMENSIONS

40 in H x 26 in W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2005.090

CURRENT LOCATION

Warehouse

BEN GEST

BORN

1975

BIRTHPLACE

Caldwell, NJ

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2005
Main Gallery, 2007

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 141
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BIOGRAPHY

Ben Gest was born in 1975 in Caldwell, NJ. He received his BA in Visual Art from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, and his MFA in Photography from Columbia College Chicago. His work has been featured in numerous group and solo exhibitions nationwide, most recently at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. His work is part of Light Work's Permanent Collection, as well as The Art Institute of Chicago; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; and the LaSalle Bank Photography Collection. Gest is currently an adjunct professor of photography at Columbia College Chicago. He has received many grants and awards, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in August 2005.

ESSAYS

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 incantation 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. Peter Bacon Hales Ben Gest lives in Chicago and teaches at Columbia College Chicago. He participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in August 2005. His photographs can be found on the Stephen Daiter Gallery Web site at www.stephendaitergallery.com. Peter Bacon Hales is professor and chair of the Art History Department, and director of the American Studies Institute at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He is the author of a number of works on cultural and photographic history, most recently *Silver Cities: Photographing American Urbanization, 1839–1939*. Ben Gest describes himself as somebody who likes to observe and collect moments. It is up to him as an artist, he says, to then figure out what to do with them. While his earlier work looks considerably different from his current images, a sense that moments have been gleaned from life is noticeable in all of his pieces. Adamant that his art is not created in series, Gest follows a work method of creating a continuous stream of images that cannot be separated into themed series. In this and other ways, his methods and concepts convey a thinking that is far more related to that of painters than that of photographers. While the act of seeing is the centerpiece of all photography, it is the act of exploring that stands out in Gest's images; and it is this curiosity that is inherent in the many layers within each image and in the artist's expertise to convey the stories found in his work. Gest's earlier photographs take a look at family life and the many activities that occur within the home. The scenes are compacted with action. Each person is concentrating on a specific activity while another family member is working on something else directly next to them, yet there is no distraction despite the close proximity. Something about the closeness of the figures, especially the familiarity amongst them, make it unnecessary for them to acknowledge each other. Only upon closer examination does the contradiction in some of the family scenes and the unlikelihood of these close-quarter occurrences become apparent. A man is spraying for insects directly in front of a woman eating an orange. Three people entertain themselves in a tight area of a personal library, yet they are oblivious to their closeness that has them almost touching. A woman tends to her turkey in the oven, while her husband installs an

air-conditioning unit overhead. The space is compacted beyond what it should be, and the people are just a little too close for comfort. Gest is a subtle practitioner—never taking his images too far or losing sight of the work overall. These images are not funny or sad. They are familiar. Some images may coax a smile from us, such as the photograph of a woman fixing her hair as she stands next to her daughter who is grooming the family dog, but they do so in the same way a look through the family album might touch us. Gest's newer work shifts gears. Whereas the early photographs stay within the familiarity of one's home, casually dressed and most importantly safe, the newer work depicts people who are confronted with the outside world. The figures are faced with the need to look good in preparation of meeting with others outside their immediate comfort zone. Fitting the emotionally charged images, the artist's newer work portrays the figures by themselves, alone. In these newer photographs Gest's figures are dressed in their finest, and clearly are about to head to important social events. They are getting themselves ready—prepared to be at their best, somewhere among others. Yet, emotionally removed from their surroundings, they have stopped in the middle of what they were doing. They are lost deep in thought, or otherwise not quite ready to face the demands of social engagement. They have paused for a moment to take that last deep breath. Life-size, standing or sitting in their large-format frames, the people in Gest's photographs have allowed us into their personal space. Alone in their heads, not moving but far from being passive, they collect themselves for what is ahead. We don't dare disturb them, however we cannot help but look. It is important to note the transition that has occurred from photographs of people doing things and having their actions stopped by the camera to images of people absent-mindedly halting their activities on their own accord. Gradually a shift has taken place from busily doing to being and thinking. Equally noticeable, the images have moved from a manipulated sense of space to a dizzying sense of three-dimensionality. The newer images are unique in their aesthetic—their visual language is one of painting and photography. In these images space conforms to the photographer's vision, and not to the rules of optics as conventional photographs do. It may not be very obvious how these images are different from regular photographs, but that they are not ordinary images is immediately clear. These photographs reflect how Gest wants us to see the world—one thing at a time. Similar to the way the human eye sees, we get to look at a person's face, their hands, their clothes, and any other noteworthy detail, while all else disappears unnoticed by the viewer and somewhat out of focus. As an artist, Gest de-emphasizes the painstaking steps he takes to achieve his digitally produced images. Only the final photographs count. However, it is worthwhile to know a little about his process to be able to understand the work better. Gest's images are on the forefront of digital photography, using new technology to redefine what a photograph can be. In most of his earlier work the figures were not even in the same room together when the images were taken. So while each final photograph depicts people who look completely at ease and comfortable enough to work alongside one another without feeling crowded, in actuality they were nowhere near each other. They were in the same space, but not at the same time. Gest has expertly stitched the images together digitally. With the shift to photographs depicting solitary figures, Gest has gone to great lengths to emphasize the psychological space in which these people find themselves. The images may look like photographs taken in one exposure by a static camera, but they were really collaged from up to thirty exposures with slightly varying perspectives. Using continuously improving software and artistic acumen, Gest has reversed centuries of artist methodology. When the camera obscura was discovered as a drawing tool, as described by Leonardo da Vinci as early as 1490, artists adopted the camera's way of seeing perspective. Art historians are still debating whether some artists, such as Jan Vermeer in the seventeenth century, developed their painting style under influence of a particular lens and visual distortion of the camera lucida, the portable camera that followed the camera obscura. It would be many decades until light sensitive materials were developed to capture the image straight out of the camera. So until Nicéphore Niépce made the first permanent photograph in 1826 using pewter plates coated with bitumen of Judea, artists had to draw or paint what they could see in the camera to create an image. What Gest has done is shift perspective with the help, or despite the camera. Space twists at his will to gently distort proportions of objects and figures, leading to a foreshortening of people's bodies. The camera looks down at the floor board of the car, but also up into its ceiling. People seem to jump off the image plane, but also sink deep into it. These images are truly the creation of the artist in a way that few artists not holding a paint brush have been able to claim. Knowing the technical details behind the work may not be important to the person viewing Gest's photographs. Their visual lure is obvious with or without an understanding of the technique that made the images possible. Yet to the future of photography in the face of technological advances these images are a milestone of what is to come. Hannah Frieser
Director Light Work