



ARTIST

Jess T. Dugan

TITLE

Collin

DATE

2017

DIMENSIONS

24" H x 18" W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

IMAGE NOTES

Signed, Edition 1/10

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2018.178

CURRENT LOCATION

NA 14

JESS T. DUGAN

BORN

1986

BIRTHPLACE

Biloxi, MS

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2018
Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2018
Be Strong and Do Not Betray Your Soul

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 198

BIOGRAPHY

Jess T. Dugan (American, b. 1986 Biloxi, MS) is an artist whose work explores issues of identity, gender, sexuality, and community. She received her MFA in Photography from Columbia College Chicago (2014), her Master of Liberal Arts in Museum Studies from Harvard University (2010), and her BFA in Photography from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (2007). Her work has been widely exhibited at venues including the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the San Diego Museum of Art; the Aperture Foundation, New York; the Transformer Station, Cleveland; and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago. Dugan's first monograph *Every Breath We Drew* was published in 2015 by Daylight Books and coincided with a solo exhibition at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum. Her second monograph, *To Survive on This Shore*, was published in 2018 by Kehrer Verlag. Dugan is the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, an Artist Fellowship from the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis, and was selected by the White House as a 2015 Champion of Change. In 2016, she was honored as a Commended Artist by the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. for her photograph *Self-Portrait (Muscle Shirt)*, exhibited in *The Outwin 2016: American Portraiture Today*. In 2018, she was an artist-in-residence at Light Work at Syracuse University and was the recipient of the Women Photograph + Nikon Grant. She is represented by the Catherine Edelman Gallery in Chicago, IL.

ESSAYS

Trust. When Jess T. Dugan asked me to write about her work, I knew it would be important to address the theme of trust. It requires trust for an artist to invite a curator to write about one's work (and I felt honored and humbled by her invitation) and it is also impossible to experience Dugan's work without recognizing the palpable sense of trust that she builds with her portrait subjects. Her portraits both rely on and reveal the trust between her subjects and herself. In fact, what has long struck me as the power of her work is her ability to capture strength and vulnerability, a quality that one only sees through the lens of trust and collaboration. In *To Survive on This Shore: Photographs and Interviews with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Older Adults*, she describes her work as revealing "what it means to live authentically despite seemingly insurmountable odds." Dugan made these images throughout the United States between 2013 and 2018. In her previous lectures and writing, she has discussed facing what felt like insurmountable odds in her own life. Her perspective on the complex intersections of gender, sexuality, and identity gives her insight into the struggles of others and opens a pathway for representation and visibility. She gets to know her subjects in a deep and honest way and her portraits convey a kind of letting go, a shaking off pretense to illuminate an authentic, resilient, visible self. In discussing her process, Dugan talks about building a relationship with her subjects, of creating a connection and shared understanding before the work even begins. This process of entering another's lived experience is where she forges an empathetic connection that is ultimately transferred to the viewers of her portraits. Empathy emerges from great works of portraiture. I believe that Dugan's portraits exemplify the most profound work that portraits can do because they can be transformative for the viewer. Writing on portraiture in *The New York Times Magazine* last August, cultural critic Teju Cole reminded me of Dugan's photographs with his words on portraiture's potential to forge connection: "A portrait is an open door. It can remind us of our ethical duty to the other. 'The face speaks to me, and thereby invites me to a relation,'" as the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas puts it. Unlike machines, we see with sympathy... Some magic happens there, a magic as old and reliable as the portraits painted on the Fayyum funerary boards 2,000 years ago. Not all portraits are created equal: To be great, they must contain presence, tension, a finely balanced amalgam of feeling and craft. "This is human," is the final meaning of a great portrait, "and I am human, and this is worth defending."

I also think of esteemed photographer (and Dugan's former teacher), Dawoud Bey, who wrote in *The Outwin 2016: American Portraiture Today* that a portrait works most effectively when it ceases to be merely an object or representation and becomes an actual experience of the individual described in the portrait... It is and remains a photograph, but at some point if the portrait is doing what I hope it would do, one goes beyond the object to have an emotional and psychological experience that is driven by the object. A portrait of Dugan's, imprinted in my mind for this very reason, is *Grace*, 56, Boston, MA. In the powerful statement that accompanies her portrait in *To Survive on This Shore*, Grace says, "When I received an award a few years ago at a conference, I said, 'In the '60s they called me a sissy. In the '70s they called me a faggot. In the '80s I was a queen. In the '90s I was transgender. In the 2000s I was a woman, and now I'm just Grace.'" This struck me as deeply connected to the core of what Dugan does so profoundly in her portrait work, whether it is of her own family or of others whom she has only recently met. She allows people to be seen for who they are. Her work honors their life narratives and her activism works toward making underrepresented people feel visible and heard. Therein lies the "finely balance amalgam of feeling and craft" that Teju Cole refers to and the psychological experience that Dawoud Bey references. And these are qualities that are not only worth defending. They are also worth celebrating.

Dorothy Moss is curator of painting, sculpture, and performance art at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, DC. Jess T. Dugan lives in St. Louis, Missouri, and completed her residency at Light Work in January 2018.