



Ben Gest's Pictures by David Travis

Ben Gest's pictures are of just the kind of subjects that we are most accustomed to and therefore the least suspicious of—domestic situations. He places us in someone's apartment, library, or even on his mother's front staircase to witness their mundane events. The situations are generally settled and calm. His pictures show friends and family in communal settings but with the occupants partially encapsulated within their own spaces. Interdependency and isolation, the opposite spheres so common to life at home.

Seeming so normal, Gest's pictures at first do not beg us to ask if they are "real," or at least, situations recorded at a single point of time and place. But the question does eventually come up. This is because artists, writers, musicians, poets, painters, or actors, fashion objects or characters that are drawn from surrogate worlds that their imaginations create from their own lived experiences. This habit seems to satisfy a common psychological need for both artist and audience. After a long, brilliant career as a leading novelist, Henry James wrote to his friend and confidant Lucy Clifford as he struggled with what the First World War had done to his confidence in European culture and civilization. He spoke for all writers, artists, and even photographers, when he wrote: "We must for dear life make our own counter-realities." Of course, we must construct our counter-realities from what we are learning or have assimilated. Even though we can never know facts, realities, or truths completely, we pretend that they may be suspended in such things as theorems, databases, or even photographs. But in order for us to understand something more of life as it is lived, the imagination, as James insists, must take over what these repositories hold. Gest works hard to have what he creates result in a believable interpersonal situation, so much so that he sometimes finds himself asking whether his pictures are closer to a reality he knows because he has pieced them together from separate exposures of each person or if they begin forming, another parallel world entirely. This has become a compelling philosophical question because in this new way of thinking about and assembling his photographic pictures all of his elements begin as photographs themselves.

Comparing photographic images to the magician's art, the historian Daniel Boorstin once wrote: "We are all interested in watching a skillful feat of magic; we are still more interested in looking behind the scenes and seeing precisely how it was made to seem that the lady was sawed in half. The everyday images which flood our experience have this advantage over the tricks of magic; even after we have been taken behind the scenes, we can still enjoy the pleasure of deception." Ben Gest in his stage direction and assembly of various exposures into one photograph is like a magician because first and foremost he makes something that is believable both in its sense and appearance. But unlike a professional magician, Gest allows us to detect his masterful melding of various poses into a single scene. Sometimes the edge of a bathtub does not quite line up. On close inspection some walls seem slightly askew or the light may appear to have multiple sources. The clues he leaves are subtle because he wants us to find them only after the picture is seen and felt as a whole. Gest places these slight inconsistencies into his compositions as an act of honesty, but they also serve as a signal for us to become more careful observers, and to realize that all pictures, whether photographs or paintings, are puzzles of one sort or another.

Getting a bearing on Gest's pictures and linking them to the realities we feel they may be assembled from is, of course, part of their attraction, as it is indeed the fascination we find in all art. But merely introducing us to the game of discovering the technique of how his pictures were

constructed is not his goal. His works are finished pictures in both a normal and a larger sense. It is not unusual nowadays to come to the understanding that digital photographers build their pictures. Some photographers just tweak details and color balance, while others make blatant surrealistic montages or set up dialectics between characters that would be impossible otherwise. Others act more like painters. Working in these ways is like employing stagecraft, laying out a mosaic, or composing a canvas. But within the world of such choices, Gest seems to have modeled his pictures on photographs themselves. In his pictures there is an exactitude, as well as a captured moment, quiet though it is. He likes to determine a figure's coordinates precisely and at the same time explore his or her personal moment in space—that inwardly wrapped world that his characters create for themselves. It is analogous to the feeling we sense when we each take time out to muse on our own particular existence. Because of this and the nature of their assemblages, there is a slightly hesitating fluidity to Gest's compositions. Although his pictures are unforced and nearly seamless, Gest retains in this format a quiet, unspoken tension between his characters and the space of others that is true to life. This is as welcome as it is necessary. It is an essential part of our human dimension, one we traverse everyday in the give and take between the two intertwined worlds of a consciousness of self and, if there are powers beyond our own imagination, the larger universe that allows it to exist.

David Travis,

©2004

Curator of Photography The Art Institute of Chicago

"Ben Gest" Gallery Exhibition Announcement

Stephen Daiter Contemporary Gallery www.stephendaitergallery.com

November 4 – December 31 2004