

James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)

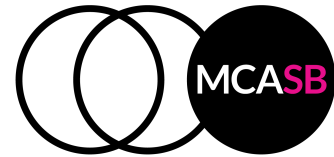
I am not better an “artist” than I am capable of being,
under these circumstances, perhaps under any other.

—James Agee

Before becoming a mathematician, filmmaker, artist, and professor, James Benning grew up in Milwaukee’s Industrial Valley. This highly segregated, working-class region punctuated by urban decay has influenced Benning’s artistic approach as well as the historical, social, geographical, and economic contexts he foregrounds in his work. Benning defines himself as much as his subjects in his long-time affinity with a diverse array of American landscapes and portraits, the extended gaze with which he explores his subjects (a hallmark of his aesthetic), and his propensity for examining the nature of the fringe and what it means to those who make their lives in that figurative, and often literal, no man’s land.

As a mathematician, Benning has approached his world from a structural frame, exploring the inherent notions of duration and proportion in the subjects of his art. As a filmmaker, he has been able to manipulate the concept of time through light and sound while creating a particular aesthetic that directly responds to this idea. As an artist, he has expanded the possibilities of storytelling, using contemporary tools with which he forges these stories. And as a teacher, he has guided his students to perceive time differently, from a sensorial perspective that focuses on looking and listening. These roles may begin to encapsulate Benning’s prolific contributions to the fields of filmmaking and contemporary art, yet there is also a sense to the artist that at any given time, he simply “is.”

A unifying thread in Benning’s work over the past 50 years is that he has always sought to explore his internal landscape (of his life, his childhood, his parenting, his nature) in order to open up to the world beyond himself. Hence, Benning is a man who speaks from a personal, yet public position that has been informed by his specifically poor, segregated, urban upbringing, that takes into special consideration his story and how his relationships with other people have unfolded. For instance, over time he has constructed deep personal connections to historical figures with whom he identifies, including James Agee, Henry David Thoreau, and Bill Traylor—thinkers acting from and existing in the periphery.



Benning's work does not provide answers, nor is it dogmatic or absolute. Rather, he shares with his viewers the lens through which he perceives life. Much like Walker Evans' photography of the 1930s, Missouri Pettway's quilts of the 1940s, and Andy Warhol's diverse artistic contributions of the 1960s, Benning extrapolates from his life history to discuss his America, using the immediacy of portraiture to do so. It is through this traditional technique that *James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)* illustrates that in the act of rendering others the artist ultimately and necessarily also renders a portrait of himself.

And while Benning shines a light on issues that tend to be subsumed under more glamorous notions of "America," the stories he shares touch delicate fibers in each of us, placing the questions he has gathered throughout his life in a larger, and thus more comprehensive context.

Here is where audiences of his films, and viewers of the photographs and objects collected along his internal and external journeys, can connect to the core of what Benning is communicating.

Works featured in the exhibition raise questions about diversity, inequality, poverty, marginalization, ownership, and appropriation while leaving agency in the hands of viewers as to how they will embrace these issues. Will the experience with the pieces in this exhibition become yet another sensation, one of perhaps millions encountered on a daily basis, or will we allow his work to become something that needles us, guiding us toward the deep and empathetic connection possible when we simply see one another?

The possibilities are as varied as the readers of Benning's art. If we could comprehend and contain all these interpretations, then we might be able to find a solution to this 21st-century isolationist condition, that is, togetherness.

Text by Constanza Medina and Abaseh Mirvali