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For Immediate Release.

Filmmaker and artist James Benning exhibits films and new works in U.S. West Coast solo museum debut show at Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB)

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

Opening Reception: Thursday, May 16, 2019 from 6 - 8 pm at MCASB

Exhibition on View: May 16 – July 14, 2019



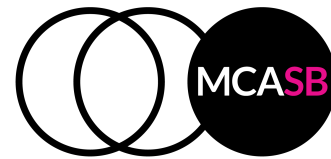
Left: James Benning, *Wooden Boxes*, 2019, Courtesy the Artist. **Right:** James Benning, *Mouchette*, 1937, *Georges Bernanos*, 2017, Courtesy the Artist.

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA. Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB) is pleased to announce the upcoming solo West Coast museum debut of independent American filmmaker and artist James Benning, *James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)*. Throughout his more than 40 years exploring the film medium, Benning has engaged with history, memory, and documentary traditions, often encompassing a rigorous treatment of the American landscape. The exhibition features the artist's observant eye in a series of intimate and distinctly American portraits, including a new body of work shown for the first time.

James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America) is curated by Abaseh Mirvali, MCASB Executive Director and Chief Curator. "It was important to me to present another layer of James

Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara

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Benning's work as an artist," said Mirvali. "While Benning is a prolific filmmaker, I was most attracted to his artistic practice using objects and photographs to tell a much deeper, more political, and socially-introspective story."

According to Mirvali, a unifying thread in Benning's work over his nearly 50-year career is that he continues to explore his internal landscape in order to open up to the world beyond himself. "Benning is a man who speaks from a personal yet public position that has been informed by his specifically poor, segregated, urban upbringing. It's a position that takes into special consideration his story and how his relationships with other people have unfolded," said Mirvali.

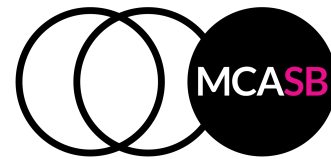
"After more than a decade of having followed the work of James Benning, I reencountered him during the Fall 2018 Arts Colloquium organized by UCSB Department of Art and College of Creative Studies here in California. I had already been thinking of a future collaboration with Benning, and after hearing him speak at UCSB and gaining a deeper knowledge on the current projects he is undertaking, I was inspired to curate this particular exhibition," said Mirvali. "By acknowledging the content presented by other institutions here in Santa Barbara and neighboring communities, we will be able to create deeper, more meaningful and collaborative programming, one that echoes our shared interests.

James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America) includes never before seen works, providing viewers with new layers of connection to Benning's artistic production. Among these new works are two quilts handsewn by Benning, *after Missouri Pettway* and *after Maggie Louise Gudger*. Experimenting with burlap sack and rag quilting techniques, Benning uses quilting as both an aesthetic tool and a narrative device. Looking to the histories and quilting traditions of Alabama's sharecroppers and the historic Gee's Bend community, Benning references the names Missouri Pettway and Maggie Louise Gudger and the sociopolitical struggles these two figures represent to stand in here for the "poor white" and "poor black" cultures of the 1930s onward. Today, these quilts speak to the struggles, marginalization, and fragmentation that economically disadvantaged groups continue to confront.

Also presented for the first time is Benning's *Wooden Boxes* series, which according to the artist aims to mirror the various societies that have lived in the state of Alabama throughout its history. Painted to reflect regional trades of peanut farming and blacksmithing, as well as quilting and other handiwork, the boxes are used by the artist as another narrative device addressing issues of inequality and the American working class from the 1930s onward. While researching in Alabama, Benning gathered a mosaic of dirt samples ranging in color—from pitch black to charcoal, copper to cinnamon brown, brick red, and bone white—that for Benning recall the Native Americans, African Americans, and Anglo-Americans who have histories rooted in Alabama.

James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America) also highlights Benning's work in film. Over the course of the exhibition, Benning's film *After Warhol* will be on view in MCASB's Norton Gallery. Benning's films *READERS* and *Twenty Cigarettes* will also be screened at MCASB and additional Santa Barbara venues. **Visit mcasantabarbara.org/upcoming-events for upcoming screening dates and times.**

Using duration as a theoretical device, Benning forgoes mainstream film vocabularies in favor of one in which the experience of time is in question. In his film *READERS*, the filmmaker confronts viewers with four long takes of individuals silently reading a book of their selection. Each reader is caught in a moment of solitude as the artist allows the viewer to embody the same sensation of getting lost in the act of reading.



Similarly, while creating *Twenty Cigarettes*, Benning invited twenty friends to be recorded individually by his camera, improvising on the canon of Andy Warhol's screen tests. Leaving each subject alone with the camera after fixing the frame, Benning uses the cigarette as a device to distract his subjects from the inherently self-conscious process of being filmed. Benning investigates the profound exchange of watching and being watched that characterizes the cinematic experience—the subjective recording that takes place in the memory of each viewer, and the intimacy that develops between individual and image.

Meanwhile, Benning's installation film, *After Warhol*, features students from Benning's "Acting Bad" class. In an attempt to mimic Warhol's screen tests, the artist asked his students to recreate what they imagined these tests to be. Benning re-contextualizes the students' actions to question notions of acting and performance, particularly in contemporary mainstream cinema.

Supplementing these films is a series of photographs that capture elements of both *READERS* and *Twenty Cigarettes*, serving as a visual record of each film project and presented as part of the exhibition. Other photographs featured in the exhibition expose Benning's creative process of extrapolating from his personal history to discuss his America. *Sadie B 1985/1986* presents photographs of Benning's daughter as a young girl, while *Self 1967/1986* is a collection of three self-portraits of Benning at different moments in his career. Having spent the last thirty years in his wallet, the photos featured in *Sadie B 1985/1986* bear the signs of wear and the occasional trip through the washing machine. Together, these images provide a glimpse at Benning's life over the last thirty years, while also presenting a personal portrait of the artist.

Through varying portraiture techniques, *James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)* illustrates that through rendering others, the artist ultimately renders a portrait of himself. 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.

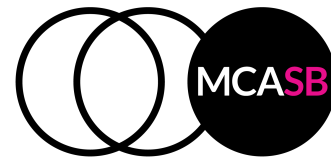
"We can allow Benning's work to become something that needles us, guiding us toward the deep and empathetic connection possible when we simply see one another," said Mirvali. "The possibilities are as varied as the readings of Benning's art. If we could comprehend and contain them all within the same space, then we might be able to find a solution to this 21st-century isolationist condition, that is, togetherness."

James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America) is curated by Abaseh Mirvali, Executive Director and Chief Curator. Exhibition text by Constanza Medina, Curatorial Research Associate and Abaseh Mirvali. Editorial support by Alesha Claveria, UCSB Interdisciplinary Humanities Center Fellowship Curatorial Intern.

Work descriptions by Constanza Medina, Curatorial Research Associate; Alexandra Terry, Associate Curator; Breyer Floyd, MCASB Intern; Evan Moore, MCASB Intern; and neugerriemschneider, Berlin.

About the Artist

James Benning (b.1942, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA) lives and works in Val Verde, California, USA. Benning is a major figure in American cinema. In the late 1960s, he directed his first short films in the experimental-cinema tradition, retaining its formal rigor and taste for conceptual constraints while pioneering the notion of "figurative narrative." His films rest on an experience of time and perception and its relationship to space. They also approach the notion of place from autobiographical, cultural,



political, and historical viewpoints. In 2014, his film, *13 Lakes*, was added to the National Film Registry. Benning has been teaching at the California Institute of the Arts since 1987.

Benning's work has been featured in solo exhibitions at Kunstverein in Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany (2015); Naturhistorisches Museum Wien, Vienna, Austria (2014); VOX Centre de l'image contemporaine, Montreal, Canada (2014); and Kunsthaus Graz, Graz, Austria (2014), among numerous others. Group exhibitions and screenings include Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA (2018); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, USA (2017); Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Germany (2017); Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria (2016); Centre d'art de L'Onde, Vélizy-Villacoublay, France (2016); MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles, USA (2015); De Cordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts, USA (2014); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA (2014, 2006, 1981, 1979); and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA (2013, 2003, 1979, 1978).

About the Curator

Abaseh Mirvali is the Executive Director, Chief Curator, and CEO at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, in Santa Barbara, California, USA. Previously she worked as an internationally-recognized independent contemporary art and architecture curator and project producer with a career-long commitment to civic engagement and public service through innovative collaborations between contemporary art initiatives and the community at large. In 2018, Mirvali curated the show of Dubai-based Iranian artists Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, and Hesam Rahmanian, presented at the 13,000-square-foot Officine Nord at the OGR - Officine Grandi Riparazioni in Turin, Italy, and co-edited the publication of the exhibition, with Corraini Edizioni.

Mirvali is the author of the concept and program development of the 2013 edition of The Biennial of the Americas, where she served as CEO, Executive Director, and Comisaria from 2011 to 2013. She was the Chief Curator of *Draft Urbanism*, an innovative and groundbreaking exhibition of urban architectural interventions. Between 2005 and 2009, Mirvali was the Executive Director of the Colección/Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo, where she consolidated and developed one of the most distinguished collections of contemporary art for a private institution in Latin America.

Acknowledgements

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About Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara

Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB) is a non-profit, non-collecting museum dedicated to the exhibition, education, and cultivation of the art of our time. Formerly Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum (CAF), MCASB is the premier venue for contemporary art between Los Angeles and San Francisco. MCASB is located at the Paseo Nuevo Upper Arts Terrace in downtown Santa Barbara, California.