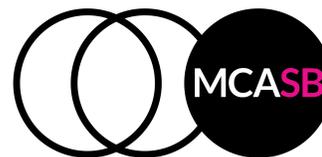


James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)
On view May 16 – July 14, 2019



WORK DESCRIPTIONS

after Evans (Lucille Burroughs)

James Benning's photograph, *after Evans (Lucille Burroughs)*, is an appropriated image of photojournalist Walker Evans's photo of 10-year-old Lucille Burroughs (pseudonym Maggie Louise Gudger) from James Agee's book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Evans captured Burroughs's image during a trip to the American South in 1936 to document the Great Depression. Through appropriation, Benning's work begins to function like a collage, developing new layers of meaning and content from juxtaposition and re-interpretation. Thus, by reframing this photograph of a photograph of a little girl with the wrong name, Benning raises issues of class, marginalization, and poverty, both in Burroughs's time and as persisting realities in America today.

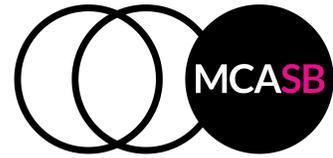
After Warhol

Featuring students from Benning's "Acting Bad" class, *After Warhol* mimics the screen tests made by Andy Warhol between 1964 and 1966. Warhol, who asked his subjects to sit still for three minutes as he filmed them, was attempting to create a new style of portraiture. By asking his students to recreate what they imagined a Warhol screen test to be, Benning recontextualized their actions to question the notion of acting and the process of performing, particularly in contemporary mainstream cinema. Replicating Warhol's screen test format also allows the artist to examine ideas of time and duration.

Book portraits

The four photographs, *Women in Love, 1920, D. H. Lawrence; Mouchette, 1937, Georges Bernanos; The Faber Book of Madness, 1991, edited by Roy Porter; and The Life of the Spider, 1912, Jean-Henri Fabre*, are still images of the books that appear in James Benning's film, *READERS*. These book portraits act as visual evidence of the project while dialoguing with the film's structure and content. The film features individual shots of four different people, whose names are unknown to the viewer until the film has ended. Clara McHale-Ribot reads *Women in Love*, Rachel Kushner reads *Mouchette*, Richard Hebdige reads *The Faber Book of*

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Madness, and Simone Forti, last in the film, reads *The Life of the Spider*. According to Benning, the books were selected by their readers. “They all chose books that reveal their own character,” he states, and thus the books further the portraiture. In the film, the books mediate the daunting nature of a portrait, enabling the readers to become more comfortable and open up to the camera over time. The act of reading becomes so personal that it unveils more about each person as the shot progresses. Similarly, the still portraits of each book reveal themselves as intimate, though mediated portraits of their readers.

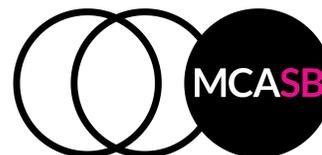
Quilts

The two quilts, *after Missouri Pettway* and *after Maggie Louise Gudger*, were not made after any actual quiltmakers. For Benning, burlap sack quilts stand as a symbol of poor white culture, much the same as “Maggie Louise Gudger” stands in for sharecroppers’ daughter Lucille Burroughs. In the same way, the rag quilts created by Missouri Pettway and other poor Southern African Americans call to mind the culture of Gee’s Bend, thus connecting so many who have struggled to make something functional and beautiful out of scraps. The names Missouri Pettway and Maggie Louise Gudger, and the sociopolitical struggles these two figures represent, stand in here as pseudonyms for poor people and the daily realities they continue to confront. The craft of quilting is recovered here by the artist not only as an aesthetic tool but also as a narrative one, which enables him to create and tell novel stories and portraits of his America.

READERS

Benning uses duration as a theoretical device, forgoing 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 for nearly thirty minutes. Each reader is caught in a moment of solitude as the artist allows the viewer to embody the sensation of the state one occupies while getting lost in the act of reading. As Benning’s subjects populate the screen, the viewers become “readers” themselves, looking for hints or clues as to what they should be seeing in each shot. Watching the film, the audience becomes attuned to the human and humane details of each subject

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and subsequently more and more aware of our humanness (posture, gestures, and movements). As we “read” the subjects, we read ourselves.

Sadie B 1985/1986 and Self 1967/1986

Sadie B 1985/1986 and *Self 1967/1986* are each a collection of photographs of two separate people that together represent the portrait of one man: James Benning. Framed behind glass, these two works each contain two photographs dating to the years listed in the title. Each photo in *Self 1967/1986* relates to a particular moment in Benning’s career history, the first photo booth image taken when he worked among migrant farm workers, and the second when he submitted the required photo for a gun license application. *Sadie B 1985/1986* includes photographs of Benning’s daughter as a young girl. Having spent the last thirty years in James Benning’s wallet, with various trips through the washing machine, these photographs survive to show the signs of wear and tear created by years of constant effort to keep them safe and close by. Together, *Sadie B 1985/1986* and *Self 1967/1986* follow the journey of Benning’s life throughout the last thirty years—physically and emotionally weathered. Together they become the artist’s portrait of himself.

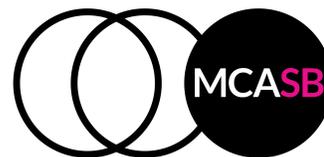
Twenty Cigarettes

Often celebrated for his capturing of duration and temporality in landscape, Benning turns his attention in this film to the human portrait. Improvising on the canon of Andy Warhol’s screen tests, Benning invited twenty friends to be recorded individually by his camera. Leaving each subject alone with the camera after fixing the frame and using the cigarette as a device to distract from the inherently self-conscious action of being filmed, Benning investigates in *Twenty Cigarettes* 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.

Twenty Cigarettes series

Twenty Cigarettes is a series of twenty portraits presented individually as framed photographs. Each photograph is a still shot taken from James Benning’s film *Twenty*

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Cigarettes and is titled after the person captured in the photo. In the film, twenty individuals are left alone to smoke a cigarette while a static camera films them from eight feet away. While the film is comprised solely of the act of smoking a cigarette, the portraits refrain from capturing the action of smoking by only capturing the smokers themselves. These portraits, presented to the audience in Polaroid-style headshots, challenge the act of looking at art by forcing the viewer to slow down and step closer toward seemingly simple images. The austerity with which these twenty portraits are created dances a fine line between intimidating and comforting. A conceptually minimalist piece, Benning conceives *Twenty Cigarettes* as an attempt to “map the world into a package of cigarettes,” inadvertently using the diversity that twenty randomly chosen people represent—in gender, race, and age—to paint a comprehensive picture of humanity. By looking at twenty portraits similar in content and aesthetics, the audience is forced to join in the process of intense observing—and intense thinking—about how we see each person and what exactly it is that we perceive.

Wooden Boxes

According to Benning, the seven wooden boxes filled with dirt aim to mirror the various societies that have lived throughout the state of Alabama’s history. The most direct reference is the diversity of colors and hues employed by Benning—from pitch to charcoal black, copper to cinnamon brown, brick red, and bone white. Although this is a small display of the mosaic of skin colors that exist, these samples of dirt may recall the Native Americans, African Americans, and white Americans that have histories rooted in Alabama. Benning purchased the boxes, then sanded the original texts and painted new ones that reference local Alabama businesses (such as peanut farming, blacksmithing, and quilting) and thus reference the Alabama working class from the 1930s onwards.

James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America) work descriptions by Constanza Medina, Curatorial Research Associate; Alexandra Terry, Associate Curator; Breyer Floyd, MCASB Intern; Evan Moore, MCASB Intern; and neugerriemschneider, Berlin.