

LUM Art Zine

Arts & Culture – Santa Barbara – Ventura – California



James Benning at MCASB: An Insider's Review

By Tom Pazderka

I'm a big fan of James Benning, let's put that right out there, because this will definitely not be an impartial review. For what it's worth, perhaps a little background could go a long way to elucidate my feelings and understanding of Benning's art.

Much was already written about Benning, by Benning himself and other authors like Julie Ault or Dick Hebdige and I don't necessarily wish to retrace their footsteps and regurgitate what was already said, though I understand that I am not immune from their influence.

I came to know Benning's art not merely by happenstance, but as a side effect of my

application to graduate school. At the time, I was working more or less conceptually, thinking up and creating objects as a direct correlation to ideas and contexts in which I was immersed, from books to construction sites, between demolishing walls and building them back up, ideas of difference/separation and relationships of unlike things with strange commonalities.

One day I stumbled on the Henry David Thoreau/Ted Kaczynski problem, which to me meant that each man's cabin looked eerily similar to the other. I took old flooring joists, some true two-by-fours, that came out of an old Asheville bungalow, nailed and glued them together to make a

couple 'canvases' and hung them side by side. I then drew Thoreau's cabin on the left side and the Kaczynski cabin on the right. A narrative of genius and madness developed from this image.



James Benning, *after Missouri Pettway*, 2019, Hand sewn quilt, 63 x 71 in., Installation view, Photo Courtesy Alex Blair © 2019

Struck by the odd similarity between the cabins, their size, layout, use, ethical and ideological implications to American history, each man built his own for the purpose of escaping civilization to immerse himself in nature and to discover and write about the experience.

We of course know how the story ends. Walden became one of the most important American transcendental texts, influencing everyone from back-to-earth and civil rights activists to gun-totin' separatist libertarians and doomsday prophesizing desert-dwelling preppers.

Kaczynski also wrote a book, but he only got it published as a result of his decades-long strategic mail bombing campaign. After getting caught, Kaczynski became a post-modern version of Thoreau, his writings and motives opaque to most who

would deem themselves steeped in common sense, much as Thoreau was in his day, but incredibly attractive and salient in his strangely romanticized saga of a bomb-wielding hermit forest dweller, an evil cowboy figure or sadistic mass murderer sociopath, incapable of empathy for his victims. He cut a fascinating figure not so much for who he was, but what the public thought he ought to be, much in the way that the public projects their own emotions and idiosyncrasies on the figure of Thoreau.



James Benning, *Twenty Cigarettes*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in., Installation view, Photo Courtesy Alex Blair © 2019

It was this piece that ultimately got me an interview and acceptance to UC Santa Barbara Art Department's graduate program. Not only did I get to interview with Dick Hebdige who wrote an essay for James Benning's "Two Cabins" that dealt precisely with the Thoreau/Kaczynski problem, he informed me that Benning built the two cabins on his property somewhere in the Sierra Nevada. I seem to have made the same conclusion independently of Benning's project on the other side of the country, albeit a few years later.

I was intrigued. Who is this James Benning and what does he do? I read “Two Cabins” and watched the videos “Ten Skies” and “Twenty Cigarettes,” cameras pointing out of the Kaczynski cabin. Things clicked. I got it immediately. Here was a version of Americana occluded by decades, centuries of obfuscations, half-truths and discrepancies, as if someone was slowly pulling up the thin veil from over the eyes.

Benning uses the camera as a prosthetic eye, letting it roll for long periods of time, simply observing its subjects. Like watching a long take from a Tarkovsky film, even the most mundane activities—like reading a book or smoking a cigarette—through Benning’s camera become subjects of study rather than entertainment. In the exhibit’s long ‘hallway’ hang twenty photographs, film stills from “Twenty Cigarettes.” Each depicts a specific moment from a take, but which moment it is, is not clear.

Benning’s own views on the “Twenty Cigarettes” stills are varied, some seem to suggest that some are takes of the act of exhaling. The light along the group is another rather subtle component. As one of the preparators at MCASB that installed the exhibit, I noticed that on the day we dedicated to lighting, we spent the most time on this group of works.

The lighting is meant to be direct yet subdued, not too bright and not too dark. One would suppose this to be the whims of the filmmaker getting the lighting to be just right, but the subdued lighting actually makes sense in context. Too much light would wash out the images and



James Benning, *Twenty Cigarettes*, 2011, DCP, 5.1 sound, 1 h. 39 min., Installation view, Photo Courtesy Alex Blair © 2019

produce jarring shadows, while the idea of the works would be totally unreadable in this way, and too little light would make the works disappear into nothing.

There is a slight reminder of Rothko’s obsession with lighting his paintings in a haze of soft, slightly subdued light, not for any dramatic effect, but because he felt that the work ought to be seen in a quiet meditative state that subdued lighting provides.

The pedestrian act of smoking cigarettes is far from spirituality, but it can be seen as meditative. For some the smoke break provides a respite from the speed and drudgery of work and everyday life. Strangely in our efforts to stamp out smoking in public places, we have also stamped out a weird form of secular meditation.

Working with Benning was a rare treat of the artist giving room to us installing the exhibition to move and suggest, at least in part, the placement of the work. In shows like this, much if not all has already been decided ahead of time in prerendered

drawings and mockups, so that one can see the show even before the show goes up.



James Benning, *Wooden Boxes*, 2019, Dimensions variable, Photo Courtesy Alex Blair © 2019

In terms of efficiency and expediency this makes a lot of sense. One shouldn't be left to fumble around at the last minute while trying to figure out where to hang this or that piece. Sometimes, the opposite is also a method, especially when responding to a specific place or time. This can lead to a strange dynamic between artist and installation crew and curators of exhibitions.

In the case of James Benning about 95 percent of the show was already placed before the work arrived. The last piece to be finished were the boxes of dirt, which we ended up pushing and pulling around the floor of the gallery. Aesthetically, it can be interesting to see what distance, size and grouping can do for the viewing of such a simple piece, making it for all intents and purposes not so simple. The floor itself can dictate where a box will and will not work.

But aesthetics aside, the boxes are a powerful commentary in themselves. Each

box has a print with a name and state where it was made, most of them originating in southern states like Alabama. Benning filled each box with dirt, each with a distinct and separate color from the other boxes. In Benning's view the different colors are somewhat indicative of the different races of people living in these states.

Having lived in the Southeast for a long time, I was curious whether the dirt happened to be from the very place where the boxes were found. The various colors of the dirt also act as place markers when one knows what type of soil is found where. Red clay dirt is often found in states like Mississippi and part of Oklahoma, a different type of red clay is found in the Piedmont of North Carolina, while Appalachia's soil is browner. In my mind I was immediately transported back to those regions. Not only this, but the story of Count Dracula, who has to travel with the soil of his homeland when he undertakes a voyage abroad, also came to mind.

Dirt and soil are strange territory to step into when we start discussing politics, and even though Benning's own commentary is available on this subject, I am nonetheless reminded of the very tough social and political implications that tie people to specific places. This type of politics is usually reserved for nationalist ideology of the blood and the soil type. But perhaps we're doing a disservice to the ground and the soil if the first thing we think of is nationalist tendencies.

Benning's point as far as I can tell is to question and understand the idea of place and origin as just such specific indicators.

To be born in a specific place doesn't necessarily mean one is "of" that place. Soil and landscape occur, and humanity's trick is to point and say that this or that part belongs to this or that people, this or that nation.



Left: James Benning, *after Maggie Louise Gudger, 2019*, Hand sewn quilt, 82 x 63 in., Right: James Benning, *after Evans (Lucille Burroughs), 2019*, Photograph, 12 x 14 in, Installation view, Photo Courtesy Alex Blair © 2019

The Grand Canyon just happens to be in the United States, but it was here before the country was established and it will be here long after the US no longer exists. Why should we make the conclusion that the Grand Canyon belongs to the US or be proud of the fact that it happens to exist here?

Benning's work is about observation, lots and lots of observation. He teaches classes where he takes his students out for a day,

sets them loose to observe and note what they see and at the end of the day discuss their experiences. His work ought to be approached in the same way. One ought to observe fully first without making much judgement. It is work that eats away at one's thoughts. What is this about and what does that mean? Perhaps nothing, but knowing and reading about Benning, this is seldom true. Though Benning's commentary on his work is pretty specific, as when he discusses his process and reasons for making the quilts in the show, the work is pretty open to interpretation.

The open racism of some products (potato sacks with "Indian" heads on them) that Benning sourced from the deep South, seem to leave very little room to interpretation, but only if one is concerned with surface level ideas. Every work in the show and in Benning's oeuvre is connected to the next in an entangled web of meaning, from the mundane to the extraordinary. It is apparent that Benning is concerned with teasing out the meaning of the American experience as it is now, and as it's changed over the years. We no longer live in the same country, but it can be said that we never did. One never steps into the same river twice.

James Benning: *Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)* is on view May 16 to July 14, 2019, at Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara.