**ART**

**Americana, Rebooted and Rerouted**

NOW AT MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART SANTA BARBARA, CONCEPTUAL ARTIST AND CAL ARTS PROFESSOR JAMES BENNING CIRCLES AROUND IMPLICATIONS OF HIS TITLE "QUILTS, CIGARETTES & DIRT (PORTRAITS OF AMERICA)"

As for the "cigarettes" part of the exhibition equation, they remain out of sight, out of frame.

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent

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

**When:** through July 14

**Where:** Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, 635 Paseo Nuevo

**Hours:** 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., Thursday

**Information:** 966-5373, www.mcasantabarbara.org

Truth in advertising meets cagy conceptual maneuvers in the current exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, bearing the telling title "James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)." For those about to embark on Mr. Benning’s seminal journey, be aware that, yes, there will be quilts, cigarettes and dirt involved, but as material and metaphorical. These features, though intrinsically important in themselves, are primarily meant to expressive and referential ends requiring some digging and thinking to access.

In this show, the artist’s first West Coast solo show and the second exhibition curated by MCASB’s new director/curator, Abbea Mirviss, we consider a series of works which qualify as “portraits” in Mr. Benning’s world, both in the traditional sense and by definitions of his own devising. Bred in the heartland of Milwaukee’s Industrial Valley and still rooted in concerns of the working class — historically and currently — Mr. Benning pursues an artistic path as a filmmaker, writer and also professor (the presently teaches at Cal Arts and lives in a rural area near to Valencia).

In one of this show’s artful dodges, some of the works here are of his film work (some examples of which have been screened in the venue and at the Faulkner Gallery during the show’s run). "Book portraits," for instance, relate to a series of films with subjects reading passages of books important to them, including "Women in Love," "Mouchette" and "The Life of the Spiders." As such, some of the gallery show knowingly functions as an echo, or a palindrome, compared to the promised “actual” manifestation as film.

Back to the show’s cautiously truthful title... the earthy stuff of actual dirt makes its appearance in the piece "Wooden Books," a series of wooden boxes American goods and labor—stamped, for instance with the true-blue company names “Woodward Iron Company,” "Selma Machine Shop" and "Gree’s Bend Alabama." "The dirt used here, though, is densely packed and appears in varying shades, suggesting the racial and socio-economic variation and disparities of the industrial-agrarian heartland and the American South.

Speaking of Grees Bend, his "Quilts" are, in fact, appropriated facsimiles and repurposed variations on the real thing, from his recreation of the denim patchwork of "Missouri Pettway," originally created in the 1940s by the famed African-American Grees Bend quilters to a quilt made from budap sacks, "Maggie Louise Godfry.""  

As for the "cigarettes" part of the exhibition equation, they remain out of sight, out of frame. The series he calls "Twenty Cigarettes," which are literally portraits the humble-toe medium of Polaroids and tapestry around a temporary hallway created in the large main gallery, captures its subjects—mostly his students—at rest between the acts of smoking. He has described his intentionally diversified and multicultural group of 20 portraits as a goal to "map the world into a package of cigarettes." For a teasing taste of Mr. Benning’s film matters, step into the darkened side gallery where one example of his "After Watch" series is screening in an endless loop. Here, the action—a man in suspendad animation, in tribute to the dogmatically bland Watch "screen tone" of the 1930s—is virtually frozen in place. Contemplation in this room consists partly of us keeping an attentive eye out for signs of real time life in the man on the screen.

Self-portraiture sneaks into the MCASB show’s spread, and the operative term is "sneak" sneaky, re-inventive tactics are part of the artist’s agenda, true to one characteristic of a conceptual artist’s work, as it was with another Cal Arts-linked artist, the 88-year old "old master" conceptualist John Baldessari. Must be something in the Valentine water.

In keeping with his impulse to being severely minimalist meditations to his art, a set of small, folded and hanged photographs amount to a cryptic window on the artist’s personal life. "Self 1967/1996" juxtaposes shots of the artist as a young man, via photo booths, and a cramped photo from his application for a gun license (so he claims).

Another pair of images, "Sude B 1985/1986," shows his daughter in tiny, wall-sized school photos, looking older than they are, thanks to accidental visits to the washing machine over the years. Suffice to say "Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)" brings together a swirl of ideas and lateral thinking aesthetics into its seemingly sparse, dwarling American portraiture. There’s more than meets and scans the eye here, not to mention genuine American dirt.

**COURTESY PHOTOS**

June 28 - July 4, 2019