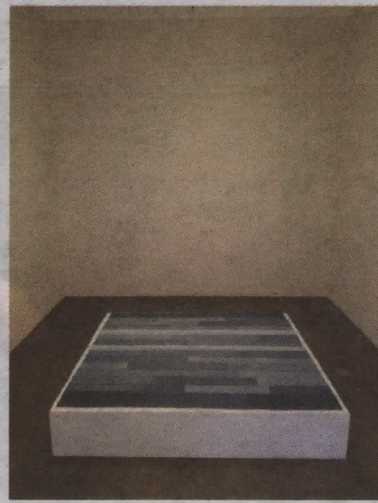
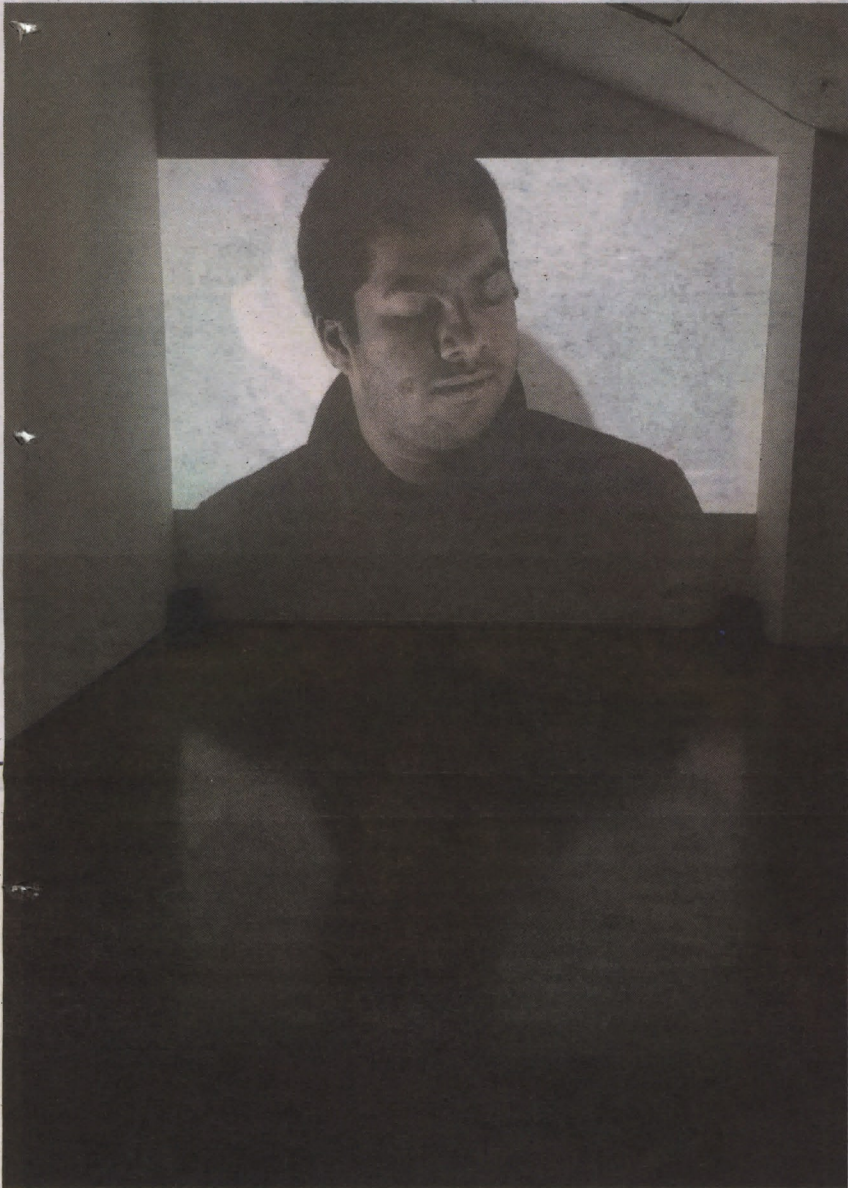


Americana, Rebooted and Rerouted

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



COURTESY PHOTOS

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, 653 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 conceptualist 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 sedimental 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 means 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, Abaseh Mirvali, 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 pursued an artistic path as a filmmaker, artist and also professor (he 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 Spider." As such, some of the gallery show knowingly functions as an echo, or a palimpsest, compared to the presumed "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 Boxes," a series of wooden crates American goods and labor—stamped, for instance with the true-blue company names "Woodward Iron Company," "Selma Machine Shop" and "Gees Bend Alabama." The dirt used here, though, is densely packed and appears in varying shades, suggesting the racial and socio-economic varieties and disparities of the industrial-agrarian heartland and the American South.

Speaking of Gees Band, 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 Gees Bend quilters to a quilt made from burlap sacks, "Maggie Louise Guderger."

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 in the humble-retro medium of Polaroids and traipse around a temporary hallway created in the large main gallery, captures its subjects—mostly his students—at rest between the act of smoking. He has described his intentionally diversified and multicultural group of 20 portraits as part of 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 Warhol" series is screening in an endless loop. Even here, though, the action—a man in suspended animation, in tribute to the dogmatically bland Warhol "screen tests" of the 1960s—is virtually frozen in place. Contemplation in this room consists partly of us keeping an astute 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 "sneaks." 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 Valencian water.

In keeping with his impulse to bring wryly minimalist meditations to his art, a set of small, faded and laundered photographs amount to a cryptic window on the artist's personal life. "Self 1967/1986" juxtaposes shots of the artist as a young man, via photo booth snaps, and a crisper photo from his application for a gun license (or so he claims).

Another pair of images, "Sade B 1985/1986," shows his daughter in tiny, wallet-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 spare, drawling American portraiture. There's more than meets and teases the eye here, not to mention genuine American dirt. ■