

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

I am not better an “artist” than I am capable of being, under these circumstances, perhaps under any other.

—James Agee

Before becoming a mathematician, filmmaker, artist, and professor, James Benning grew up in Milwaukee’s Industrial Valley. This highly segregated, working-class region punctuated by urban decay has influenced Benning’s artistic approach as well as the historical, social, geographical, and economic contexts he foregrounds in his work. Benning defines himself as much as his subjects in his long-time affinity with a diverse array of American landscapes and portraits, the extended gaze with which he explores his subjects (a hallmark of his aesthetic), and his propensity for examining the nature of the fringe and what it means to those who make their lives in that figurative, and often literal, no man’s land.

As a mathematician, Benning has approached his world from a structural frame, exploring the inherent notions of duration and proportion in the subjects of his art. As a filmmaker, he has been able to manipulate the concept of time through light and sound while creating a particular aesthetic that directly responds to this idea. As an artist, he has expanded the possibilities of storytelling, using contemporary tools with which he forges these stories. And as a teacher, he has guided his students to perceive time differently, from a sensorial perspective that focuses on looking and listening. These roles may begin to encapsulate Benning’s prolific contributions to the fields of filmmaking and contemporary art, yet there is also a sense to the artist that at any given time, he simply “is.”

A unifying thread in Benning’s work over the past 50 years is that he has always sought to explore his internal landscape (of his life, his childhood, his parenting, his nature) in order to open up to the world beyond himself. Hence, Benning is a man who speaks from a personal, yet public position that has been informed by his specifically poor, segregated, urban upbringing, that takes into special consideration his story and how his relationships with other people have unfolded. For instance, over time he has constructed deep personal connections to historical figures with whom he identifies, including James Agee, Henry David Thoreau, and Bill Traylor—thinkers acting from and existing in the periphery.

Benning’s work does not provide answers, nor is it dogmatic or absolute. Rather, he shares with his viewers the lens through which he perceives life. Much like Walker Evans’ photography of the 1930s, Missouri Pettway’s quilts of the 1940s, and Andy Warhol’s diverse artistic contributions of the 1960s, Benning extrapolates from his life history to discuss his America, using the immediacy of portraiture to do so. It is through this traditional technique that *James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)* illustrates that in the act of rendering others the artist ultimately and necessarily also renders a portrait of himself.

And while Benning shines a light on issues that tend to be subsumed under more glamorous notions of “America,” the stories he shares touch delicate fibers in each of us, placing the questions he has gathered throughout his life in a larger, and thus more comprehensive context.

Here is where audiences of his films, and viewers of the photographs and objects collected along his internal and external journeys, can connect to the core of what Benning is communicating.

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. Will the experience with the pieces in this exhibition become yet another sensation, one of perhaps millions encountered on a daily basis, or will we allow his work to become something that needles us, guiding us toward the deep and empathetic connection possible when we simply see one another?

The possibilities are as varied as the readers of Benning’s art. If we could comprehend and contain all these interpretations, then we might be able to find a solution to this 21st-century isolationist condition, that is, togetherness.

Text by Constanza Medina and Abaseh Mirvali

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

No soy mejor “artista” de lo que puedo ser, en estas circunstancias, quizás en cualquier otra.

—James Agee

Antes de convertirse en un matemático, cineasta, artista y profesor, James Benning creció en el Valle Industrial de Milwaukee. Esta región de clase obrera, altamente segregada y marcada por el deterioro urbano ha determinado el enfoque artístico de Benning así como los contextos histórico, social, geográfico y económico que destaca en su obra. Benning se define tanto a sí mismo como a los sujetos de sus piezas a través de la relación que ha establecido en el tiempo con diversos paisajes y retratos americanos; la mirada ampliada con la que explora a sus sujetos (un sello distintivo de su estética); y finalmente, su tendencia a examinar la naturaleza de lo liminal y lo que esto significa para aquellos que viven sus vidas de una manera figurativa y a veces literalmente en la tierra de nadie.

Como matemático, Benning ha planteado su mundo desde un marco estructural, explorando las nociones de duración y proporción que les son innatas a los sujetos de su arte. Como cineasta, ha logrado esculpir el concepto del tiempo a través de la luz y el sonido, creando una estética particular que responde a esta idea. Como artista, ha expandido las posibilidades narrativas, utilizando herramientas contemporáneas con las que forja cada historia. Y como maestro, ha guiado a sus estudiantes a percibir el tiempo de manera diferente, desde una perspectiva sensorial que se enfoca en mirar y escuchar. Sin embargo, y aunque sus competencias y su performance nos permitan clasificar a Benning como cineasta o artista contemporáneo, existe una verdad más profunda sobre su humanidad en donde él simplemente “es”.

Un hilo conductor en la obra de Benning de los últimos 50 años es la exploración de su paisaje interior (de su vida, su niñez, su paternidad, su naturaleza), antes de abrirse al mundo más allá de él. Así, Benning es un individuo que habla desde una posición personal, aunque pública, orientada por su educación ciudadana, segregada y pobre y que siempre ha tomado especial consideración de su historia y de sus relaciones con otras personas. Por ejemplo, a través del tiempo, el artista ha construido conexiones personales y profundas con personajes históricos con quienes se ha identificado, incluyendo James Agee, Henry David Thoreau y Bill Traylor—todos ellos pensadores que actuaron desde y existieron en la periferia.

La obra de Benning no da respuestas, ni es dogmática o absoluta. Más bien, comparte con sus espectadores la óptica con la cual percibe la vida. Semejante a la fotografía de Walker Evans de la década de 1930, los *quilts* de Missouri Pettway de la década de 1940 y las diversas contribuciones artísticas de Andy Warhol durante 1960, Benning extrapoló la historia de su vida para hablar de esa América que es suya, utilizando la inmediatez del retrato para hacerlo. Es a través de esta técnica tradicional que *James Benning: Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)* ilustra que en el acto de interpretar a los demás, el artista en definitiva y necesariamente se interpreta a sí mismo.

Y mientras Benning ilumina ciertas problemáticas que suelen ser tópicas de la América glamurosa, las historias que comparte tocan fibras delicadas en cada una y uno de nosotros, colocando las preguntas que ha formulado a lo largo de su carrera en un contexto más amplio y comprensivo.

Es entonces cuando la audiencia de sus películas y los espectadores de las fotografías y objetos que ha colecciónado a lo largo de sus búsquedas interna y externa, pueden conectar con el centro de lo que Benning está comunicando.

Algunas de las obras en la exhibición plantean cuestiones sobre diversidad, inequidad, pobreza, marginalización, propiedad y apropiación, dejando a las y los espectadores carta blanca sobre cómo desean abordar estos temas. ¿Acaso la experiencia con las piezas de la exhibición se convertirá en una sensación más en la marea sensible de lo cotidiano? o ¿dejaremos que su obra se convierta en algo que nos incomoda, guiándonos hacia una conexión profunda y empática en donde ella es el lugar en el que nos veamos el uno en el otro?

Las posibilidades son tan diversas como los lectores de las piezas de Benning. Si pudiéramos integrar y contener todas estas interpretaciones dentro de un mismo espacio, entonces quizás encontrarnos una solución a la condición aislacionista del siglo veintiuno en la que vivimos: la unidad colectiva.

Text by Constanza Medina and Abaseh Mirvali

JAMES BENNING

Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)



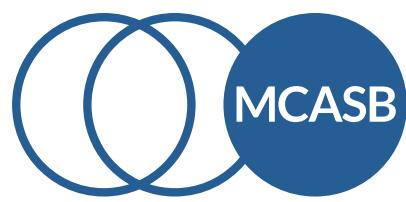
On view: May 16 - July 14, 2019



Museum of
Contemporary Art
SANTA BARBARA

JAMES BENNING

Quilts, Cigarettes & Dirt (Portraits of America)



Works

1. *after Missouri Pettway*, 2019, Hand sewn quilt, 63 x 71 in.
2. *Self 1967/1986*, 1990, Three photographs, 6 x 7 in.
3. *Sadie B 1985/1986*, 1990, Two photographs, 6 x 7 in.

Twenty Cigarettes

4. *Stephan Pascher*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
5. *Jahcobia Cosom*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
6. *Suzanne Dungan*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
7. *Kelman Duran*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
8. *Francesca Sloane*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
9. *Tedy Gentry*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
10. *Margaret Haines*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
11. *Dave Crane*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
12. *Alan Reed*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
13. *Suzan Pitt*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
14. *Sharon Lockhart*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
15. *Thom Andersen*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
16. *Fabian Vazquez Euresti*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
17. *Janet Jenkins*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
18. *Sompot Chidgasornpongse*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
19. *Tanya Barber*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
20. *Dick Hebdige*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
21. *Blake Derrington*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
22. *Hyesung Moon*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
23. *Norma Turner*, 2011, Photograph, 15 9/16 x 13 9/16 x 1 1/2 in.
24. *Women in Love, 1920, D. H. Lawrence*, 2017, Photograph, 21 3/4 x 17 3/4 in.
25. *The Life of the Spider, 1912, Jean-Henri Fabre*, 2017, Photograph, 21 3/4 x 17 3/4 in.
26. *Mouchette, 1937, Georges Bernanos*, 2017, Photograph, 21 3/4 x 17 3/4 in.
27. *The Faber Book of Madness, 1991, edited by Roy Porter*, 2017, Photograph, 21 3/4 x 17 3/4 in.

Wooden Boxes

28. *Mobile*, 2019, Object, 12 x 17 x 8 1/2 in.
29. *Choctaw Co.*, 2019, Object, 12 1/4 x 18 x 9 in.
30. *Woodward*, 2019, Object, 12 1/4 x 12 x 16 1/4 in.
31. *Selma*, 2019, Object, 10 3/4 x 13 1/4 x 13 7/8 in.
32. *Gees Bend*, 2019, 8 x 13 7/8 x 21 in.
33. *Alabama*, 2019, Object, 12 1/4 x 12 3/4 x 17 1/4 in.
34. *Montgomery*, 2019, Object, 12 7/16 x 15 1/2 x 1 1/2 in.
35. *after Maggie Louise Gudger*, 2019, Hand sewn quilt, 82 x 63 in.
36. *after Evans (Lucille Burroughs)*, 2019, Photograph, 12 x 14 in
37. *After Warhol*, 2017, HD ProRes file, stereo sound, 11 min. 40 sec.
38. **READERS*, 2017, DCP, 5.1 sound, 1 h. 48 min.
39. **Twenty Cigarettes*, 2011, DCP, 5.1 sound, 1 h. 39 min.

All works Courtesy the Artist

* Check at the front desk or visit mcasantabarbara.org for film screening times.

Exhibition site specific new works: Wooden Boxes and Quilts

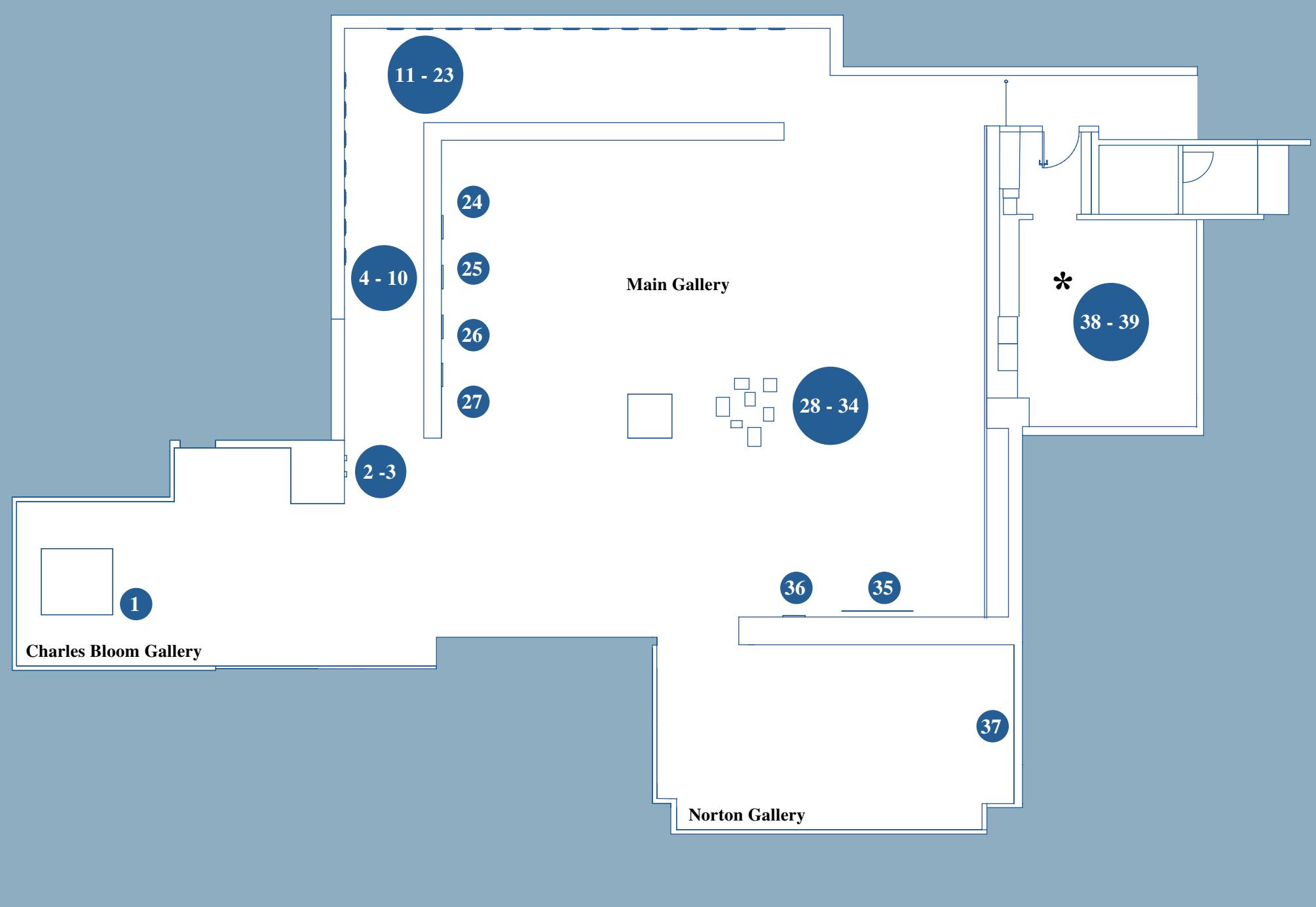
According to Benning, the seven wooden boxes filled with dirt aim to mirror the various societies that have lived throughout the state of Alabama's history. The most direct reference is the diversity of colors and hues employed by Benning—from pitch black to charcoal, copper to cinnamon brown, brick 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 working class from the 1930s onwards.

De acuerdo a Benning, las siete cajas de madera llenas de tierra buscan reflejar la variedad de sociedades que ha vivido a lo largo de la historia en el estado de Alabama. La referencia más directa es la diversidad de colores y matices de tierra utilizados por Benning—azabache, carbón, cobre, marrón, terracota y hueso. Aunque esta lista sea insignificante ante el mosaico de colores de piel que existen, puede que estas muestras de tierra recuerden a los nativos norteamericanos, los afroamericanos y los norteamericanos blancos que tienen historia en Alabama. Benning compró las cajas para después lijar los textos originales impresos en ellas y pintar nuevos que hicieran referencia a negocios locales de Alabama (como el cultivo de maní, la herrería y el *quilting*) y así, referenciar a la clase obrera de 1930 hasta el presente.

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The two quilts, *after Missouri Pettway* and *after Maggie Louise Gudger*, were not made after any actual quilters. For Benning, burlap sack quilts stand as a symbol of poor white culture, much the same as "Maggie Louise Gudger" stands 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 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.

Los dos quilts, *after Missouri Pettway* y *after Maggie Louise Gudger*, no fueron realizados como tributo a una artesana en particular. Para Benning, los sacos de arpillería simbolizan la cultura de la pobreza entre gente de piel blanca, de la misma manera que "Maggie Louise Gudger" representa a la hija de aparceros Lucille Burroughs. Similarmente, los *quilts* hechos de harapos de Missouri Pettway y otras afroamericanas del sur de Estados Unidos, recuerdan la cultura de Gee's Bend, conectando así a muchas personas que han tenido la dificultad de confeccionar algo funcional y bello hecho de materiales de desperdicio. Los nombres Missouri Pettway y Maggie Louise Gudger, así como el debate sociopolítico que estas dos figuras representan, se muestran aquí como pseudónimos de la pobreza y la realidad cotidiana que la gente en esta condición sigue enfrentándose en la actualidad. El arte de acolchado o *quilting* es recuperado por el artista como una herramienta estética y narrativa que le permite crear retratos y contar historias novedosas de su América.



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