

## The Complexity of Things: an interview with *Ben Gest*

By Suzanne Scanlon

*In the Fall of 2006, photographer Ben Gest had a solo show at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago which brought him critical attention and acclaim. Rather than resting on the merits of that early success, Gest has worked steadily, continuing to explore the questions that have always driven him as an artist. Suzanne Scanlon sat down to talk with Gest about these questions, his process, and the work that will be shown in an upcoming solo show at the Stephen Daiter Gallery.*

**Q:** *Can you talk about your process in constructing a work? Has the process changed over time?*

It hasn't changed much. One of the things I started to focus on with the Renaissance show was the idea of intimacy and details – seeing things on a person's body that you wouldn't see unless you were intimate with them in the first place. In a picture there is some kind of implied intimacy between the viewer and the subject. That's been heightened and expanded on in the work I've been doing since then. In that way, it has changed.

The process is labor-intensive in that the works are pieced together from lots of photographs; that takes a long time – but the intention is to select details designed to make you look into the picture and engage with the ideas of the picture and the people who are described in it. The way I put it together is also designed to control the way you physically look at it. I want you to look at this hand in a heightened way, or this eye in a heightened way. One way I do that is with detail, or sharpness; another way is with subtle movements of perspectives, things that photographs always have done very well on their own – controlling or bringing you into a part of the picture.

**Q:** *So in "Jessica and Her Jewelry (2005)" the hands were a place of sharp focus.*

In that particular photo it was a sharp focus close to her hands. I was able to portray them in a highly described way. It is also where the hands sit in the composition – how they sit flat to the plane of the camera in that spot. All those things affect how it becomes the heightened part of the picture. They work on you very subtly. These are the graphic tricks of photographs, how they direct you.



Ben Gest, "Maya," archival ink jet print, 2008.

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**Q:** *So for the upcoming show at Stephen Daiter Solo [April 26, 2008], your work is going in a somewhat different direction?*

It's expanding. There is this idea that the way a thing looks helps create what it means, and I believe that really

strongly. So I use different ways of making the thing look the way it looks, with the intention of directing what I want you to think about the picture, how I want you to work with it. There are a few pictures that isolate the figure in more of a black space. I've changed the way I photograph on those pictures, with the understanding that doing that helps create this kind of visual effect. I want these figures isolated, I want some parts heightened more – how do I photograph that?

**Q:** *In your other photos the space/place played a big role. The viewer got information from the setting – Erick's Volvo, Jennifer's rooftop.*

There is less of that in some of the new pictures. But not all. This new body of work is not packaged as concisely as the work in the Renaissance show. I didn't want it to be. You can find about five jumping off points for the new work in this show. I'm not in the same place, in terms of my body of work and career.

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**Q:** After your last big show, I noticed that many writers and reviewers remarked upon how your work was concerned with class. How intentional was that?

In some ways, the class question is a byproduct of the formal ways of dressing that everyone shared. That had less to do with class than with the implication of looking a certain way to be a part of something that involves others. Being dressed up implies looking good for others, to be part of a group of some sort. I used nice clothing to imply that these people were alone right now, but would not be alone forever.

Things I'm thinking about don't just have to do with class. These solitary moments and going to be part of something else – we can all relate to that. I used the clothing as a visual cue and that elicited the conversation about class and puts them in a position of class. That's interesting to me, but I don't know if it was a motivational factor, as much as other ideas.

I like the idea that there are things in life, there are people in life, all these moments that you can't orchestrate or

ing about those things. And to me those are the moments of life that I like. This is who you really are at this particular moment.

This is what defines me: this acknowledgment of the complexity of things. I do like how complex the simplest thing is, layered with something bigger, so much complication happening, in an interesting way – the richness of everything. Which

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Ben Gest, "Alan With His Car Still Running," archival ink jet print, 2006.



Ben Gest, "Laura on Her Side," archival ink jet print, 2005.

control, as part of everyday existence. You are burdened in a sense: you are taking in the garbage and wearing a suit ("Alan with His Car Still Running [2006]"). If you had to choose the clothes, you wouldn't be wearing these – the idea of this moment, the frustration of the moment. In "Kate Fixing Her Earring (2005)" – that idea of having to go inside and do something you don't want to do, that moment of gathering herself – which we all deal with, all the time.

**Q:** That look on her face is so great – the face that will be put away when she goes inside, wherever it is that she is going.

To me, the most interesting spots of life are there. It's easy to avoid really thinking about who you really are. Our society is set up to avoid think-

ing why the most mundane moment can potentially be fraught with meaning – like lifting the garbage can lid. Something as simple as that gesture is so much more.

**Q:** But that is also why I find your work challenging. We are constantly wanting to resist looking at that complexity. We want to put things in discreet categories – and have them stay there. Are you trying to challenge the viewer that way?

I think that way. I think a lot about what I think I know or I don't know and what it is really. That's how I navigate through life. That is what we are structured not to want to engage in. It is so easy not to engage in life that way – there are so many systems set up to help us not think about it. And I can't not think about it.

**Q:** Your pictures evoke a sense of empathy that can be overwhelming. Sometimes you see more than you want to. Often in life, we cut ourselves off in order to survive, but your work doesn't really allow that. I see "Joe Finishing Lunch (2005)" and I see who he is, in a rather painful way.

A lot of people don't think about it because it's not easy to. I have this feeling that we all deep down know who we really are but most of the time don't want to deal with it. In my pictures the people are dealing with it, briefly and fleetingly. In some ways that is overwhelming and sad and difficult. There can be something tragic to my figures. But there is something, I think, about the structure of the way we live our lives that is not good, and this most simple thing can be a symptom of a bigger problem. It is a social critique. It's not going out to try to preach. Rather, it is me trying to understand who I am and how we live and what it is we are doing.

**Q:** How does this work with children as subjects, in your new photographs?

That was the question with some of these pictures. Do children have some of the anxiety of life that adults have? I think there is anxiety – lots of it. And so I made pictures of kids with their anxiety. It can be as simple as closing their eyes to go to sleep, or more complex, as in being left alone for a few minutes. There is one picture of a little girl in the back of the house and she's dressed up, pushing her dog down ("Maya [2008]"). She has to tell him to stay here, and there is an anxiety between what she wants and what she has to do. It is different, but true for kids too. This little boy walking up a ramp with his father ("William [2007]"). He's looking at something, going into somewhere. He's holding on to his father's leg. There's a very real thing about not knowing what's around that corner – and knowing you have to deal with it.

Suzanne Scanlon's writing has appeared in *Bust*, *The American Scholar*, *Poets and Writers*, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, and many other publications. She lives in Chicago with her husband and newborn son, and teaches writing at Columbia College Chicago.