

Art in America

Face Time With Ben Durham

by Brienne Walsh

Ben Durham grew up in Lexington, Kentucky and still lives in a sleepy town dotted with thoroughbred farms called Midway. The area's lone cultural attraction is the Bluegrass Railroad Museum. While he's remained in close proximity to his origins, Durham's drawings, made on sculptural hand-made paper, depict mug shots of people he knew from the area where he was raised, and demonstrate complicated identifications.

Durham's solo exhibition, "Text Portraits," which opened simultaneously at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in New York and Marc Selwyn Fine Arts in Los Angeles (his first solo in both cities) features three series of work.

One group, called "Text Portraits" are precise graphite drawings based on mug shots. The subjects are people the artist he knew in his youth. He culled the images from the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government website, which posts them online in the name of public safety. "I have a very perverse curiosity about the images... in some ways they reconnect me to these people," he told AiA.

These portraits, which Durham has made since 2003, are composed of a layered narrative text, drawn on a heavily textured surface. "The paper takes on the history of my hands, [which] gets into the drawing," said Durham. "I like to think of the paper as being an abstracting force that brings in sculptural elements."

Durham begins each drawing with a silhouette which he fills with a stream-of-consciousness narrative about his interactions with each subject. He reads the text into a recording, which he plays on repeat in his studio in order to fill out the features of the figure. The result are large-scale, photo-realist portraits that deny the viewer the ability to read Durham's original words.

The neighborhood where Durham grew up was bordered on one side by a poor white community, and on the other by a poor black population. He attended public school where these communities intersected. "Things got strange as we grew older," he said. "A lot of the people in my portraits started to become more emblematic of the culture they grew up in."

The portraits are often menacing. In David (all works, 2010), a plain faced white man glares out with inscrutable, hooded eyes. In Jennifer (2010), a young black woman lifts her head and purses her lips, her pose full of hubris. Her serpentine hair winds around the picture surface and unravels wildly. "I feel under the power of these people," he said. "They have become myths or legends in my world."

Durham's uses his art to examine his memory—his desire to remember all of his history, even if forgetting might be easier. In pieces like Betty (Five Maps), one of the "Map Composites," he created a dyed paper map of the location where "Betty" lives, sliced it into pieces, and then

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reconfigured it to fit the portrait's mug shot silhouette. The final piece maps both the subject's physicality, along with Durham's personal topography and desire to manipulate the configuration.

"It's important for me, as an artist, to shine a light on that awkward territory between me and my subjects, the societal and cultural differences," he said. "I'm trying to lay claim to that territory."