

Ben Durham and the Art of the Mug Shot

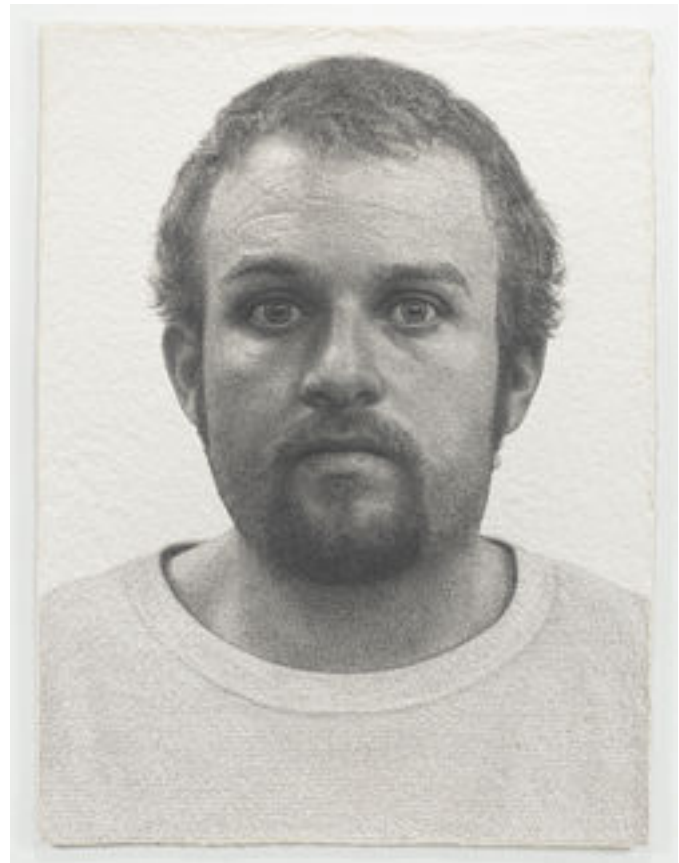
By Brienne Walsh

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Ben Durham doesn't seem like the sort of guy who would be involved with criminals and delinquents. He has the earnest and measured mien of a philosophy student. But Durham's subjects for "Portraits, Maps, Texts," his second—and final—solo exhibition at Nicole Klags-brun, are all culled from mug shots he pulled from an online public database. And, it turns out, he does associate with the criminal element, or at least he did: The photos are all of people he went to high school with in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Lexington, Kentucky.

Arrested for crimes ranging from unpaid fines to murder, they haven't been in contact with Durham in years; as far as he knows, they have no idea he is working with their images. "It's frightening to me," he says about the prospect of his subjects reacting angrily—or even violently. "But the fear is why I'm still doing it."

Part of an ongoing series, the exhibition consists of three stained-glass sculptural works, which look like post-apocalyptic maps made for wall decor, and five drawings on paper. The latter, from a distance, appear as realistic as photographs. It takes getting up close to see that they are typographic portraits of Durham's incarcerated classmates, each composed of streams of jumbled words. (Durham dictates memories he has of each subject into a recorder, and then uses the transcribed texts, scrambled, as the building blocks for his images.) "The portraits don't speak, and I'm not letting them communicate," he says.



Knowing nothing about the subjects (except that they're criminals—allegedly) allows our sinister fantasies to come out to play. Jack (2012), a white guy with a goatee, looks like an Appalachian tweaker. Kwame (2012), a black man, lifts his chin in defiance of the cop behind the camera. Heather (2012) is blond and pretty, but the photographer seems to have caught her as she passed out; still, she looks like she should be sitting at the gallery reception desk, not in a cell.

The works themselves are gorgeously precise. Durham manages to capture facial expressions as well as contours and texture with his streams of gibberish, an effect that echoes Paula Scher's maps built of words. Inscribed into the thick surface of the paper, which Durham makes himself, the writing achieves a tactile quality. At close range, the portraits take on the texture of a shaggy rug.

Durham's texts have a bittersweet subtext: Nicole Klagsbrun plans to close the doors of her gallery at the end of the exhibition. Klagsbrun could have gone out any way she wanted, but in choosing Durham, a sobering young artist whose work is concurrently on display at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., she has signaled that she wants to depart gracefully—and quietly. "He first brought his work to me on a truck from rural Kentucky," she says. "Now he's being embraced by the art world."

It's tempting to look for sinister reasons for why Klagsbrun is closing. No, she was not caught up in Upper East Side art dealer Helly Nahmad's gambling ring (although now maybe Durham can branch out from former classmates to art-world contemporaries). Klagsbrun's reasoning is more quotidian, like a lawyer giving up a partnership track to take up organic farming. "I feel like I'm in a washing machine, and the only way to stop spinning is to get out of it," she says. "There's the art fairs, the auctions, the deadlines, the e-mailing—I can't keep going round."

Many out there in artland are grumbling that as seasoned dealers like Klagsbrun pack it in, the void will be filled by Walmart-y outfits like Gagosian, Hauser & Wirth, and David Zwirner, all of which aggressively poach artists from smaller institutions. ("All anybody sees is money," says Klagsbrun.) But maybe a rosier outlook is possible: Perhaps the mega-galleries, which cater to an obscenely wealthy audience, will become just another sort of irrelevant peddler of luxury merch, like a yacht builder or Patek Philippe. And, with luck, it's possible that the growing prevalence of

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art fairs and online marketplaces such as Art.sy, Artspace, and Paddle8 will allow younger galleries to nourish the careers of emerging artists like Durham.

One thing no one needs to worry about is Durham himself, who is being courted by a number of dealers. "Money means time to me," he says. Or at least it does until he's swept up by Larry Gagosian or one of his ilk. Then money will mean what it does to everyone else who actually has some: a waterfront condo in Williamsburg.