

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Ben Durham: John

April 8 – May 27, 2017

Opening reception: Saturday, April 8, 6–8 pm

Artist's talk at 7 pm

Lora Reynolds is pleased to announce *John*, an exhibition of new works on paper by Ben Durham—his first solo presentation at the gallery.

The three large portraits in the exhibition are based on a single Department of Corrections mugshot. Ben Durham's work is drawn from the official mugshots of friends and classmates from his childhood. Durham finds these images by looking for familiar faces and names among the hundreds arrested daily in his hometown and posted on an online database. The arrested subject—John—is a young black man. As viewers, we know he was arrested but we do not know why—or whether he was convicted, acquitted, or simply released. He could have been arrested under any number of circumstances—but looking at his face will not answer these questions about his life.

In the Text Portrait, *John*, Durham writes everything he knows or can remember about his subject, repeatedly layering thousands of words on top of themselves—left to right, top to bottom—so they eventually (mysteriously) form a photorealistic image. Only in the lighter areas of the drawing is Durham's mark-making recognizable as text; the darker areas of the portrait require so many layers that individual words become illegible.

Chain-link Fence Portrait (John) is similar to the Text Portrait, but in addition to drawing his subject with words, Durham also embeds a grid of steel fencing permanently within the handmade paper. The paper (sometimes nearly an inch thick) covers the fencing, so although no steel is visible, the paper's surface echoes the form of the grid embedded within. In this piece, Durham does not layer the text; it is linear and legible. Because the overall image is not as defined as the Text Portrait, John seems to hover between disappearing and coming into view.

In *Chain-link Fence Silhouette (John)*, he is almost entirely gone. The piece has a grid of fencing but no graphite drawing or text. Only a subtle remnant of the portrait remains—the thickness of the paper delineating John's silhouette from the background.

The varying density of Durham's three renderings of the same mugshot of John imply a progression. Starting with the heavy graphite in the Text Portrait and moving toward an empty silhouette of the same figure implies John is fading—into oblivion or irrelevance. But if this progression is reversed (starting with the silhouette and moving toward the Text Portrait), John becomes increasingly visible and complex. He becomes less an abstraction and more a real person. In the gallery, these three works are displayed facing one another, suggesting not only this progression, but an interrogation of what each work does and does not reveal about John.

Stereotyping, racial profiling, and class discrimination are widespread in our culture and Durham examines their impact through the lens of his own personal experience. His work encourages empathy and a reevaluation of the way we look at others. As the artist states, "I seek ways of making portraits that aren't a reduction of identity, but create an expansive and nuanced counter-history populated by those marked to be forgotten."

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Ben Durham, born in 1982 in Kentucky, lives and works in Virginia. He has exhibited at the 21c Museum (Louisville), FLAG Art Foundation (New York), and National Portrait Gallery (Washington DC). His work is included in the collections of the Hammer Museum (Los Angeles), Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Richmond), and Whitney Museum of American Art (New York).