

CFAM SPOTLIGHTS: HISTORY AND IDENTITY

By Hind Berji



Jess T. Dugan. *Betsy*, 2013. Pigment print.
Purchased with funds provided by the Diversity Council, Rollins College.
Cornell Fine Arts Museum 2014.06 © Jess T. Dugan



Jess T. Dugan. *Jeans*, 2014. Pigment print.
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Jess T. Dugan. *Jillian*, 2014. Pigment print
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The Cornell Fine Arts Museum (CFAM) has vamped up its galleries for its Fall 2015 season with updated technology and captivating exhibitions. From the moment you enter the museum, you may find some interesting new changes, such as tablets that give information about featured artists, along with a welcome video from director Ena Heller, and new, interactive areas for kids and adults alike. The season's three exhibitions, *Every Breath We Drew*, *Fashionable Portraits in Europe*, and *Enduring Documents*, showcase the museum's varying takes on portraits.

Whether they are showcasing the historical tradition of European portraiture or examining themes of identity, gender, and historical documentation, CFAM highlights topics relevant to today's social stage. One such exhibition is *Every Breath We Drew*, a collection of photographic portraits by artist Jess T. Dugan, whose work is charged with themes of identity, masculinity, and intimate connection.

Dugan identifies as genderqueer, referring to her work as "a form of visual activism" with subjects that are often of the LGBTQ community. According to curator Amy Galpin, *Every Breath We Drew* is broader than Dugan's other works, such as *Transcendence*, a collection of portraits of the transgender and gender variant community. Galpin says that the series "is

much more broad and it really focuses on intimacy—the connection between the subject and the photographer."

Sometimes, this connection finds itself through Dugan's still lifes. Even when there is no one in the shot, Dugan manages to capture her softer take on masculinity through a photograph of two slightly unkempt pairs of blue jeans carefully placed over a hotel room chair.

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Using light as a significant tool, Dugan rarely uses artificial light in her pieces, adding to the soft hues of "Betsy"—a subject she revisits many times in her photography—or the subtle sunlight behind the bright red sofa in "Jillian."

Perhaps the magic of Dugan's presence at CFAM highlights the other exhibitions in a refreshing, comparative light by giving voices to people who are otherwise misrepresented in

pop culture. Galpin notes, "A lot of the subjects in Jess's work look our neighbors, or members of our family. There's an approachability to the subject; these aren't Hollywood constructions... These aren't forced relationships. There's a real sense of connection in these works."

Similarly, artist Whitfield Lovell uses historical photographs of anonymous African-American men and women to develop a more representative, visual presence of the African-American experience. The museum recently acquired one of his works, "Patience," a charcoal drawing on reclaimed, blemished wood of a 19th century African-American woman, paired with a radio. Lovell's assemblages encourage viewers to think about the relationships between these photographs and their given objects on a conceptual basis.

Artist John Sims—who is no stranger to the Rollins community—ties up this theme of historical identity and social politics with his confederate prints. You may remember Sims as the artist who, along with a group of Rollins professors, led the initiative of the confederate flag burial this previous Memorial Day.

With this remarkable season, CFAM's exhibitions should catch the eye of visitors with diverse tastes, touching on the idea of art as a direct reflection of how cultural identities change. ■

All photos courtesy of the Cornell Fine Arts Museum.