

# Group Portrait

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By Leslie K. Brown, PRC Curator

As we approach the holidays, when family and friends gather, it seems apt to consider the group portrait. What moments or situations, for example, compel us to produce a portrait and inspire us to call out, "everyone, quick, get together for a group photograph"? What relationships do we address, solidify, or even evade, during this time, and how might photography in turn reflect and possibly affect them? Much like a holiday gathering itself, this exhibition brings together emerging and mid-career photographers who engage and extend ideas of narrative and group portraiture—time-honored genres that traverse the diverse fields of fine art, commercial, and vernacular photography as well as painting. This project acknowledges the increasing attention paid to this practice in photography today by highlighting the work of Julie Blackmon, Ben Gest, Jessica Todd Harper, Amy Montali, and Sage Sohier.



ABOVE: Jessica Todd Harper, *Self-Portrait with Christopher, (Easter Dinner)*, 2001/2003, pigmented ink jet print, (original in color), 32 x 40 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Cohen Amador Gallery, New York, NY

LEFT: Sage Sohier, *Mum, Laine, and me trying on wigs*, Washington, D.C., 2004, C-print, 30 x 40 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston, MA

RIGHT: Ben Gest, *Chuck, Alice, and Dale*, 2003, printed 2004, pigmented ink jet print, (original in color), 40 x 40 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago, IL



The stories featured here are quiet studies, often dealing with interpersonal relationships, ideas of the self and the group as well as an individual's experience within a group. Some of the portraits bring together two people, some three, and others capture even larger assemblies; likewise, certain works are best understood as and in a group, with the grander meaning being cumulative. Part of this renewed interest in narrative, group portraiture certainly owes a debt to the social commentaries of Tina Barney and the staged, often surreal, environments of Gregory Crewdson and his contemporaries. Beyond such allegiances, the photographers in *Group Por-*

*trait* address everyday, domestic interactions from a distinctly contemporary point of view. The photographers' subjects—all friends and family—become willing actors and participants, with the artist serving as director for the production. The home or interior itself emerges as an additional "character" in many of the plots, functioning more than just a stage or backdrop. Furthermore, the artists that involve familial relations in their endeavors reflect a unique understanding and perspective not often considered—that of a family or group that is comfortable with a camera. The moments depicted are recreated, reinterpreted, or even re-remembered, and are >>



sometimes based on photographs themselves. Most often, the contemporary group portrait occupies this fascinating state somewhere between fact and fiction.

The works in *Group Portrait* recall earlier paintings and photographs—including large-scale conversation pieces and genre scenes as well as 19th-century composite photographs—yet approach and depict these scenes using 21st century themes and methods. Following a process akin to painting, the photographers build up elements and characters as needed. Mirroring the scale and impression of canvases, all of the works in the exhibition are large and all are in color. Several of the compositions evoke Dutch and Victorian paintings in their setting and lighting; others are adjusted digitally to create new, hybrid realities. As such, these tableaux hover somewhere between the pre-modern and the post-modern in their aesthetics and philosophy. By way of this narrative staging and restaging, the contemporary photographers in *Group Portrait* allow us to enter their worlds, and, as Jessica Todd Harper so eloquently puts it, assume “a new place within an old tradition.”

#### Julie Blackmon (Springfield, MO)

“I am the oldest of nine children,” begins Julie Blackmon in the statement for her series *Domestic Vacations*, “and now the mother of three.” Indeed, her arrangements of multiple figures swirl with energy of a full-house and celebrate the mythical and imaginary amid the chaos of everyday life. Many of the scenes are set in her own home, with any of her sisters, nieces, and nephews acting as models and helping to embellish the efforts. If one “performer” is not as she wishes, she photographs them separately or adjusts them digitally, crafting her composition much like a canvas. “These images,” she contends, “are not documentary, but, in various ways, a re-creation of everyday moments that reflect not only our lives today, but as children growing up in a large family.” Appearing at once both contemporary and timeless, her beautifully-lit subjects and surroundings create an environment that verges on the fantastic, replete with diminishing renaissance perspective and Vermeer-like checkered floors.



Julie Blackmon, *Saturday*, 2005, pigment ink print, (original in color), 22 x 22 inches, 1/25, Courtesy of the artist and photo-eye Gallery, Santa Fe, NM



Ben Gest, *Kate & Ben*, 2004, archival inkjet print, (original in color), 40 x 41 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Daiter Contemporary, Chicago, IL

Born in Springfield, MO, Blackmon pursued studies in art education and photography at Missouri State University. She has received several national awards for her work, including 1st place in Photospiva 2005 (Joplin, MO), commendation in the 2004 Santa Fe Center of Photography Project Competition (Santa Fe, NM), and a merit award in the Society of Contemporary Photography’s (Kansas City, MO) 2004 *Current Works* exhibition. Her exhibitions include a solo show at Blue Sky Gallery (Portland, OR) and group shows at venues such as Photo LA, photo-eye Gallery (Santa Fe, NM), and the Museum of Contemporary Photography (Chicago, IL), for which her work was selected for the Midwest Photographer’s Project and included in their collection.

#### Ben Gest (Chicago, IL)

Ben Gest portrays everyday domestic scenes, which upon further inspection, appear to be slowly unfolding right before one’s eyes and then briefly halted, as if catching their breath, to begin once again. Viewers are plunged into Gest’s pictures from a privileged perspective, as if we were actually in the scene itself. At first glance, one apprehends the whole, and then gradually we notice individual gestures and meaningful minutiae. Gest’s working method in fact relates to and expands upon his artistic aim; that is, to call into question and remove a single point of view. To create his arrangements, he captures between 10-30 frames of film that he then scans and composites in the computer. The resulting shifts in perspective and focus guide our attention to important aspects with exacting detail, serving to flesh out the developing storylines. As he makes clear in his statement, “These ambiguous narratives of personal and simple everyday activities describe the way people sometimes disengage from those closest to them.” Each of the figures seems lost in their own world, concentrating mostly on his or her actions or thoughts. Nevertheless, Gest suggests that such coping mechanisms, while a product of modern life, are neither bad nor good, but simply and indelibly human.

Ben Gest was born in Caldwell, NJ, and earned a BA from Rutgers University. Gest received his MFA in 2002 from Columbia

College (Chicago, IL), where he is currently an Adjunct Professor. Recent solo shows include *Ben Gest’s Pictures* at Daiter Contemporary (Chicago, IL) and *12x12 New Artists – New Work* at The Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago IL). He is included in many collections in Chicago, including The Museum of Contemporary Art, The Museum of Contemporary Photography, The Art Institute of Chicago, and the Lasalle Bank Collection. This past summer, he participated in Light Work’s (Syracuse, NY) prestigious artists-in-residence program. Gest is represented by Daiter Contemporary (Chicago, IL).



Jessica Todd Harper, *Emilie and Stephano*, 2005, 32 x 40 inches, digital C-print, Courtesy of the artist and Cohen Amador Gallery, New York, NY

#### Jessica Todd Harper (Wynnewood, PA)

Jessica Todd Harper’s subjects include herself and her family and friends within the domestic sphere. She acknowledges a debt to painting—from Mary Cassatt to Andrew Wyeth—in her concentration on intimate moments in interiors as well as a fascination with natural light. Like Gest, her focus is on people’s private worlds and moments. “The figures in my work are depicted both alone and in groups,” she states, “but my emphasis is on their individual experiences. No one is ever doing anything; all the activity is internal.” Harper herself, her sister Becky, her grandmother, and even paintings of distant relatives, often directly engage the camera, generating a dialogue across generations and, by extension, the picture plane. Well-appointed interiors and possessions serve as backdrops for any number of histories and stories running just below the surface. In many of her pieces, furniture meant to bring together friends and family—a table, a couch—unite but also isolate the figures within the group, both physically and metaphorically.

Originally from Albany, NY, Harper received her undergraduate degree in art history from Bryn Mawr College (Bryn Mawr, PA) and her MFA in photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology (Rochester, NY). Currently, she is a visiting Assistant Professor at Swarthmore College (Swarthmore, PA). In 2005, Harper was named one of PDN’s “30 Emerging Photographers to Watch” and awarded a Juror’s Choice at the Santa Fe Center for Photography. Harper has exhibited at venues such Blue Sky Gallery (Portland, OR), Houston Center of Photography (Houston, TX), and the Silver Eye Center for Photography (Pittsburgh, PA). This past summer, her

work was shown at the Paul Kopeikin Gallery (Los Angeles, CA). In October, Harper will be featured in a solo show at Notre Dame University (South Bend, IN). She is represented by Stephen Cohen’s new gallery in New York City, Cohen Amador, and participated in the gallery’s debut group show this fall.

#### Amy Montali (Northampton, MA)

Amy Montali’s enigmatic, large-format color works—“portraits and narrative fragments” as she describes them—reveal traces of Montali’s background working in film, theater, and dance. In addition, vestiges of an earlier series of moody family portraits can be seen in Montali’s latest pieces. She works regularly with small groups of friends and acquaintances that function essentially as a repertory company. “The process is collaborative,” she explains, “improvisational, and spontaneous, as I attempt to fuse the seductive power of studio photography with the energy and emotion of a snapshot.” In creating her scenes, Montali “paints” her compositions with large swaths of bold color, leaving telltale traces of the film to enclose and enhance intense psychological moments and interactions. Her characters appear mid-action or mid-gesture, yet even this is not always clear. In her work, she aims for narrative ambiguity and open-ended situations—the photograph as receptacle—allowing the viewer to produce his or her own stories.

Born in Oakland, CA, Montali received a BA from Wesleyan University (Middletown, CT), with majors in both Film Studies and Theater, and her MFA in photography from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA), Boston in 2004. That same year, she was one of the last fellows to go through the Photography Institute National Graduate Seminar at Columbia University (New York, NY). Her work was featured recently in a show, *You Are My Secret*, curated by Youngsuk Suh on display at Boston’s Clifford•Smith Gallery and the show *WISH: Mediated Desire*, which she curated for the Photography Institute at the BAG gallery at the SMFA. Numerous venues have featured her work, including Laconia Gallery (Boston, MA) and Hampshire College (Amherst, MA). Additionally, she was awarded an honorable mention in the Griffin Museum of Photography’s annual exhibition juried by Andy Grundberg (Winchester, MA). Montali teaches photography at Tufts University (Medford, MA), Greenfield >>



Amy Montali, *Martin, Palmer, and Nora*, 2004, C-print, 30 x 40 inches, Courtesy of the artist



Amy Montali, *Late*, 2004, C-print, 30 x 40 inches, Courtesy of the artist

Community College (Greenfield, MA), and will also be teaching at Hampshire College (Amherst, MA) this winter. She continues to work as a video editor and producer for theater and dance groups throughout the Northeast.

#### **Sage Sohier (Brookline, MA)**

Sage Sohier's featured work is from her series "*Mother*," begun in 2000, in which she addresses her mother, herself, and her sister aging as well as their relationship together. Once a model for Irving Penn and Richard Avedon, Sohier's mother was featured on the cover of *LIFE* magazine. "As I grew older," Sohier explains in her statement, "there was no use in competing with her, and so I assumed my position, quite happily, on the other side of the camera." Some compositions are recreations of family snapshots or rituals, and most are shared efforts between her mother, her sister, and herself. In many of the scenes, Sohier appears awkwardly posed or fussed upon, a Pygmalion to their Henry Higgins. The women often arrange themselves in a tri-part manner recalling ancient sculptures or paintings of the three graces, an apt allusion for a series dealing with beauty and class. Lavish furnishings and paintings haunt the background in Sohier's work; a portrait of her mother at age 16 appears in the living room, and in another, picture of her sister dressed as a harlequin hangs in her mother's bedroom. Ultimately, Sohier's work is a portrait of an intimate group of people and their own created worlds.

Born in Washington, D.C. and a graduate of Harvard College, Sohier has taught at a number of schools in the Boston area, most recently for 12 years at Harvard University (Cambridge, MA). She has been awarded many grants for her work, including a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Photography Fellowship, and two Massachusetts Artist Foundation Photography Fellowships. Her work has been featured in numerous solo and group shows at venues as diverse as the DeCordova Museum of Art (Lincoln, MA), International Center of Photography (New York, NY), Museum of Contemporary Photography (Chicago, IL), and a part of the Museum of Modern Art's (New York, NY) seminal exhibition, *The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*. Her work is included in the collections of the Addison Gallery of American Art



Sage Sohier, *Laine trying on Mum's evening dresses*, Washington, D.C., 2004, C-print, 20 x 24 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston, MA

(Andover, MA), the Fogg Art Museum (Cambridge, MA), Princeton University Art Museum (Princeton, NJ), and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (San Francisco, CA), among others. In addition, her work on assignment has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *LIFE*, and other journals. She is represented by Bernard Toale Gallery (Boston, MA).

#### **Conclusions**

The artists in *Group Portrait* function as participants/observers in sharing their private and artistic worlds with audiences. Important key elements in all of these images is the photographers' focus and engagement with gazes and glances. The individuals, often the photographers themselves, contained within these photographs often reflect or reject the camera's and viewer's stare, further contributing to an engagement with the space and story. Similarly, many framed, family photographs and portraits lie scattered about within the interiors, peering out from bookcases and bureaus, and thus also enter into this multifaceted dialogue. We attempt, as viewers, with all of our own family issues and cultural perspectives brought to the table, to make sense of such narratives presented to us, and thus in turn create them anew.

Looking to these artists as inspiration, the next time you click the shutter for your own group portrait, consider capturing something different from the customary "lineup" or traditional posture. What alternate story or event is there to narrate and recreate? Viewed another way, such a group portrait might tell generations hence volumes about the complex nature of personal relationships as well as your own place as narrator within them. ■