

James Benning

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AUTHOR: TRAVIS DIEHL

02.12.11-03.12.11 Steve Turner Contemporary

The flushed face of a woman, closely cropped, fills the whole wall. Her lips slowly blur and part as one frame melts into the next. Her teeth glint and then darken; a speck of dust on her cheek fades in and out; her lips close. This takes twelve and a half minutes. A quick cut, and now the creviced and oily features of a man's face morph with the same aching slowness. His movements are especially subtle and eerie, like shadows lengthening.

In James Benning's *Two Faces*, 2010, the centerpiece of this exhibition, two three-second portraits shot in 16 mm have been digitally scanned, then stretched beyond normal legibility. In the extrahuman size and lassitude of their expressions, the faces become an exercise in perception. Pores resemble film grain and vice versa; the image disintegrates into viscous lights and darks. Like the structuralist landscape films for which the artist has become known, this work is patient. The faces reveal less about themselves than they do about the viewer. Feelings of boredom and anxiety alternate with meditative calm as the work prompts an awareness of the act of seeing. Likewise, events organized at the gallery by guest curator Chiara Giovando provide settings for sustained attention—including a night of experimental "sound structures" that will accompany the video, and an excursion patterned on Benning's long-running CalArts class, "Listening and Seeing," in which the artist leads students to explore fringe sites in the Los Angeles area.

Once a film purist, Benning has recently turned to the possibilities of digital media, achieving durations unthinkable with 16-mm reels (as in *Ruhr* [2009], his first project shot in HD), and paradoxically yet methodically exploring the time between frames of film (as in *John Krieg Exiting the Falk Corporation in 1971* [2010] and *Two Faces*). Here, revisiting footage from 1973, he casts a lingering glance into the faces of two people from his own past. As he has for forty years, Benning presents a cinematic model for contemplative, deepened perception that extends to human experience in all its aspects.