



From Los Angeles: Desire Armed

- Bean Gilsdorf

A mug shot is not a particularly compassionate image; from the very advent of photography, the criminal snapshot has been a revealing but callous document. Yet, now on view at LA><ART Gallery in Los Angeles, Aaron Sandnes's suite of portraits delicately conjure a sense of tenderness and empathy from mug shots.

The seventeen 22-by-18-inch drawings in the series (all from 2012) depict the various faces of the French anarchist group La Bande à Bonnot. This group plied their illicit trade, including robberies and murders, between 1911 and 1912 before the members were killed in shoot-outs with the police, captured and imprisoned, or executed. To render each visage, Sandnes dips his fingertip repeatedly into graphite—the same type of graphite employed by law-enforcement personnel to dust for fingerprints—and touches the thick ecru paper in the style of pointillism, creating depth and shade by layering the roundish gray marks. His adroit employment of this specialist powder to form the portraits provides a satisfying conceptual link between the medium and the image, combining the distinguishing features of each face with the unique material and connecting the forensic character of police photography with the identifying marks at the tip of a finger.



The gray daubs created by the impression of Sandnes's dusted finger also manifest a sensitivity that is absent from conventional mug shots. Here, the overall texture imparted by the marks creates an image that is fragile but potent. The surface draws the viewer closer to inspect the manner of its creation, and one's realization that the likenesses were created with a fingertip produces a kind of tactile yearning. It provokes the sensorial memory of tracing another person's skin, lips, and cheeks. From this a viewer understands how Sandnes's depictions come to be rendered with such sympathy: touching another person's face, as Sandnes has done in order to realize the portraits, is an incredibly intimate act.

The manner of the work's manifestation suggests associations in language, as well. "To finger" is to identify while "point to" is to indicate. Further, "point out" is to reveal, and Sandnes's process manages to play subtly with all these terms and more. Though they are not pushed forward—there's nothing in the press release or wall text to attract the viewer's attention to these relationships—the connotations are there in the background, waiting for someone "to put a finger on it"—to be discovered.

The portraits are framed very simply in somber black and are grouped on the walls in a way that implies particular relationships among La Bande à Bonnot's members. Though the press release discusses the artist's interest in the gang's technological sophistication and "attempt to resist the weight of conditions that still suppress today," the portraits seem less politically motivated and more a way toward a compassionate understanding of this group by manifesting it, touch by touch, mark by mark.