Jan Kaesbach's Portraits are Still Moving

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Kaesbach offers a welcomed change to the portrait genre.

"Pastry Chef," 2014. ©Jan Kaesbach. Image courtesy Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago.

Artist Jan Kaesbach breathes new life into the portrait genre. We are accustomed to seeing painted or photographed portraits with the subject still, frozen in a moment of time. But imagine looking at one of Kaesbach's portraits: the subject's eyes begin to blink, hands tremor and the body gently sways.

Six of Kaesbach's portraits were part of a small group exhibition titled "Still Moving" at Catherine Edelman Gallery, which concluded earlier this month. Each portrait consisted of an individual posed, facing the viewer in the setting of their profession: a pastry maker, basket weaver and metal worker among them. The theme is reminiscent of 20th century photographer August Sander, whose work includes people portrayed in their occupation.

Yet, Kaesbach's technique marks a critical difference between the two artists. The gallery detailed the process: each portrait consists of 3,500 looped still images, resulting in videos lasting several minutes. At first glance, the portraits looked like static photographs on an electronic medium. And if you did not pause and look closely, you would have missed seeing movement in each portrait.

"Pastry Chef," 2014. ©Jan Kaesbach. Image courtesy Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago.

The technique was startling initially. I wasn't expecting to make eye contact with the young woman in "Pastry Chef" and see her blink; nor did I expect to study the portrait "Tanner," mesmerized by the details of this man's environment, as droplets of water occasionally hit the ground. But Kaesbach's approach was effective. Subtle movement make the subjects more human, resulting in a relatable experience between subject and viewer.

After a while, viewing the portraits became a game in spotting the movement. It also became a study of the human condition. I was drawn to nuances that made the story of each portrait come alive. And this gets at the heart of what Kaesbach's portraits did for me: giving ordinary people an extraordinary presence.