

Catalogue Essay by Mary Birmingham, director of exhibitions at the Hunterdon Museum. For the solo exhibition: "*Goup Shot Italy, 1972*" at the Tomasulo Gallery, May 2009.

"Diana Jensen's *Group Shot Italy, 1972 (The Pistachio Series)* is an installation of more than forty small, irregularly shaped paintings derived from a single source—a photograph purchased at a flea market in Rome. Dating from the 1970s, this group photograph commemorates the eighteenth birthday party of a young woman named Elizabeth, with some thirty people (and one dog) posed around her in a restaurant or banquet hall.

Jensen uses found photographs of strangers as departure points for her multifaceted work. After studying this Italian photograph she became fascinated by what looked to her like "a sea of floating heads," an effect common to large group photos. She explored this idea by physically isolating heads, faces, hands and objects from the photograph to create individual paintings—fragments of the whole. By removing group members from their communal setting, Jensen challenges the viewer to consider each one as a unique individual.

In some paintings she zooms in closely to focus on specific facial parts or expressions that suggest the sitters' personalities. Sometimes she places several individuals together in one painting, highlighting the more intimate relationships and interactions at play within the larger group. In the fragment titled *Brothers*, Jensen suggests a familial bond among three figures. Other paintings isolate hand gestures or objects such as wine bottles and musical instruments. While portraiture conveys specific identities and emotions, hands evoke more universal ideas about human activity and interaction. The painting *Toast* juxtaposes one man's head with another man's hand raising a glass of wine; because we don't see the owner of the hand, we focus instead on the distilled meaning of the gesture. Through the artist's careful editing these paintings offer a stimulating mix of identity and anonymity.

Jensen arranges the individual paintings in a single row around the gallery, the long line of disembodied heads and hands literally bisecting the walls. Shuffling and reconfiguring the individual players may subvert the meaning of the original photograph, but this linear placement also acts like a thread reconnecting all of the members back to the birthday girl, and by that common association, to each other. The artist's radical approach of breaking apart and reformulating images is provocative on both formal and metaphorical levels.

Jensen's loose, expressionistic brushwork and heavy impasto help impart a sense of weight and physicality to her subjects. While she acknowledges the influence of Francis Bacon, her work also displays an affinity with Frans Hals, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch painter whose lively portraits featured ebullient characters in convivial surroundings. Jensen is especially attracted to pictures of people in social settings. She first explored this theme by painting portraits of bar patrons.

In 2003 she created *Miami Fragments*, a series of shaped portrait fragments derived from holiday greeting card photographs found in her grandmother's house. Similarly, her *New York Story* series was drawn from a found photo album and depicted participants at an annual New York party. Jensen is currently at work on paintings inspired by snapshots displayed on the wall of a Miami pizzeria. Working exclusively with pictures of strangers, she continually seeks "signs of intimacy, personality and relationships."

In these projects Diana Jensen is almost like an anthropologist, examining photographs of anonymous strangers for evidence of social relationships and individual identities. Looking for clues that will reveal emotional content, she extracts new meaning from her sources. Through her artistic intervention she rescues forgotten people from lost photographs and memorializes them in new and innovative ways. Ultimately it is Diana Jensen, the artist, who offers them renewed life.