

DIVISION | REVIEW

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The Art of Bill Beckley

Rose color glasses tint any recent overview of the grimy 1970s “Downtown” Manhattan art world. Bill Beckley (<http://www.billbeckley.com>) was one of the few (perhaps only) Romantics that emerged from a socially enmeshed but competitive milieu that flourished below Houston Street. Beckley’s circle included the various media-nomadic artists showing at 112 Greene Street, whose art was acknowledged by an international network of frugally operated contexts through exposure in publications like *Avalanche* (NY), *Flash Art* (Milan), and *Interfunktionen* (Cologne). Beckley’s early work involved performances and installations that, like those of his older peer Dennis Oppenheim and close friend Gordon Matta-Clark, were dependent upon the photograph to document and commodify the event or temporal physical intervention. In post-minimal lingo, photographs were sometime referred to as “bi-products” and were generally black and white, accompanied by typewritten texts or urgent handwritten descriptions situated below the images. Beckley and others (this period in art is an era of “lists”) opted to employ these display strategies as a means of introducing content other than reportage, that is the story or tale. “Narrative Art” identified itself as a warmer offshoot of conceptual, land, or body art. Beckley’s self-authored stories were physically compact but referentially broad, incorporating images of

animals, rainbows, and nature juxtaposed with neutrally intoned erotic musings and noirish observations. Learning on the job, Beckley out-distanced the pack by adopting the most advanced imaging technologies available, specifically the print material Cibachrome, which had a glossy surface that could replicate the depth of painting, a medium bereft of big ideas in at least the first half of that transitional decade. When encountering Beckley’s ambitiously scaled multi-paneled units (derived from Jasper Johns), the blasé gallery goer re-engaged as reader, narrator, and implicated witness.

Beckley’s Wooster Street studio (I assisted Bill at that time) was neither the encrusted painter’s cave nor the conceptualist’s “office,” but a hybrid of the photo laboratory and the in-house advertising agency. Beckley’s art then (or now) does not easily fit into the staid historical account of “fine art” photography, which barely acknowledges the role photo-based “conceptualism” played in the otherwise tepid 1970s photography market. The art of Richard Prince and the late Sarah Charlesworth, both habitués of the John Gibson Gallery, where most of the narrative group exhibited, certainly took notice of Beckley’s crisply installed assemblages of words and vivid pictures that enlisted the camera into service to the idea. Beckley and a few other producers of photo/objects, such as John Baldessari in Los Angeles, preceded the

photograph’s current spectacularization by decades. While acutely aware of the local critical momentum gathering around “pictures” in the late 1970s, Beckley was not enchanted by what he termed the “puritanical” language aligned with the rapid embrace of the highly principled mélange of philosophy and criticism in what is generically labeled “Theory.”

Beckley’s tenacious work ethic evolved from a rural Berks County childhood, recalling other industrious Pennsylvanians such as his former student Keith Haring and Jeff Koons, an admirer and collector. A restless intellect, Beckley edited the influential essay collection *Uncontrollable Beauty* (1998) and argued for the guilt-free pleasures of the sublime in all its manifestations. The art continues; poppies spin like dervishes, floral stems arc in graceful pliés, and most recently, roses explode in apocalyptic slo-mo like in the final moments of Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970). Bill Beckley’s collaborations with publications are rare; let’s see what images he shares with *The Proletariat*, a series chosen from a recent stroll through Naples...the readers of *DIVISION/Review* may assist in their decoding. ■

Tim Maul

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