

Sunday, July 4th, 2010

Silently Still Among Us: The beauty of Bill Beckley

by David Carrier

Bill Beckley at Tony Shafrazi Gallery

May 15 to July 30, 2010

544 West 26th Street

New York City, 212 274 9300

Too often, art galleries display only a veteran artist's most recent production. Such exhibitions block historical perspective, which is necessary when an artist has had a substantial career. By presenting a full survey of three decades of Bill Beckley's art, this note perfect show reveals a great deal not just about his development, but also about larger changes within our art world.



Bill Beckley, *Myself as Washington*, 1969. Photograph, 21 x 17 inches.

Courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery

Beckley became an artist when conceptual art was the newly fashionable mode in New York. His *Myself as Washington* (1969), the earliest work in the show, anticipated the role-playing photographs of Cindy Sherman. In the 1970s he did marvelous combinations of words-and-images. *Mao Dead* (1976) consists of a headline from the *New York Post* juxtaposed to a page of text and two cibachrome photographs, which don't seem to be about Mao. *Shoulder Blade* (1977) offers an engaging play of eroticism as also does *Deirdre's Lip* (1978), with a text about Deirdre set between images, which have no obvious relationship to that text. But in that decade he also did purely visual works like *Hot and Cold Faucets with Drain* (1975), a triptych with red and blue faucets set on either side of a yellow drain, shown in a close up large images.

In the past decade, abandoning the elliptical storytelling found in his earlier art, Beckley has made openly beautiful photographs. This was a complex, over determined change. In 2000, he was much influenced by seeing a vase of lilies outside a flower shop near his studio. He's spoken, also, of his admiration for Barnett Newman whose "zips" appear somewhat like the flower stems in *Station 1* and *Station 10* (both 2001). More important in motivating this development, I suspect, were his literary interests. After editing volumes devoted to reprints of Walter Pater and John Ruskin, he produced two well-known anthologies, *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics* (1998) and *Sticky Sublime* (2001). Beckley, so these books show, is an aesthete, and so not someone who could be permanently satisfied with the ironies of conceptual art.

From early on he struggled to escape from the puritanical world of his childhood. But conceptual art, he discovered, was also puritanical, too concerned with denial of visual pleasure to be satisfying. Hal Foster's famous anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (1983) argued that contemporary art needed to abandon the search for harmony and wholeness traditionally associated with beauty. Beckley rejected that way of thinking. But this turn to beauty isn't "a conversion or an avowal of faith or a dogmatic

Carrier, David. "Silently Among Us: The beauty of Bill Beckley," *Art Critical*. July 4, 2010.

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assertion,” Thomas McEveiley has rightly said. “Rather it’s just that Beckley still sees beauty: welcome or not, expected or not, there it is—silently still among us.”



Bill Beckley, *Station 1*, 2002. Cibachrome photograph, 81 x 44 inches.

Courtesy of Tony Sharfrazzi Gallery

When Beckley became a visual aesthete, making art without using words, he achieved a new directness. His flowers, *Warwasong 4* and *Warwasong 10* (both 2007) and the drop-dead-gorgeous abstract-looking images, *Vases: Ashtray 2. Don't Smoke* (2010) is a good example. Imagine some old master still life artist taking up photography and doing large images of contemporary subjects and you get some picture of these extraordinary works of art. Beckley, it turns out, is a great colorist. At the very start of his career, he greatly admired the early abstract art of Brice Marden and Frank Stella. In some ways, his recent photographs have more to do with their paintings than with classical conceptual art. Starting in what was a very difficult time for an aesthete he found a way to make ravishing art. His career thus is as strange as the fictional artists' lives in Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*.

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