



THE
AVANT/GARDE
DIARIES



Studio Visit: Bill Beckley

29 October 2013

Since his early 1970s performances at the formative art space "112 Greene," Bill Beckley has been fascinated by the potential to combine imagery and narrative. For his first exhibition at Friedman Benda, he explores this vivid combination through a series of photographic diptychs and object-text pairings. *The Avant/Garde Diaries* stopped by Bill Beckley's studio to discuss how we read art today.



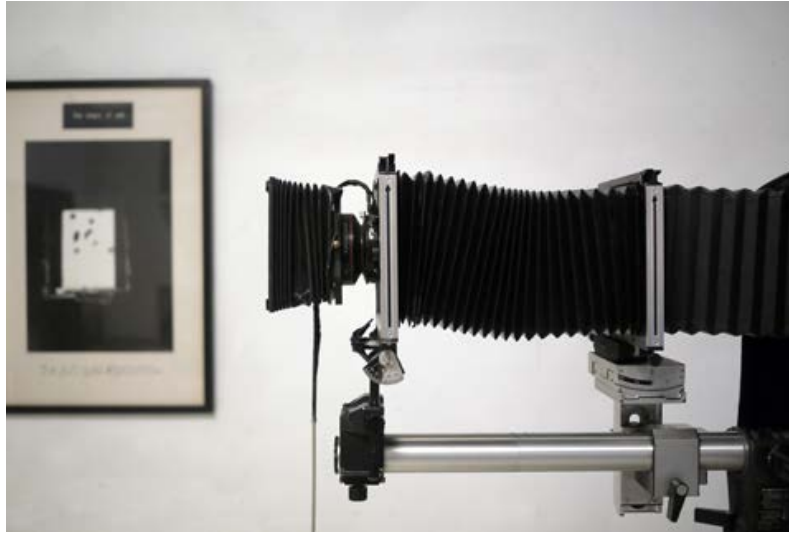
Your forthcoming exhibition *Facts (F*) I Love You* is up now at Friedman Benda. Often, the titles of your work allude to a narrative. What is the story behind the name of the show?**

I had a couple of candidates for a title of the show—"Other Nostalgias" and "Those Kisses?" But I guess the young and perceptive staff at Friedman Benda thought these titles a bit nostalgic. So we took a line from Tyler the Creator. I had just written a short piece on the sublime. Next to quotes from Immanuel Kant and

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Longinus, I mentioned lyrics from Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and Tyler the Creator's *I.F.H.Y.* It's one of the most beautiful love songs to come around since Frank Sinatra sang, "I'll Be Seeing You."



Several of your recent diptychs—such as *To Meyer With Love - Pairings 28*, and *Empiricism Doggy Style - Pairings 51*—show weaving layers of both sharp and diffuse streaks of forms extending through the frame. How do you see these photographic images in relation to the history of painting?

I moved from painting to photography in the late sixties having literally painted landscapes—lines with a paintbrush in the fields of Pennsylvania culminating in my dripping paint as I walked in the water where Washington once crossed the Delaware. I recorded these outdoor gestures with my camera, and then realized that the photos and texts that described them *were* the art. So around 1969 I started writing fictional stories, including love letters written on dark canvases to a fictional girl named Julia. My photographs have always evolved from the context of painting and they still do. In college my favorite painters were Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin, Frank Stella and Brice Marden, but at some point I had to graduate from that minimal aesthetic. As for the pairings in the show, there is often a visual correspondence between the two sides. However, each side of the pairing involves a disparate act. For example, in "Facts Fuck I Love You," the left side is the result of a menu corroding through rain, snow, and sun in the open air though a period of months. I found this image on the site of what was left of the Rainbow Diner. The diner had burned to the ground almost a year before. To produce the image on the right side, I shook some ribbons with the camera close up. This phenomenon took place in the space of a 16th of a second.



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I understand the inspiration for several of the photographic works, such as *Pairings 67*, was the site of a burned down diner you came across outside of New York City. What is it about the wreckage of this site that initially drew you closer? What were you surprised to take away from it?

The Rainbow Diner was a classic 1950's diner on Route 209 in a little town called Kerhonkson, near to where I have a country place. By the way, Hugh Lofting and family lived in my house in the early 1900's. He was the author of the Dr. Doolittle stories.

So the diner burned down to the ground about a year before I photographed its remains. It was deemed a polluted site because of asbestos etc. making it very expensive for the owner to clean up. So he left it there. When I first pulled over to look around, I found an old empty safe, a decimated jukebox with album covers flopping, lying flat on the ground, and the remnants of a bubblegum machine with all the plastic bubbles holding Star Wars characters strewn across the cement floor. Various remnants of texts were scattered about, such as menus and newspapers that now were embedded in the exposed floor of the diner. I had recently tried to reintroduce texts back into my work, but to no avail. I didn't want to repeat doing what I did in the early seventies—stories on the walls next to photos. But I liked the textures of this diner and the words "text" and "texture" come from the same Latin root "textura" meaning, "web" or "weaving." (In Greek, the word "tekhnē" means roughly "art.") That's pretty good isn't it? So there is an affinity between "text" and "texture," and it felt much better to use the remnants of these texts. By this time they were "ur" texts, too fragmented to make any kind of cohesive sense. They filled my need for nostalgia and at the same time a need for a new beginning. And that's where I felt I was—in a period of redefinition. Combining them with the more immediate free flowing ribbon photos worked very well.



Three wooden crucifix-like structures stand erect in the gallery space. The three wooden sculptures are progressively scaled to the size of child, a mother, and a larger than life father. Can you speak to the narrative power of personification within these art objects?

Of course these are pairings too. I thought of the idea sometime last summer when I came upon a big black mama bear foraging in the garbage for her cubs next to the garage at the country house. In 1974 I did a narrative work called "Three Bears" spun off from the story of Goldilocks. In the fairy tale, Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and a Baby Bear all had descending sized beds, porridge bowls, etc. something like a minimalist progression. Saint Andrew was burned on a particular kind of cross—an X with two horizontal bars near the top and the bottom. (It also looks like an easel.) Through a trick of fate that I won't get into, and the black room at Friedman Benda that reminds me of the good old days at the Hell Fire Club, I decided to do Saint Andrew's crosses, with designer cuffs for an affluent family of bears. She had a strange lack of humanity in her glassy stare. Talk about the female gaze. Luckily my cat, Oscar Wilde, came out and scared her away. So now when I walk into the gallery, I feel like Goldilocks.

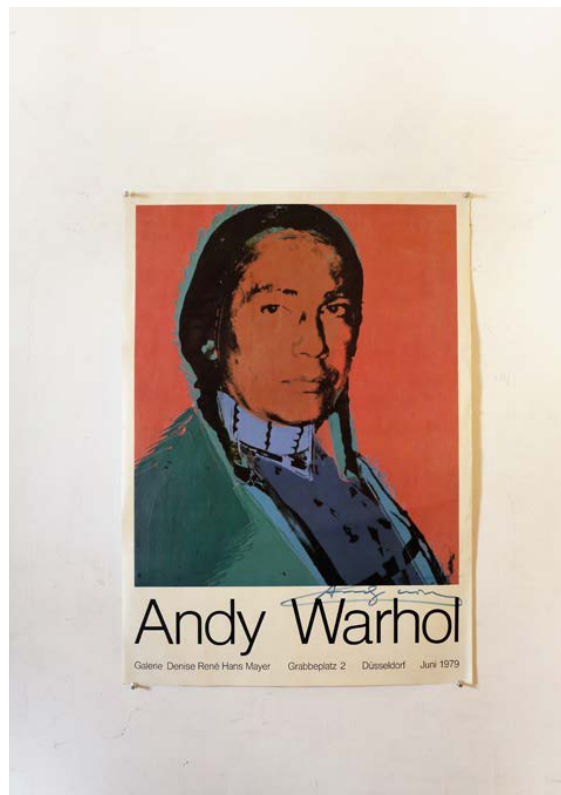
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How do you see writing as a part of your visual arts studio practice?

Writing and music have always kick-started my work. They take me away from self-conscious conceptualizing, which is always a mistake. Conceptualizing a series of work is pleasurable, but it comes in moments where I am preoccupied with other things including reading and writing. Seeing the photos through at the lab and organizing the financing of everything is entirely necessary, but it's basically work. So I write for a hobby. I love to. And one can spend a whole year or more immersed in writing a novel or a play, and only spend a few bucks on paper and ink. After I stopped putting texts on the wall circa 1979, I kept on writing, but I wrote longer things like essays, a pseudo memoir, and even a couple of plays. They are too long to put on the walls, and they work better as books. Stories begin through the simple juxtapositions of images, one against another.

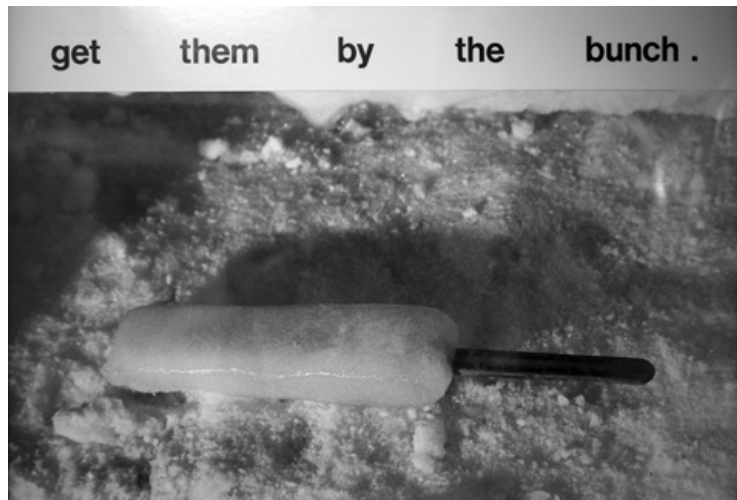


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You have worked with text many times throughout your career. We know that text and imagery operate as two separate types of languages. What is different about your approach to working with text today, as opposed to then?

Throughout the ages, text and image were two different ways of communicating. Technicalities of traditional media kept these two languages separate. Movable type made it much easier for letters to say what they wanted to say, but not for pictures. In any case, good writers are able to conjure up images through words. In the context of a novel, literal images get in the way. In the late sixties, early seventies, conceptual artists combined texts and images more so than most art had before, and I think conceptual art foresaw the age we are now in, when image and text are accepted as a single item. iPhones and laptops have no problem combining them. But can you believe it? At one time it was weird to put words on the wall as art. Language in art was most often reduced to a caption or to gossip. And, of course, there is art history.



Do you listen to music when you work in the studio? What type of music were you listening to when you made the diptych pairings?

It all depends on if I want to distract myself or loose myself. If I want to distract myself, I turn on NPR and listen to republicans sing songs about Obama. This gets me pissed off enough to work unselfconsciously. If I want to loose myself in my work and theirs, I listen to Bob Dylan's "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again," followed by Tyler the Creator's "I.F.H.Y.," followed by, Dylan's "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," followed by almost anything by Sam Amidon, followed by K.D. Lang's entire album *Hymns of the 49th Parallel*. I learned of Tyler the Creator through a young artist friend. I remember the first time my roommate lowered the needle to a vinyl recording of Bob's. I first met Sam as he was playing claw hammer banjo in the West 4th street subway station. Now he is with Nonesuch Records who also works with K.D. Lang.



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You had to take hundreds of photos to get one you were happy with. What are the constraints you placed to get these shots?

I need to take many photos to get one good one—particularly for the works like the “Dervishes,” where a few daisies spin upside down from Lego motors to create a kind of a whirl. This was also true of the shaking ribbon pieces. I normally shot these through a traditional 4x5 camera that you had to load and reload for each individual shot. Recently I switched to a digital camera so I could edit on the spot. I hate taking the subway to L.T.I. on 30th street to process the film. I am trying to make my life more pleasurable. Epicurus never took a subway.



How do your recent photos use the element of chance?

This is a story about Mike and Marie. Mike decided to have ham and eggs one morning at a country diner, not at home with his wife like he usually did. He had just had an argument with her about the affair she was having with a guy she met at the meat counter of Emanuel's, a grocery store near Stone Ridge. Ironically she was there buying rib-eye steaks because Mike said he wanted to do a barbeque. So that morning Mike gets in the pickup truck, drives south on Route 209, sees the Rainbow Diner and says to himself. “What the f***, I'll have breakfast here. She can f*** that guy for all I care.” And furthermore, he knows Marie, the cook. She's cute. So he goes back to the kitchen, says hi and chats her up a bit while she's frying up some eggs and bacon for a guy that doesn't care about his cholesterol because he's only twenty-six. But while they are talking, Mike feels a great need to have a Marlborough. He smokes them because even though he lives on the east coast, he imagines himself a cowboy. Not coincidentally, that very day he is wearing a cowboy hat and boots. So he says, “excuse me,” and walks out the back door and lights up a cigarette standing in the scraggly weeds that are growing out of the cracks of the tarmac.

Then he starts back inside, climbing the little metal staircase to the back of the kitchen. A can sets there by the back door. So he takes one last meaningful puff and tosses the butt in the can. Little does he know that the can is full of yesterday's bacon fat. So he walks back into the kitchen and continues his flirtations with the cook, and the innuendos get hotter and hotter, and just as they are about to kiss, they smell smoke. Soon the whole Rainbow Diner has burned to the ground. Luckily everyone gets out OK. And Mike and Marie use the whole incident as a way to be free that afternoon. They take a walk in the woods an f***. The last part is irrelevant to this story about chance. Whatever they did in the woods, the diner had already burned down. But if Mike had not had the argument that morning with his wife, because his wife had not met that guy at the meat department some time before, Mike would not have met Marie at the diner, and would not have flicked the cigarette in the can, and the Rainbow Diner would not have burned down, and I would have not taken those particular photographs. The Rainbow Diner is now a heap of ashes and textures in the aftermath of that spectacular fire.

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How do you define beauty?

It is best defined by applying it to an object, not considering it as an abstraction. It's always something frameable in your sight and pleasurable. It is too simple to say it is in the eye of the beholder or solely in the person or object adored. It is collaboration between two parties on many levels. Beauty is a good criteria for choosing a mate. Lucky for us, because beauty prefers health, happiness and symmetry. Ever wonder why most everything on the outside of a body is symmetrical? That's because we see it and we select people who are basically symmetrical because symmetry shows that you and your genes can get things right on both sides of the line. Sure, on the inside our lungs are symmetrical, but most everything else on the inside, the liver, the pancreas, the heart, are not symmetrically situated because when we chose a mate, we don't get to see the inside of them unless there is a tragic accident.

Most compositions are not symmetrically organized. But the framing parts—the sides of the rectangle that encompass the image, the top and the bottom, the left and the right sides of the photo or canvas are usually the same. If they were not, we would probably be a little annoyed. The painting says, "OK, look at me. Whatever is askew in a good way inside my borders, my outside silhouette is symmetrical, just like yours." The dark side of beauty, the sublime, is more complex. It is beauty riddled with terror, ultimately the terror of the void. That's what's so frightening, the emptiness of the void. It's like facing the dark abyss, "L'Origine du monde" as Courbet suggested, or fearing the person you love will no longer be there, or losing your 'self' in a way that you know you will never come back.

Studio photos by Callie Barlow

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