



HOUSE CALLS

In a Soho Loft, New York City's 1970s Art Scene Lives On



[Bill Beckley, seated in his dining room under a wall painting by Sol LeWitt alongside Beckley's own work, 'Shoulder Blade', 1978. All photos by [Cameron Blaylock](#).]

Guarded by a languorous King Charles Spaniel and Maine Coon cat, Bill Beckley takes a moment to answer the door at his Soho loft. When he finally does, the bespectacled artist—a veteran of New York's **1970s conceptual scene**—is garbed in one of his signature dandy prints. Seated at a table made for for him by

Wisniewski, Katherine. "In a SoHo Loft, New York City's 1970s Art Scene Lives On," Curbed. August 3, 2015.

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an Amish carpenter during a trip to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, he divulges that his **Wooster Street loft** was not his first New York apartment. "Before this, I lived in a sailboat docked on City Island." With an impish grin, he adds, "I would row from City Island and take the bus to Sheridan Square where The Village Voice would distribute the day's apartment listings at 6 a.m. sharp."

Beckley's daily ritual came to a close when artist Gordon Matta-Clark, a close friend of Beckley's, suggested he move into the space below his own. The year was **1972**, and Soho was the Wild West plopped into Downtown Manhattan. Building codes were lenient, police lackadaisical, and *space*—there was just so much space.



[Sol LeWitt's minimalist 'T' sculpture takes priority in the dining room, while Beckley's eclectic vinyl collection sits in the corner.]

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[Beckley's desk is littered with family photo, potted plants, and smaller prints of his later work.]

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"There was **no water, no walls, no toilet**," Beckley elucidates "We didn't even call it Soho, it was just 'Downtown.'" The interior walls, all built by Beckley, came up in spurts as need demanded. As evidenced by the mountain bike in the corner, Bill shares his expansive **3,000-square-foot** loft with his two sons, Tristan and Liam, and wife, artist Laurie Johnenning. The rooms are unplanned and barely measured, but the apartment's inherent sprawl is endearing. The ceiling, dyed permanently by a bead factory that used to inhabit the space, has been futilely painted white time and time again. "I don't remember when we finally got it to stick," says Beckley as he glances upward.



[Beckley's mantle is graced with his work 'Cake Story.' Below, sit some of Laurie Johnenning's sculptures.]

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Littered with ephemera, Beckley's home has become a scrapbook of sorts. Perched on his table is a Christmas card from **former student Keith Haring**, tacked on the living room wall is Vito Acconci's "[Trademarks](#)," above his bed is a signed gift from Andy Warhol, and, perhaps most delightfully of all, adorning his mirror is **Louise Bourgeois's rap album**. He says, "It's a limited print." These rarified objects rub shoulders with receipts, '80s pop albums, exhibition pamphlets, business cards, a tricycle carried over from his childhood home—from the seemingly mundane to the outright bewitching, these relics serve as living testaments to Beckley's life as an artist.



In the dining room lies a familiar sight: a wall drawing by **Sol LeWitt**. Beckley simply asked LeWitt to do it, and with the promise of a trade for Beckley's 'Elements of Romance,' LeWitt obliged. Nicked and torn, the priceless wall drawing betrays three decades of spilled drinks, rearranged furniture, and a philosophy towards art that is none too precious. Like the apartment itself, its pedigree is belied by an unshakeable scruffiness that, in spite of itself, is charming.

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[Bill Beckley's 'Preposition Paddles' flank 'Dervish 4, Bayrami,' a piece that debuted in 2007.]



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Take a left past the dining room, amble past the baby grand piano and an exhaustive collection of early film cameras, and there, whitewashed from floor to ceiling, is Beckley's expansive, surgically clean studio. He ambles over to his 1971 piece *Short Stories for Popsicles* and begins to carelessly leaf through *recherché* prints, strewn haphazardly about. Beckley is in the midst of curating the [inaugural show of his work for Albertz Benda](#). "Everything," he says, "is from 1968 to 1978." Glancing around, he points out, "It's rare that an artist is allowed to curate his own legacy."



[Beckley's cat, Oscar Wilde, shows off some of the artist's 1970s creations.]

Whereas some collect art, Beckley seems to collect stories. Rene Ricard, Gordon Matta-Clark, Andy Warhol, Louise Bourgeois, Phillip Glass, Sol LeWitt, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jean-Michel Basquiat—the impressive roster of guests that rolls off his tongue reads like a syllabus in a 1970s conceptual art class. Some are alive; most not.

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Outside, the European tourists milling about the Cassina showroom feel decidedly separate. It's almost as if they belonged to a future that, from the window of this madcap Soho loft, never even happened



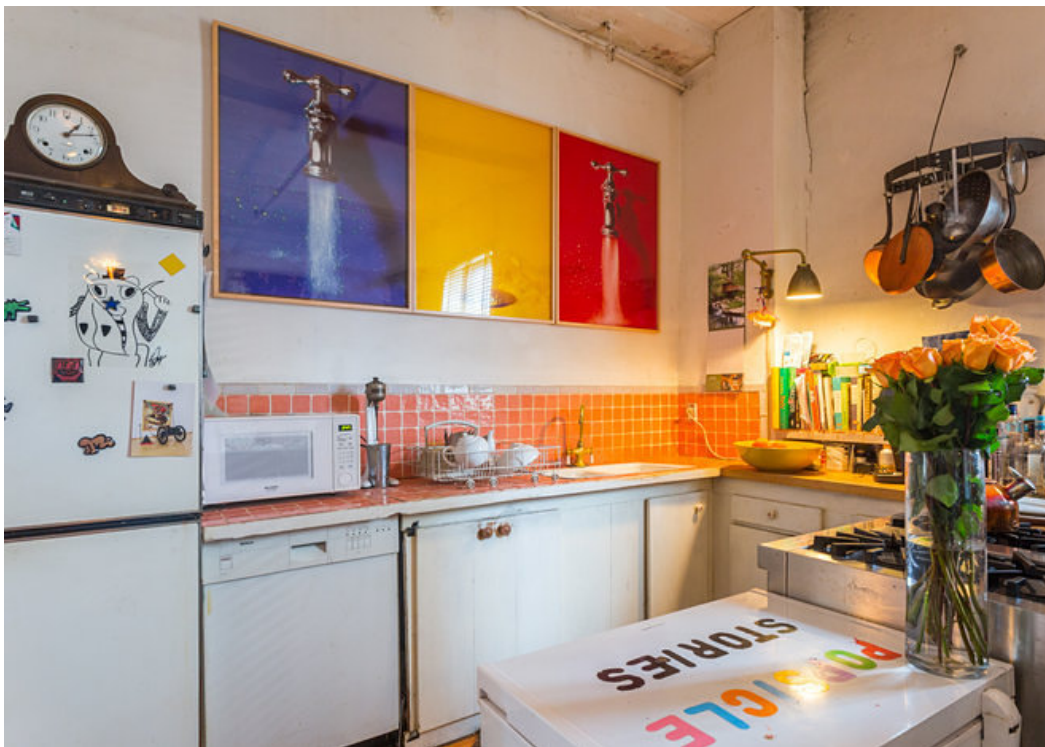
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[Bill's seminal 1975/1994 piece 'Hot and Cold Faucets with Drain' bedecks—what else—the kitchen sink.]



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[Film cameras were pivotal in Beckley's early work, especially his narrative art. Now, they reside in his studio.]



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[The bathroom of the loft is in dire need of fresh paint, but, despite that, the claw-footed tub and marble sink echo the sumptuous luxury of a Roman bath.]



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