

Art in America

BILL BECKLEY

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TONY SHAFRAZI

by tim maul



NEW YORK

Bill Beckley's early '70s projects at 112 Greene Street were reported in *Avalanche* magazine and brought him to the attention of a network of European galleries where frugal variations of Conceptual art found a loyal audience. "Etcetera," at Tony Shafrazi, allowed those unfamiliar with Beckley's dense oeuvre the locally rare opportunity to view works from the beginning of his career to the present. His installations and performances survive only in documentation, most of which was shown here for the first time. Featuring animals, re-enactments of American myths and original one-note-per-word musical scores, his fanciful, romantic early work stood apart from the rugged Post-Minimal esthetic of the '70s. Nostalgia drives much of Beckley's art. For *Short Story for Hopscotch* (1971), a white hopscotch pattern and an observational

story have been silkscreened over a grid of black tiles situated on the floor à la Carl Andre. Noting that the reception of Conceptual, Land, body and performance art were all

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dependent on photography and descriptive text, Beckley co-opted these documentary forms to build layered narrative fictions which exploited the misregistrations that occur when applying what you read to what you see. *The Origin of And* (1972) demonstrates a natural grasp of semiotics; Beckley's inventive photographic eye serves a dislocating tale detailing, in four panels of black-and-white photographs and text, the (false) origins of the word "and." In *Drop and Bucket* (1975), a photograph of a drop of water hovers between an upper image of a faucet and a lower one of a pail-the inverted triangle of the central image's shape is undoubtedly meant to direct the drip into the bucket. Brice Marden's abutted painted panels and Frank Stella's shaped canvases influenced Beckley's multipanel presentations of original photos and crisply printed, elliptical texts, which often involve erotic observations. *Deirdre's Lip* (1978), included in the 1979 Whitney Biennial, is a major work in what could be referred to as "Story" art. Its scale (approximately 8 by 14 feet) may not surprise now but it did then; a train engine trails smoke across most of a woman's red-lipsticked upper lip, which is flanked by a text quoting words overheard from a phone booth. Below are three manifestations of warm speech in cold air-i.e., clouds of breath-aligned in Judd-like progression. Beckley chose the Cibachrome color process for its archival longevity and hard glossy surface, the manufactured sensuality of which advanced the photograph as an art object. This was a fairly new road to take in the late '70s.

New imaging technologies have allowed Beckley to produce monumentally scaled prints that are technical achievements. In 2001 he began a serial engagement with "pure" photography: flowers seem to waltz by in intoxicated slow motion, green stems execute ballet positions and glassware melts into pools of color a New York School painter would have envied. *Photo: Bill Beckley: Short Story for Hopscotch, 1971, silkscreen on rubber tiles, 12 by 7 feet; at Tony Shafrazi.*

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