

Parachute
no. 115, Para-para, no. 015, p. 6
August 1st, 2004

Robert Beck

CRG Gallery

— By Tory Dent

The ongoing American political debate about gun control versus the constitutional right to bear arms plays a central role in Robert Beck's conceptual exhibition "New Work." Comprised of only six objects, each work is radically disparate in material and context - so much so that when one enters the gallery space, Beck's exhibition initially could be read as a group show by six different artists operating under a similar premise. Photography, sculpture, found objects, painting and charcoal drawing are juxtaposed, incurring a sense of visual dislocation that stirs up both intimate and aggressive emotions. The decision to display the pieces without wall texts encourages viewers to perceive the exhibit as a whole, and to consider the relationship of objects to one other rather than simply in themselves, promoting a contemplation of the context produced by the metonymy of their construction.

Viewers first encounter the stainless steel found object Untitled (2004) - a public bathroom stall partition displaying graffiti and its erasure by different coats of paint, obscenities asserted then censored - and are confronted by the subversive underworld of aggression and sublimated sexual and political frustration. The architectural fragment Wall Ceiling ("Bless This House") (2004) features an insulated wall, standing upright (but inverted), with the presumed ceiling positioned at a right angle near the floor. An ornately framed poem, a memento of American kitsch, hangs upside down on the wall and reads "Bless this house/Oh Lord we pray/Make it safe/By night and day." As if blown apart by tornado or hurricane, the shamble of a structure resembles the remnant of war-torn landscape, a sight so familiar that viewers may be all but anaesthetized. An image of Jesus Christ, Screen Memory (Mother's Room) (2003), rendered in black-and-white photography, appears ghostly as it looms behind delicate drapes partially opened. It hangs with the prominence of a crucifix on the gallery's end wall. By utilizing mainstream techniques of postmodernism such as refraining and defamiliarization, Beck's domestic artifacts operate more as a pastiche of the home, items eerily void of history and memory for which no recognition genuinely resonates.

By contrast, the work "Glove Skinning" (Bruised) (The Modern Man's Guide to Life by Denise Boyles, Alan Rose, and Alan Wellikoff) (2003), which appropriates and magnifies a page from a "how to" manual demonstrating the skinning of a rabbit, can be construed as pro-gun. The supposed authenticity of the drawing amplifies the deeply-rooted tradition in right-wing American culture to hunt, which remains a cornerstone of the NRA argument (though a majority of arms sold at gun shows are inappropriate for hunting). Yet in the middle of the gallery, functioning like a traffic island that guides viewers in one direction or the other and serves as the locus or nexus from which meaning endlessly recycles its "play" of sign and signifier, sits Beck's sculpture 01/25/04 - Shots No. 12, 13, 14 (Daly Over/Under at Close Range with .12 Gauge "Punkin' Ball Slug") (2004). Three buckets similar to containers used for spackle or other construction material have been filled with mortician's wax, also referred to as wound filler. Beck shot a "punkin' ball slug" (a shell with a ball of gunpowder on the end, very different from the shotgun shell) into each bucket at close range. While the shotgun shell is scattershot, the "punkin' ball" is more exact in its mark, producing cavernous, frightening holes in the buckets of wound filler. Wounding the wound filler demonstrates the irony and poignancy with which visitors are forced to witness, with a degree of acceptance and ineptitude, the omnipresence of violence.

Meaning in Beck's work is derived associatively - each piece operates like a Rorschach blot sending the viewer off on a journey of self-discovery. This process of internal awareness ideally instigates a subsequent sense of political enlightenment. Hence viewers become another element of the exhibition, questioning their relationship not only to the pieces but to culture as well. Beck challenges the willingness to look for relationships and, more importantly, to take responsibility for the ways in which individuals unknowingly become complicit in culture's (re)production of violence. Aggressive and intimate responses alternate: as violence is witnessed, the need for security increases, as well as the urge for retaliation, eliciting angry instincts which in turn surrender one to the longing for home and protection. Caught in a spiral of polarized reactions, the viewer is provoked to identify with terrorist impulses. Along with this identification, otherwise submerged in a kind of collective cultural conditioning of its denial, channeled almost exclusively through expressions of mourning and mystification, a nostalgia for an "original" America, now marred and lost, is born. The diptych Untitled ("Afterimage") (2004) underscores this idea. One half depicts the American flag represented in green and a canary yellow to substitute for the red, white and blue of this national icon. The other half is left blank, save for a small sticker in the lower right-hand corner that states "Made in the USA." Emptiness and futility replace patriotic pride.

Although Beck claims in interviews to take a non-partisan stance on gun control, opting for portrayal rather than advocacy as his primary artistic motive, clearly he is invested in the topic. Through the various media he uses he attempts to propose yet refuses to conclude. He presents, ostensibly, without comment. Once Beck steps toward a definitive statement he just as definitively backs off, constantly throwing in twists to defeat a cohesive sense of message. The thread the viewer must construct to connect Beck's meaning in a dot-to-dot fashion is tenuous at best, but is it this very fragility, and sense of confused groping toward comprehension of self and culture, that Beck actually intends? The portrayal of this fragility is one that is potent in its potential to incite questioning and disturb platitudinal presuppositions. The fragmentation of the transcendental American trinity of God, Country and Home as a presumed unity appears to be precisely what Beck wants to represent as now existing only through the evidence of its decomposition.

The author has published What Silence Equals (1993) and HIV, Mon Amour (1999) and writes art reviews for various publications.