

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A SPANDEX TUXEDO

GENE BEERY

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OUT OF ORDER!: Gene Beery, Rogue Conceptualist

Text by Lucy R. Lippard, 2022

Gene Beery may never have been considered Most Likely to Succeed, although doubters over the years have been proved wrong so often that now he and his supporters are laughing all the way up the rocky road to the mainstream. Yet he continues to be a model for artists resisting the markets that impose order on the art world. This is an artist who kissed no asses during his brief stay in New York, the heart of the beast (1959-63). He has followed his own path ever since, never abandoned by his supporters, Sol LeWitt and Jim Rosenquist among them.

It was Beery who found a small loft on the Lower East Side; when another opened up, LeWitt moved in and later Adrian Piper came, making 117 Hester Street a microcosm of three short generations of iconic conceptual artists, all of whom were outsiders at that time, all of whom broke the rules. I lived nearby on the Bowery with Robert Ryman. We both worked at MoMA (along with Beery, LeWitt, Dan Flavin, and other soon-to-be known figures). Ryman was a jazz musician transitioning to an artist and Beery was an artist influenced by jazz improvisation. His contribution to my 1969-70 “numbers shows” brought a much-needed dose of humor to my earnest endeavors.

Beery knows the art world well, having participated peripherally during his time in New York and marginally ever since. In 1963 he received a major grant and had his first solo show. Then he left. He could have remained in the city and become an inside contender or outside court jester, but he chose to follow a very different path. After stops in Racine, Stinson Beach, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Petaluma, he settled with his wife, Florence Merritt, and her three children plus their eventual two on their Logoscape Ranch in Sutter Creek, California, isolated in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. At a time when so many artists were doing their damndest to make art that was not just about life, but entered life, Beery’s art was part of his family.

If Beery belongs to any of the “movements” he has stalked and evaded over the years (expressionism, conceptualism, pop, folk), it might be Dada, closed down by fascists in the 1930s for its in-your-face irreverence, blasphemy, and politics. Conceptual art was just emerging when Beery began to focus on words. Since he “did not like doing the same thing as everyone else,” he found a way to hang onto words but take them

on wild detours that made conventional conceptual art, intentionally non-visual, look dull. Beery maintained his integrity over the next decades as some of his conceptual colleagues were selling out to the very forces they were supposed to supplant.

At first glance, there is nothing particularly clever about Beery's clunky phrases. What brings them into focus is their satirical edge and their presentation as paintings, alien invaders. So in a sense his work is "formalist" though hardly within the Greenbergian dogma. (SOME WORDS ARE WORTH A THOUSAND PICTURES.) At times, Beery has resorted to "energy blobs" like spilled ink, as though his casual lettering wasn't message enough. Critics have often commented on the "painterly" quality of Beery's works, grasping at straws to keep his work in the painting fold it seems to have escaped decades ago. But for all his resistance, it is the art context, which often welcomes misfits, that validate his art. At one point in the 1970s, Beery offered up a self *Advertisement* in which he named his "Singular-Titanic" genres: "visual percussionist and 2-dimensional energist," creator of "Logoscapes - Glart -pitchers." Exhorting the viewer to "BUY SOME NOW" he skillfully summarizes the career process most artists prefer to ignore even while immersed in it. A work from the 2000s asks rhetorically WHAT IS THE FORMULA FOR ORIGINALITY? the last word in pink superimposed over "the Grimly Amusing."

For several periods, Beery mostly abandoned all frippery like color, composition, or conventional esthetics for wonky scrawled black and white texts. So the words have to count for everything, commenting on the unlikely contexts in which they appear. When color does enter the picture, it's often for a reason, as in *MERE DECORATION* (1976) – blue lettering on a dull yellow ground bordered by green. The irony lies in the play between the decidedly undecorative effect of the painting and a jab at the mainstream's fondness for contentless surfaces. I have to admit that I find Beery's decade (roughly 1965-75) of color and decorative trimmings less compelling than the sketchier black and white works – my own puritanism at work. In that decade of the pared down conceptual minimalist apogee, he may once again have been trying to avoid doing anything anyone else was doing. A genuine populist (not the MAGA variety), Beery describes himself as "a folk artist making art for a folk without art."²

From the mid 1970s to mid 80s, with no studio and no time, working to support his large family, Beery abandoned painting. Artists' books filled the void. But had he not made the paintings, barging into the sacred cow of the visual arts, his innovations

would have been buried as “minor arts.” When several of us surrounding LeWitt founded Printed Matter, the (unachieved) goal was to place artists’ books in airports and drugstores. Beery’s work would have been among the few comfortable as genuine public art. However, we realized early on, the form of the artist’s book may have been a perfect fit, but its experimental content was not.

Over the decades, Beery’s art has seemed to some a flash in the avant-garde pan. But sixty years later, know what? IT’S STILL HERE!

¹ This was the title and content of an early painting, sparked by the “Out of Order” sign on one of Jean Tinguely’s anarchic machine sculptures when it was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

² Beery quoted by Jo Melvin in “Between the Eyes Painting Gene Beery: Paravisual Painter of Word Signs,” in *Gene Beery* (Fribourg: Fri Art Kunsthalle Fribourg/Mousse Publishing, 2019), p. 49.

Gene Beery (b. 1937 in Racine, WI; lives and works in Sutter Creek, CA). The artist’s first retrospective was organized by the Fri Art Kunsthalle, Fribourg, Switzerland in 2019. Recent solo exhibitions include those held at Derosia, New York (2020), Cushion Works, San Francisco (2019), Shoot the Lobster, Los Angeles, CA (2017) and Jan Kaps, Cologne, Germany (2016). Recent institutional group exhibitions include *AOULIOULE*, curated by Sylvie Fanchon and Camila Oliveira Fairclough, Musée régional d’art contemporain Occitanie, Serignan, France (forthcoming); *The Drawing Centre Show*, curated by Franck Gautherot, Seungduk Kim, Tobias Pils and Joe Bradley, Le Consortium, Dijon, France (2022), and *Stop Painting*, organized by Peter Fischli, Fondazione Prada, Venice, Italy (2021). The artist’s work has also been included in historical group presentations, including the *1975 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (1975); and *955,000*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada (1970) and *557,087*, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA (1969), both curated by Lucy Lippard.