

Seth Becker – *Other Music* – CASTLE

The rectangle is the jumping-off point and landing pad at once in Seth Becker's productive universe. Each composition is contained within the time stamp of one sitting, though the final images are layered over previous paintings. Stacked on top of one other, each compositional field provides visual information for the next strata. A rock might dictate the formation of a tree and that tree might become an inferno as progressions are made through each incarnation...He circumnavigates the roadblocks posed by "style" as he moves through a composition, instead applying in multifarious modes, whether thick, thin, sprayed, washed, or troweled. What remains a constant is Becker's awareness of the materiality and its varying reactions to the panel's surface.

Becker forages for images in his life, amassing an inventory from Weltanschauung, or his particular worldview. Working full time at a public library in upstate New York, he revels in the rows of books that constitute his daily surroundings. Likewise, he spends a lot of time on eBay tracking sales of vintage photographs. While sifting through the literature and online databases, literal and mental images swarm his mindscape, though specific source imagery has been inexplicitly confined to material that predates 1940.

Certain paintings from Max Liebermann's oeuvre appear as historical precedents for Becker's own productions. In both *Rider on the Beach* (1904) and *The Yacht Race* (1924) Liebermann's loose brushwork is demonstrated in the blurry evocations of seaside happenings. The first image illustrates a rider and knee-deep horse wading through frenetic surf, and in the second he conjures a placid congregation of people observing the yacht-packed harbor. Neither pictorial formulation specifies its contexts or subjects, as this German Impressionist largely focused on bucolic landscapes and the quotidian pleasures of the leisure class.

Archaeologist contains the same frenzied energies of Goya's *The Dog*, as both images see their mortal subjects cast into disappearing environments. Becker's manifestation sees the crop of a hillside and its titular worker pulling bones from the excavated landscape. Another such example, *Boy with Rabbit*, illustrates a suited figure, whose face is cast in shadowed anonymity as he clutches a rabbit in one arm. This specter of a person is reminiscent of Kokoschka's nebulous portraiture, with a similar brown palette and intense brushwork. Some of the grit in these compositions likewise reaches back to the tenets of Expressionism and its Neo rebirth, as the move away from abstraction, conceptualism, and minimalism was ducked in favor of an updated approach to the figurative paradigm.

Real photo postcards (RPPC) are also a frequent touchstone in Becker's practice. The producers of these images remain largely anonymous in the annals of history, save for the few that gained moderate recognition. The democratization of images was booming at the same time as a byproduct of photography's advent and the proliferation of the medium's vernacular dimension. Typical intonations of American living become the productive valve from which these documentarians cull their material. In a remarkable illuminating book on the subject, Lucy Sante writes that "the photo postcard is a vast, teeming, borderless body of work that might as well have a single, hydra-headed author, a sort of Homer of the small towns and prairies." A certain freedom came with this form of production, as the photographers were largely divorced from the medium's historical conceits. Sante writes that it all began with the need to do a job, "but also to record things faithfully, to include as many details of a scene as the frame could contain, to hold up a

mirror to that bit of the world shared with the clientele,” going so far as “to make the familiar strange, simply by noticing things.”

This will to notice is a key point of departure for Becker, just as these postcards work to concretize a place, a memory, an imaginal idea. He, too, observes the contortions in early twentieth-century comics. As his own images metamorphize over time, Becker shares this open-ended sensibility of early cartoons. While the painter occupies a position of frankness, the expression of details is markedly sidestepped. After all, Becker is not confined to the limitations of photography or cartoons, but rather, attached to the expansive field of painting. The surface textures are a veil that the eye dances along with, one focuses on the distinct peaks and valleys of paint, then abandons the tactile dimension in favor of the loose imaginal one.

Form and content coalesce, reflecting the murky waters of memory. The mysterious elements of language and sound also dance about as Becker works through his paintings. His studio is constantly occupied by sounds emanating from speakers, the painter guided by the rhythms of musicians like Louis Armstrong and Kostas Bezos. The notes of provincialism here are derived from Becker’s immediate context, that of Wappingers Falls. An artist’s practice is inextricably linked to experience, as he or she must phenomenologically deal with the world. As such, this show reflects Becker’s pursuit of quasi-legibility and his own awareness of paint’s materiality in conjunction with its surface-wise specificity.

Reilly Davidson

Seth Becker (b. 1987, Queens, New York; lives and works in Wappingers Falls, NY). He received his MFA in painting from The New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture (2017), where he was also an adjunct professor (2019-2022). Recent solo exhibitions include *Field Music* at Pamela Salisbury, Hudson, NY (2023); *Meadow* at Pamela Salisbury, Hudson, NY (2022). Recent group exhibitions include *Rear View*, LGDR, New York, NY (2023); *Night Light*, Cob Gallery, London, UK (2022); *Small Paintings, Venus Over Manhattan*, New York, NY (2022).