

Kenneth Lawrence Beaudoin

In the Hands of a Poet

December 13th 2024 – March 1st 2025

Tops Gallery
400 S Front street
Memphis, TN 38103

Tops Gallery is pleased to present *In the Hands of a Poet* an exhibition of Kenneth Lawrence Beaudoin's Eye-Poems.

In the 1940's the poet Kenneth Beaudoin (1913-1995) was living in Manhattan where he operated Galerie Neuf and was publishing a literary and art magazine called *Iconograph*. At some point in the 1940's his own poetry began to break from traditional lyricism to a more experimental form of collaged works that he termed Eye-Poems. In these works, words and images were cut out of magazines and combined in a way that put the form of the collage and the linguistic content on an equal footing. Beaudoin's use of the found word rather than the conceived word led to verse that was more obscure while the handmade nature of the works gave them an intimate quality.

By the early 1950's Beaudoin had returned to Memphis where he had previously attended the West Tennessee State Teachers College, (University of Memphis). In Memphis, Beaudoin would be at the nexus of the city's literary, art and countercultural community as well as continuing correspondence with established poets including William Carlos Williams, E.E. Cummings, Randall Jarrell and Jonathan Williams. For decades Beaudoin hosted a well known salon out of his home that attracted many regional writers and artists and he created the Gem Stone Awards to encourage the production of poetry in the Mid South. These awards combined two of Beaudoin's life-long passions— rock collecting and poetry. They were open to poets of all abilities. They attracted entries from established poets, school children, incarcerated prisoners and even enlisted soldiers.

For three decades Beaudoin's day job was as a clerk in the criminal intelligence division of the Memphis Police Department. In a 1995 article in the *Commercial Appeal* Beaudoin noted the value of this work, "My police job kept me close to human beings in tense situations." For a poet who was concerned with the everyday and the world around him, being a daily witness to dire situations brought an edge to what was routine.

Beaudoin would produce his Eye-Poems for over three decades. These works, along with handmade books of poetry, were often presented as gifts to his circle of artist and writer friends. Many Eye-Poems were seen in small scale reproduction in the handmade mimeographed books that he produced. Beaudoin's Eye-Poems were an everyday domestic kind of art. His friend the artist John McIntire fondly recalls Beaudoin's creative process: "He would just sit in the middle of piles of magazines and books, cutting, gluing, and smoking." By the early 1980's Beaudoin had lost his eye sight and no longer produced these works. The Eye-Poems that are being exhibited at Tops were produced in the early 1970's with a handful from the late 1960's.

During his lifetime Beaudoin's poems were published in a variety of literary forms including books of collected poems, literary magazines, self-published tracts and mimeographed broadsides. Currently all of his work is out of print.

This exhibition is organized in collaboration with the artist Dale McNeil.