



"Fred Halsted's paintings titled "Secret Places" sometimes balance on the edge of hard-edge considerations but generally consist of understated color shapes culled from landscape elements and interwoven with each other in almost a collage manner. The artist forces the spectator to slowly enter the secret places his uneven paintings provide."
-Los Angeles Times, June 10, 1977.

When critics use the word "uneven," it is often because they cannot categorize the work. The above review of S/M pornographer Fred Halsted's paintings (more on him later) is just one of countless examples. Consistency often equals a knowable "body" of work – a traceable outline to describe the bulk of an artist's production. Consistency is normalized.

Jarrold Beck's work in the past has been architectural, dingy and labyrinthine. Think Monica Bonvicini if she could be bothered to let a little (actual) dirt and filth in. He built "secret places" – zones to look and be looked upon erotically. Beck's newest spate of work continues his engagement with architectural space, but departs drastically from his previous work in the manner of presentation. Instead of a multitude of materials spread/hung/built/lain scattershot, the new work is comprised of relic-like sculptures and drawings. Quietude is privileged over messiness, and sometimes the process is self-contained and singular. Such is the case with the large graphite drawing *Belly* (2010). Torso-like and tectonic, the drawing was made by tracing edges of a plexiglass fragment and filing it down as the drawing progressed. In Beck's words, "a form is built while the tool dissolves." The resulting line moves and mutates, and while the application of graphite is even, the form shifts and transmits a kind of instability. In addition to the large drawings he has made a series of small plaster sculptures – deemed "limbs" – ridged, precarious, and subtle. What we are left with is an ethnographic display of studio practices, externalized as bodily and interior spaces.

And yet the break between past and current practices is not so definite for Beck. This is reflected in the choice of work for the BACKROOM, as the show includes two works from 2005, a delicate drawing of eyes, and a plaster fragment – lost and found from previous installations. The drawing recalls the artist's first show:

[My first show was] a quasi-backroom at the Leslie Lohman Foundation. One entered the space from a hatch in the sidewalk down a steel stair painted black, an unmarked double door. A dark hallway had display cases which I filled with my first "eye" drawings. These drawings were edits of an archive of photographs that entrapped me. To renovate the memories they froze, I selected small moments, a harvest, a careful selection placed on a white page. For me they were photographs, over-exposed to the point of blindness, pieces of bodies swallowed in light.

Beck's drawing practice is entrenched in the display of queer desires, an eye looks at art just as sure as it cruises the patrons at an opening. Context – BACKROOM after back room – pushes the association further. This desire doesn't appear to be as readable in his sculptures, which are informed as much by architectural processes (sawing, connecting) as by landscape (eroding, aggregating). Perhaps they are instead informed by Beck's recently acquired parcel of land out in the Texan desert, or his participation in the Land Arts of the American West in 2006, a program that explores "the intersection of geomorphology and human construction."¹ Landscape is evident in the titling of the show, taking its name from a series of abstract cloud pictures taken by the Modernist photographer Alfred Stieglitz called *Equivalents*.

"Unevenness" is a trope well-known to contemporary queer producers – as fragmentation, duplicity and isolation are not only hallmarks of the Postmodern condition, but are also the vestiges of the historic positions queers (LGBT folks) have been forced to inhabit for at least a century. Perhaps no one personifies this more than Fred Halsted, who is best known for his film *L.A. Plays Itself* (1972), one of two gay pornos residing in the archives of the Museum of Modern Art (the other film is *The Sex Garage* (1972) – also by Halsted). The structure of *L.A. Plays Itself* is bifurcated, featuring two sequences filmed in disparate ways. In the first, an encounter between a blonde youth and a brown-haired hiker is filmed in the friendly wilderness of Decker canyon. The sex is sweet, and the camera lovingly rests on each part of the sex act, every now and then moving to the natural world – a flower or bug (in fact Halsted referred to the film more than once as a film primarily "about

bugs."). This part of Halsted's film we can think about connecting to Beck's "limb" and plaster sculptures. Bright and stacked precariously as the rock in Decker Canyon, the color is chalky and calcified – bone white. It is as though Beck's sculptures were left out in the desert to harden and bleach. The sex is subcutaneous, making itself known in the minutiae of glacial and geological movement, in the careful (human) stacking of pieces and parts. The second part of Halsted's film is set within the cruise strips of Los Angeles (are we thinking about that "eye" drawing, yet?), and features Fred Halsted in a two-story apartment whipping, beating, and finally fisting Joey Yale, Halsted's longtime romantic partner and collaborator. This section is noticeably darker than the first, and likewise Beck's drawings are noticeably darker than his sculpture – the delicate lines of the eyes in contrast to the heavy lines of *Belly*. It's worth remembering that "heavy" does not only represent a quality of line but a kind of sex as well.

Not content to rest comfortably in one style, Halsted chose two (or more). He shares this trait with some of the best artists of the past 60 years: Paul Thek, Carolee Schneemann, and Robert Rauschenberg to name but three examples. And I daresay he shares this with Jarrold Beck. Even though Beck is young and early in his career, he has already slipped through numerous modes of making, this show exhibiting only two. It is difficult to brand such a shifting practice, and yet, Beck continues to make large-scale installations and small-scale objects that rely on constant slippage. For me, this becomes the test of an artist's resolve to adhere to that most magical of processes – the willing transfer of belief that is the space between art-making and art-viewing. Inequity is at the heart of this exchange, and artwork that is "uneven" allows more space for an audience to maneuver its own sense of viewership, while insisting that such cracked foundations are part and parcel of a queer history of making and viewing.

-Andy Campbell

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