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WAXTER

# ARTFORUM

NEW YORK | CRITICS' PICK

**Hilary Berseth**

By Zack Hatfield | March 1, 2019



Hilary berseth, *Cleaved Slates Stacked*, 2017–18, graphite and fixative on paper, 23 x 18 x 18".

With paper and pencil, Hilary Berseth has drawn in exacting detail life's less charismatic roadside attractions—rocks, sticks, bones—and fashioned sculptures mistakable for what they depict. Inspired by the scenery of Pennsylvania's Tohickon Creek, they possess a rugged whimsicality, like a dust-bowl pop-up book. On plinths or suspended by string, the artworks appear parched and brittle, unable to withstand a human sneeze. Behold how the heaped, lichened stones of *Cleaved Slates Stacked*, 2017–18, attached with tiny notch joints, elude gravity. Peer inside the stippled cave of *Model 5*, 2012, a conical mobile twirling in a corner. A doe's skeleton has been reconfigured; its skull dangles by a window, while the rest of it forms a helix nearby.

No new muse for Berseth, nature: In a lovely twist on art colonies or Koonsian factories, he has previously outsourced labor to thousands of honeybees to construct otherworldly hives. As in the work of Vija Celmins—whose influence especially looms in *Moon and stars*, 2018, a nightscape diorama spied through a peephole—the artist's hand is disappeared through every stroke, through every additional minute of impeccable toil. Berseth's mute models appear locked in dialogue with photography (how easily the show could have shared a title with William Henry Fox Talbot's landmark book, *The Pencil of Nature* [1844–46]). And it's in two dimensions, not three, where the trompe l'oeil thrives; those quickly perusing the exhibition's web page may think the artist is simply hawking backyard finds. In the gallery itself, there's that familiar whiff of reheated commentary on the speed and treason of contemporary art—specifically, how it's made and, of course, how it's consumed. Yet Berseth's lifelike, lifeless realia satisfy for how they refuse to take for granted the tedious miracle of the Earth, rendered here as exquisitely flat and emphatically erasable.