

VAN DOREN WAXTER

Rosemarie Beck

Earthly Paradise

November 13, 2024 – January 31, 2025

“The pursuit of light is a lost cause today. It’s my pursuit nonetheless.”
Rosemarie Beck, 1971



Studio in Venice, 1964, Oil on linen, 52 x 70 in.

Van Doren Waxter is delighted to announce *Rosemarie Beck: Earthly Paradise*, a radiant, revelatory exhibition of paintings and works on paper made by the bold and independent artist, on view at 23 East 73rd Street from November 13, 2024 to January 31, 2025. Organized with the Rosemarie Beck Foundation, and following the centenary of the artist’s birth last year, the presentation includes a special loan of archival material, including photographs, sketches, correspondence, and writings; a public program with the artist’s granddaughter; and a fully illustrated exhibition catalogue with an essay by Jessica Holmes, writer, critic, and former deputy director of the Calder Foundation, who asserts that Beck took risks “to stay faithful to her vision,” producing “work that incongruously looked like no one else’s, especially among her peers.” Beck was recently on view in the gallery’s presentation at Independent 20th Century, and this is the gallery’s inaugural exhibition of the artist at its 1907 townhouse since announcing exclusive presentation.

A second generation Abstract Expressionist who was mentored by Robert Motherwell, exhibited at the legendary Stable and Peridot galleries, and was included in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 1955 Biennial, Beck (1923-2003) in 1958 decisively abandoned abstraction in a moment when the movement had engulfed the field, and began making representational tableaux, which she would continue to explore over six decades. A “narrative” painter “in a pre-feminist moment,” according to critic and curator Eric Sutfin, and with, as she said, a “passion...for the great masters and their newness and freshness,” Beck produced a sublime body of work characterized by epic archetypes and themes and formal interests in light, color, and unity.

The exhibition includes more than twenty-five works made by the overlooked artist between 1959 and 2000, and includes intricate, lyrical, and luminous representations of fables and Greek myths on linen, board, and paper, and

her rarely seen, often private cloth embroidery practice. Early figurations include a dazzling and bright small scaled 1966 oil on linen rendered in vertical and horizontal brushstrokes, while *Lovers*, 1967, and *Study, Two in a Room*, 1967, are examples from a prolific cycle of nudes she produced, “usually in pairs” and “in complicated interior settings,” that the critic, author, curator and art historian Martica Sawin asserted, “completes her break with Abstract Expressionism.”

The charged and glowing *Cape Landscape*, 1973 and *Bathers*, 1976, especially, recalls the small brushstroke and building of color of the artist’s hero, Paul Cézanne—“Cézanne is an easy person to have as a model because he’s so clear”—the latter invokes his own romantic, expressive *Bathers*, 1874–75 and was made during a cycle of work devoted to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, “the kind of subject I can’t resist...a maker and his magic.” And a rich, evocative oil on board, made in 1972, shimmers in its bright palette and affecting scene. The American art critic James R. Mellow asserted that same year in *The New York Times*, that Beck creates “an over all tapestried effect in her canvases, wedding the figure to its context in such a way that it seems a symbolic extension of her idyllic theme.”



Untitled, 1986, Cloth embroidery, 23 x 17 in

The exhibition includes enchanting, seductive examples of works invoking Classical myths in which Beck centers defiant and triumphant women, such as a riveting, vertical oil on paper sheet, *Apollo and Daphne*, 1982, just before the nymph is transformed into a laurel tree in hues of ochre, blue, and pink, while the jewel-toned *Study, Earthly Paradise*, 1994, also an oil on paper, glows and radiates in brilliant color. The significantly scaled canvas, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1985, depicts the hunter Actaeon surprising the bathing goddess just before she splashes him with water and changes him into a deer, in a sweeping, densely painted drama and in a high key palette. Remarking on the work in the show’s accompanying essay, “Rosemarie Beck: A Question of Risk,” Holmes adds that the “breadth of pastel colors draw light to the painting’s surface in an impressionistic composition,” asserting that with “her penchant for theatrical *mise-en-scène*, she was able to translate many of these myths with forthright emotion to canvas and embroidery.” And nearby, Beck’s lesser known and often privately made cloth embroidered works, “a joyful mode of improvisation,” she said in her lifetime, are both delicate and vibrant.

Special talk

Following an opening reception on Wednesday, November, 13 at 5:00 p.m., at 6:30 p.m. join the artist’s granddaughter Doria Hughes, the archivist and collection manager of the Rosemarie Beck Foundation and a professional storyteller and folklorist, and Jessica Holmes, writer, editor, art critic, and former deputy director of the Calder Foundation, for a lively, visual conversation.

About the artist

Born to Hungarian Jewish immigrants in New York, Rosemarie Beck graduated from Oberlin College with a bachelor's degree in art history in 1944. Beck later studied at Columbia University, the Art Students League in New York, the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, and in workshops with well-known artists Kurt Seligmann and Robert Motherwell. In 1945, she married author Robert Phelps, and they moved to Woodstock, N.Y. There she struck up lifelong friendships with Philip Guston and Bradley Walker Tomlin.

Early in her career, Beck was regarded as a member of the second generation of the New York School of abstract expressionists and her work was often exhibited at the annual shows of the Stable and Peridot galleries. Beginning in the late 1940s, she was mentored and promoted, first by Kurt Seligmann and then by Robert Motherwell in their respective ateliers. During this time, Beck identified as an abstract expressionist, but by the late 1950s, she had switched to the figurative focus that she would retain for the rest of her career. Beck described her transition this way: "The ore in my abstract veins had thinned. I thought I would nourish my abstract painting by painting subjects. Then I couldn't go back. I must have been a secret realist all along because I had never stopped drawing from life."

Beck became "one of the few painters of our time to treat grand themes in ambitious multi-figure compositions while satisfying a need both for abstract structure and for an execution that embodies energy without being gratuitous," according to critic Martica Sawin.

Beck taught at Queens College of New York, Vassar College, Middlebury College, the Vermont Studio Center, Parsons School of Design, and the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, where she was on the faculty until shortly before she died.

The artist's works are held in public collections, including Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., The Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, among others.

Rosemarie Beck is represented exclusively by Van Doren Waxter.

Gallery Information

23 East 73rd Street
New York, NY 10021
Tel: 212 445 0444

info@vandorenwaxter.com | vandorenwaxter.com

Media Relations

Brent Foster Jones

press@vandorenwaxter.com, tel: 917-280-6217