

Rosemarie Beck: Paintings 1965-2001



Studio with Lovers, 1965-66, oil on linen, 50 x 50 inches

Article by Martica Sawin

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Opening Reception

Thu, January 22, 2004

6:30PM - 8:30PM

New York Studio School

8 W 8th St, New York, NY 10011

“The real subject of a life work in painting is the putting together of irreconcilables.”

With these words Rosemarie Beck defined the essence of painting’s problematic nature as well as the fatal attraction the pursuit of such an elusive goal was to hold for her to the end of her days. Her compulsion to force these “irreconcilables,” to coexist in a common space and to make them interact for their mutual enhancement became the drive behind more than five decades of work on large, increasingly complex paintings that fuse literary themes with abstract structure. Starting out to become an artist in the mid-1940s, Beck like many of her contemporaries was drawn to abstract art and shaped by the New York School ethos. Among its Existential precepts was the avoidance of tight formulations—painting had to be open-ended with implications of ongoing possibilities, yet at the same time it should cohere and should reach a point of precarious stasis, should be at once conclusive and inconclusive. Although Beck was to become one of the foremost contemporary representational painters during the zenith of Abstract Expressionism, these precepts remained at the core of her art as she instructed herself to make “every form essentially shapely, yet never form but forming.”^[i]

Beck was more a musician than a painter by training. She was born in 1923 in Westchester County outside New York City. Her parents were both natives of Hungary who had come to the United States as young adults. Although there was no particular artistic background in the family, Beck, was given violin lessons starting at age ten; her brother James became an art historian and her sister a dancer and choreographer. At the New Rochelle High School she was involved in theatrical productions, as set and costume designer, performer and director, activities which she continued at Oberlin College. During her years at Oberlin, 1941-44, studio art was not an option so she majored in art history and continued to study the violin, becoming good enough to play professionally with a string quartet during the 1950s and 1960s until an injury to her hand forced her to stop. After her graduation from Oberlin she studied art history for a year in the graduate program of New York University's Institute of Fine Arts and attended life drawing sessions at the Art Students League.

These three strands of involvement from Beck's early years-music, theater, and art history-were woven together to form her approach to painting. Music informed her work, both literally in the many instances when musicians were her subject, and figuratively in the underlying structure of her paintings where each stroke is the equivalent of a distinct beat playing a part in the overall rhythmic composition. Many of the subjects of her paintings are theatrical, drawn from Shakespeare and Sophocles, and her canvases were conceived with a stage director's eye for placement and telling gesture, and this extends to dress and settings; even her still-lives and self-portraits have a *dramatis personae*. As for art history, time spent studying the masters of the past left its mark; although she did not overtly borrow, the standard to which she aspired was one handed down from the High Renaissance, and masterpieces from the past make an occasional appearance as paintings within her paintings.

One of the most significant components of Beck's artistic formation was the friendship she formed with two of the most intellectual of the future New York School painters, Phillip Guston and Bradley Walker Tomlin. A year after her graduation from Oberlin, Beck married a young writer and literary critic Robert Phelps and in 1947 they moved to Woodstock, New York, where they could afford the cheap off-season rental for a summer cottage. They soon met Tomlin and Guston both of whom had behind them a decade of representational painting, infiltrated by both Cubism and Surrealism. Their intense discussions at the time revolved around the question of whether or not to be abstract. "Listening," according to Beck, "is a way of learning about painting as good as practice," Beck recalled. But she was also looking-for example at the myriad shimmering colors on Guston's palette in a range that lent itself to "exquisite degrees of subtle modulation," and experimenting, as when Raoul Hague loaned her tools and gave her a block of chestnut wood to carve. Late in her life Beck looked back on those years as a halcyon time, despite the fact that they lived in an unheated house, competed to see who could concoct the most interesting dishes with the cheapest ingredients, and that she worked as a baby sitter, housecleaner, and in the local bookstore to make ends meet.

Tomlin was particularly supportive and arranged for her to work in Motherwell's studio during the year her son Roger was born (1949) when she was living with her parents in suburban New Rochelle. Motherwell, who was about to start his Subjects of the Artist School, was an articulate spokesman for some of the ideas that circulated in the nascent New York School. Apart from life-drawing sessions at the Art Students League, the critiques from Motherwell were Beck's only formal training. "He had a way of making exciting the romance of modern art," she recalled. "Also he helped by selecting me for exhibitions and suggesting that

Clement Greenberg put me in a “Young Talent” show at the Kootz Gallery.” Soon Beck was exhibiting not only in group shows such as the annual “salon” of the New York School at the Stable Gallery, but in a succession of one-person shows at the Peridot Gallery where Phillip Guston also exhibited. The work she showed during these early years is generally described as abstract expressionist, although she maintained that she “never was a big dripper. I wove with small threads. I like addition and subtraction-some kind of system, since I’m essentially chaotic.” For a time she adopted the ribbonlike bands that had become the basic units of Tomlin’s painting, but she broke the bands into segments, as one can see in her large untitled painting, #2, 1952. Then came the delicate stitches of color aligned horizontally and vertically and interweaving in a shimmering fabric of subtle interactions as in *House of the Sun* (1954). These linear strokes gravitate toward the canvas center in a manner similar to the dense clusters of paint strokes that began to appear in Guston’s first abstractions in the early 1950s. Her paintings were reproduced in *Time and Art in America*. Thomas Hess, the editor of *Art in America*, included her in his essay “U.S. Painting: Some Recent Directions,” his lineup of a second generation of New York School [iii] artists and the Whitney Museum counted her as one of 30 artists under 35 in its “Young America 1957” exhibition and included her in its “Nature in Abstraction” show in 1958. Starting in 1954 Beck began to receive fellowships at Yaddo and other art colonies where she could have the luxury of uninterrupted time to work.

Despite the positive feedback, Beck’s work entered a time of crisis in 1956-58. “The ore in my abstract veins had thinned,” she recalls. “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.” The conflicting pulls are made palpable in her *Self-Portrait of*

1958. Out of an abstract grid emerge a violin, a still life, then the artist herself, almost confrontational, as if the figure emerging on the canvas is asserting her right to be present. Characteristic of Beck is the way the entire surface of this canvas is covered with small deliberate touches of closely related tones that give both vibrancy and unity to the difficult synthesis she had undertaken. She worked over the whole canvas at one time, first laying in larger color areas and gradually moving to ever smaller units without zeroing in on any single area, so that there is a unifying rhythm to the whole. Many of the smaller units are a whitish yellow to represent light and they constitute what she calls her grammar. "Light," she explained, "was my real subject. The first thing I have to do is find out where the light is coming from."

Her underlying sense of form requiring a unity of all the parts stood her in good stead when subject matter began to force its way into her painting in the late 1950s. Her determination to keep "everything moving to and through everything" enabled her to orchestrate large and spatially complex compositions while keeping a vitality of stroke and play of light rippling over the entire surface. In this way she has become one of the few painters of recent years 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.

After that turning point in the late 1950s Beck continued to carry on within each painting the dialogue between image and abstraction that gives to the best representational art its contemporary validity. Speaking to students at Wesleyan University in 1960 she said, "I am now convinced that if the anguish of paradox is not somewhere felt-the paradox of a patch of paint being also a hand or an apple-we are still hungry; there is not enough food for the mind." A tacit recognition of this duality

was Cézanne's legacy to 20th century artists and Beck acknowledged that the Master of Aix has always been her teacher, saying: "Cézanne is an easy person to have as a model because he's so clear." Like Cézanne she built volumes with small strokes of closely related tones, but to this she adds a surface play of light, created by her distinctive almost calligraphic touches of yellow-white paint, that enliven and bind into a whole all the complex components of her never simple paintings. Also like Cézanne she would return to draw with the brush over an already painted section to emphasize a curve or a movement and to provide a staccato linear counterpoint to the flatter color areas.

In 1957 Beck began what was to be a long teaching career, first at Vassar, followed by several years at Middlebury College in Vermont; having a model to work from at Middlebury reinforced her move in a figurative direction. In 1960 she left her son with her mother, borrowed \$300, and went to Italy, a trip that must have strengthened her ambition to paint the large figure compositions that began to emerge from her studio in the 1960s. Using whatever model she could cajole into posing, she spent the next decade working on sizeable canvases of nudes, usually in pairs, in complicated interior settings, completing her break with abstract expressionism and at the same time setting her course against the prevailing wind of the media-generated Pop Art that in the early 1960s was usurping the avant garde territory. Obsessed with painterly values and inspired by a tradition extending from Titian to Bonnard, she found the courage to chart the independent course that she was to follow for more than forty years.

Beck stepped boldly into the ranks of competitors with the masters with a 1961 painting, *Le Maquillage II*, of three women dressing or applying make-up, in contrasting poses like Seurat's *Models in the Studio*. Fragments of her earlier grid remain in the architectural elements, furniture, and the frame of a painting of the

three graces on the wall. Her compulsion to leave no empty space is already apparent—in the discarded clothes, still life elements, and patterned fabric, but the careful orchestration of color and shape holds the disparate parts in an over-all unity. There is nothing of the routine studio set-up in the numerous versions of *Two in a Room* that followed during the 1960s. The artist's inherent sense of drama charged her pairs of figures with latent emotion that is reflected in the highly charged painting activity in the surrounding space, the disarray of scattered clothes, or the violence in a painting on the wall. However, she avoided specific story telling that might diminish the work or detract from its power as a painting. Nor did she belabor the iconography of the still life components—studio paraphernalia, books, works of art, her own small plaster sculptures, musical instruments—although at times they lend themselves to symbolic interpretation or imply personal associations.

By the late 1960s she was ready to move on to other subjects and, as a musician, it was natural that she should be drawn to the Orpheus legend. There are tragic paintings of *Eurydice Mourned* or of the *Death of Orpheus*, but the best known, and perhaps the best of this series is *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1975). Here Orpheus is a cellist, in shirtsleeves, playing to charm Pluto, seated at a table, into releasing Eurydice who sits to his right, wearing a Spanish costume of indeterminate period. There are also three dancing graces in a large painting on the wall, two dogs, two smaller paintings, a bowl of fruit and sheets of music and clothing strewn on the floor, adding up to the kind of congestion Beck preferred, as if she were composing for a full orchestra. Music, classical mythology, drama, art historical references, and reminders of modernity constitute a richly allusive mix, held together by the web of knowing brushstrokes that enliven the entire surface. Body language rather than facial expression was Beck's preferred narrative device and she used it

to achieve pathos in her various mourning paintings as she portrayed the deaths of Eurydice, and later of Antigone and Phaedra.

In 1972 Beck became a full-time member of the faculty at Queens College and was appointed a full professor there in 1984 , remaining until her retirement in 1990. The department chair, Louis Finkelstein had become an articulate spokesman for what he called “painterly representation” and although Beck found him an exacting taskmaster for both students and faculty, she admired his intellect and was profoundly in accord with his dedication to painterliness and the values he upheld in both his painting and teaching.^[iiii] After retiring from Queens she became a regular faculty member at the New York Studio School until she became ill in 2003. There colleagues such as Mercedes Matter, Charles Cajori, Ruth Miller, and Andrew Forge contributed to an atmosphere conducive to the kind of teaching as well as the art that Beck favored. The deaths of Forge and Matter in 2002 and Finkelstein in 2000 left Beck feeling somewhat isolated and embattled, but she continued to fiercely defend painterly painting and the tough-minded principles she stood for, so much so that the Studio School director, Graham Nixon, compared her to Bodicea, the Celtic warrior queen.

Since it was essential for Beck to work from the motif she customarily set up her easel in front of it or made countless drawings of people and places which later were incorporated into paintings. She even followed the traditional practice of making small clay figures to use as models when live subjects were lacking in order to observe the play of light and shadow necessary to her rendering. Whatever place she happened to be in became a potential setting for her paintings. Summers in Martha’s Vineyard in the mid-1970s afforded an ideal background of stormy seas and rocky shorefront for a subject that had long

been on her mind, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Writer Glenway Wescott posed for Prospero, the daughter of a friend became Miranda, and a former student who played many roles in her paintings was both Ariel and Caliban. When she painted the marriage feast of Miranda and Ferdinand, artists Paul Resika and Rackstraw Downs were models for the wedding guests. The resulting mix of reality and fantasy, the contemporary and the timeless, recalls another Shakespearean drama, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with its melange of legendary Greek heroes, magical beings, and earthy Elizabethan villagers caught in one grand tangle. A similar complexity exists in one of Beck's favorite paintings, Velasquez's *Spinners*, with its contemporary workers in the foreground workshop and the Arachne myth on the background tapestry. Like the great 17th century painters Beck aspired to an inclusiveness capable of suggesting life in all its variety and encompassing contradictions like Prospero as both flesh and blood yet endowed with supernatural powers. Even a modern dress painting of herself and her students working outdoors on a stretch of shorefront, *No Country for Old Men* (1985-86), resonates with Bacchanalian allusions.

Having met the challenge of Shakespeare, she began in the 1980s to mine Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from which she drew the images of Apollo and Daphne, Diana and Acteon, and Dedalus and Icarus. After a trip to Greece in the spring of 1990 she turned to Sophocles, selecting the drama *Antigone* from his Theban trilogy. According to Beck, "The tragic view is the only tenable one." For her it is strongly embodied in the plight of Antigone torn between familial loyalty and the law of the land as laid down by Creon, the king. The trip to Greece familiarized her with Aegean light and a visit to Delphi helped to provide the appropriate landscape background. Again body language more than facial expression tells the story as a distraught Antigone confronts her submissive sister, Ismene, while in the background their dead

brother's remains are carried to the desert. In *Antigone Before Creon* (1991) the modern dress of the four major characters stresses the timelessness of classical tragedy. Beck's capacity for pathos is given full play in the various versions of *Antigone Mourned* with the grieving figure of Haemon flung over the corpse of his betrothed. One version is painted in dark and somber tones, another in brilliant color, as she changed from a minor to a major key, and experimented with the correlation between lighting and mood. Here the sunny, bright-colored version is the more horrifying because of the contrast with the stark image of grief.

Beck's half century marriage to author and professor of English Robert Phelps may have had some influence on her decision to work with literary themes or may have at least nurtured her strong enthusiasm for literature, but there is another vein in her work that is without literary content, yet is central to artistic tradition: self-portrait and still life. "I always do self-portraits; it's one of those punishing things you have to do like looking in the mirror." The recent extraordinary self-portraits hark back to the 1958 image of herself and her violin taking shape in an abstract grid. The frontal pose and squarish head and torso reappear in the later images of herself in the studio as she looms large and implacable, her energy suggested more by the surrounding tumult than in her own immovable image. Characteristically she crowded the space with studio paraphernalia, finished and unfinished paintings, copies after old masters, cats, another artist at work, and cityscapes glimpsed through the window. In these confrontational self-portraits, for example the large *Studio* (1984) the surface resemblance is minimal, but what one sees instead is the embodiment of an unshakable force, the artist, still and implacable in the middle of frenzied activity.

As for still life, Beck apparently picked up the gauntlet that Cézanne threw down with some of his exploding still life paintings,

with baskets halfway off the table, tablecloths ruffled until they look like mountain ranges, fruit and crockery jostling for space. Look, for example, at her 1994 *House of Venus*: the eye travels from a couple of open art books in the foreground to a copy of Watteau's *Giles* on the back wall, taking in en route a violin and bow, a plaster sculpture of a striding figure, a vase of sumptuous peonies, a spill of rich pink fabric on which nestles an ornamental jar, and odds and ends of studio paraphernalia. Just as features are minimized in her figure paintings, so the size and appearance of actual still life objects is unimportant—the flowers are actually made of paper, what appears to be a plaster cast from antiquity is one of her own small clay figures; like everything else in her paintings objects are not there to be copied but to function as part of a dynamic interplay of forms in space. The figure strides to the right, *Giles* pulls the eye to the upper left, the cloth cascades to lower right, the bow juts out of the lower left, the flowers almost sway, while two open volumes in the center foreground anchor the whole. The senses are addressed by the rich and resonant color, by the references to music, fragrance and art; but what really astounds is that these various focal points, pulling in different directions in a crowded and ambiguous space, ultimately all resonate together like the instruments in a quartet.

If musical comparisons come naturally to mind when analyzing Beck's compositions it is because she tended to think in musical terms as she painted, as she herself acknowledged. "When I paint I often am using musical analogies, suspensions, *appoggiatura*, counterpoint. I use strategies in painting as if I had modulated from F# to G. I do like rhythmic changes of beat and use it sometimes-eighth notes and suddenly a row of triplets. I'm aware of it when I do that." She required a clear articulation of her strokes of paint as if each was a distinct note playing a role in a larger composition, yet the application is direct and spontaneous without a trace of preordained formula. *Staccato* touches of the

brush on one side of a canvas may find an echo on the opposite side with a variation in tone; a stroke that defines a leg or shoulder can be found again the branch of a tree; and crisp linear arabesques brushed in over the broader areas of color serve as a recurrent rhythmic beat. Of course music is more literally referred to throughout her work in the frequent inclusion of a violin or her use of the Orpheus myth, but its given its fullest treatment in her recent series on the theme of musicians playing in the Tuscan landscape. The members of a string quartet in Concert in Tuscany (1998) are seated in an idyllic landscape stretching beyond dark cypress trees to distant blue mountains that might have materialized out of a Renaissance painting. The players bend to their task, bows flourish in the air in varying directions while the angles of arms and legs keep leading the eye from one to the other in a circular movement that merges each absorbed individual into an ensemble. Although an accident in 1974 forced Beck to stop playing the violin her identification with the performer was very strong and she was able to evoke for the viewer the pleasures of both sound and sight in this modern Arcady.

The screen of television and computer have usurped the role literature and oral traditions have played in imprinting the brain with an awareness of human experience that is beyond the reach of sensory perception, i.e. the historical past and the capacity to deal with the unknown through mythmaking. Even as we drown in a floodtide of information and mindless entertainment, we are cut off from the moral wisdom of the ages as it has been embodied in art and literature. I undertook to write this essay out of my admiration for Rosemarie Beck who I regarded as a kind of wizard with the paintbrush, but I have ended with reverence for both her ability and her determination to give revitalized form to tragic flaws, filial loyalty, Arcadian idylls, love, grief, and human isolation. Often when something of this kind is attempted in the visual arts today the result is a tongue in cheek pastiche. All the more

amazing then is the authenticity that endows her representations of human plight. Her deep roots in artistic and literary tradition and her very contemporary elucidation of the act of painting, along with her infallibly modern syntax, continually jostle with each other in a tense dynamic that compels long and repeated viewing.

[i] All quotations from the artist are from discussions with the author in 2001-2

[ii] Art News Annual, 25 (1956):73-98, 174-180, 192-199

[iii] See Louis Finkelstein, "Thoughts about Painterly," Art News Annual, 1971 and his Painterly Representation, New York: Ingber Gallery, 1975.