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## A CONVERSATION WITH ROSEMARIE BECK

KIM LEVIN



Rosemarie Beck, *The Tempest: Miranda in Milan*, 1977-78. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60".  
Courtesy Genesis Galleries.

**From the narrative matrix of the stories of Orpheus and *The Tempest*, Rosemarie Beck posits not merely the specific myths, but the whole matter of magic and its maker which is art itself.**

KL: About the narrative aspect of your work—your use for a long time of the Orpheus myth and now *The Tempest*—how did it come into your work? Do you think of it as story-telling or autobiographical metaphor?

RB: Any sort of dedicated life, a life of focused passion, interests me and moves me, more than just beautiful things move me. I noticed on looking at an old journal of mine—this went back to the early '60s—I had written several entries and on each one it said: "don't forget *The Tempest*." You know, I've been variously engaged since that time with other forms of subject matter and I hadn't really done a narrative picture. They were thematic rather than narrative. The first real narrative pictures were the last group I did, the Orpheus paintings, and that seemed a sort of culmination of all the things that were set in motion before that.

KL: Can you explain that?

RB: Originally I thought to go around the whole wheel of the horoscope but I got sidetracked in the House of Venus, that is, the house of making art. And first it was illustrated by women—I called them then *Le Maquillage*; they were making themselves up for we don't know what. I used that theme for several years and enjoyed the subject; it kept reminding me how

difficult a vocation is—the vocation, say, of being a beautiful woman, of pleasing a man. So these were all still behind the scenes, getting ready for this event, and I was painting about it, which was a secret excitement—to paint about painting. And then I had another batch of them, a sort of interlude period between the early ones and the *Lovers*, and I gave them rather fanciful titles, *The Magdalene* and *The Annunciation*, things like that, about awakening. I had a young girl and a ballet dancer as the angel of annunciation, and the young girl was either playing cello or the piano, still unawakened. Somehow I always knew what I was doing in a funny way, I mean there's such a pattern to all of this. Anyway, this was prelude to a series of *Lovers*, the getting together of two people in their various forms, and landscape could enter the picture. Orpheus followed by natural progression, it seemed.

KL: How did you choose the Orpheus theme?

RB: It seemed absolutely natural to me. I can't remember. Did I wake up in the morning and say I'm going to do it? Orpheus is the performer; he doesn't just win his beloved, he must work for her, and lose her, eventually losing his gift, all that imagery. But most of this had to do with interior events of my own life. It's always about the vocation, the dedicated life.

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KL: It's a kind of hidden autobiography then?

RB: Perhaps it is, though it isn't specific. It doesn't require that on such and such a day my son got married and so I had my daughter-in-law killed off on the stairs as Eurydice or anything of that sort, though my husband, Robert Phelps, loves to say that. None of these events are in the right sequence though; they were all begun before or after. Before generally.

Something else on another level, to do with the subject matter. I get a rhythm, or combination of shapes, that needs to be embodied in some kind of figuration that is not merely a piece of nature, a nude or still life, which corresponds to the analogic or metaphoric processes by which I live from day to day. That's the only way I can say this very complex thing. I'm living this metaphor and the shapes I get have to be embodied. For me, story is the only way to do it. I'm not that pure or simple so that a wave by the sea or a still life can do it for me.

KL: What connects the Orpheus theme and *The Tempest*? Is it that they're both about the unknown?

RB: Yes, and they're both about power and the misuse of power—I mean the inventive power, the artistic power. We're all doing our autobiographies in that way. The first thing to go is one's power, not one's physical energy necessarily but one's faith in one's poetic gift. So it's a thing to worry about. When you're young you don't worry about your powers. When you get older you make more demands, and compare yourself not with just talented peers but with the whole panoply of great art, and you may begin to doubt your own *raison d'être*. Now that may be very silly to worry about. One of the things that makes the Abstract-Expressionist painters seem rather pure and hearty—as well as silly to me at times—was their freedom from the museum. I mean the kind of ambition and complexity of vision. Anyway it was that generation's business, not mine. They had their problems; now everything is a problem for me. Things are so fraught with meaning that it isn't as easy. But sometimes we use subject matter because, truthfully, we can't get in the act without it.

You can ask me if I paint better happy or unhappy, because it has something to do with this.

KL: All right, do you paint better happy or unhappy?

RB: Alas, I can only be happy when I'm painting well which means that generally I'm painting out of unhappiness. Still, it's an unhappiness I prefer to all others, and to whatever we mean by most kinds of happiness. Joyfulness, I used to believe, is an important task of the artist—informing and vitalizing his work—and that does account for some of my subject matter too. I cannot say these things directly, but they are there. From time to time I went after it or, rather, let it catch up with me, but such occasions were always slightly suspect—opportunistic? I'm distrustful of the bromides prevailing regarding our duty—or right—to be happy, well adjusted, self-fulfilling. In fact, from my own experience, the tragic view is the only tenable one. I'm an enthusiastic pessimist.

KL: To what extent, then, is making a work of art a proxy for living?

RB: This is really why I use subject matter. Honestly, if I could say it any other way I would. Practically total for me. "My nature is subdued by what it works in like the dyer's hand." That's from Shakespeare. It's very true for me, and I mention it only in connection with this other thing. I mean, if I could put salt on my own tail that's how I would have to do it.

KL: I would rather ask you about this view that art must be difficult, that suffering is necessary. Do you think that is something you inherited from the Abstract Expressionists?

RB: I can only say that sublimation has been the source of my greatest—I don't want to say power and strength—but its most galvanic factor. That doesn't sound right, does it, in this world?

KL: Well, isn't that what Freud and those people said art was?

RB: Is that what they say? We were told on the other hand that we should go to them and be told how to live happily.

KL: Let me ask you about your embroidered work.

RB: I can't stop you.

KL: You've been making these embroidered tapestry paintings, and you don't exhibit them. Now that this distinction between art and craft has been dissolved, why . . .

RB: Ah, but I would make the distinction between art and craft, on the first level: that is, craft is useful and art is frivolous.



Rosemarie Beck, *The Tempest: Caliban and Miranda*, 1978. Oil on canvas, 60 x 52". Courtesy Genesis Galleries.



Rosemarie Beck, *The Tempest: Brave New World*, 1978. Oil on canvas, 32 x 40". Courtesy Genesis Galleries.

KL: But they're only useful if you attach them to pillows. They're not useful in themselves.

RB: Oh, the embroidery; I'm talking about craft as a whole category.

KL: I'm talking about your embroideries.

RB: I'm making the distinction anyway. I think they are useful. And they really shouldn't be just hung up. Their charm for me and delight is that they were practical, that is, I could decorate the house with them, which was rather bare; we hadn't any furniture. So I said, well, we will make this place nice. And then for a while it was a form of doing what I could when I wasn't allowed to smell turpentine. I won't go into all that but I was supposed to stay away from all harmful smells and didn't have the physical energy; I had a broken arm and a broken foot and one thing and another so I sat there making a lot of those embroideries. And they had another usefulness: the joyful mode of improvisation rather than the serious mode of discovery, or inventing. I could test my serious work in this lighter mode.

KL: But I can't quite get it into my head why . . .

RB: I don't show them?

KL: Well, why isn't a brushstroke made out of colored thread just as valid as a brushstroke made out of paint?

RB: It probably is, I have no way of judging. The truth is, they are probably pleasanter. Any of the crafts tend to be very flattering to the people who own them whereas painting usually isn't, not modern painting; it's not comfortable at first. When you embroider you're always at the same tempo. That's why I'm a little suspicious of it, because it's nice and even. Slight irresponsibility then too; let's see, I do it the way I doodle, sitting at the table, comfortable, resting, the radio is on, you know, other things distract me too. I'm not really alone when I do it; I don't trust it. I can do it too easily.

Ah, but I know what I want to say. There are two kinds of artists essentially: those who do what they can and those who do what they can't. I think I belong to the latter. The purest artists are canny enough to do only what they can and do it better, do it more gracefully. They please and satisfy. The other kind are moral lecturers, and I'm afraid I belong to that category. Surely there's a certain morality in the hedonism of Matisse, but on the other side I posit Bonnard, who was more troubled; there was something more dangerous in his art, sweeter, more doting, and more exasperating.

I have a question to ask you. You're interested in a different kind of work than mine, aren't you? Your aesthetic sympathies lie elsewhere than in the kind of painting that I do. Does this make our interview especially awkward?

KL: I don't think so. You do share some characteristics with a trend I'm interested in, which is coming back to figuration and narrative and autobiography and personal, quirky . . .

RB: As if the personal were as important as anything else, giving a sort of credence to the private life. There is a fashion today that the personal, the idiosyncratic and the private, is what we have to give. That is a reason why some of us who are very secretive use narrative.

KL: Right, and you're doing it coming out of a different tradition than they are and it interests me what the differences are, what the points of contact are.





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Rosemarie Beck, *The Tempest: Prospero, Miranda, Ariel*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 40 x 50". Courtesy Genesis Galleries.



Rosemarie Beck, *Orpheus Mourned*, 1973-74. Oil on canvas, 34 x 48". Courtesy Genesis Galleries.



RB: Are there any differences? Are there any points of contact? I used to apologize, calling myself the last *anachroniste* or whatever, but I don't feel that way any more. It's simply my affection—passion if you will—for the great masters, and their newness and freshness for me, and a certain need I have for fullness. I'm still an old-fashioned painter. My reality is still really paint. It's very much in my foreground. I think it's very very different.

There is a profound difference between those who finish and those who conceive and transpose. The latter solutions are not *a priori* pictures of something but subjects having varying degrees of figurative reference, differences much greater than figurative versus abstract. Does this make sense? It usually is truer when a person is making a sketch than when he's going through the puritanical business of drawing all the way. I mean knowing it all. But I have a nostalgia for order, for a total world, no matter how subjective or personal, whose morality is still going all the way. I believe that every painter ought to deal with the whole story, not a fragment of something. I'm against pasticcio, it isn't ambitious enough. Perhaps any art that denies any part of a talent is a fatality. It's like saying I'm not going to come into the party with all of me, you're just going to see my face. Even if you have to begin all over, you have to begin with a totality somehow.

KL: Are you influenced by other arts, like literature?

RB: Literature for me is an important influence, but only analogically, that is, I am moved by making, I am moved by structure, so that it does influence me in that sense, as a parallel. Music has been in fact more influential. My first discipline was there, and my first recognizable talent was for music. I studied formally, I made a bare livelihood teaching and playing. When I paint I often think in musical analogies—suspensions, appoggiatura, counterpoint. Someone once asked me why I didn't write music instead of painting and the truth is—maybe because I was a fiddler, not a pianist—that I tended to think in melody rather than harmonically, which is not the right mentality for a composer. Whereas I always thought harmonically as a painter: in layers, in chords. But I don't really like music that paints or painting that imitates music. I'll admit that I don't read for information. I can only get information from a sentence that moves me. I don't learn well. I have difficulty learning what I already know.

KL: I get the idea that form is very important to you.

RB: Absolutely. First. That's why subject is so enticing too. It puts so many stones in the way of realizing one's form. It's just the kind of limitation that liberates invention.

KL: You're very much a modern artist.

RB: Perhaps. In modern art the ultimate solution is not built in. Apropos of that remark about painting not being *a priori*, I think that most of us who paint post-modernly are thinking in terms of a continuum rather than how to paint correctly this figure and correctly that bridge. This totality, this constant totality, may have something to do with where we stand. I and the few of my generation I think of as my contemporaries, my peers, are very ambitious; we struggle, we're unsatisfied. Not in this way—what shall I do next. We're always on the horns of the same dilemma, even when we were abstract painters. The failures are

much bigger when you're a realist painter. They're more obvious. If a hand is coming out of the middle of your belly, you can't say, well, I like it that way. But an abstract form can sit anywhere if it sits well, or lies flat, or behaves so it's not recognizable. If, on the other hand, a face has an expression, it's not just a set of formal relations which when turned upside down might work just fine. It always gives off something—anger or dumbness or sweetness or something—and if it's contrary to the mood that you're setting up in the abstract rhythm itself, it has to be dealt with perhaps to the point of having to paint through the whole picture just to get the smile off the face. It's incidental to painting but part of its business. Our formal elements have to fight for their freedom. It probably was the most interesting thing about painting for de Kooning when he was doing his *Women*. I think it was the literary or the non-painterly element that set him in motion for a long time.

KL: You started as an Abstract Expressionist?

RB: Yes, but I never was a big dripper. I wove with small threads. I like addition and subtraction—amounts are crucial to me—some kind of system since I'm essentially chaotic. Resika said to me once: "Too many spots." And I said not enough spots—if you can feel it as spots then obviously I have failed. It's a method. It's a form of accuracy, my kind of accuracy.

KL: You once spoke of the failure of third generation Abstract Expressionism and said that risk had become an emblem, and that you wanted "not a style but Style."

RB: Well, I made that remark about not a style but Style in 1960 after several years of self-questioning regarding my abandonment (or apostasy?) of the then establishment International Style, and in reaction to the stranglehold idea of historical necessity. I think it was a very pompous remark for those days—and I didn't quite know how to defend it. I became convinced that style could not be achieved by way of some offshoot system but only through figuration. Nothing is really finished, you know; Cubism isn't really finished and I would say that probably only accidental art is finished. Still, there's no just going back. It's a lifetime's arduous business to recover fullness in formality, not mere idiosyncrasy and personality. I better understand Cézanne's example in defining tradition, or, rather, in inventing a new way back. Those doctrinaire directives—make it new, it can't be done again, live in your own time—represented a formidable array, a bulwark for a frail ego and inconclusive talent to butt against. It seems so obvious now but of course it didn't then.

KL: Fame, how do you feel about fame?

RB: You mean when the world bestows upon your errors and failures as well as your successes the dignity of virtue? When you're young and strong in character, it's tonic—makes you courageous, adventuresome, and incidentally gives early the privilege of a healthy selfishness. You see these things are very dear to my heart, I haven't had them. When the outside world confers some notice, it's easy to lay down the law to family and friends about the importance of your endeavors; hence a certain amount of chain mail goes with this lucky condition. I could never behave with conviction and naturalness in this department but I must have somehow succeeded in browbeating my seven-year-old son who knocked timidly on my studio door one afternoon: "I'm so sorry to disturb you but the woods are on fire!"

KL: What do you feel about the feminist issue?

RB: The problems of being a woman, the inferiorities and all that stuff? Tough. We can't talk about it ever, ever again. All the creative men I have known have worked out of their femininity, the female in their nature.

KL: Tell me more about these paintings of *The Tempest* that you've been doing since 1975.

RB: The Orpheus subject is melancholy. After all, it's about a maker who was so self-conscious or mortified or destroyed that he loses his muse, his vision, his inspiration. These subjects you don't really choose; they choose you. I thought at the time *The Tempest* would be an antidote to the more tragic world of Orpheus. It's the kind of subject I can't resist, a maker and his magic. But I found it increasingly melancholy. I can't talk about it now. It's always the thing one is involved in at the moment that one can't verbalize about. In any case, I'm not through with it.