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Art in America

GENE BEERY

Within Gene Beery's conceptual language-based paintings, there always seems to be some kind of joke—and not always one that the viewer is in on. Among the pieces included in the artist's 50-year retrospective was *Note* (1970), in which the words "NOTE: MAKE A PAINTING OF A NOTE AS A PAINTING" are rendered in puffy, candy-colored letters on a pale background with a black framelike border. In another, the words "life without a sound sense of tra can seem like an incomprehensible nup" (1994) are written in black capital letters on white; the canvas is divided by a thick black line, which cuts through the lines of text so that the reversed words "art" and "pun" are separated from the rest.

The exhibition began with works from the late 1950s, when Beery, then employed as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art, was "discovered" by James Rosenquist and Sol LeWitt. An "artist's artist," he was championed by artists who were, and would remain, better known than he. After a 1963 show at Alexander Iolas Gallery in New York, Beery moved to the Sierra Nevada mountains, where he still lives. While other artists using text and numbers who emerged in the 1960s—Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, On Kawara, for example—produced mostly cerebral works lacking evidence of the artist's hand, Beery seemingly poked fun at the high Conceptualism of the day. He continued to make his uniquely homespun and humorously irreverent canvases, the rawness of their execution a throwback to the Abstract Expressionists.



Gene Beery: *Note*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 34 by 42 inches; at Albus Greenspon.

Beery's work is sharp, deceptively simple and layered with humor. He peppers it with made-up words and exaggerated references to popular culture. In *The ethical crisis playoffs* (1970s), for example, "revolutionary, evolutionary involuntarians" square off against "jollywed copulators," and in *A Snappy Alphabet* (2000s), "h" is for "horgle." While language-based paintings comprise the bulk of Beery's output, the show also included two early, vaguely figurative works. An untitled piece from 1959 depicts an abstracted female figure rendered on a piece of masonite cut in the shape of a woman's torso. It's stocky and crude, but the exaggerated curviness of the hips gives it a strong sensuality. In *What is beyond so what??* (1960), Beery has begun to move from figuration to text-based work. The words are painted on an expressionistic female torso. It's an almost too perfect example of overlap between his two styles.

The artist's text paintings from the 1960s and '70s often involve whole messages, or common word and number constructs—calendars, lists and alphabets are his favorites. *Not feeling well* (1968) is a painted copy of a note Beery wrote to an employer. *Quixotic* (1975) depicts a calendar page of the romantic month "Quixotic" on a background of rough stripes of grassy spring colors.

Beery's recent paintings are simpler. A few of the pieces have just a scrawl in graphite on unprimed canvas. One of these, *Double name selfportrait* (2003), contains a letter to the viewer: "To whom it may concern / This logoscape was created by Gene B Beery. The amazingest artist aesthetician of semi pantagruelistic visual percussionism! Now why don't you the viewer get off your proud pacifier sucking minds ass and try to figure out if this means anything!" Installed in a small room just off the gallery's main exhibition space, *Double name selfportrait* served as an epilogue and a reminder that one must have a sense of humor—or at least a "sound sense of tra"—to appreciate Beery.