

Domenick Ammirati, Artforum, October 2020

# ARTFORUM

## Gene Beery

BODEGA

Gene Beery's life is thoroughly imbricated with his art, so to fully understand this mini-survey, a little background is in order. In the early 1960s, Beery did the New York art thing: He worked at the Museum of Modern Art, became friends with Sol LeWitt and James Rosenquist, and with his text-centric neo-Dadaist paintings landed a 1963 debut at Alexander Iolas's renowned gallery. Then, abruptly, he bolted to California, where he ended up settling in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas on a remote plot that he dubbed the Logoscape Ranch. He's lived there

with his family ever since, peppering his bucolic environs with paintings that have come to function almost diaristically, in a signature mixture of the highfalutin and the goofy.

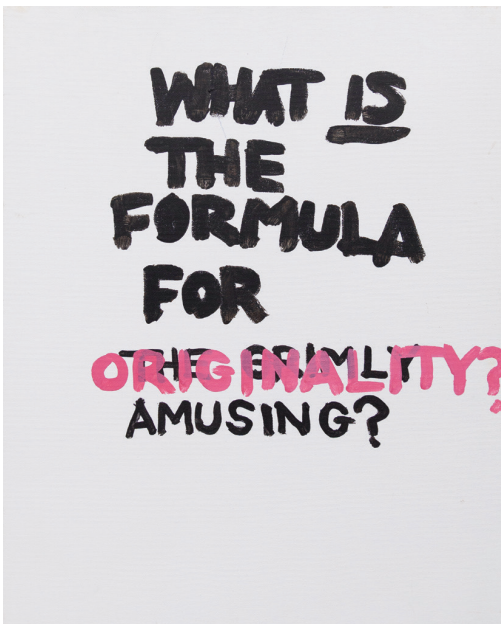
Reiterating a 2019 presentation at Cushion Works in San Francisco, the exhibition at Bodega gathered pieces from the 1970s through the early aughts—the Logoscape era. The works were dated, for the most part, by decade. The earlier paintings on view cram screwball, vaguely personal texts into informatic forms—the map, the calendar, the diagram, or, as in *Parenthood Art*, 1970s, a colorful thermometer representing the titular “movement,” invented by the artist, to be the hottest, beyond boiling. Such reflections on the culture industry persisted alongside earnest musings on capital-A Art

and fragmentary observations on daily life as the years rolled on. Eventually all of Beery's formal devices fell away, resulting in the artist's format of choice since the 1990s: blank white canvases bearing gleeful, all-caps declarations in black acrylic. He produced them seemingly in droves, their ambit broad enough to encompass daily chores (as embodied, for example, by one reading SPLIT WOOD! but also MATERIALIZE ART OF THE AMAZING “ORDINARY”!!!); reflections on the standards and limits of art (WHAT IS THE FORMULA FOR ORIGINALITY? AMUSING?);

and the evocative, as characterized by a painting that reads THE WORLDS GREATEST NONPERFORMING ARRHYTHMIC PERCUSSIONIST, a phrasing that could either describe Beery as an artist or merely offer a reflection on running a rustic household with his wife, Florence. What the works express indirectly is how the constraints on his time caused him to speed up his output; on one canvas made sometime during the 2000s is written I AM SIMPLY RECORDING ESSENCES EXPEDIENTLY! With his fusion of flow with form, his anarchic sensibility, and his rejection of the boundary between art and “non-art reality,” as George Maciunas put it in his famous manifesto, Beery may be the last living Fluxus artist, despite never having hooked up with that movement while in New York.

Alongside his paintings, the show presented a sampling of the snippet-like videos Beery has been making over the years, which capture absurdist scenarios that resemble homestyle Happenings (someone introduce this man to TikTok!), and his artist books, which became his primary medium from the later 1970s into the 1990s. *Manifesto!*, 1978, contains a series of declarations that express Beery's philosophies (“The true visual artist naturally creates nothing *but* art”) under headings such as the self-mocking “Mounting Fiasco!” that variously pun on the work's title. A few, such as the fantastic *Beastomania*, 1979, unleash the graphic talent often restrained in the paintings. This work's spare yet bold images depict critters such as the Fatalistic Walrus, one of whose tusks has turned into a smoldering cigarette, the fumes of which form an elegant double helix, and the title page's Right Turning Moose, featuring the animal's unmistakable silhouette with action lines radiating from its starboard horn. Across these volumes, Beery's creative drive benefits from the sequencing and juxtaposition of one utterance and the next, an effect that the exhibition effectively replicates by focusing on the later text works. Likewise the terrific book by the show's co-organizers, Nick Irvin and Jordan Stein, which presents a selection of the diaristic digital photographs Beery has sent in email blasts to his friends and associates since the mid-2000s. Sometimes overlaid with a message in a colorful typeface, they offer poignant musings and glimpses of Beery's paintings as they live in situ—hanging over the kitchen sink, worn as a mask on the artist's face, lying in a makeshift grave, standing like a signpost in the snow.

—Domenick Ammirati



Gene Beery, *What Is the Formula?*, ca. 2000s, acrylic on canvas, 20 × 16".