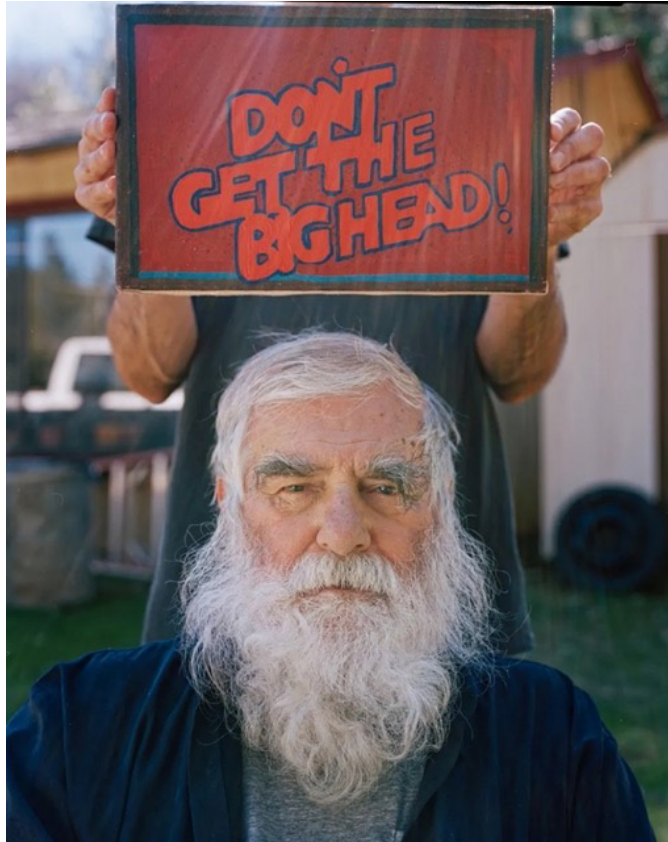


ARTFORUM

GENE BEERY (1937–2023)



Gene Beery Photo: Jason Frank Rothenberg

Gene Beery, whose irreverent text-based paintings presaged the work of Conceptualists such as John Baldessari and Lawrence Weiner, died on November 19 in Sutter Creek, California, at the age of eighty-six. His death was announced by New York’s Derosia and the Los Angeles–based Parker Gallery, which represent him. Variously cast, over the course of a career spanning six decades, as a Pop artist, an Expressionist, a Minimalist, and a Conceptualist, Beery was resolutely committed to the idea that words and the ideas they conveyed could alone embody a work of art. Unlike many of his peers, he was unafraid of using humor to comment on the vagaries of the art world. “Gene Beery’s ongoing painterly production over more than half a century resolutely undermines the elitism of the dominant art system (and its transatlantic channels of legitimation) as much as it self-consciously expresses resistance to any ‘high art’ convention,” wrote Kari Rittenbach in a 2019 issue of *Artforum*. “The simple material forms, selectively flat colors, imperfect brushwork, and rough, sometimes mottled or yellowing surfaces of his works articulate a peculiarly American nonchalance.”

Gene Beery was born October 13, 1937, in Racine, Wisconsin, where a childhood encounter would inspire his later practice. “When I was a young kid, my grandmother had a boarder that lived at her house,” he told *Artforum* in 2013. “When I used to go there for the summer, the boarder would read me nursery rhymes from books that had all these pictures. In that combination of image and text, each really affects the other, and affected me, qualifying and creating a third thing—the result of the juxtaposition.”

Following stints at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and the Layton School of Art in the same city, Beery in 1958 moved to New York, which was then on the cusp of becoming the crucible in which Conceptual art would be forged. “My three-plus years in NYC drove me sane,” he told Art Blog Art Blog’s Joshua Abelow in 2013. “This was the New York of heroin, high crime, diaphragms, Abstract Expressionism, classy openings and the last years of European influence and there was plenty of romantic artist style living and sharp critics and the institutionalizing of too many things.”

He joined the Art Students League and obtained a job as a security guard at the Museum of Modern Art, where he became fascinated with the explanatory labels accompanying the paintings hanging on the walls and noticed that “art viewers were very interested in paintings with scraps of text, newspapers, notes like that. So I thought I’d add some text to my otherwise imagistic work. Words are a tool of the visual art experience; see Balzac, Magritte, Stuart Davis, etc.,” he told Abelow.

Beery began making text-based works on shards of wood and Masonite. A 1961 example, *Out of Style*, is characteristic of his wry take on the art world, depicting what appears to be a wall label meant to accompany the blank spot where a picture once hung. “Sorry / This Painting Temporarily Out of Style,” reads the text. “Closed for Updating / Watch for Aesthetic Reopening.”

At the museum, he worked alongside fellow guards Dan Flavin and Robert Ryman; Lucy Lippard toiled in the print department there, while Sol LeWitt acted as a night clerk. LeWitt would become a lifelong supporter of Beery, whose break came in 1962 with the inclusion of one of his works in the MoMA group exhibition “Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure.”

Among the viewers who saw Beery’s work at the MoMA show was German Dada giant Max Ernst, who recommended him for a solo show at New York’s Alexander Iolas Gallery. Shortly after that exhibition’s close, in 1963, Beery decamped for San Francisco, eventually settling in Sutter Creek. He continued to make and exhibit work throughout the 1970s, with a notable fifteen-year gap in public display occurring after 1980. By the 1990s, he had added photography to his practice, creating intimate portraits of family and friends. The 2010s brought a resurgence of interest in Beery, with a spate of solo gallery exhibitions across the US and a 2019 retrospective of his work at Fribourg, Switzerland’s Fri Art Kunsthalle, which was the underrecognized artist’s first institutional solo show.

Derosia

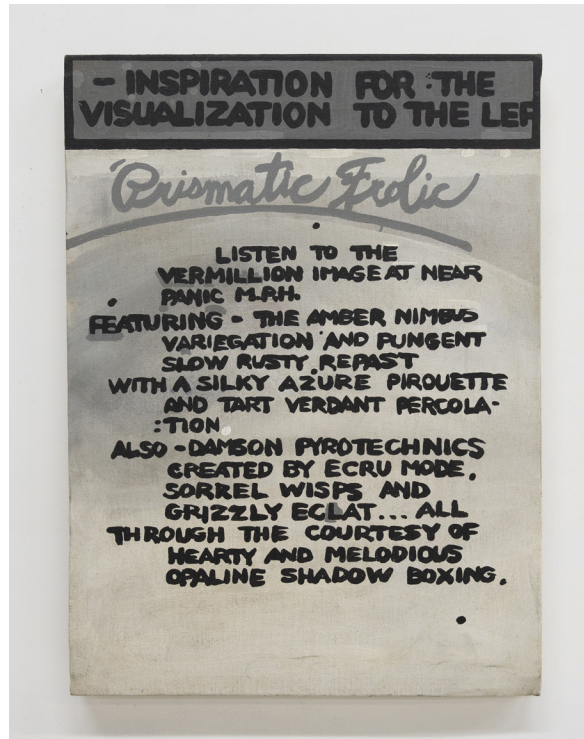
News Desk, Artforum, November 30, 2023

Beery produced text works until nearly the end of his life; his most recent solo show was “Portrait of the Artist as a Spandex Tuxedo” at Parker Gallery last year. His work is on view through February 18, 2024, in the group show “Rules and Repetition” at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut.

“I got to the point where the most original thing for me to do was to continue to do what I was doing,” he told Abelow, “and isn’t that what art is all about — to do what you think you should in the spirit of freedom, keeping in mind it’s nice to find agreement and that the products or actions have some human beneficence.”

Contemporary Art Writing Daily

Gene Beery at Derosia



Gene Beery, *Prismatic Frolic*, 1970

An “elemental usefulness” to signage. We evolved to interpret signs, and there should be mutual respect in harnessing our primeval wiring. This is what the advert does. To speak to someone is an intimate thing. To have their ear. To be inside their head, my words. We should treat it delicately, erotically that it is. We were made to interpret this. To interface. The painter controls volume that poet does not. Treat it with respect, a mutual suspicion. Beery and I invent a third thing together through the handshake of the poem. Not a cruelty of font size.

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

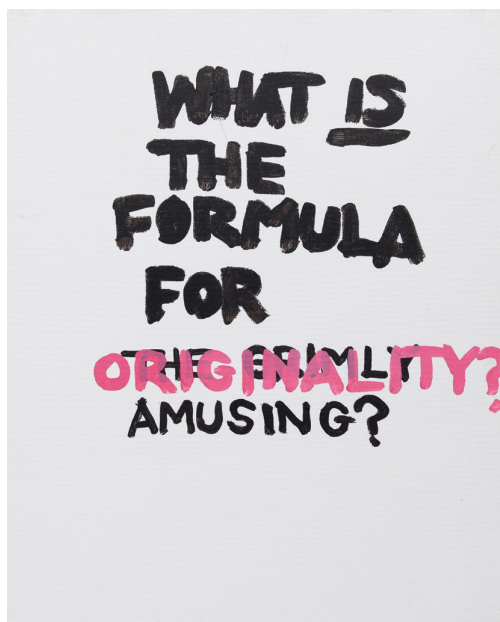
with his family ever since, peppering his bucolic environs with paintings that have come to function almost diaristically, in a signature mixture of the highfalutin and the goofy.

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 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".

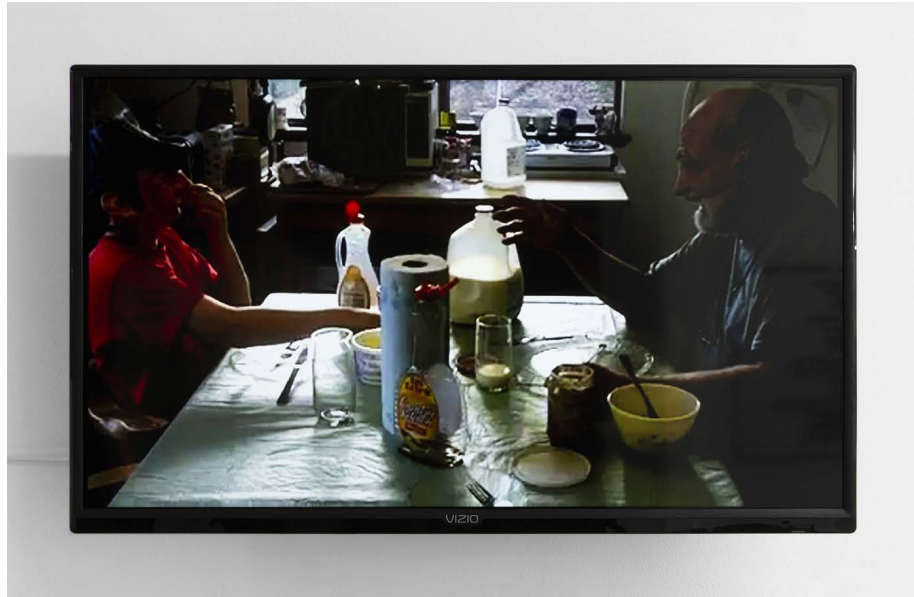
and fragmentary observations on daily life as the years rolled on. Eventually all of Beery's formal devices fell away, resulting in the artist's format of choice since the 1990s: blank white canvases bearing gleeful, all-caps declarations in black acrylic. He produced them seemingly in droves, their 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

Will Heinrich, The New York Times, April 2, 2020

The New York Times

Gene Beery

Through April 26. Bodega Gallery, Manhattan; bodega-us.org.



A still from Gene Beery's digital video "Your Move," 2000s. Gene Beery and Bodega

In some ways, Gene Beery's "Transmissions From Logoscape Ranch" at Bodega Gallery was made to be seen online. Adapted from a career-spanning 2019 exhibition in San Francisco, it includes a host of this California conceptualist's small text paintings along with three short videos. The paintings, many featuring their jokey, unsettling koans in the artist's signature black on white, are easily read as JPEGs ("Unknown Unknowns," "What Is the Formula for Originality?"), while the videos may even look better on your laptop than they do installed.

But pay attention to the video "Your Move." Seated at a crowded breakfast table, the octogenarian artist and his grandson take alternate small actions — moving a lid, pouring milk — which they punctuate with the phrase "Your move!" It's an inspired distillation not just of how games are played, but also of how we communicate in general. The only limits on what we can say to one another are those of context and vocabulary: Whatever the grandson may mean by leaning his knife against a jelly jar, it would mean something different if he did it with a pencil, or in a restaurant.

In this way, the show also pins down the underlying sadness of looking at art right now, precisely because it looks so good online. It's still not the same.

Derosia

Nick Irvin, Frieze, April 2020

Frieze



Gene Beery, Your Move, 2000s, video. Courtesy: the artist and Bodega, New York

'Gene Beery: Transmissions From Logoscape Ranch', organized with Nick Irvin and Jordan Stein
Bodega, New York

Gene Beery has been 'working from home' for a while. Based in the remote foothills of the Sierra Nevada since 1978, Beery's work – paintings, artist books, photography, and starting in the 2000s, a jolly web presence – has mostly been seen through secondhand transmission, rather than exhibition. This show considers his ranch and family life as essential subjects for his painterly language games, rooting his post-war conceptualism in rural Californian life. Videos such as *Your Move* (2000s) demonstrate that his art's primary audience and co-conspirators have been his grandkids. Bored, trapped, and together, the Beerys make do, drawing amazement out of their breakfast table and the forest beyond it. In our new strange moment, with art's market and social incentives ripped out from under us, I'm comforted by the thought that those losses wouldn't affect what goes on in this video: art being made for its own sake, for the enrichment of living.

– Nick Irvin, Curator

Gene Beery - Transmissions From Logoscape Ranch - Bodega - ****.5
“There’s too much art in this show, and I want more.” In this post-canonical art world everyone wants to dig up an obscure genius from the past because that’s having it both ways; it’s fresh work but with the historical gravitas you usually only get from those big institutional shows of artists everyone already knows backwards and forwards. Unlike most shows that try this maneuver, Beery holds up under scrutiny. It’s kind of astonishing that, in a room literally packed with his little meta-art dad jokes on canvas, none of them come off as cloying or forced. He really crafted his own micro-current of Minimalism out of little more than making fun of the grandiloquence of the arts (though he knows how to paint when he feels like it, with great precision and economy), and, even more impressively, has kept it up out in the middle of nowhere since before 1980.

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS

FRIBOURG, SWITZERLAND

Gene Beery

FRI ART KUNSTHALLE



Gene Beery, *Mere Decoration*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 19 1/2 x 25"

the slapdash smears and irreverent drips, disorderly composition, and exuberantly hyphenated uppercase script—that separate Beery's cheeky pictorial conceptualism from the dry, bureaucratic exercises of his peers, aligning him with the late-twentieth-century turn to "bad painting" *avant la lettre*. Take, for example, *This Is My Last Serious Painting*, 1960, in which swiftly opposing diagonal strokes of brown and white obscure the title text, which is set beneath a trickle of dark (and stormy) bluish gray that spills perpendicularly until all of the color sloshes together into a no-longer-serene aquamarine "sea" at the lower edge. Or the recent *Life Stars*, 2016, which celebrates existence by awarding it a succinct three and a half out of five. White overpainting not only blots out a prior indecipherable phrase, but also alludes to the variability of the rating system itself; the "blank" stars are also filled in but have been effaced in a kind of subtraction through addition, perhaps reflecting the depletion of energy over time.

But maybe Beery's attitude is best describes through another early work in the show, *Out of Order*, ca. 1960, executed in the aftermath of an event that would shape his entire oeuvre: While making his rounds as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (alongside noted colleagues Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Lucy Lippard, and Robert Ryman), the artist observed an apologetic TEMPORARILY OUT OF ORDER sign hanging on a kinetic work by Jean Tinguely. The placard announcing the art's dysfunction seemed to have been absorbed into the total assemblage—which must have been the Fribourg-born sculptor's *Homage to New York: A Self Constructing and Self-Destroying Work of Art*, exhibited at MOMA in 1960. Beery's primary source material and the engine of his neo-Dada artistic dissent—the romance of oblivion deferred, due to technical difficulties—can be seen reflected throughout his wordy displacements of "painting," often performed on canvas. In the circa 1960 piece, a rectangular frame positioned on the lower half of a Masonite board excuses itself: SORRY PAINTING IS TEMPORARILY OUT OF ORDER, while leaving open the possibility that its "order" might return.

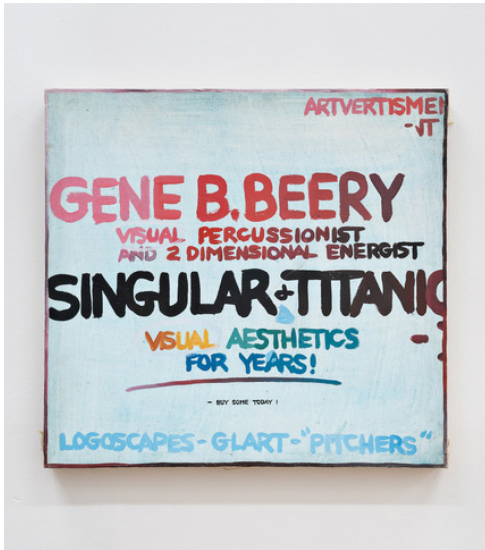
This sense of art negated—attracting the viewer's attention only to direct it elsewhere, out of frame—was in general evident in the selection of works (including *Out of Order*) grouped as "Wall Dancers," which approximated Beery's annual release of recent paintings into a disorienting, uproarious salon hang at his home, *en plein air*. Among those shown at the Fri Art Kunsthalle, *Counter Clockwise Compass Demonstrating the Truth of Worth*, 1965, scrambled the cardinal directions as a function of time, starting from true north but (like the artist) ending out west. The title of *Free Art Work Tomorrow*, 2015, which coincidentally punned on the name of the exhibition space, could be appreciated as either an ever-alluring tagline or unrealized political demand. The small square canvas that one saw on both entering and leaving the show, *Looking for Visual Thrills*, 2010, spelled out its title within a washed-blue boarder, letters running up against and dangling, lemminglike, on bad breaks on the right-hand edge. The text, not least, represents the grunt work of this reluctant artist—and the "subsequent generations of art viewers" he's projected the likely audience of his work—as nothing incomplete.

—Kari Rittenbach

Gene Beery's outgoing painterly production over more than half a century resolutely undermines the elitism of the dominant art system (and its transatlantic channels of legitimation) as much as it self-consciously expresses resistance to any "high art" convention. The simple material forms, selectively flat colors, imperfect brushwork, and rough, sometimes mottled or yellowing surfaces of his works articulate a peculiarly American nonchalance. The environs of the small Swiss city of Fribourg, which bear a remote similarity to the woods of Northern California under the Sierra Nevada mountains where Beery has lived and worked since the mid-1970s, fittingly emphasized the workaday quality of his "logoscapes," as the artist describes his paintings of words, which accompanied a handful of figurative paintings (rare for Beery), and a dozen stapled zines in the artist's first institutional survey, curated by Balthazar Lovay.

Beery's paintings are often understood as wry commentary entirely eschewing representation, since most are indeed text-based and can be literally read. But it is the work's particular painterly qualities—

ARTFORUM



Gene Beery, *Advertisement*, 1970s, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 21 1/4"

SAN FRANCISCO

Gene Beery

CUSHION WORKS

3320 18th Street

October 26–December 14, 2019

In “New Mythic Visualizations,” Gene Beery’s first solo exhibition in the Bay Area since the 1970s, the Californian artist’s signature non-sequiturs and declarative truths, attenuated by his satirical drawl, are featured in a central black-and-white multi-panel arrangement of recent paintings. “SOPHISTICATION IS DEATH,” reads one, in biting all-caps, while another simply offers, “A PIPE,” in just off-center ligature, a quip at that Modernist master whose readymades lurched from conceptual rebellion to rarified artifacts of high culture. Curated by Jordan Stein and Nick

Irvin, the exhibition also includes three videos filmed at Logoscape Ranch, Beery’s home of forty years in the remote foothills of the Sierra Nevadas, and exhibited here for the first time. In *Burning Cardboard*, 2000s, he sets ablaze a pile of paintings made on flattened boxes, as his simultaneous humming crescendos to a high-pitched wail. The sole survivor of that immolation is on view here: *THE BURDEN OF VULNERABLE BEAUTY*, 2000s.

Beery’s language paintings are not unlike the aesthetic and linguistic immediacy of a graphic T-shirt gone rogue, a parallel the artist draws by enclosing a number of his visual texts in gesturally outlined blouses and cotton tees. Eschewing the preciousness of a single painting, Beery works with juxtapositions, creating the effect of textual animation and allowing his critical edge to quietly bleed in after first read. His is a vision that witnesses and remembers the dissonance between one’s presentation of self, and how that self is received in the (art) world—a sensibility possibly learned during his stint as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art in the early 1960s, alongside colleagues “Bobby” Ryman, Dan Flavin, and Lucy Lippard. Near the show’s exit, a painting featuring a pop-color palette (an influence, perhaps, of Sol Lewitt, Beery’s first patron and a former MoMA night clerk himself), announces, “GENE B. BEERY . . . SINGULAR + TITANIC . . . BUY SOME TODAY!”

— Theadora Walsh

FINANCIAL TIMES

Gene Beery — why the cult American artist's time has come

Championed by Max Ernst and Sol LeWitt in 1960s, the 82-year-old's first ever museum show opens in Switzerland



Gene Beery's 'Experiment in Time' (1972)

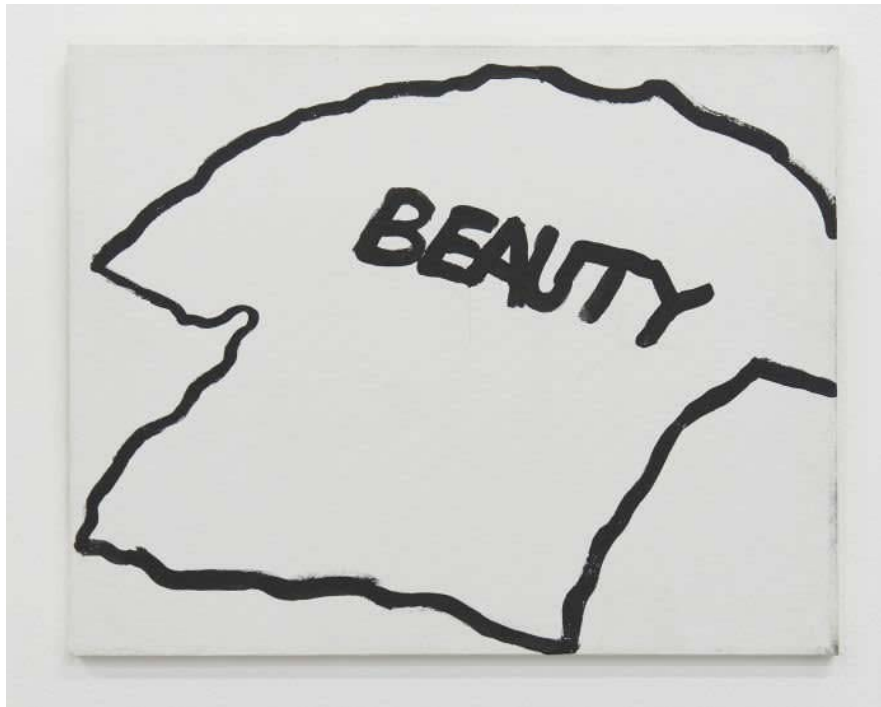
In 1961, the Surrealist artist Max Ernst slipped a note and a \$100 cheque to an unknown, Wisconsin-born artist who had a work in a group show at New York's Museum of Modern Art. "Continue your work!" Ernst wrote. The artist was Gene Beery, then in his mid-20s, who looked set for success. Just four years later he left town. In his determination to escape the trappings of an art world that otherwise hadn't show much appreciation, Beery left most of his work behind too, including text paintings on the hardboard Masonite he'd picked up from Lower East Side construction workers. Another artist came to his rescue: his friend and neighbour Sol LeWitt, who gathered up the abandoned works (paying for them at a later date).

These, and other works that LeWitt later bought, remain in the LeWitt estate collection. They are now among the pieces in Gene Beery's first institutional retrospective, currently at Fri Art, a former cardboard box factory that is now a kunsthalle in the Swiss countryside city of Fribourg.

On a train from the event-packed Art Basel fair to the more modest, French-speaking Fribourg, I ask the show's Swiss curator, Balthazar Lovay, why it has taken so long for such an exhibition to happen. "Beery withdrew himself from the art world: that sends a strong message," he says. "His work is also not easy to 'catch'. It can be satirical, poking fun at the professionals he needed to impress, but is also a super deep interrogation into what art is and what artists do."

Beery's naive style, social criticism and often-surreal narrative humour — which to my mind delight — were out of step with their time. Vernacular art that made people smile (or wince) was not the order of the day. In 1960s, Clement Greenberg's influential art criticism supported the high-minded and heroic rigours of Abstract Expressionism. One of the earliest works in the Fribourg show (salvaged by LeWitt) is a Masonite oil with the words "This Is My Last Serious Painting" (1960). The text is accompanied by Beery's signature and smeared with expressionist drips and gestural brushstrokes. His distaste for Abstract Expressionism is clear

But Beery took Ernst's advice and kept painting once he moved first to the outskirts of San Francisco, and eventually to the remote gold rush town of Sutter Creek, in the Sierra foothills, where the 82-year-old artist still lives and works. He did take a pause — between 1976 and 1997 — when his focus was to bring in money for a growing family. Painting took a back seat as Beery took on gardening jobs, though he did produce about 30 self-published books during this period, some of which are included in a vitrine in the Fri Art show.



Gene Beery's 'Beauty' (c2000s)

Before this, California's sunshine and hippy vibe injected colour and imagery into Beery's work. Bubble-writing and a children's book style characterise pieces made between 1965 and 1970, when the artist also worked as a taxi driver. These works include a touching painting called "I Love You" (1965), in which sound waves between a man's mouth and a woman's ear become visible and which was made for his adored wife Florence who died in 2015. Lovay isn't comfortable when I suggest that, visually, this was something of a Pop phase in Beery's life. "Pop was more about mass production and consumerism, and had a certain detachment, Beery's topics don't fit that mould." He concedes, though, that "Special Event" (1969), a work that brightly builds up the form of words in a birthday card, could be seen as "a sort of vernacular Pop".

Pop or not, these works seem the most commercial (not that Beery has had much of a market to date). But the artist seems more at home with his distinctive text paintings, now a dominant part of his output. "Some words are worth a thousand pictures," Beery says in an interview reproduced in the show's catalogue.



Installation view of Gene Beery's exhibition at Fri Art © Guillaume Baeriswyl

It seems the right moment for this work. What may have been out of time in 1960s America looks increasingly relevant today. Beery's recent "Life Stars" (2016), which assigns a 3.5/5 star-rating to "life", poignantly sums up how much of our critical thinking is now reduced to the likes of an online restaurant review.

When I look at his earlier works — with phrases such as "As Long As There Are Walls There Will Be Paintings!" (1986) and "This painting will always be interesting" (in his 1972 "Experiment in Time") — I can't help thinking about pieces on offer just 90 minutes away at Art Basel. The surreal, self-referential French artist Laure Prouvost, born in 1978 and currently representing her country at the Venice Biennale, comes most to mind. Her works such as "This sign is illegally here" (2018) and "Ideally here the floor would be covered of squashed strawberries" (2016) are selling like hot cakes (€10,000 each) through Lisson Gallery. It's telling that Beery, now 82, has begun to work with Cologne's Jan Kaps gallery, which otherwise represents much younger artists.

Fri Art's retrospective is relatively small, with 40 paintings overall, but this seems the right way to introduce an artist that currently has a cult following at best. Works are arranged mostly chronologically through four rooms and a corridor, though there are a few interruptions to the timeline that seem appropriate to Beery's resistance of structure and labels. The last room, in which 19 mostly text paintings are hung haphazardly and at angles, feels particularly personal. "This is what his home looks like," Lovay says, but admits it was a difficult hang for an overthinking curator to achieve. "I asked Gene where exactly he wanted the works and he told me just to put nails randomly into the wall and then add the paintings." This, and the show as a whole, works a treat.

To June 30, fri-art.ch

Gene Beery: *Just a Good Painting*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 53½ by 50 inches. Courtesy Jan Kaps, Cologne.



With their dogged poetry and existential wit, Gene Beery's text paintings have developed a cult following.

by Nick Irvin

FOR MORE THAN fifty years, Gene Beery (b. 1937) has churned out words. Not words as they are typeset, but words as they are inscribed by a particular hand. Beery's words, which appear in his countless paintings and books, often rendered in the unheroic style of sign painting, convey a specific voice that he has honed over the decades. This voice is peculiar, and not widely known; it speaks in slogans and jokes, spanning topics and tones. A representative sample of Beery's paintings hanging together might read something like this: THWART FATE / RE-VIRGINATE!; BRAP / SPUGG / ZANKO / IT ISN'T OVER TILL / THE DRUMMER / SOLOS!; ENOUGH!; STILL LIFE; PRACTICE QUOTIDIAN ECSTASY!; NOT BORN AND RAISED TO BE A HUMAN SACRIFICE!; A NICE PAINTING TO BE READ ON A WALL IN ONE OF THOSE SECLUDED ROOMS WHERE SOME CONSPIRE TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OVER OTHERS; WE STILL HAVE WILD BIRDS HERE; I GAVE UP / IT'S WONDERFUL!

Though he had a brief, formative period in New York, Beery has spent most of his life working in the rural foothills of central California, about an hour east of Sacramento. This has no doubt affected his visibility within the overwhelmingly cosmopolitan art world. But decades of steady transmissions from the hinterlands, including not only paintings and publications but also snapshot photography, video performances, and an idiosyncratic personal website (genebeery.info), have bolstered Beery's cult status.

Among the founding members in Beery's cult was his early friend, former neighbor, and lifelong supporter, Sol LeWitt. But in contrast to LeWitt's tidy, stately rigor, Beery has embraced a rough, vernacular aesthetic. He lives like a

backwoods Gauguin, but he also cultivates an existential cantankerousness that recalls Vonnegut. In his pastoral remove, Beery is a humorist whose bits aim both high and low, commingling crass puns and mortal dread. Using corny one-liners and low-budget materials (pre-stretched canvases, cheap paint, and cardboard), he tackles such heady, broad topics as nature, semiotics, ethics, and art itself. But despite the bite of his self-effacing explorations of grand themes, Beery's wordplay retains a bright-eyed optimism—even an affirmative humanism—in the face of a life and world where cynicism could be the more obvious response.

EUGENE B. BEERY was born in the industrial town of Racine, Wisconsin, to a working-class, staunchly Catholic, Germanic-Polish family. His father was a used car and vacuum cleaner salesman who painted watercolor landscapes in his spare time; his mother came from a family of mechanics and engineers. He briefly attended a local Catholic university and studied industrial design—a practical, money-conscious application of his creative impulses, suited to his upbringing—but decided to focus on fine art after taking a figure painting night class. While in school, he learned about contemporary art from magazines, including *Art in America* and *ARTnews*. The magazines made clear that New York “was where the action was,”¹ and so in 1959 Beery quit college and drove to the city, seeking to unbridle his ambitions from his origins and enter the ranks of the American avant-garde.

The New York art world that Beery entered was smaller than today's and, in keeping with high modernism's heroic

NICK IRVIN
is a writer based in
New York.



Out of Style,
1961, oil on
Masonite, 38 by
48 inches.
LeWitt Collection,
Chester, Conn.

All images,
unless otherwise
noted, courtesy
Greenspon,
New York.



tenor, more pugilistic. Beery set out to find where he stood, and how he could make his mark in an economy then characterized, according to Peter Schjeldahl, by “the terrible pressure for aesthetic novelty.”² Abstract Expressionism was cresting, Pop was percolating, Rauschenberg was making Combines. Like so many young artists, Beery observed these currents at openings and in bars. But he also gained additional insights while working as a security guard at the Museum of Modern Art (where he befriended LeWitt, a fellow guard). There, he watched over works by the modernist masters (Cézanne, Matisse), noting not only their techniques but also their effects on the room. What got reactions from the crowds? What makes someone take pause in a cascade of masterpieces?

Beery noticed that one reliable way to make a MoMA visitor pause was text: “Art viewers were very interested in paintings with scraps of text, newspapers, notes like that,” he said in a recent interview with painter Joshua Abelow. “Words are a tool of the visual art experience; see Magritte, Stuart Davis.”³ But the “visual art experience” that interested Beery included words written by institutions as well as by artists: explanatory wall text, pamphlets, and signage generally. Sometimes in the gallery you read more than you look.

Beery was especially inspired by one particular MoMA sign that he saw affixed to a kinetic sculpture by Jean Tinguely. In Beery’s telling, he encountered the sculpture on a day when it was malfunctioning. The museum had shut it off and hung an OUT OF ORDER sign on it. Beery was amused by the sign’s apparent incorporation into the assemblage artwork. The scene became the sort of dry, one-note jab at high culture’s stuffy mores that makes for a quintessential *New Yorker* cartoon. What’s more, the sign’s sober, functional design stood out in what Beery has called the “spectral glut” of painterly pyrotechnics evident throughout the museum.⁴

The slippage of signs from commentary into content would prove the basis of Beery’s entire career. A gleeful prod, aimed at “proper taste,” would become his main mode of delivery. His first show in New York was a 1962 juried open-call exhibition at MoMA titled “Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure,” to which he submitted a salvaged Masonite slab, uniformly painted drab gray, with four biomorphic cutouts labeled ARM, MRA, BREAST, and TSAERB (*Strange Device Still Untested*, 1960).

Within an otherwise conservative figure painting survey, Beery’s quirky linguistic play and bizarre forms piqued the interest of at least one observer: Max Ernst. The German

émigré eventually helped score Beery a slot at Alexander Iolas Gallery, which represented European Surrealist statesmen such as Ernst and Magritte, but had also held formative shows for younger artists such as Yves Klein, Ed Kienholz, and Andy Warhol. There, in 1963, Beery debuted his first all-text paintings, rendered in black on salvaged Masonite. One of these works, *Out of Style* (1961) reads: SORRY / THIS PAINTING / TEMPORARILY / OUT OF STYLE / CLOSED / FOR UPDATING / WATCH FOR / AESTHETIC REOPENING.

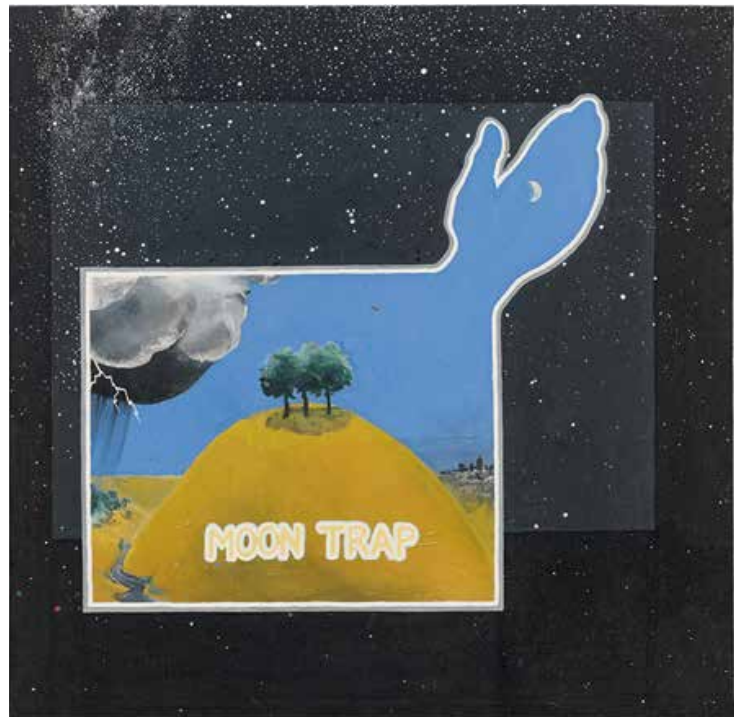
This early work contains the kernel for most of what Beery has produced since. Its gruff capital letters, applied with measured yet idiosyncratic brushwork, would become Beery's go-to lettering style. The blunt self-awareness of the text also established a tone that Beery has maintained. The Iolas show featured several other jokes on canvas. USE THIS / AS A PAINTING / IN AN / AESTHETIC / EMERGENCY ONLY, one read. Another stated: THIS PAINTING MAY / ALSO BE UTILIZED AS A / PANEL IN A WALL FOR / BUILDING A PIGEON COOP / OR A ■■■■. But as *Out of Style* shows, Beery's humor could have a scathing edge, reflecting, perhaps, a young artist's anxiety in the presence of greats. *Out of Style* shows a morbid awareness of the brief shelf life of most artists' careers, many artists' lives, and the fickle ebbs and flows of attention that sustain them.

These concerns were (and are) commonly discussed in the social circles around art, but rarely had they been so explicitly made the subject of artworks. Ad Reinhardt had taken up this theme in his "How to Look" comics, but he famously divorced his satirical output from the "serious" work of his paintings. To do otherwise would be gauche—and that's exactly what Beery decided to be. Starting with his first gallery show, he made a habit of calling the bluffs of the reigning aesthetic elite—the language, themes, narratives, and behavior with which it ascribed and accrued value—while retaining an earnest faith in art-making itself. At Iolas there were no sales, no reviews.

It would take several years for the rest of the art world to tune in to the kind of text-based, reflexive critique that Beery was offering, and when it did, other players were at the forefront. Conceptual art, and its preoccupations with semiotics, formal austerity, seriality, and the critique of institutions, would gain traction only later on in the '60s, albeit with a more academic inflection, and scrubbed clean of any trace of the artist's hand.

BEERY'S DISCOMFORT with the New York art world's politics, posturing, and raucous lifestyle proved untenable: in the same year as his solo debut, he quit the city, leaving his Hester Street loft full of works, a handful of which were salvaged by LeWitt, who lived upstairs at the time.⁵ He returned to Wisconsin for a spell, met and married his lifelong partner, Florence, and eventually moved to central California—first to Petaluma, where he commuted to San Francisco to drive cabs, and then to Sutter Creek, where he built a studio, raised a family, and continues to live to this day.

One might suspect that Beery would have found some kinship with West Coast Conceptualists like John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha, whose earliest experiments in text, humor,



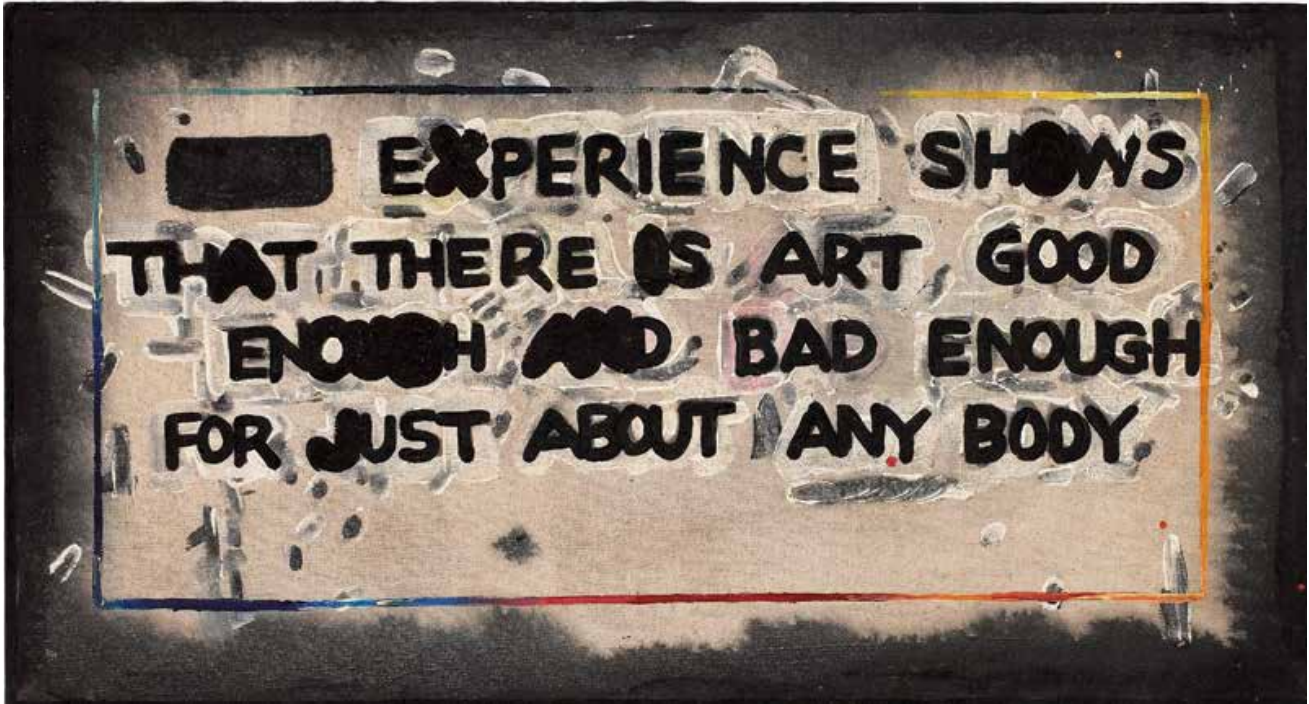
Moon Trap, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 29¼ by 29⅞ inches.

and meta-painting commenced some years after Beery produced his first major works. In fact, Beery's paintings traveled with work by Baldessari and Ruscha, among others, as part of the series of "Numbers" shows that Lucy Lippard organized in the early 1970s. Yet having withdrawn from the New York art world, Beery made few attempts to ensconce himself in the burgeoning Los Angeles scene.

In Petaluma, far from the "spectral glut" of New York that he parried with austere gray panels, Beery developed a bolder, more expressive palette, leading to his most formally virtuosic works. His fixation on art about art loosened, and he began to incorporate themes from his new, more placid life—chiefly his proud role as a family man, and his proximity to nature. *Just a Good Painting* (1970) typifies these expansions. It includes multiple layers of text, each distinguished by a bold graphic treatment. The work's title reads in huge, schmaltzy cursive, radiating hard-edge bands of color. A second phrase, THE HIGHEST ART / PARENTHO- / -OD ART!, appears in pink and blue capital letters, with even strokes of orange cutting off their peaks. A third, fainter text, rendered in orange, is tucked in the bleed between bigger words. It reads: ADDICTED / TO / NATURE. The whole composition is oddly cut off at the right, and the texts appear on top of a mustard-brown field that is suffused with dots of pigment. It's enamoring in its expert queasiness.

Beery's work was wide-ranging during this period. He indulged in hallucinatory formal experiments, and he began to advance a beguiling, insular poetics—a phonetic dance

Beery often calls himself a “visual percussionist,” suggesting that the rhythm and sequence of simple elements are what produce interest.



Experience Shows . . .
ca. 1970s, acrylic
on canvas, 14 by
26 inches.

of puns, whimsical phrases, and neologisms. In *Experience Shows* (1970), he toys with letterforms and paints the same letters repeatedly until they hover on the edge of legibility. Fragments of landscapes appear in some works. Constellations painted from star charts are just visible in others. In *The Ethical Crisis Playoffs* (ca. 1970s), he concocts a tournament bracket of artist tropes, including COCKY YOUTHFUL SNIPPETS (in orange); REVOLUTIONARY, EVILUTIONARY, INVOLUTIONARIANS (in black); and ELECTRONIC MEDIA-OCHRE SERENITY CONFABULATORS (in purple). The final round comes down to JOLLY WED COPULATORS (red) versus KICKY HEROINITE NODDYS (blue), but the champ remains undetermined, a blank space circled by cartoonish exclamatory lines.

Similarly inventive sequences can be found in Beery's many books. (LeWitt provided the funding for dozens of these publications in the '70s and '80s.) Beery tends to treat each page like a text painting made with a Sharpie. Many of the spreads in *Art Test* (1987) are devoted to a search for a “universal art symbol” on the level of ♥ for love, or ☺ for peace. Page after page is filled with inscrutable squiggles and commentary on various approaches to iconicity

(A FINITE IRREPRESSIBLE / SPECIFIC AESTHETIC VISUAL- / IZATION OF A BINOCULATE / PRETZEL AS A HEURISTIC / SUGGESTION IN QUEST OF / THE UNIVERSAL ART SYMBOL). Such books allow Beery to twirl an idea repeatedly, free from the restrictions of a single-panel painting. *Manifesto!* (1978) pairs seemingly earnest declarations of art's function and merit with increasingly cheesy puns on “manifesto” (MANY FATSOS; MIGHTY SPENT JOKE).

Along the way, Beery's paintings came to look more like the pages of his books: black on white, quickly executed. By the 1990s, his exuberance transferred from focused, intensive technical labor to rapid-fire production. As he told Abelow, “the ideas were coming so fast I wanted to get them down before they slipped away or I got a better idea.”⁶ More and more, he pared down the expression of these ideas to black acrylic on starched, pre-stretched canvases from Walmart (there are no art supply stores in Sutter Creek). This is mostly how he works today. Each whim gets a canvas, usually small. Sometimes they are as succinct as STILL LIFE, A POEM, or VIBRASTROPE; others continue his penchant for enumerative lists, like *Still Champions!!!* (1994), which pits cars against various types of roadkill (AUTO DRIVERS 8; SKUNKS 0). He



Paintings hanging in Beery's Sutter Creek, Calif., home, 2016. Photo Jason Frank Rothenberg.

Still Champions!!!,
1994, acrylic on
canvas, 24 by 30
inches.

STILL CHAMPIONS!!!			
'1994' SHAKERIDGE ROAD AMADOR CO. CA.			
AUTO DRIVERS	18	AUTO DRIVERS	8
DEER	0	SKUNKS	0
AUTO DRIVERS	66	AUTO DRIVERS	5
GRAY SQUIRRELS	0	GRAY FOXES	0
AUTO DRIVERS	14	AUTO DRIVERS	11
SNAKES	0	OPOSSUMS	0
AUTO DRIVERS	FORFEIT WIN	AUTO DRIVERS	32
PORCUPINES	* NO SHOW	BIRDS	0
* NO MORE PORKYS?		AUTO DRIVERS VS. AUTO	
LATELY AUTO DRIVERS 23		DRIVERS & OTHERS NEXT!	
JACK RABBIT & COTTONTAILS 0			

treats his paintings unpreciously and sometimes repeats phrases from work to work. Ambiguously dated canvases pile up in his home. When the weather is good, he paints outside and hangs finished pieces on the exterior of his house.

IN A WAY, Beery's current unfussy mode of making retains elements of Conceptualism's early dream of dematerialization, and its critique of art's commodification. Whereas more canonized Conceptual practices eventually calcified into the very type of rarefied, marketable art objects that they had set out to dismantle, Beery retains the attitude that it's the idea that is precious, not the thing itself. Of course, it's somewhat ironic that he expresses this attitude through painting—arguably the most salable medium and a frequent target of Conceptualist attacks. But his recent fast-and-loose production upsets painting's presumed sanctity and value.

The recent work makes the most sense when viewed serially. The flow of thought can accumulate into something more powerful than what can be conveyed on any one canvas. Beery often calls himself a "visual percussionist," suggesting that the rhythm and sequence of simple elements are what produce interest. Still, he delights in specific moments of

painterly gesture, compounding the transcendence of idea art with the immanence of looking: he will work his letters over, smudging, redrafting, and redacting lines, betraying precision and intention beneath their apparent slop. Such moments help his work emit a humanity that is alien to both Joseph Kosuth's cold analysis and Baldessari's ironizing distance. Beery's works remain flawed, vulnerable, warm.

At the time of this writing, Beery's place in the canon remains somewhat tenuous, but things are looking up. He has yet to have a museum show, but a younger generation of artists, curators, and gallerists continues to join his cult. Abelow is perhaps Beery's most vocal advocate. He evangelized about the older painter at length on his blog and presented Beery's work at Baltimore's Freddy gallery. Lower East Side galleries like Bodega and Simone Subal have all paid homage to Beery, by including his canvases in group exhibitions. There's a strange prescience in Beery's succinct, easily disseminable, junk-heap poetics that seems ready for the Web. Beery's text paintings also hang well, it turns out, alongside works by younger artists such as Nicholas Buffon, Lily van der Stokker, Mathew Cerletty, and Abelow. He's a loopy grandpa we never knew we had.



Four photographs, ca. 1990s–2000s, C-prints, each 8¾ by 11¼ inches. Clockwise from top left, *Seeking Mentor*, *Farmaceuticals*, *Not Whistler's Mother* (courtesy Jan Kaps), and *What gets nature's work done?*

But for Beery today, success is not measured by visibility or influence. His life isn't about wine and cheese, but "Beer and Peaches," as the title of one 1991 painting goes. This became clear to me when I made the drive to visit him this past August. Looking around while Gene fixed us sandwiches, I realized that, in a sense, his works are not made for the white cube—they are made for the ranch, for his grandkids, for Flo, who passed away last year. Above his sink hung a quadriptych listing the first names of Beery family members—but even here, Gene's penchant for pedantics showed in the "key": THE BEERY FAMILY'S / FIRST NAME PORTRAITS. / IDEAL PROPORTION / AXIOM. / RELEVANT MYTH. To the left, above the fridge, was a "formal portrait" listing their post-office-box address. It became clearer why Gene's snapshot photography has been so central to his website, and to recent exhibitions—paintings resting on the sofa, he and his family playing games in homemade masks, paintings wrapped on the wall on Christmas Day. The work thrives on-site, "art into life."

Later, we drank beer in folding chairs under a tarp in the yard, looking at an arrangement of "T-shirt paintings" (showing shirts adorned with slogans) Gene had composed on the side

of his home. We talked about his professional regrets, and his "what-ifs," but mostly about his pride in a career built on his own terms. A 2014 painting offers a retrospective assessment: LIFE ★★½. He told me, "in the city you don't get a full slice of life. You don't get a true sense of death, either—out here, you learn to live with death, and you learn to live with beauty, too." Crickets chirped; a deer walked by; one T-shirt, its right arm extended, read: I DON'T WANT TO THINK OF ANY LAST BREATHS! ○

1. Gregor Quack, "Interview with Gene Beery," July 2016, jan-kaps.com.
2. Peter Schjeldahl, "Hartford: Echoes of the '60s," *New York Times*, January 27, 1980.
3. Joshua Abelow, "Interview with Gene Beery," *ART BLOG ART BLOG*, March 2013, artblogartblog.com.
4. Beery in conversation with the author, Sutter Creek, Calif., Aug. 15, 2016.
5. LeWitt's support over the years would sustain Beery's practice and help keep him tethered, somewhat, to the Conceptual legacy. In addition to funding the production of Beery's many artist books, LeWitt had a hand in Beery's inclusion in Lucy Lippard's 1973 compendium, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, as well as two of her "Numbers" shows. For a time, *Out of Style* hung in his studio. Moreover, LeWitt's loan of the salvaged loft works to the Wadsworth Atheneum for a *MATRIX* show in 1979 was key to Beery's rediscovery: it was there that gallerist Mitchell Alguis first learned about Beery, and he would go on to represent and exhibit Beery through the '90s and early 2000s.
6. Abelow, "Interview with Gene Beery."

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

GENE BEERY

Gene Beery discusses his life and work



Gene Beery, *Untitled*, ca. 1990s-2000s, C-print, 7 3/4 x 11 3/4".

Throughout his fifty-year career, California-based painter Gene Beery has been described as an expressionist, Pop artist, Minimalist, and Conceptualist. His text-based and earlier figurative canvases tend to show all of these strains of art, like the many walls of a museum, often by placing them in literal conversations with one another. His exhibition "Early Paintings and Recent Photographs" presents work from as early as 1961, and is on view at Albus Greenspon in New York from March 16 to April 27, 2013.

I GUARDED MY OWN PAINTING at MoMA in the early 1960s. I wasn't the only artist working as a guard there. Dan Flavin was too; so was Bobby Ryman. Lucy Lippard had a job in the print department and Sol LeWitt was a night clerk in the museum's offices. I remember an elevator would get stuck there every so often. At night, when people would hear the loudspeaker say that the museum was closing, Sol and I would bullshit around or he would sometimes suggest interesting authors to read, like Henri Barbusse. Sol was really literate like that, erudite. So I started to read some of them.

The second floor of the museum at that time had a lot of older modern masterpieces. There was a room full of Matisses that I really liked. It was a good spot to be stationed. But I had to stand all day, so I would get stuck looking at a work until the damn thing started moving on the walls like a movie. You can start to see Matisse's process that way, and what a fabulous dream it really is to turn something out like that.

It inspired me to submit five works of mine to MoMA curator Dorothy Miller for the exhibition "Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure" in '62. Five was the limit, so I entered them all and actually got one in: It was a female torso with just the torso and the hips cut out in cardboard, painted silver, with two loops at the top—breast, breast—and holes that looked like some weird torture mask. It was a pretty good size. On one side, her arm read ARM. On the other: MRA.

When I was a young kid, my grandmother had a boarder that lived at her house. When I used to go there for the summer, the boarder would read me nursery rhymes from books that had all these pictures. In that combination of image and text, each really affects the other, and affected me, qualifying and creating a third thing—the result of the juxtaposition—that has helped me go back to the previous two to see if what they said initially is what they now are meaning. I wrote a story once about a man at a museum. He was a guard there and was knocked on his butt by understanding Matisse in a red room. One line from that era still resonates: "Canny is a nose that knows an onion that is called a rose." That was Nicholas Johnson, one of Earth's seminal semanticists. I personally prefer the reverse, a canny nose that knows a rose that is called an onion.

ART BLOG ART BLOG

THIS INTERVIEW IS THE RESULT OF AN EMAIL EXCHANGE, WHICH TOOK PLACE BETWEEN ARTIST GENE BEERY AND MYSELF DURING THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY 2013. I HOPE YOU ENJOY HEARING WHAT MR. BEERY HAS TO SAY AS MUCH AS I DO. FOR MORE ON BEERY PLEASE VISIT HIS GALLERY IN NEW YORK: ALGUS GREENSPON.

Joshua Abelow: Where are you from originally?

Gene Beery: I was born in Racine, Wisconsin - October 13th, 1937. I'm 75 years old.

JA: Where do you live now?

GB: Currently living in Sutter Creek, California.

JA: I know you used to live in New York City. What was that like? Did you meet any famous artists?

GB: I lived in NYC from 1959 to 1963. I worked as a museum guard at MoMA and later the Whitney. They were adjoined then. I had a great loft studio at 117 Hester above Meyerhoff's butter and egg candling store. I bought the key for a couple hundred dollars. The rent was 45 bucks a month - can you believe it! Sol LeWitt moved in upstairs around that time. A solid good guy. It seemed like all the world came by the museum eventually. Saw many celebs and artists - most gone now. I even guarded my own painting there in a show called Recent Figure Painting USA in 1961 - a rare open show. Max Ernst saw my piece and sent me a note and 100 dollars to continue my work.

JA: Wow - Max Ernst - that's incredible! I bet you could buy a lot of art supplies for \$100 in 1961! What was it like being a young artist in New York at that time?

GB: I was drawn to New York in the late 50's by Art magazines. I left Layton Art School in Milwaukee as a junior to go to the big ART city as presented in ARTNEWS etc. I couldn't believe there was a place where people talked about Art and the Art World in magazines, bars, and clubs. This small town dope with grandiose plans and an itch for new surroundings almost flipped out! Instead, my three-plus years in NYC drove me sane. This was the New York of heroin, high crime, diaphragms, Abstract Expressionism, classy openings and the last years of European influence and there was plenty of romantic artist style living and sharp critics and the institutionalizing of too many things. I survived and thrived, but left NYC for a lady in my hometown. I shoulda stayed in NYC though, but then I wouldn't have met the eventual love of my life, my wife Florence. New York was quite stimulating for a 25-year-old ex-bumpkin, but I left in 1963. I packed up my drum set and favorite Art pieces in my Volks and took a vacation to sort things out - from which I would not return for years. I did fairly well during my time in New York: briefly worked in Art amazing MoMA; had a show at a big time gallery, Alexander Iolas in 1963; I received a grant of 2000 dollars from the Copley foundation on Christmas Eve!, met many interesting people including artists on the up swing - Jim Rosenquist, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, and Mike Hardin, and, of course, many babes of various predations and so forth. Sadly, or maybe it was for my benefit (I needed a rest), I didn't sell and was now too spoiled to work a regular job.

JA: What was your show at Alexander Iolas like?

GB: Iolas was a gallery that exhibited and was associated with European Surrealists like Man Ray, Duchamp, Max Ernst and some Americans, CPLY, Stevenson, Pfriem and others. I got this show there through my participation in the "Figure..." show at the MoMA. My show was received well, though I don't remember more than a paragraph of a review in ARTNEWS. No sales, but Duchamp gave me a fine after-dinner cigar at Bill and Noma Copley's home. The show was black and whites and figures in gold and silver with text. Albus Greenspon gallery has documentation on that period.

JA: Do you ever miss it here?

GB: Well, it is a different New York now. For me what is past is past - unique and instructive - hedonistic and aesthetic and etc. Now, I love my rural life in the Sierra Foothills in California, but I'm always ready for a trip to New York. If someone buys the tickets! The best "Eyes" are there as well as history, and moolah!

JA: I know you did some shows with Mitchell Albus before he joined forces with Amy Greenspon in 2010, right? I didn't become aware of your work until somewhat recently via the Internet. How did Mitchell discover your work and how many shows did you do with him?

GB: Mitchell says he saw a work of mine at the Wadsworth, was impressed and contacted Andrea Miller-Keller who turned him onto myself. Mitchell saved my retreated ego and gave me a show at his Thompson Street gallery - sold a few and got excellent reviews. Both shows there went well, but were cautiously received. The dates of these exhibits elude me. Word works only, some large and many in color. Some good sales.

Derosia

Joshua Abelow, Art Blog Art Blog, March 2013

JA: There's an excerpt from a letter you wrote to Andrea Miller-Keller dated 1979 in the press section on the Albus Greenspon website that I think is great: "...or was it trying to find out just what Art was by throwing out everything and starting over from the idea on up...not worrying about hard edges or painterly edges because the ideas were coming so fast I wanted to get them down before they slipped away or I got a better idea. With just words, realizing the graphic interest was there - in the background of course in the sense that the letters could be viewed up close or paintings hung upside down for someone who said they are too simple...I also was disappointed nobody else had the 'fun' I did with these paintings...looking back, maybe it is or was neurologically difficult to view symbols or words as Art because of the functioning of the different halves of the brain. You know the right half is nonverbal and aesthetic, the left symbol using and analytical. It might be difficult to synthesize a leap where the word works as art - of course look at Chinese ideograms or calligraphy. They do it...Anyway, you can see I'm still working with words (books lately) mainly because as I told you I got to the point where the most original thing for me to do was to continue to do what I was doing - and isn't that what Art is all about - to do what you think you should in the spirit of freedom, keeping in mind it's nice to find agreement and that the products or actions have some human beneficence."

JA: Have you always made text based work?

GB: No, I picked that up while guarding paintings at MoMA. I noticed Art viewers were very interested in paintings with scraps of text, newspapers, notes like that. So I thought I'd add some text to my otherwise imagistic work. Words are a tool of the visual art experience; see Balzac, Magritte, Stuart Davis, etc. Eventually, I became interested in signs and their content in everyday society and tried to uptone the meanings to some kind of poetry.

JA: Do you remember the first word painting you ever made?

GB: I'm sure the first word painting I made was text on an image - likely a female figure. I have always wanted to be original in my art and ended up doing text pieces because nobody else was - then.

JA: To me, your work feels fresh and contemporary - it's hard to believe some of this stuff was made decades ago. How long have you been making art?

GB: I have been conscious of doing Art since I was in second grade (I'm finally in third grade, Ha!). I did profiles instead of front view stick figures. I also drew a lot of army tanks and airplanes and war scenes like other boys in my class. The Second World War was on, we were good citizens. Creating Art has always been the frosting on the nourishing cake in my imperfect/perfect existence.

JA: Do you spend a lot of time on the Internet looking at art?

GB: I am a fan of ART BLOG ART BLOG.

JA: Thank you. ABAB is a fan of Gene Beery. Do you have any favorite artists or writers or other points of inspiration?

GB: I think we are subconsciously influenced by other Artist's efforts. I have always admired Frans Hals, Matisse, Magritte and Egg the cave wall painter. Sol LeWitt is also a very admirable Artist and person as well as all of those who worked and are working that I haven't mentioned including yourself plus all of the Zen writers and Lao Tzu.

JA: I know you're married and I think you have kids. What do they think of your work?

GB: My wife Florence and I have five children, Teresa, Pamela, Elizabeth, James, and Mary. All of their homes exhibit my art. Florence has always backed me up in my artist's vocation without competing and with a real gift for listening. We have 13 grandkids and 5 great grand kids.

JA: They are all very lucky to have your work in their homes. I have three of your paintings in my home and they bring me a lot of joy. My favorite is the one that reads: "DOWN WITH YOUR ART!" That one really makes me happy.

GB: Thank You, I just hope it isn't my ART that is down - Ha! - a nice open-ended universal piece! Part of Art as conscious of itself. It's not yours either!

JA: It's the voice of our critics! Haha! Do you have a favorite color?

GB: I like them all but Mauve has a deep complexity I like.

JA: At some point you stopped using color and decided to just paint words in black on white canvas. Is that right?

GB: General expedience was my motive. At one time I imagined I should be in a hurry to get all of my ideas realized and black and white was least expensive and I thought more noticeable than the over stimulating blast of color we find ourselves swimming in in our culture. I still think in color in photography.

JA: Do you think of yourself as a conceptual painter?

GB: I think of myself as a Folk Artist for a Folk without Folk Art (although, now the electronic toys are kind of Folk Artiness). I'm not a total Idea guy - I like to do Ideas though that can expand human choices for Behavior and Living - a new way of seeing Life and Art and getting some joy out of them on this tough planet (I guess that eliminates the electronic toys). Humor is a good part of my shtick.

Derosia

Joshua Abelow, Art Blog Art Blog, March 2013

JA: I love all the weird photographs with text you have been emailing me for the past couple of months. How do those come about?

GB: I see Art everywhere like many of us. I like to grab it and Art it with captioned or not photos.

JA: A few weeks ago you sent me a short story about a six-legged dog named POUND0 who can “run as fast as the speed of light.” That was fun to read. Do you write a lot of short stories?

GB: Well, I do some writing - a story or two or a humorous paragraph or short story. I also have dabbled in spurious music, videos and comedy skits. Poundo is in the works. Eric Ginsburg is illustrating.

JA: Sounds great. I’m looking forward to seeing that. Have you ever exhibited music or video in New York?

GB: I also have done Artist’s books, YouTube videos, a Music CD, and several Comedy CDs available through Albus Greenspon Gallery.

JA: In the early 60’s you said you wanted to find out what art was by “throwing out everything and starting over from the idea on up.” That’s a very interesting idea. Can you tell us a little more about that? Any closing thoughts?

GB: I can tell you that since then I’ve found out that starting from rock bottom with Art is a charming simplification. I’ve learned that Art is much bigger than that, complex, ever re-forming, and probably of an unknowable, bottomless nature. I’m still pleasurably whacking away at it. So do what you like Artists! Expand the definition of Art! I do like the connection of Art to Beauty and Eros. Art continues to make Artists. Details available in my artworks. Gene B. Beery.

JA: Gene, thank you for taking the time to speak to us. I know my readers will find your words truly inspirational.

GB: Thanks for the stimulating opportunity Joshua.

ARTFORUM



Gene Beery, *We still have wild birds here*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 14".

NEW YORK

Gene Beery

GREENSPON

71 Morton Street

September 11–October 16, 2010

This exhibition, the first at Albus Greenspon, presents a five-decade sampling of the little-known Conceptualist Gene Beery's paintings, several of which forgo dithering aphorisms for some knotty wordplay. The artist's sharp, direct wit is manifest in works such as *Artists Paint Themselves*, 1966, and *What Is Beyond So What??*, 1960, which portray their title phrases. Inviting viewers to approach each canvas as blend of found signs and instruction manuals, Beery's word prompts certainly efface the capacity of text to anchor the permutations that an image incites. These frank statements, sometimes painted atop a psychedelic wash or white backdrop, elicit a train of connotations and ponderings; it is hard to not finish the punch line or fill in the blanks.

Beery's art should not be taken as a collection of ironic one-liners, though. Rather, his aptitude lies in his sensitivity and cultivation of a "logoscape" (a term coined by the artist), as in *We still have wild birds here*, 1994, a small canvas in which the text of the title is painted in black and lucidly aligned at the center. The painting recalls cardboard signs, the kind crafted with marker and stuck to a shop's front door. Its assertion invites an internal rumination on an impossible vista. *Eye Rest*, 1970, a small work that coyly hangs in the gallery bathroom, its bubble letters bottom-aligned against a brown ground. Extending from the right-hand corner of the painting's wooden frame is an electric cord that connects to an adjacent socket. A polysemic pun, the work is "on," even though the cord is not actually powering it. "Resting" particularly resonates in a contemporary climate that propagates high-production art-as-entertainment catering to a tuned-out public. Beery's staged surreal moment and sage commentary confront us with the hazards of art and its miraculous potential—an alchemy created by the coupling of even the most basic material.

— Piper Marshall

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 Algae 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 aesthician 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.

Derosia

Claire Barliant, The New Yorker, September 2010

THE
NEW YORKER

Gene Beery

The art dealer Mitchell Alpus has a deservedly great reputation for championing under-recognized artists; he and his new partner, Amy Greenspon, inaugurate their spacious West SoHo gallery with a show by an under-known seventy-three-year-old painter from Racine, Wisconsin, who worked as a guard at MoMA in the fifties and once counted Sol LeWitt and Marcel Duchamp as supporters. The deadpan word paintings here (including “Note: Make a Painting of a Note as a Painting,” a rainbow-hued mise en abyme from 1970) exhibit a trippy style and deadpan wit. Beery doesn’t seem fazed by his outlier status: a 1997 self-portrait in text, titled “Childhood Dreams,” lists his name alongside those of Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, an Indian taking on all the artworld cowboys.

Gene B. Beery



I've only seen one show of Gene B. Beery's paintings, at Mitchell Alpus Gallery in New York in 2001. Each painting in the exhibition followed an identical format: a phrase quickly written out in black block letters on a primed canvas. Most of the canvases, as I remember, were small and the phrases were often self-reflexive comments on painting and art in general. (Beery, Mitchell told me, lived in a small town in Northern California and had been doing this kind of painting for years.) This sounds like conceptual art, which I guess it must be, but unlike most language-wielding conceptualists, Beery is humorous and self-deprecating.

Beery also expresses himself through self-published books. Over time I've picked up a dozen or so of them, dating from the late 1970s to the 1990s. As with the paintings, the format of the books is standard (offset, stapled, uppercase lettering that looks like it was originally done with a Sharpie pen, sometimes captioning cartoony drawings), and the subject is usually art itself. One from 1988 is titled *Art for Artists Only*, with this tantalizing subtitle "Tales, Reifications and Comments by Imaginary Masters of Art." The pages alternate between words or phrases framed in hand-drawn rectangles and the advice of the "imaginary masters," who include, among others, "the master of an art that must never have a place," "the master of outlaw art" and "the master of the unrepeatable visually malapropic art object."

He constantly plays with reader's expectations. The page numbering in *Art is the Universe Admiring Itself* (1983) alternates between front to back and back to front, apparent captions can read like non sequiturs, a devilish 1979 volume titled *Admit One to the World of Tra* inverts selected words on every page. Beery apparently has an obsession with one-eyed figures: two books feature hilarious drawings expressing his self-termed "cyclopiphilia." The earliest book I have, *A Nice Painting Book*, is dated 1977 and is designed feed into the paintings, as its

Raphael Rubinstein, The Silo, July 10, 2010

subtitle explains: “a sketchbook catalogue of actual and projected art works by the visual percussionist Eugene B. Beery.” (Somewhere along the line he became plain “Gene.”) The “art works,” helpfully set in loosely drawn rectangles, are not only a catalogue of projected Beery paintings but also a catalogue of familiar artistic strategies and likely fates of artworks: “A nice painting to be understood by subsequent generations of viewers,” “A nice painting for your average gallery goer to wonder about,” “A nice painting for perpetual endowment in a well-known art museum’s storeroom.” The last page strikes a typically self-referential note: “A nice little art book to begin or end an art book collection with!”



From one angle, Beery’s work could be read as a cynical deflation of artworld pretensions, but there’s a sense of celebration – perhaps of the fact that Beery is able to tap into a seemingly inexhaustible store of ideas – emphasized by the exclamation marks that pervade his books, which suggests that his real message may be a joyful acceptance of every aspect of art-making. I think he may be the best language-painter around.

Later: the best way to catch up with Beery’s paintings is to visit his frequently updated website which goes under the moniker Gene Beery Fine Artist.

April 8, 2013: There is a great show of early paintings and recent photographs by Beery on view at Albus Greenspon Gallery in New York until April 27. The color photos at first glance might seem like casual snapshots documenting his daily existence but many of them have formal complexities that sneak up on you. And don’t miss the 1971 painting titled From the Artist’s Sketchbook that warns of “dread painter’s block.” Now I am absolutely sure that Beery is, and has long been, the best painter of words we have.

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

Gene Beery

Whatever the aesthetic merit of Gene Beery's Pop-Conceptual paintings, on view in this delightful miniretrospective, they are certainly funny. Since the early 60's, Mr. Beery has been making word paintings that look and read like signs you see in shop windows. What the words offer, however, are not commodities but mischievous, self-referential messages, like John Baldessari's but goofier. "Invent your own art kit!" blares the exuberant text of a 1968 spoof of Conceptualism called "Be an Artist Tomorrow." "No brains, technique, skill, imagination, etc. needed. Clever system makes everyone an old master in seconds."

In "Essences Only" made this year, Mr. Beery used a thin brush to write in black with apparently casual haste on a white canvas, "My life is now too short to spend much time on formal painting art concerns. I am simply recording essences." Just so.

It is tempting to go on quoting other paintings, but it is worth noting, too, the paradoxical Jasper Johnsian character of Mr. Beery's works: are they actual signs, fictional signs, representations of signs, just paintings or all of the above? The categorical uncertainty is a part of the sly charm of this seemingly simple yet intellectually invigorating art.