

Pathways to a Self

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In March 1969, Bill Beckley went into his George Washington phase. It didn't last long but it kept him very busy. A few months earlier, he had drawn a line across a field in Pennsylvania. In the early morning, when the sky was orange, Beckley used orange paint. Later, under a blue sky, he switched to blue paint and then back to orange as the sun set and the light again changed. Next, he tried to draw a line across the Delaware River, stepping from the bank into the water with a can of paint strapped to his belt. As he advanced, he dripped paint from a brush into the running water. Suddenly, there was nothing beneath his feet and he felt the current pulling him under the surface. Scrambling up to the light and air, he ditched the paint can and made for the opposite bank. Hauling himself out of the water, he noticed a plaque. It was here that George Washington had crossed the Delaware. ☐ This was news to Beckley, who hadn't intended his performance piece to retrace a historic itinerary. Simmering in his imagination, the coincidence prompted him to launch a series of George Washington works. To resemble, as closely as possible, the figure in Gilbert Stuart's portrait of Washington, he dressed up in formal clothes and sprinkled talcum powder in his hair. Then he made a photograph of himself.

To commemorate all the places the first president is supposed to have slept, Beckley spent a night at the George Washington Motel on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. He chopped down a cherry tree. With these performances, Beckley evoked the iconic Washington who used to hang on the walls of American schoolrooms; the Washington driven hither and yon by the vagaries of war, always in need of a good night's sleep;

and Washington the epitome of virtue, who could not tell a lie. Of course, it's untrue that the young George Washington chopped down a cherry tree and then confessed, declaring, "I cannot tell a lie." The episode was the early nineteenth-century invention of Mason Weems, who included it in a book of uplifting stories for American children.

Read for decades as history, Weems's fabrications were eventually debunked. By contrast, Beckley introduced his impersonations as flagrantly transparent masquerades. "Obviously, I wasn't George Washington," as he remarked earlier this year.¹ Obviously. What is not so obvious is why Beckley played Father of His Country in 1971. I think his make-believe Washington was a response to minimalist objects—the Robert Morris cubes and Carl Andre grids and Sol LeWitt lattices that had startled the previous decade with their taciturn clarity. As Frank Stella put it, "What you see is what you see."² Just that and nothing more and nothing less because the minimalist object is what it is, self-evidently. It cannot tell a lie.

Playing off the simplicities—and the solemnities—of minimalist art, Beckley painted tree trunks in a pattern that coalesced, at a distance, into the shape of a cube. In an early exhibition at 112 Greene Street, one of the first SoHo galleries, he filled the space between two columns with three horizontal planks, all the same size and evenly spaced, like the units of a wall sculpture by the arch-minimalist Donald Judd. Beckley's piece was called *Rooster, Bed, Lying* (1971): "rooster" because the space between the middle and uppermost planks was enclosed with chicken wire to provide a rooster with a temporary habitat; "bed" because Beckley placed a mattress on the bottom plank; and "lying" for reasons that are not quite as straightforward. As the artist has said, the mattress offered the

possibility that “one might lie down and fall asleep, become unconscious, and later be made conscious again by the rooster.”³ *Rooster, Bed, Lying* could be seen as an invitation to some sleepy member of the audience to stretch out and become Beckley’s collaborator. Though “lying” in the sense of reclining did not entirely banish “lying” in the sense of telling a falsehood, this work offered no secure perch to the idea of a deliberate deception.

Beckley’s *Song for a Chin-Up* (1971) consisted of the word “are” sung over and over by a singer doing chin-ups on a metal bar. As the singer ascended, so would the tone, and the tone would descend as the singer did. This action was performed by a tenor from the Julliard School of Music. In place of minimalism’s starkly repetitious objects, Beckley put equally repetitious actions. Transposing minimalist patterns from static things to bodies in motion, work of this sort had come to be known as performance art. Beckley, Stephen Kaltenbach, and William Wegman were among those who infused it with freewheeling wit.

This infusion was heresy in the eyes of those who admired minimalism and its spin-offs for paring art down to forms that are what they are, with a clarity that permits no doubt or distraction. Yet here was Bill Beckley using minimalist repetition to turn “are” into a nonsense syllable. At best, his *Song for a Chin-Up* converted the word into a sound floating somewhere between intelligibility and its disreputable opposite. That which unambiguously *is* appeared to be of little interest to Beckley and others of his generation. Their indifference was shocking to those who praised minimalism for the lucidity, the look of plain truth, it had brought to an art world only recently submerged in the endlessly ambiguous currents of abstract expressionist pigment.

Those currents were still roiling in 1959, when Carl Andre declared that “Art is the exclusion of the unnecessary.”⁴ With the unnecessary excluded, said Donald Judd, a work of art doesn’t offer “a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyze one by one, to contemplate.”⁵ Unburdened by a lot of things to look at, the work displays “a good gestalt”—a phrase Robert Morris borrowed from the psych lab to designate an “indivisible and undissolvable whole.”⁶ When an object exhibits this wholeness, it can be seen all at once, according to Morris, leaving it to Annette Michelson to spell out the good gestalt’s most powerful implication. Addressing herself to Morris’s *Slab* (1962)—a thin, rectangular sculpture with a smooth gray surface—Michelson said that it declares “with John Cage, ‘I have nothing to say and I am saying it.’ Statements’ of this sort, which brook neither denial nor debate, we term apodictic.”⁷ Simply to look at *Slab* is to know all there is to be known about it. To be apodictic is to be in no need of interpretation.

Our history of interpretive commentary on art begins with Homer’s description of the Shield of Achilles, if not earlier. So if art requiring no interpretation had, in truth, appeared some time in the 1960s, it would have been astonishing. For those who believed that the minimalists had produced art of precisely that sort, its arrival was millennial. It was redemptive, and to those who understood themselves as saved by minimalism from devilish ambiguity, an artist of Beckley’s inclinations was literally incomprehensible.

In 1971, he mounted a rectangular beam in a gallery doorway. So far, so good. With its plain white surface, the beam had a respectably minimalist look. Beckley left the beam open on top, however, and those who looked into its boxy interior saw that it had an occupant: a small turtle. Why bring a reptile into it? What does an inarticulate animal have to do with

statements of the apodictic kind that—to hear Michelson tell it—art had not long ago become capable of making? Nothing, obviously, but what was the point? Why embrace the static clarity of minimalist form only to compromise it with a form not only animate but flagrantly ungeometric? Didn't Beckley feel the compelling force of apodicticity? No, and, as the seasons went by, his indifference evolved into offhanded opposition. Beckley is not a polemical artist. Nonetheless, by the mid-1970s he was mixing texts and photographs with results that put unanswerable questions to the ideal of art as a revelation of apodictic truth.

Toward the end of the previous decade, that ideal had migrated from objects in galleries to documentary photographs of performance pieces executed in neighborhoods throughout Manhattan and earthworks built far away in the deserts of the West. The empire of apodicticity was being expanded. Documenting his performance pieces with heavily captioned photographs, Vito Acconci appeared to establish a self-evidently true correspondence between his actions and the concepts that shaped them. This was truth in a documentary mode and all the more praiseworthy in the eyes of those who believed that what a minimalist object makes clear, ultimately, is a concept, as Morris had suggested in *Notes on Sculpture* (1966).⁸ If Morris was right, Acconci was no less a conceptual artist than a performance artist. And Beckley, too, was called a conceptualist when he started to mix photographs and texts.

As his performances led him to extremes of self-exposure, Acconci put his documentary medium under increasing strain. Yet a true record remained the ideal, and he tried, with gridded layouts, to give his snapshot arrays and ever more frantically scribbled texts a degree of order. Accumulating evidence of

psychic disintegration, he nonetheless anchored his art to a memory of minimalist clarity and wholeness. For Acconci, minimalism provided a standard of seriousness, authenticity, and indubitable truth. Beckley turned to it for none of those things. Minimalism is an art of ready-made forms: right angles, squares, cubes. Beckley liked their clarity but had no use for the minimalist notion that simple geometries are concepts made visible. In his art, squared-away surfaces can serve as the sites of sensuous display—the bright colors, for instance, of *Hot and Cold Faucets with Drain* (1976), which is a horizontal array of three Cibachrome prints.

On the left is an image of a running faucet against a blue background. Presumably, we are to take the blue as a sign that this is the cold faucet. On the right is another faucet, this one against a red background signifying hot. Or so one supposes, reasonably enough. Reason is a bit baffled, however, by the center panel, which shows a drain in a bright yellow sink. A logic of sorts unifies the things this work depicts. Faucets go comfortably enough with drains. And the three primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—make a familiar triad. But what logic is there to the relationship between subject matter and color scheme? That they ought to be connected by some rational principle is an assumption extrapolated from the ideal of apodictic truth. This is an assumption that Beckley never made. Cultivating contingency, ignoring the minimalist demand for a good, conceptually coherent “gestalt,” he freed geometry from the grip of apodicticity.

By 1976, he had begun to give his wall pieces irregular outlines. Panels were still rectangular but symmetry no longer governed their overall configurations. The following year, circles appeared. *The Kitchen* (1977) is anchored by a round photograph of a round subject: the top of a can of Campbell’s

soup. The can reappears, in a side view, as part of a column supporting the circular image. The rest of the column is a strip of off-white occupied by a short text. To the left, another strip angles downward. Shorter than the first column, this one presents a fragment of a landscape seen through a window with a half-drawn shade. The text of *Kitchen* refers to the window and to a person, not visible anywhere in the work, who might have looked into the kitchen that morning. It refers, as well, to a can opener spread at a forty-five-degree angle that is mimicked, almost, by the work's overall configuration. And there is more to this densely allusive fragment of narrative, some of it echoed by *Kitchen's* imagery and some of it without any visual counterpart. A can opener can open a can of Campbell's soup, but no key can unlock the mysteries of this work of art. There are no mysteries to be unlocked. *Kitchen* is a field of possibilities, and meaning emerges from the play of speculation uninhibited by anxiety about truth or any other conceptual propriety.

In the 1970s, sex became one of Beckley's explicit topics. *Shoulder Blade* (1978) includes an image of a woman's nipple, erect and in close-up—the tender center of a landscape mapped by images, verbal and visual, of paths repetitiously traced, roads blocked, and a border finally crossed. By turns bleak and seductively lush, this landscape never coheres into a graspable terrain. Its map remains fragmentary, and so the point, it seems, is in the imaginary passage from one fragment to another. The more decisively Beckley's shapes departed from minimalist precedent, the more involuted and sensuous such transitions became. As the 1970s ended, erotic energy migrated from Beckley's imagery to his forms and, more subtly, to the very mode of his art. In *The Living Room* (1977), curves throw rectangles out of skew. Freed from a gridded format, they nestle luxuriantly against one another, as if seeking the

most pleasurable fit. And there are ambiguously gendered intimations of sensuality in the sprawling, pinwheel configuration of *The Dining Room* (1977). Treating photography as a means to the pleasures of imaginative play, Beckley undermined the medium's supposed truthfulness. His indifference to photographic truth appeared early on.

Beckley took a camera with him in 1969 when he crossed the Delaware. Losing his footing, he lost this piece of equipment and realized later that he didn't miss the photographic record he had intended to make. "The art world was filling up with documentary photos," he later said. "There were photos of earthworks, photos of performance pieces. I realized that something about them was bothering me. They were images of things that existed somewhere else. Or events that had already happened. In other words, art world photographs were secondary. I wanted my photographs to be primary."¹⁰ They could be that only if Beckley relieved them of their evidentiary weight. A photograph counts as documentary if it supports a clear and narrowly focused conclusion. Throughout the 1970s, Beckley had been working against determinate meanings. In *The Dining Room*, candles are phallic, funereal, and abstractly formal. The overall shape of the piece may be floral, with all that might imply in the vicinity of those other qualities. Or it may be nothing of the sort. One can be certain only that Beckley has induced minimalist truth, in all its depersonalized clarity, to evolve into a play of meaning—usually high-focus, sometimes hazy, and always eroticized. He was entering new territory, but not alone.

Having spent the better part of the 1960s as an abstract painter in New York, Peter Hutchinson ended the decade with several performance pieces in distant landscapes. Some of these adventures produced transient earthworks, which

survive only in his photographs. *Paricutín Volcano Project* (1971), for instance, is a large color print showing mold as it forms on the hundred-yard-long line of bread loaves he laid along the edge of a volcanic crater in Mexico. Continuing to travel and to take pictures, Hutchinson organized his images and accompanying texts into narratives. Yet coherent plots never emerged, for his organizational principles were arbitrary: alphabetical or alliterative or beyond the reach of labels. Hutchinson's art is an invitation to plunge into the flow of fragments and make whatever sense of it one can.

Staged in black-and-white, the photographs Mac Adams made in the 1970s look like film noir stills or, at their roughest, like pictures taken by a crime-scene technician. Juxtaposed, his images seem to summarize a B-movie plot. So one looks for clues, and one finds them, but they never add up. As Adams told a critic in 1978, "I'm not really interested in mysteries. I'm interested in the whole semantics of information, where you look at something and you pose questions of how you know what you know."¹¹ Yet Adams is not a psychologist. Nor is he a conceptualist, however directly his forms and formats derive from the stringencies of minimalism. Knowledge is his theme and he grapples with it, yet he never tries to pin it down. For him and for us, the point of his art is in the grappling, which is as pleasurable as we allow it to be. Like Beckley, Adams entangles the viewer in the eros of epistemology. By the mid-1970s, a number of artists were mixing images and texts for parallel purposes: James Collins, Eleanor Antin, and a few others.

All these artists put the forms of minimalist and conceptual art to speculative uses that ignore the ideal of self-evident truth. Yet there is more to it than that. Minimalism purported to show that true art simply is the revelation of truth. In

response to that solemn revelation, Beckley and others made art's indifference to truth more salient—more an explicit point of art—than it had ever been in the long history that reaches back to ancient times.

But just a minute, you might say. What is so new about the possibility that art might be indifferent to truth? Didn't Plato condemn painting and poetry and every other variety of mimetic art for distracting their audiences with seductive lies? He did, though Aristotle soon revamped the idea of mimesis to support the argument that some art—tragic poetry in particular—is more than mere distraction. It engages our faculties in illuminating ways. To find a work of art intelligible is to learn something about the world. More to the point of art and apodicticity, Plotinus converted Plato's distrust of art into the Neoplatonic faith in art as a revelation of absolute, transcendent truth. In the nearly two millennia since the Plotinian revision, Neoplatonism has shaped everything from Augustine's theology to Shelley's idea of art as utopian revolution. These days, one hears a faint echo of Plotinus's "knowledge and wisdom" every time an art writer invokes some timeless essence or ultimate.¹² There are of course other doctrines of art-as-truth—among the German idealists, most notably, and one hears a recycling of Hegel's talk of time-driven essences whenever a writer praises an artist for capturing the spirit of the moment. An impressionist laboring to nail down a quality of light seeks another sort of truth, and yet another is the goal of a surrealist in an automatist trance. The idea of art as revelation is so familiar that you might want to say hold on, hasn't art, despite Plato, nearly always been after some sort of truth? Yes, it has, and yet minimalist truth is distinct to the point of strangeness.

Over the centuries, it has gone almost without saying that

art requires interpretation. This requirement generates a tableau. The artwork, always mute, faces a viewer, always voluble, who articulates the meaning of the work. It is hard to imagine how else the viewer might proceed. Like every other kind of art, minimalism has prompted shelvesful of interpretive commentary. Nonetheless, minimalist objects had their impact as works of art that could do without interpreters—works that impose their muteness on their viewers. Nothing need be said in the presence of a minimalist object because its meaning is manifest, there to be perceived without impediment. Simply to look is to know, to be compelled to know.¹³ So minimalism's friendly commentators had the task of explaining why no explanation was necessary.

Beckley was among those younger artists who sensed the coercive force of minimalism and resisted it. He resisted, as well, the temptation to coerce the audience. If the minimalist object disdained all tasks other than the revelation of truth, he would give it work of a different sort to do. He turned a minimalist slab into a cot. Another served as the floor of a rooster coop, and his minimalist beam housed a turtle. During the 1970s, as the supposedly palpable truths of boxes and grids became the documentary truths of philosophical "investigation" or "institutional critique," Beckley, too, moved on to images and texts, which he juxtaposed in patterns that undermined any documentary value they might have had. He was interested in other kinds of value. Then, in the 1980s, he returned to objects. He did not, however, abandon images or their aptitude for ambiguity. Far from it. Mixing photographic imagery with hanging ferns and bits of carpentry, *Front Porch* (1987) gives these three-dimensional things the presence of lushly ambiguous pictures.

Beckley's *Jack in the Beanstalk* (1980) is a large wall piece

with a startling heterogeneity of parts. Streaks of black enamel on brown panels bring Jackson Pollock to mind. Jack the hero of the fairy tale about an ogre and magical riches is invoked, maybe, by the vegetal forms that hover alongside the right-hand panel. Along the edge of the other panel runs a sequence of syllables—“fe fu fi”—that definitely echo the ogre’s chant about “the blood of an Englishman.” There is no obvious sense to be made of the five beams mounted in a row along the upper edge of the piece. Extending into the space of the gallery, they may be imaginary fragments of Pollock’s house in the country, which is mentioned in another wall piece from 1980. Rough and irregular, they may belong to the ogre’s ramshackle house in the clouds. There is no point in trying to settle on a single reading of this or of any other part of *Jack in the Beanstalk*. The point is to put all possibilities in play and see where they lead.

Self-consciously un-Pollock-like, Beckley’s black enamel streaks look like tadpoles or spermatozoa. Surging upward, they may be cousins of the beans that grew into Jack’s beanstalk, a symbol of unlimited physical strength, of an unstoppable will, of primordial potency prior to the will, and of much more. Whatever the beanstalk means, there can be no question about what it does. It reaches to the sky. But where—or what—is that? I think Beckley invites us to understand the sky, the source of unlimited riches, as the same, somehow, as the infinite space implied by Pollock’s drip paintings. It is a place, as well, of deathly danger, and Beckley’s willfully unformulated mythology offers a glimpse of Pollock in the role the ogre who rules this realm. Who, then, is Jack and what is his role?

I would call my reading eccentric if I thought it were possible to establish a true or, anyway, a standard reading as a

point of comparison. But that is not possible, because Beckley has given *Jack in the Beanstalk* an amazing openness. Its parts all fit together and yet there are vast, fascinating gaps between them, and these deliberate refusals of coherence ensure that the interpretation of this work is, in principle, endless—like the sky, like pictorial space. In practice, each viewer settles on the range of readings that is the most plausible or interesting or useful. And some of Beckley's works seem to narrow the range of interpretation from the outset. Turning to *Front Porch*, one could go on and on, forcing symbols and allusions from every detail of the piece. But its quietly domestic atmosphere encourages the imagination to slow down, suspend its interpretive anxieties, and drift into sympathy with the prevailing, fern-scented mood.

Some works of art drive us into a speculative frenzy. Others leave us calm and happy to scrutinize their inscrutability at length. In neither case does looking come to an end with the certainty that we have discovered the truth that an artist wanted to convey. To put it the other way around: a visual image counts as a work of art only if its interpretation is potentially endless. Looking at a documentary image concludes with the judgment that we have seen in it the evidence it was meant to record. We may peruse an illustration over and over—every time we open *The Wizard of Oz*, for example—but perusal becomes repetitious once we have grasped the illustrative intention that connects the picture to the text. Of course, certain artworks can tire the imagination and send it circling, for relief, along paths it has already traced. Yet one is fatigued by art precisely because it is inexhaustible. And one is buoyed up by it for the same reason.

Because the interpretation of an artwork never arrives at a conclusion, art has nothing to do with truth. If we are

interested in truth, we must turn to images and utterances that do arrive at conclusions. Furthermore, they have to be conclusions of the kind that can be tested. If I say, “The cat is on the mat,” you, who know how to interpret this sentence, can look around and test what I said against what you see. If the cat is on the mat, what I said is true. If not, not. Because of the way truth and meaning are entangled, declarative sentences count as true or false. Documentary images count the same way. Art images do not, because—consciously or unconsciously—artists suffuse them with ambiguities that defeat the viewer looking for a testable conclusion. So an artwork cannot be true and yet, whatever seventeenth-century Puritans or contemporary mullahs might say, one need not conclude that works of art must be false. Rather, they are fictions.

Among the great fictions of twentieth-century art is the claim that the minimalist object reveals—or even embodies—a truth so compellingly self-evident that it requires no interpretation. We don’t actively work out the truth of the object, we passively submit to a revelation. This is a fiction because there is no truth so luminously self-evident that it enters our minds without an interpretive interlude.

Everything needs to be interpreted to be intelligible. Some interpretation is so routine that we don’t notice it, but this gives us no excuse for positing as an axiom the notion that we need not interpret a certain object as a cube to recognize it as a cube. Nor is there any good motive for axiom-mongering along those lines, which led advocates of the minimalist object to praise it as a source of immediate, unquestionable truth. According to those critics, the minimalist object emitted an aura of absolute authority, and they liked to immerse themselves in that aura. It made them feel powerful.

Every aesthetic implies an ethics, if one looks at it carefully enough, and the morals of minimalism are dubious. Nonetheless, the minimalist object had one good effect. It gave questions of art and truth a focus as sharp as they have ever received. Beckley and a few others responded in ways that no one expected and few have understood. Commandeering minimalist forms and structures, they ignored all claims about apodicticity and absolute truth. With this indifference they effected a kind of demystification, a dispersal of the minimalist object's quasi-magical aura. Geometry, symmetry, and the rest of the minimalist-conceptualist repertory were now available to the realm of fiction.

There is something of a self-portrait to Beckley's *Juggler* (1990), which centers on a black-and-white photograph of a hand outstretched, palm upward and fingers strained. This hand—or, rather, this image—seems to have tossed all the other images into the surrounding space. There is a picture of a ball and several other round forms, including a white circle bearing black, typewritten letters. No doubt “tween” is a fragment of “between,” a word that applies throughout this piece. As usual, the interest is not in individual elements but in the relations between them, which are tenuous. In the lower reaches of the work, various materials, textures, palettes, scales, and kinds of imagery abut, providing a base of sorts. Just above is another hand, its fingers extended as if to provide another base. But nothing stands on it, and the overall configuration of *Juggler* does not suggest an orderly pattern of the kind that jugglers try to establish. For Beckley is not a performer. He is an artist with a reflexive sense of how to prevent disparate images from establishing too comfortable a peace.

Checkmate-on-Pond (1996) juxtaposes two square frames.

Within each frame is an eight-by-eight grid ruled off in white lines on a black field. A reminiscence of the minimalist sixties, this grid is also a chessboard, with chess pieces standing on several of its squares. One sees these objects from above, in extreme foreshortening. Though the white pieces glow like ghosts, the black ones are barely visible. I can't tell if checkmate has been achieved on either of the boards. It is clear, however, that the boards are translucent, for goldfish are visible in the black field, which we read in two ways: as a solid surface supporting the chess pieces and as a liquid in which animate creatures swim. Pawns and bishops and kings are rule-governed. Fish are not, and their freedom from the imperatives of the grid gives them the look of surrogates for the artist.

In the spring of 2000, Beckley suddenly simplified his art, photographing small crowds of stems against monochrome fields. This series began as recollection of a work from 1974—*Rose Are, Violets Are, Sugar Are*—which incorporates rose and violet stems. These more recent stems are mostly green, and some have blossoms attached. The backgrounds are variously tinted: red, pinkish yellow, blue, white, and grays and beiges in a range of variations that resist the effort to name them precisely. Sumptuous colors saturate forms as sharp and clear as digital technology can make them. When Cibachrome prints became available in the early 1970s, Beckley was the first artist to use them. As innovative in matters of technology as in aesthetics, he always gives his works immaculate surfaces. With his recent works, he has attained a new level of refinement.

These images glow, and on first encounter one is tempted to admire them for their startling accuracy, as if Beckley had become a hyper-documentarian. But documentary

photographs are bits of evidence. These pictures prove nothing. Often it is impossible to tell even what sort of flower the artist has photographed. Stems stand vertically, and they preserve that orientation when they appear in Beckley's panels, which are usually higher than they are wide. Some panels are shown singly. Others are gathered into series, to form horizontal configurations. Occasionally, these pieces are wall size, like paintings by Pollock or Barnett Newman.

In the *Old Warrior* series of 2002, stems are spindly. Dark, wilted blossoms tilt and sometimes nod. Sooner or later, one realizes that these plants were too fragile to have stood for their pictures. To take the pictures, Beckley must have hung them upside down. To exhibit the finished works is to return the plants to their original positions. All the stems and flowers in Beckley's recent work were photographed upside down, and they all look gracefully at ease when shown right side up—as if, having grown into this posture, they had never left it. So an elemental sort of make-believe permeates these pictures. More subtly, their metaphors persuade us that nothing about Beckley's flowers is to be taken literally.

The series called *Gothic Attempt* (2002–4) shows fresh green stems standing straight, arcing, intertwining. Sometimes, as two of them curve toward one another, they try to form a Gothic arch. The results of such attempts are always approximate. Organic forms can never imitate architecture precisely, not even Gothic architecture, which mimics interlaced vines and curving branches. Still, the stems in Beckley's *Gothic* pictures often have the scale of cathedral vaults and pillars—or they do if one stays alert to their title. In the *Three Graces* series (2003–4), stems appear in patterns very like those of the *Gothic Attempt* pictures. Yet the *Three Graces* are classical, not Gothic—human in scale, not

architectural—and this difference brings one close to images of a kind that seemed grandly distant when one saw them in the imaginary light cast by a title with other implications. When the title changes, the scale shifts.

Beckley's stems suggest Barnett Newman's thin, vertical lines, or "zips," as he called them. And with *Fourteen Stations*, the name of a series from 2001, Beckley refers directly to Newman's *Stations of the Cross*. Newman said that his "zips" were gestures of placement, means of measuring off a painting's field of color and taking possession of it. Beckley's floral "zips" don't work in quite the same way, partly because they appear against colors very different from Newman's. But this is not just a matter of paint versus Cibachrome. It has to do, as well, with different kinds of enclosure. To stretch a canvas is to ensure that a painted image has palpable edges, a physical boundary. Newman invented his mature style in the struggle to break through that boundary—not literally but metaphorically. Placing his "zips" on a field of color, he gave them a rhythm that ignores the frame. Attuned to their expansive energies, one sees the field as unbounded, potentially infinite. By contrast, a photographic image records a portion of ordinary space, which is infinite not in potential but in ordinary fact. So the edges of a photographic image always look more or less arbitrary, and Beckley feels no need to defy them. Instead, he arranges his linear forms—the stems—to give a contingent order to fragments of the utterly unstructured space we all occupy. One could say, then, that Newman achieves the infinite by drawing lines. Beckley's achievement, by contrast, is to induce ready-made lines to map, however tenuously, an infinite he also finds ready-made.

Stems are limber and so are the arcs and arches, the crisscrosses and curves, that structure Beckley's recent images.

Their order always looks improvised, never frozen into a cautious clarity. That is why the stems look gestural, like the inventions of a liberated hand. Scale remains fluid. Beckley's linear elegance would be at home on a small sketch pad or a massive wall—and *Gothic Attempt 21* (2004) is among the works from this series that has been exhibited mural size. As meanings drift, lines that allude to architecture could just as readily be seen as cartographic: unsettled borders on a map in progress, a possibility suggested by the title of a work from 2005, *Shall I at Least Get My Lands in Order*. A three-part image of lilies, this work has an elegiac edge. The mood shifts in pictures of poppies, lovely flowers with dire associations the artist makes explicit with titles that mention heroin and Afghanistan.

It is difficult to know how to take the poppy series entitled *Oh to Be Young Again, Carefree and Gay* (2005–6). As unflinchingly lovely as these images are, their title plagues them with a flock of troubling associations—some of them autobiographical, no doubt. In 2005, Beckley entitled a nearly monochrome picture of poppies *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*. This title raises autobiography to the scale of art history, for it was invented by the minimalist Carl Andre for a minimalist painting by Frank Stella. It has never been clear what Andre meant by “reason” or “squalor” or the marriage of the two. Maybe he saw reason in the symmetries of Stella's design and squalor in his materials: black enamel on unprimed canvas, mere matter, which the painter's pattern had fused with mind.

Though binary oppositions of this sort are often called Cartesian or structuralist, they emerged fully formed in the writings of Plato. One finds them even earlier, in the speculations of Plato's predecessors. From the ancient, cloudy

outset, we in the West have opposed mind to matter, reality to appearances, truth to opinion. The minimalist object enthralled those who saw it as a reconciliation of irreconcilable differences. Unifying matter and mind—or concept—it silenced the babble of opinion by compelling appearances to reveal, at long last, truth. Early in his career, Beckley confronted this doctrine's delusive allure. Then he turned to the doctrine's embodiment in the boxes and grids of minimalism, took what he could use, and moved on, unencumbered.

Beckley's work of the past five or six years looks as new as the new millennium, and yet for years he has exchanged the ruled line of the minimalists for the less predictable linearity of stems and branches. After painting trees in the late 1960s and early '70s, he pictured twigs and stems in photo pieces a few years later. In the 1980s, he mimicked blades of grass with lengths of green aluminum pipe. Over the decades, metaphors evolved, allusions ramified. Because there is never one true meaning to be extracted from a work of art, it remains endlessly open to interpretation. Inviting and eluding the attempt to make sense of it, the work brings one, eventually, to a sense of oneself.

Who am I, who must I be, to feel a kind of horror as I linger over Beckley's gorgeous images of poppy plants? I don't say that I am right to feel this, that these images are truly horrifying. Nor would I ever declare my reading to be wrong, for art raises no question of truth or falsehood, truth or error. Truth is at issue only when a work of art has led one to see—or to get a glimpse of—who one is. Because it is so inviting, and so generous to those who accept its invitation, Beckley's art leads us by innumerable paths back to ourselves. Rescuing interpretation from routine, he lures our habits of feeling and

thought to light. He brings facets of our humanity into focus, to be recognized and, it may be, refined.

Notes

1. **Bill Beckley**, conversation with the author, February 21, 2006.
2. **Frank Stella**, in Bruce Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd” (1966), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1968), 158.
3. **Bill Beckley**, quoted in Carter Ratcliff, *Out of the Box: The Reinvention of Art 1965–1975* (New York: Allworth Press, 2000), 130.
4. **Carl Andre**, “Preface to Stripe Painting” (1959), reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 820.
5. **Donald Judd**, “Specific Objects” (1965), reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900–2000*, 827.
6. **Robert Morris**, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2” (1966), reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900–2000*, 832.
7. **Annette Michelson**, “Robert Morris—An Aesthetics of Transgression,” Robert Morris exhibition catalog (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969), 13.
8. **Robert Morris**, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 1” (1966), reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900–2000*, 829. In this passage, Morris promulgates a traditional correspondence theory of truth according to which the sense data conveyed by perception establish a veridical fit between “the existential fact of the object” and a “pattern within one’s mind”—the concept of, say, a cube. This account, derived from metaphysics already old-fashioned in 1966, and fitting nicely with the routines of common sense, is worth mentioning only because its errors led so forcefully to the further error of supposing that art is a matter of elaborating conceptual essences of one kind or another.
9. See **Sol LeWitt**, “Sentences on Conceptual Art” (1969), reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900–2000*, 849–51. As I’ve noted, Morris also treated the “good gestalt” of a minimalist work as corresponding to a concept in a logically necessary way.

10. **Bill Beckley**, conversation with the author, November 15, 1999.

11. **Mac Adams**, quoted in *Out of the Box*, 256.

12. **Plotinus**, from *The Fifth Ennead*, reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 179. I have argued that the minimalists are among the many artists who show a recognizably Neoplatonic interest in pure, transcendent form. See *Out of the Box*, 98–100, 182–84, 272–73.

13. For a commentary on the persistent faith that the source of knowledge is revelation of a Parmenidean or Platonic—or, by extension, Neoplatonic—kind, see Richard Rorty, “Is There a Problem about Fictional Discourse?” (1981) in *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982)