

The Child in the House

David Carrier

It is false to suppose that a child's sense of beauty is dependent on any choiceness, or special fineness, in the objects which present themselves to it, though this indeed comes to be the rule with most of us in later life; earlier, in some degree, we see inwardly. . . .

Walter Pater

Visual experience plays a central role in the everyday lives of only a few people. In their autobiographical writings, *Praeterita* and *The Child in the House*, John Ruskin and Walter Pater tell how they, raised in philistine homes, became visually sensitive. In philistine Victorian England that was no easy task. Bill Beckley, who was born in Hamburg, Pennsylvania, in 1946, grew up in a very different but equally philistine culture. His aesthetic, conceived in large part by early experiences with photography, was formed in the late 1960s. And so it is interesting that in the 1990s, after a highly productive three-decade-long career as a working artist, he published texts by Ruskin and Pater. In trying to understand his art and life, you could do worse than to begin with his introductions to those books.

The sense of beauty, or what Beckley calls "belief in the value of human pleasure, those fleeting moments in human experience that are expansive," is the basis, also, for his own art. His goal is to recover the living value of that way of thinking.

No one is born an aesthete, and in our culture few parents train their children to be aesthetes. How, then, do some people

come to make art the source of their values? Beckley offers an oddly straightforward answer.

I decided to become an artist when I was five, after I found a couple of my father's pastel drawings, one of his dog and another of a parrot, stored away in a cabinet. I understood even then that some everyday objects of life were more important than others.

Ruskin was fascinated by the carpets in his father's house, the brick walls of neighbors' homes, and designs of bedcovers, dresses, and wallpapers. The long hours he spent contemplating these patterns suggest the source of his later obsession with the late-Medieval stone ornamentation of Venice. As a child, Pater was fascinated by bright colors and choice forms: the lips of singers in particular attracted his eye. Already, the basis for his love of the musical qualities of the painting of Giorgione was established. When it comes to becoming an aesthete, the child really is father to the man.

What most dramatically separates Beckley from these two nineteenth-century English aesthetes, however, is his frank acknowledgment of the intimate relationship between beauty and sexual pleasure. In the introduction to his anthology *Uncontrollable Beauty*, Beckley quotes yet another nineteenth-century aesthete, a Spanish-born American, George Santayana, from his lectures at Harvard in the late 1890s:

If one wanted to produce a being with a great susceptibility to beauty, one could not invent an instrument better designed for that object than sex. If people didn't have to unite for the birth and rearing of each generation, they might retain their "savage independence." But sex endows the individual with a silent and powerful instinct, which carries each of us continually toward another.

A more happily sensual personality than Ruskin or Pater, Beckley grew up with photographs. When he was nine, he first

saw a woman's breast in a photographic reproduction of Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*. He learned that visual art had real power. But this photograph also raised troubling personal questions.

I was denied mother's milk because breasts were off-limits even in the home where I was born. I survived on formula.

Four years later, he found another sexy photograph that also mattered a great deal to him.

It was in a magazine I found on the top shelf of a bookcase in a soda fountain on 4th Street and Vine in Hamburg. There were booths just next to the magazine shelves and we-who-were-under-sixteen had to sneak the so-called pornographic books from the top shelf to the lower shelves where, hidden from view of the counter, we could peek. It was a photograph of a couple of girls hanging upside down and topless from the branch of a tree. They were smiling. It seemed so innocent and carefree, not dirty, melancholy, or wrong.

I tucked the magazine, appropriately enough, into the front of my pants—and walked out of the store. I kept it for a week or so, looking at it in a secret tree house in the woods behind our house. This photograph with its branch and dangling girls eroticized even the branches on which my tree house was perched. Then I returned the magazine to the bookcase, as if the soda fountain were a lending library. □ □

My First God

Most ambitious artists wrestle with precursors, establishing their identity by detaching themselves from the influence of father figures. During his early years, there was one artist in particular whose influence Beckley needed to overcome.

My first god, so to speak, was Frank Stella. His influence was huge. But in order for me to become an artist, I knew I would have to work my way out of him. Stella too, in order to go on, had to work himself out of the early Frank Stella. But the system Stella set up as a twenty-two-year-old in

an attempt to set himself apart from the nonobjective precedent of Malevich—one decision and only one, every stripe reflecting the origins of the first—was something that both intrigued and handcuffed me.

It may seem surprising that Beckley mentions Stella and not Rauschenberg, Johns, or Warhol, artists whose concerns seem more closely allied to his. Like Beckley, and unlike Stella, they too were interested in photography. Yet Beckley was attracted to Stella both for personal reasons and for his minimalist aesthetic.

For a time those black stripes were my prison bars. (At the same time I was up for the draft, but a hernia and flat feet helped me escape from that nightmare.) To escape this aesthetic prison, I started cutting holes out of my canvases. They got bigger and bigger, and soon there was no more painting, or at least no more canvas. I started painting stripes of paint in the landscape, three feet wide and about an hour long.

I was influenced by painters, not photographers. I admired Stella, Marden, and Ryman. But I knew I did not want to be a second-generation minimalist. I admired their work a great deal, but I thought, perhaps incorrectly, that it lacked content: Ryman with his flat all-white paintings, Stella with his flat black, and Marden with his grays and greens.

Faced with this endgame, the young Beckley sought his own solution.

Two paintings from 1969 titled *Dear Julia* were pseudo love letters to a fictional girlfriend, 96 × 48 inches each, written with a marker on stained brown linen. It was a nod to Stella, with the lines of the words like rows of stripes, but also an early narrative and a bridge from my paintings to my photo-text works.

Photography came to seem the only way out: not to paint it, but to photograph it and to get it all in one grab—the instant of the shutter opening. Each photo panel of my works would be like a painted panel of

Marden's. □ □

The Philadelphia Story

Beckley left Hamburg to attend college in nearby Kutztown and in 1968 went on to graduate school at Tyler School of Art, Temple University, in Philadelphia. Although only eighty miles away, it was an entirely different world. At the Philadelphia Museum of Art he saw the permanent display of Marcel Duchamp's work. And at Tyler he had two inspiring teachers, Italo Scanga and Steven Greene.

Italo was a portly Italian professor of sculpture and a good artist. He had been a teacher of Bruce Nauman. Steven Green, a painter, had been a professor at Princeton, where he taught Frank Stella.

After worshipping Frank Stella throughout my undergraduate days, the break in my own aesthetics occurred when Scanga introduced me to Sol LeWitt and Bruce Nauman at recurrent barbecues in his backyard in Elkins Park. Nauman arrived one afternoon in an old black Citroën. I had never seen a Citroën before. He appeared to be from outer space. When he turned off the ignition, the car lowered itself to the curb. When he later got in to drive away, it rose again like a flying saucer. He nailed a little plaque onto a tree that said, "A Rose Has No Teeth," and LeWitt buried a white cube in the ground. I fell in love with a black girl named Adrian McCoy and read Wittgenstein's *Blue and Brown Books*.

Thanks to Scanga and Greene, Beckley became friends with LeWitt. The painted bushes in Beckley's *Rising Square: For Sol LeWitt* (1969), a sculpture very much in LeWitt's style, are a subtle tribute to his friend. He also befriended the curator Marcia Tucker and the future art dealer Larry Becker. This networking proved to have immensely productive intellectual consequences. Tucker recommended that he read Ludwig Wittgenstein, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Ferdinand de Saussure, all authors who proved to be relevant for Beckley's art and writing. And he was

introduced to ways distinctly unlike those of puritanical Hamburg.

Our drunken discussions in Scanga's basement sauna were seminal moments of my life. There Italo had his students flagellate him with reeds in the manner of Calabria, his home in southern Italy. Certainly we can call these the good old days. He died while roasting chicken for his students in San Diego.

Beckley learned much from this new milieu, and he made *Myself as Washington* (1969), his first significant work. Like Duchamp, Beckley was interested in erotic visual humor, but his reference to Washington had more to do with his sense of personal liberty than with any overt political sentiment.

I did five works with Washington: crossing the Delaware, the self-portrait disguised as Washington, signing my name with the swirls of his signature, sleeping at the George Washington Motor Lodge with a girl named Mary, and chopping down a cherry tree and having a description of the act notarized.

By photographing himself as Washington, Beckley intuitively engaged (long before Cindy Sherman created her role-playing photographs) in the tradition of aesthetic role-playing found in Pater's *Imaginary Portraits and its predecessor, The Child in the House*. He also stumbled upon themes he would develop over the next three decades.

When I did the piece crossing the Delaware River on foot, dripping paint as I went, the current took me under, and I lost not only the paint but also the camera I was using to document the work. I realized then that all I had left was the story.

Much of Beckley's future art would involve stories.

My work incorporated text and photographs but did not need to be true in the way photographic or textual documentation needs the pretense of

truth to back it up. It could be fiction—and so began my involvement in what was later described as narrative or story art. □

SoHo: Ephemeral Narratives

While working out the implications of these ideas, Beckley moved to New York.

Italo introduced me to Jack Krueger, another former student. Jack was showing with Leo Castelli, and when I finished graduate school I moved to New York, or at least off-shore New York. Jack let me stay on his sailboat moored on City Island. Every night I would sleep on the boat then row into shore in the morning, get a bus, and look for a place in Manhattan.

He found himself in an art world that was undergoing a dramatic transition. The Manhattan art world had shifted from midtown to SoHo, which soon was filled with artists' studios and galleries. Very quickly, Beckley was in his first show.

Just three months after I arrived in New York, in June of 1970, Gordon Matta-Clark, Alan Saret, and Jeffrey Lew organized a show in Jeffery's space, 112 Greene Street. It was the first show, I believe, in SoHo. Bill Bollinger and Barry Le Va were part of it as well.

He was soon immersed in an extremely stimulating art scene.

I met Gordon Matta-Clark, Yvonne Rainier, Barry Le Va, Louise Bourgeois, and Susan Harris through Rafi Ferrer and Jeffrey Lew at 112 Greene Street. Gordon and I became good friends. He was at the center of a group of artists, dancers, and writers. For several months in late 1972 and early 1973 we each had a complete floor, 50 × 100 feet, in this building at 155 Wooster owned by Paula Cooper; Jim Seawright, an artist; and Weston Naef, then curator of photography at the Met and now curator of photography at the Getty.

John Gibson organized the first show of story art early in 1973. John and I, in a kind of artist-dealer honeymoon (his words), discussed the terms "story art" and "narrative art" on a road trip from Basel to Baden-

Baden in June of 1972. The first show, called Story Art, included Bill Wegman, David Askevold, Peter Hutchinson, John Baldessari, and myself. It took place at Gibson's gallery on West Broadway. I had already had a solo show with John that year, which included my 1971 stories *Silent Ping-Pong Tables*, *A Story for Hopscotch*, and *Short Stories for Popsicles*.

Through Willoughby Sharp, who followed the shows at 112 Greene Street and published my work in three issues of *Avalanche*, Yvon Lambert proposed a show in Paris. Holly Solomon opened a sister space at 98 Greene Street, and I did a performance there of *Song for a Chin-Up* and *Song for a Slide*. Nigel Greenwood and John Gibson came to Holly's and soon I had shows scheduled in Milan with Yvon's wife, Françoise, and in London with Nigel. Gibson took my *Silent Ping-Pong Tables* to the Basel Art Fair in 1972, and a young gallery assistant named Benjamin Buchloh saw them and asked me to be part of the inaugural exhibition of Galerie Rudolf Zwirner in Cologne.

Zwirner opened the gallery with Gerhard Richter's Baader-Meinhof Gang paintings and four of my *silent ping-pong tables* and performances of *Song for a Chin-Up* and *Song for a Push-Up*. I did not perform the songs because I wanted to make it clear that any capable, athletic singer could perform them just like a Chopin sonata. I did not want them to instantly become documentation.

Later, in works like *Joke about Elephants* (1973) and *Prepared Piano* (1987), Beckley returns to these musical concerns. *Joke about Elephants*, with its joke, was very much a premonition of Richard Prince, who later developed similar visual humor. *Silent Ping-Pong Tables* (1971) was the converse of these sonic performances. Anyone could play. But when they did, it was a silent game, without pings or pongs. □

The Liberating Power of Photography

Some art historians have argued that 1970s postmodernism depended essentially upon the invention of novel media. When the traditional painted canvas and materials of sculpture were replaced by photography, art was free to move in radically new

directions. The state of photography in the early 1970s provided some significant openings for Beckley's art.

I was using a Hasselblad and a 4 × 5 view camera. In 1973 the color process called Cibachrome came into being. It was good because you could print from color slides and transparencies instead of negatives. It was also contrasty, like advertising, and it was archival.

I made a processing drum for a 30 × 40 print but then realized the chemicals would kill me. So I found a lab that was processing it and exposed the paper in my studio, rolled it up and boxed it, and took it to the lab on my bike. I paid them ten bucks a foot to send it through their processor. That's how I could afford to do all those prints in the 1970s.

Development was a special concern for American artists in the 1970s. For conceptual artists, the problem was especially serious: insofar as their art was inherently ephemeral, how could they move forward? Photography provided a way to create permanent records of their activities. In a commercial art world, it also enabled them to create sellable objects. When Richard Serra made sculptures or Sol LeWitt created wall drawings with certificates and instructions for collectors and museums on how to reproduce them, they identified solutions to these dilemmas. Beckley's insistence on the objecthood of photography provided another way to develop conceptual art.

I never had the problem making a transition from conceptualism to making objects because I always thought the photograph was an object. A thin object! Undermining the gallery system was not a motive for my work because my parents were from the working class. I had little material inheritance, only their love and their dignity. Although these are the most important things in life, without a trust fund, one must make a living.

A concern with the photograph as an object with properties that must be acknowledged runs through all his art.

In *Drop and Bucket* (1974) the photo of the drip becomes a funnel, and

in *Rabbit-Turtle* (1974) the white space in front of the turtle wins the sequential race. These pieces reflected my attitude about a photograph being an object. *Elements of Romance* (1977) was inspired by a work of Sol's, *The Black I* (1974), which he gave me in a trade. I turned the shape of Sol's work on its side and made two H-like forms—symmetrical, like a minimalist. But on the left side all the photographic content is fresh: the flower blooming, the candle lit, the wine full. In the set of photos on the right everything is fading: the rose wilted, the candle out, and the wine empty. So it is a dialogue with the outside edge of the photos, symmetrical in both sets, and the inside content, the right a decadence of the left.

This idea of the photograph as sculpture is still integral to my work in more recent pieces like *Gothic Attempt 14* (2004). The straight vertical spaces between the photographs in the triptychs play against the curving forms of the lily stems.

It was important to Beckley to use photography not simply as a way of documenting happenings but as a medium with its own aesthetic qualities.

With conceptual art, the photograph is the residue of the work. But that residue is what is experienced by the culture at large, hardly ever the original act or work itself—even with Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. The photograph is not the art itself but a means of preservation, like a refrigerator.

With the George Washington series, I flipped right to the medium of photography and text, to the lie that all mediums are capable of, even though little George said he could never tell a lie. □ □

The Pleasures of Narrative

Very soon after moving to New York, Beckley was included in major exhibitions that defined conceptual art, including *Art of the Mind* (1969) in Oberlin, Ohio, and the *Information Show* (1972) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

My piece in the earlier show was simply the title, *My Ears Are Clogged*, in Masonite letters nailed to the wall. It was, perhaps, an incomplete surrender in the realm of the senses. I knew conceptualism had its limits. This was the start of my using language.

Photography seemed expansive as a medium—why paint it if you can photograph it?—but conceptualism’s denial of retinal pleasure seemed close to the puritanism of my hometown, from which I had just attempted to escape.

To flee the puritanical limits of conceptualism, Beckley continued to use photographs and text, not as documentary or didactic tools, but to tell highly ambiguous stories.

Some works unraveled a solely visual narrative. *Rising Turtle Watching the Setting Sun* (1974) juxtaposes a sunset with turtles apparently rising from white photographic space. And *Rising Sun, Falling Coconut* (1978)

has to do with two equally sized photographs and the relation of two orbs, the sun rising from the lower photo to the upper, and the coconut falling from the upper to the lower.

Down, Up (1974) twists the documentary language of conceptual art into a rather open-ended narrative clearly unworried about being aesthetic or erotic.

The work was sixteen-feet across, with a flaccid penis on the left and an erect penis on the right—both given the same amount of photographic space, again an assurance that the photograph, like a penis, is a viable object. This was, of course, pre-Viagra.

Not surprisingly, some of Beckley's former champions were nonplussed.

Buchloh criticized works like *Hot and Cold Faucets with Drain* (1976) because there were two faucets and a drain; i.e., two males and a female

or, to be more precise, two cocks and a cunt. And on top of that—color! Ludwig Wittgenstein's book *On Color* inspired the idea. In that book he discusses the cultural meanings of colors and the language games in play. This is not to claim innocence, however. So what if it was a couple of cocks and a cunt?

In the early twentieth century, some art historians insisted that black-and-white photographs were more truthful than color images. This strangely illogical prejudice—why should black-and-white photographs be truer?—resurfaces in *October*, the house journal of the leftists associated with Buchloh. *October* uses only black-and-white photographs. No doubt there are practical reasons for this policy, but since black-and-white photographs lack presence, the effective result is to subordinate images to the text. Beckley, on the other hand, made full use of Cibachrome's rich colors.

The lure of the irrational lies, as Jacqueline Lichtenstein eloquently suggests, in color. Color is the element most conceptualists neglected. As conceptualism turned to agitprop, lacking not only color but sensuality and humor, a new disease infiltrated bodily fluids, and it was everyone's worst nightmare. Perhaps for self-preservation we needed a postmodern update of the anti-aesthetic as an intellectual rationale to foster a fear of pleasure.

Much of Beckley's work in the seventies combined photographic images with words, sometimes using word-image sequences almost like comic strips. *Avoidance of An(n)* (1972), for example, uses two black-and-white photographs and words to tell a complicated story about sexual adventures. And *Cake Story* (1973) employs color photography to relate a funny anecdote about dining alone—about having your cake and eating it too.

Through language, we can make love, tell jokes, banter, argue, or preach. Sometimes all at once. A tendency toward the latter took over in the eighties when politically motivated artists became pious and narrow, as

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe observes in his book *Beyond Piety*. Musicians, even while evangelizing, as many rap artists do, still get off on harmony, dissonance, melody, and rhythm.

In these works, words and images have equal power.

The texts were written for the works, and the works evolved from sketches that included notes on the texts, prospective photographs, and the arrangements of the photos. The text developed with the piece as a whole. Neither the text nor the photographs came first. They came together.

What now seems most striking about Beckley's narrative art from the 1970s is that its meaning remains oddly difficult to pin down. *Melancholy Ending* (1975) illustrates this idea in a wonderfully literal way. Reading from left to right, we get three pictures and a story, which, set in that context, is nicely elliptical. Who is speaking and what do these straightforward visual and verbal narratives mean? Those questions are not easy to answer.

Mao Dead (1976) may initially seem like a political work, but what are we to make of the narrative to the left of the *New York Post* headline? Beckley himself describes *Mao Dead* in almost formal terms.

On the left is a streetlight, on the right is a misty field of winter wheat, in rows like Frank Stella's stripe paintings but with pictorial, penetrable space. The photo on the right was meant to refer to the weather conditions on the last page in the text.

Of course none of the photos in these fictional works is meant to prove any condition of the text in the way that the text/narratives of documentation prove something or that text and image in advertising reinforce each other.

The subject of Beckley's elliptical narrative is, I think, less

Maoism than the relationship of words and images in Manhattan conceptual art circa 1976.

Bus (1976) seems to come more obviously from a world close to home: capitalist advertising.

I was thinking of different levels of meaning. Thus the different levels of the bus—a rare New York double-decker, which was not a tourist bus but a regularly scheduled one that parked in front of my window on Houston Street in those days. So I had levels of meaning and the levels of the bus and the levels of the photographs—the way they were placed. I hired the girl from a modeling agency to do a typical model shot, again referring to advertising, a place where we find combinations of text and photo.

During this period, Beckley was fascinated with assemblages of fragments. In *The Bathroom* (1977), photos of body fragments are assembled into a complete narrative with the aid of the text. And in *The Kitchen* (1977):

The whole work was meant to be shaped like a can opener and, of course, was a reference to Andy, as was an earlier story, *The Origin of And*, with its dark romantic photo of a can of soup.

Having made photographs about the bourgeois household, Beckley then did art more specifically about body parts.

First *The Underarm*, now in a group called *Parts of the Body* that includes *The Armpit*, *Shoulder Blade*, *The Nose*, and *The Ear*, and finally *Deirdre's Lip*.

As Beckley explains, *Deirdre's Lip* (1978)

was inspired by a red English phone booth and was written around Christmas when I was staying with my first wife in St Leonard's on Sea near Hastings. At first, I hired a model from the Wilhelmina modeling

agency for the lip photo. But, ironically, the model had a harelip, and Deirdre, my wife, was a little suspicious of my motives. So to resolve the problems, I asked her to pose for the close-up lip shot. Thanks to her jealousy and my attraction to most anything English, *Deirdre's Lip* is one of my best pieces.

It has to do with breaths of air representing the phonemes and the line of words in the text; the line of words—broken—in her phone conversation; the line of teeth; the line of train cars, which we assume would be beneath the smoke; and the continuity of the smoke and “twilight,” “forget,” and “darling.”

It is still, however, difficult to connect the words precisely to the images. As in *The Underarm* (1977) and *Shoulder Blade* (1979), body parts are juxtaposed to words and landscapes as if our identity as persons were linked to these verbal and visual settings. Once again we see the ongoing power of Beckley's erotic fascinations. Word and image seem to cohere in aesthetic or erotic play.

Speaking of skirts: When I was in fifth grade we would pay this kid Jackie Seltzer to pull up girls' skirts so we could see them. We paid him in crayons—the black crayon being the most valuable. This eroticized the act of making art for me to this day.

In some important ways, Beckley's concerns are closer to those of Jeff Koons than to most of the conceptual artists he started showing with around 1973.

I met Jeff at the Museum of Modern Art in 1979 when I was having a Projects show there. His work comments brilliantly on the art market, capitalism, etc., by assuaging collectors into buying what are essentially enlarged tchotchkes, like something you might find in a middle-class German home, something they might pay a few precious euros for. Jeff, of course, makes tchotchkes for the rich: bigger and much more expensive, in proportion to an upper-class income—a great comment on consumer culture. In a way it reminds me of Andy's paintings of Mao and of hammers and sickles. Only a capitalist can afford them.

Jeff owns *The Underarm* and *Shoulder Blade*, two of the works that were in the MoMA show. Maybe because we both escaped from the puritanical atmosphere of early conceptual art, he felt close to my work then. His work spins off media culture and throws ironies back in its face. In 1991 we were both in a show at the Whitney called Art and Media Culture. I showed *Deirdre's Lip* and he showed that girl in the tub. □

The Death of Love

The late 1970s was for Beckley a time of the death of friends, a relationship, and an aesthetic.

Gordon Matta-Clark and I had some great parties. These were not elegant parties like Truman Capote's Black and White party—we were too scruffy. And people, because of the raw energy of that time, were fucking in every corner of the room.

One afternoon in the summer of 1976, Gordon's identical twin brother—he was a painter—threw himself out of the window on Houston Street just as Gordon was coming home from the Grand Union.

The window was just above mine, and I remember seeing a whoosh. He split in half on the sidewalk right in front of Gordon. Things were never the same after that. It is my theory that because they were identical twins, Gordon was deeply and physically affected by the incident. Two years later, Gordon died of cancer. His death coincided—coincidentally—with the death of an aesthetic. It was the end, really, of what had become known as conceptualism (the idealistic sort) and also, I suppose, the death of modernism. For better or worse, art became much more market oriented. In 1980 I applied for an American Express card and married Deirdre at the Chelsea Registrar's office in London. Several months later we divorced. At thirty-four I still wasn't old enough to get married.

The turn to the eighties signaled a loss of many of the things I believed in and loved. *Frank* (1987) was a memorial to those deaths and an homage to Frank O'Hara. I never met him, but I loved him through his poetry. I drove out to that cemetery in Springs—the one where Pollock, Reinhardt, and Lee Krasner are buried—and I photographed a dried rose on his gravestone. I put it in a large frame next to some wallpaper of white roses from the forties. I built a kind of air-conditioning duct, a vent for the

whole thing, and propped it up with a stack of *New York Times*—all from the day I finished the work. I showed it at Tony Shafrazi in 1987 and at Hans Mayer in Düsseldorf along with some other three-dimensional photographic work. □ □

The Return of Beauty

In the 1990s, Dave Hickey, Arthur Danto, and a few other influential critics began to write about the power of beauty. Many of these essays were republished in *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics* (1998), the influential anthology Beckley coedited with David Shapiro.

I knew it was unfashionable in the art world to discuss beauty—and that made it all the more interesting to me. Because of what I was saying in my lectures on aesthetics, Roberto Portillo, a graduate student from Mexico, brought Hickey's first book, *Enter the Dragon*, to class.

Over the course of my life I have made aesthetic decisions with respect to love, and if those decisions were so deeply important, why shouldn't art have something to do with beauty as well?

As a sort of lead-up to *Uncontrollable Beauty* I wrote introductions to new editions of Pater's fictions and two books by Ruskin. I was attracted to Ruskin because he was so eccentric and perverse but also because aesthetics and political-social issues concerned him so much. Social issues did not negate aesthetic issues and vice versa. But I was also attracted to him because he was such a beautiful writer. Turner said that Ruskin's writings about his paintings were often more beautiful than the paintings. Proust also loved the style of Ruskin's writing, and one can see that Proust probably learned a lot from *Praeterita*—his final three-volume memoir—as a kind of “in search of lost time.”

The sublime, which was often contrasted with beauty in the late eighteenth century, had been important to some of the abstract expressionists. But the term had largely disappeared from the vocabulary of the art world by the time Beckley began making art. He reintroduced it, however, in 2001 when he

edited a second anthology, *Sticky Sublime*.

Tom McEvilley said that my generation of conceptually based artists was out to save the world from the sublime—from nothingness and from the endgame of abstract expressionism and totally flat minimalist painting. He is right, because through unself-conscious photographic space we regained space. Still, the sublime—and the accompanying void—attracted me, but I did not know at that time to call it the sublime or the void for that matter.

The Sublime Power of Flowers

Around 2000, Beckley's situation changed dramatically. For thirty years, he had been making conceptual art using multiple photographs, pushing his imagery toward advertising images, and often incorporating texts that subverted the images. During that time, the two parts of his working life, writing words and making photographic images, eventually drifted apart and came to exist effectively in isolation. Then, in the fall of 2000, he saw a vase of small, long-stemmed calla lilies outside a flower shop near his studio. He started photographing flower stems. Shot against neutral backgrounds, they appear curiously unlike the flowers we see on dining tables or in historical still lifes. Beckley went on to create a body of magnificent photographs that focuses in an unprecedented way on this theme and its many variations.

The story of how Beckley found this, his great subject, is very personal.

Everything does lead up to the flowers. Their development corresponds to the birth of my second son, Liam. Actually, I was walking my first son, Tristan, to school one day, pushing Liam in the stroller. I dropped off Tristan at the door of the school and pushed the stroller around the corner past a little outdoor garden and flower shop. A slim, clear glass vase with fading white calla lilies caught the early morning sunlight. Their stems curved gently. I remembered the violet stem I

photographed some quarter century before.

Beckley was influenced here by Barnett Newman, whose “zips” are echoed by these vertically rising stems. But a textual element, too, is sublimated into the forms, one the artist associates with Eastern Ideograms.

There is no literal text—or language as image—in the works any longer, but the images allude to written language of an Eastern sort, a language in formation, as language first evolved from image. When I returned to the stems in 2000, I called the first series *Fourteen Stations* after the series by Barnett Newman. It was an homage to Newman and an allusion to *Who’s Afraid of Red Yellow and Blue*.

Hans Mayer, who has always been the most important person in my career, showed *Fourteen Stations* in Berlin on August 28, 2001. Tony Shafrazi showed them in SoHo on September 14, 2001.

Here the sublime terror of politics intervened.

On September 11, I was getting ready for the shipment of photographs to come from the lab on Fifty-second Street to the gallery on Wooster Street, just below Houston. I knew this would be my best show in the U.S. A few days before, I had come back from Berlin, where the show with Hans had been my best in Europe. I had just taken Tristan to school, pushing Liam in the stroller past that same flower shop. After we dropped off Tristan, we stopped at a little coffee shop on Barrow Street for some milk and coffee. When we came out, everyone was looking at the sky. We watched the whole thing happen, at the corner of Prince Street and West Broadway—a clear view of the burning towers and their fall. (For some reason I had my video camera with me and photographed much of it and haven’t looked at it since.)

Later, despite all the blockades between Fifty-second Street and SoHo, I managed to get the work down to SoHo, and Tony, George, and I hung the show amidst the dense smog of burning buildings and burning bodies. We had a little reception at Barolo with Tony and his director, Hiroko Onoda; my wife, Laurie; Tristan; Liam, then six months old; Tom McEvilley; and a few other friends who managed to get admission into

SoHo. We were the only table at the restaurant. It was the most surreal evening of my life.

Still lifes, portraits, abstract paintings, ideograms: Beckley's very subtle flower photographs condense into relatively simple images a great deal of both his history and the story of American art over the past thirty years.

I first wrote stories to a fictional girl named Julia, then I told stories about George Washington. After all, his was the art of liberty. What resulted was a decade of "shaggy dog stories," or at least that's what some critics called them. I admit those tales didn't go anywhere. Nor were they intended to. They were just stories at a moment when modernism's story was over.

But if you can believe it, photographs and texts weren't really considered art then. They always got the backseat of the bus. Late at night I would lie awake and think, "Am I putting myself out on a limb?" I would ask myself, "How would I explain this to Johnny Carson on the *Tonight Show*?" If you are up in a tree and out on a limb, what you fear is the empty space between that limb and the earth—that void. That is why any innovative art has an affinity with the sublime. De Kooning must have felt it, and Pollock, and my favorite painter, Mark Rothko—not only in his depictions of the void, but in the chance he was taking.

Strangely, now I feel the same way about the flowers. In 1974 the rose and violet stems came out of looking for a clean, leafless, vertical "zip." But when, in the oughties, I came across the erratic and erotic stems of poppies I could not bring myself to cut off the bud the way I did with the rose, the violet, and later the lilies. Again I wondered if I was putting myself out on a limb with these flowers. But this time I asked myself, "What will Larry think?" I like Larry Weiner a lot and always have. When he was young, he always had an old man's beard—and he looked much older. Now he still has the same old man's beard and he looks much younger—timeless. In the early seventies, I went to visit him on his houseboat in Amsterdam. With his spare life style he personified the milieu of conceptual art. He was a real hippy in the good, true sense of the word. Recently, I went to his opening at the Whitney and he was wearing a beautiful bright red lambskin jacket that looked soft as a glove. I thought, "I guess the seventies are over." I must have realized it myself some time

ago, or I would have cropped off the poppies. Those buds are luscious; depending on what stage of bloom, they double as testicles and vaginas. For me, they are more transgressive than any tenth-generation readymade. For Charles Foster Kane (an ultimate Apollo), all meaning came down to childhood and to the feminine—down to a sleigh called Rosebud. My Rosebud is a photo that met its fire fifty years ago: those smiling girls hanging from their branch, half-naked, happy-go-lucky. Blissfully unaware of the void.

I finished more work in the four years after that catastrophe in September than I had in my lifetime previously, even then working constantly. Maybe seeing those people flinging themselves out of the towers—what a decision to make, burn or jump—I felt the poignancy of life up against death. And maybe it was because when I was watching the whole thing happen, Liam was there with me and Tristan was in school, or so I hoped, on the lower West Side. Maybe it's because the subject of much of that work was a stem, and lilies are redemptive.

But let's not forget that lilies and poppies are also the sexiest flowers on earth, and, well, there is nothing wrong with getting your eros while, from some indefinite sin, you get your redemption—having your cake and eating it too.

The ways of thinking behind Beckley's lavishly beautiful photographs of flowers were implicit, in other words, in his early conceptual works of art. Even in his childhood experiences. And he agrees with Ruskin and Pater that art is transcendental.

From the time I was a boy and found those drawings by my father, I have always known that art transcends, and anyone who argues otherwise faces this paradox: When you say that art is not transcendental, you are speaking--using words. Words by their very nature transcend the guttural sounds of the voice box connected to the palate and lips that produce them. Nabokov reminds us (tongue-in-cheek) that "Lolita" is merely a succession of sounds produced by "the tip of the tongue taking three steps down the palate to tap on the teeth." We forget this as we immerse ourselves in the novel's twists and turns. The erratic black-on-white

squiggles that represent those sounds transcend the printed page. They do it even if they are badly written. But if they are beautifully written, like the words of Nabokov, Proust, Dickinson, or Stevens, for example, then the reader gets lost in the meaning that somehow evolves from those erratic black squiggles. So in arguing against transcendence you are using the very objects—words—that are a human's means of transcendence. Each of my series, *Gothic Attempts*, *Old Warriors*, *Heroin Trade in Afghanistan*, *Whirling Dervishes*, and so on, are attempts at an alphabet, but an Ur-alphabet. It is an alphabet as a child sees it, like my son Liam when he was five. It is an alphabet where he knows from Doctor Seuss that "foot" begins with *f* and "feet" begins with *f* and that "all alone" could possibly end with *n*. For him, all the sounds in the middle are still up for grabs, as yet unconsigned. It is somewhere in the space of that ambiguity that I would like to make my house, where I would like to live. □