Robert Beck

By Helen Molesworth

As I write this we are at war. We were at war when I went to visit Robert Beck in his studio a few weeks ago on a particularly ambiguous cloudy and sunny spring morning. It’s hard to remember that we’re at war from a desk in Columbus, Ohio or a studio in the East Village. But if you travel through America’s airports it's hard not to notice the young men in desert fatigues and army issue canvas rucksacks, their heads shorn, their gazed fixed (permanently?) in the middle distance. Transferring in Dallas, or Atlanta, or Chicago, then it's easy to know we’re at war. Whenever I see these men (there are a smattering of women, but the specificity of their gender seems overwhelmed by the situation) I always think of the brilliant first half of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. These men, I think, have been trained to kill, to do great harm to others, and the process through which that happened was calculated with utter clarity, with an exacting goal and an efficient result. How many will they kill? How many of them will be killed (or brutally maimed)? I always think this; it is my futile airport mantra. Sometimes, I’m able to move off of this dirge by recalling the ravishing serenity of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*; those men had been trained to kill too, but Malick shows his soldiers having already sublimated all of their fear, and the residual aspects of their selfhood, into a hunter’s appreciation for the mild beauty of the great outdoors. Malick’s soldiers are astonished by the fleeting music of wind in the grass, birds soaring overhead, insects at work.

Robert Beck's work is about the violence of every day life, particularly the everyday violence of white, middle-class, suburban American boyhood. It's about hunting with your dad and high school shooters; it's about what you're able to remember and what you can't. It's about the inexorable fact that how we become ourselves is a complicated affair, an almost incomprehensible mixture of DNA and ideology, of family dinners and television programs, of siblings and classmates, of language and sciences. Beck’s project is a meditation on how various institutions – school, church, medicine – are synthetically woven together in ways that produce us by narrating our stories for us (The parents: “Bobby was always good in school,” the newspaper headline, “Teenage Time Bomb”). And yet, Beck’s work also suggests, in a mode of seeming internal contradiction, that no amount of institutional structuring can dispel the intensity of feeling that one has an individual power through it all, a set of memories, experiences, and feelings that are exclusively one's own. For me, Beck’s work is suspended in the nimbus of emotional affect articulated by the pairing of *Full Metal Jacket* and *The Thin Red Line* – utter brutality and extreme gentleness.

This means that one often finds in Beck’s work a simultaneous quietude and violence. On more than one occasion Beck has “opened” an exhibition with a makeshift memorial, complete with kitsch balloons and grocery store bouquets. For whom the bell tolls? Oddly, it doesn't seem to matter, as we are now accustomed to a social space more comfortable registering symbolic rather than literal loss. Although it is literal lost that is at stake in the cast headstones for Kip Kinkel's parents, shot to death by their own son before he went to school to shoot and kill his fellow students. The headstones serve as a base for the cast wax bullets on top of them (a nod to Brancusi’s *Endless Column*), but they're specificity is held in radical check by the media’s uncanny ability to transform individual persons into statistics and symptoms. Tragedy is formulaic. And yet Beck counters the media’s nearly pathological addiction to homogeneity with an interest in indexicality, which is to say that Beck’s work often strikes a delicate balance between the sculptural method of the cast, a mechanism for producing infinite replicas, and the index, a form of image making that insists upon a perfect trace of the specificity of persons in place and time.

In *The Daily-Over-Under* generic plastic buckets are stacked one on top of the other (in acknowledgment of the additive nature of contemporary sculpture?), and inside of which is placed a bulbous substance –waxy and Caucasian flesh-colored – called wound filler. Traditionally used by a creepily heterogeneous group – museum preparators (for securing small objects), morticians (for filling out cadavers), and cub scouts (for mold making) – here it has been used for target practice. Shot into with a Daly Over/Under shotgun each sculpture, despite their similarities to one another, is a perfect record of a singular event. For those well versed in post 1945 art history, it is difficult not to recall the iconicity of Jasper Johns’ seminal *Target* pieces of the late 1950s. If Johns’ fragmented parts of the body in relation to the target as a means to sublimate the desire of the body in the presence of the art object then Beck substitutes the indexicality of the body for the fossilized effect of the slug’s impact with the wound filler. Its explosive force creates an image of sexualized excess as the material is displaced by the velocity of the bullet’s force. Barely able to be contained, the sculptural void at the center of the work/target stands as a metaphor for all of the orifices of the body, from the voiding/contracting pleasure of the anus and vagina to the auditory canal of the ear.

Targets make repeat appearances in Beck’s work. On a video monitor (placed on a shelving unit that mimics the repetition found in the stacked buckets of wood filler) a grainy and blurry image of concentric circles endlessly expands and contracts. This image is equally suffused with bodily associations, from the dilating of an iris to the contraction of our sexual sphincters. The audio is ominous, in addition to multiple gunshots; we overhear a father and son discuss the two types of shooting taking place. The mood of the auditory landscape is tense, ominous, a situation going awry? It's a while before you realize that no image is going to materialize, the camera might be recording, but the lens cap is on. So we listen instead to the discrepancy between the specific conversation of the two individuals played out in relation to the camera programmatically attempting to auto focus. It's funny and futile, indexical and generic, strangely cruel and tender.

One more example; one more iteration of Beck's play with the homogenous and the individual, the violent and the gentle, father and son. Some of Beck's most haunting works are the psychological drawings. The drawings are appropriate from personality assessment tests, scrawled by children in response to a series of putatively therapeutic questions. They were subsequently re-drawn by Beck on paper he has treated with latent fingerprint powder, the material used to dust crime scenes for fingerprints. Sometimes Beck layers these drawings one on top of the other, creating a palimpsest of both the artist’s memory and the individual situation of the child. Each drawing refers not only to the individuality of its original, but as well to the artist’s own bodily presence as draftsperson (drawing is often considered the most immediate and intimate of art forms given the temporality and proximity of the maker and the final mark). But the continuity established between the drawing and a crime scene suggests that the drawings and their production have a kind of “by the book” quality, that the “disturbed” or “violent” child is a type – the case study is always turned into a template, the individual is always able to be transformed into a “soldier”.

One of the things that I take away from Beck’s work, is that the war starts long before men are made into soldiers in boot camp, that the violence that runs through our culture is structural to patriarchy, endemic to fathers and sons, part and parcel of the suburban withdrawal from the messy chance and heterogeneity of urban life. And the only way to stop this war, and to prevent the (inevitable?) next one, is to allow the contradictions between sameness and difference to resonate in a self-examined way throughout our everyday lives. The work in Beck’s bravely disparate oeuvre, complete with their ambiguity surrounding any truthful claim to autobiography or stories of real people in the media, all share a spirit of quiet self reflection that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge. (Beck’s work is filled with partial images that are out of focus; absences structure our memory as much is presences.) In the end, I don't think Beck’s work can be construed as being primarily anti-war (war is a given, the historical condition within which we all practice; it is the ground and we are the figures), but the framework of war disallows a reading of Beck's work as being merely a meditation on the vagaries of a certain kind of American boyhood. For in the end I think his work tries to articulate what is at stake for the social in the memories of the individual and how we might set about counter balancing the violence (both in real time and in memory) with revelations of extreme gentleness.

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