



ROBERT BECK

How am I to sign myself

NOV 10 – DEC 22, 2007

No opening reception will be held.

“How am I to sign myself”, an excerpt from the close of a letter written to Nora Barnacle by James Joyce, August 15, 1904, is the title of Robert Beck’s exhibition of new drawings.

What are often referred to as “Diagnostic Drawings”; a variety of psychological tests used to understand the functioning of a subject’s personality, have also been the form in which Beck has executed a vast body of work on paper spanning more than a decade. This exhibition marks the end and culmination of that body of work.

One text Beck focuses on is *The House-Tree-Person Technique* (HTP), developed by John N. Buck¹ in 1966. It serves as a personality assessment test in which the subject is asked to draw a house, a tree, and a person. By doing so, the subject is thought to provide a measure of self-perception and general neurological functioning. As Beck recreated these drawings in his own hand, each deviates from the original. With the addition of unconventional materials, notably latent finger print powder, the substance used by forensic investigators to recover finger prints at a crime scene, a bridge is established between the passive physical index of the subject or artist’s hand and what is actively derived diagnostically from the drawings.

After completing the HTP drawings, the subject is asked a series of test questions, though due to the subjective nature of the technique, the examiner is able to ask unscripted questions, such as “Is that a happy tree?” or “Is that tree alive?” In the second phase, the subject is asked to redraw the drawings, and another set of questions follow. The test drawings are scored using both objective-quantitative and subjective-qualitative criteria. The qualitative evaluation is derived from the examiner’s subjective interpretation of the drawings.

For instance, a tree with a narrow trunk but out-reaching branches could be interpreted as the subject’s need for satisfaction, while the walls of a house might correspond to the subject’s strength of ego, the windows or absence of them to the subject’s relation to the outside world. Such interpretative procedures might lend insight into the relationship between the work and the alteration of the gallery’s architecture that Beck has imposed. By reconfiguring the space to be centrally isolated and starkly illuminated by flood lamps rather than the usual gallery fixtures, Beck engages the otherwise unnoticed interpretive theater of the exhibition space.

Psychoanalysis as an interpretive method abides throughout Beck’s work as a theme, often as a means of exploiting the dynamic between artist, art object and viewer. In the drawings, the mechanism of interpretation is rerouted within the form of the culturally derived art-object. The drawings become a transparent form of the act of interpretation itself as, for instance, the examiner’s assessment is captioned. While one often interprets the art object as a trace or consequence of its maker, here the less apparent, self-referential property of interpretation is itself reflected through the otherwise tacit exchange that occurs between the observer and the observed drawing. Accordingly, the viewer is not exempt from this ricochet of interpretation.

¹ Buck, John N., *The house-tree-person technique*; revised manual [by] John N. Buck. Beverly Hills, Calif., Western Psychological Services [1966]

Location: 535 West 22nd Street 2nd Floor, between 10th and 11th Avenue
Hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 10am to 6pm
Transportation: C or E train to 23rd Street