

Gene B. Beery



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

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

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

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Raphael Rubinstein, The Silo, July 10, 2010

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



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

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

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