

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

GENE BEERY

April 05, 2013 • Gene Beery discusses his life and work



Gene Beery, Untitled, ca. 1990s-2000s, C-print, 7 3/4 x 11 3/4".

Throughout his fifty-year career, California-based painter Gene Beery has been described as an expressionist, Pop artist, Minimalist, and Conceptualist. His text-based and earlier figurative canvases tend to show all of these strains of art, like the many walls of a museum, often by placing them in literal conversations with one another. His exhibition “Early Paintings and Recent Photographs” presents work from as early as 1961, and is on view at [Albus Greenspon](#) in New York from March 16 to April 27, 2013.

I guarded my own painting at MoMA in the early 1960s. I wasn't the only artist working as a guard there. Dan Flavin was too; so was Bobby Ryman. Lucy Lippard had a job in the print department and Sol LeWitt was a night clerk in the museum's offices. I remember an elevator would get stuck there every so often. At night, when people would hear the loudspeaker say that the museum was closing, Sol and I would bullshit around or he would sometimes suggest interesting authors to read, like Henri Barbusse. Sol was really literate like that, erudite. So I started to read some of them.

The second floor of the museum at that time had a lot of older modern masterpieces. There was a room full of Matisses that I really liked. It was a good spot to be stationed. But I had to stand all day, so I would get stuck looking at a work until the damn thing started moving on the walls like a movie. You can start to see Matisse's process that way, and what a fabulous dream it really is to turn something out like that.

It inspired me to submit five works of mine to MoMA curator Dorothy Miller for the exhibition "Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure" in '62. Five was the limit, so I entered them all and actually got one in: It was a female torso with just the torso and the hips cut out in cardboard, painted silver, with two loops at the top—breast, breast—and holes that looked like some weird torture mask. It was a pretty good size. On one side, her arm read ARM. On the other: MRA.

When I was a young kid, my grandmother had a boarder that lived at her house. When I used to go there for the summer, the boarder would read me nursery rhymes from books that had all these pictures. In that combination of image and text, each really affects the other, and affected me, qualifying and creating a third thing—the result of the juxtaposition—that has helped me go back to the previous two to see if what they said initially is what they now are meaning. I wrote a story once about a man at a museum. He was a guard there and was knocked on his butt by understanding Matisse in a red room. One line from that era still resonates: "Canny is a nose that knows an onion that is called a rose." That was Nicholas Johnson, one of Earth's seminal semanticists. I personally prefer the reverse, a canny nose that knows a rose that is called an onion.

— As told to Frank Expósito