

ART BLOG ART BLOG

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Joshua Abelow: Where are you from originally?

Gene Beery: I was born in Racine, Wisconsin - October 13th, 1937. I'm 75 years old.

JA: Where do you live now?

GB: Currently living in Sutter Creek, California.

JA: I know you used to live in New York City. What was that like? Did you meet any famous artists?

GB: I lived in NYC from 1959 to 1963. I worked as a museum guard at MoMA and later the Whitney. They were adjoined then. I had a great loft studio at 117 Hester above Meyerhoff's butter and egg candling store. I bought the key for a couple hundred dollars. The rent was 45 bucks a month - can you believe it! Sol LeWitt moved in upstairs around that time. A solid good guy. It seemed like all the world came by the museum eventually. Saw many celebs and artists - most gone now. I even guarded my own painting there in a show called *Recent Figure Painting USA* in 1961 - a rare open show. Max Ernst saw my piece and sent me a note and 100 dollars to continue my work.

JA: Wow - Max Ernst - that's incredible! I bet you could buy a lot of art supplies for \$100 in 1961! What was it like being a young artist in New York at that time?

GB: I was drawn to New York in the late 50's by Art magazines. I left Layton Art School in Milwaukee as a junior to go to the big ART city as presented in ARTNEWS etc. I couldn't believe there was a place where people talked about Art and the Art World in magazines, bars, and clubs. This small town dope with grandiose plans and an itch for new surroundings almost flipped out! Instead, my three-plus years in NYC drove me sane. This was the New York of heroin, high crime, diaphragms, Abstract Expressionism, classy openings and the last years of European influence and there was plenty of romantic artist style living and sharp critics and the institutionalizing of too many things. I survived and thrived, but left NYC for a lady in my hometown. I shoulda stayed in NYC though, but then I wouldn't have met the eventual love of my life, my wife Florence. New York was quite stimulating for a 25-year-old ex-bumpkin, but I left in 1963. I packed up my drum set and favorite Art pieces in my Volks and took a vacation to sort things out - from which I would not return for years. I did fairly well during my time in New York: briefly worked in Art amazing MoMA; had a show at a big time gallery, Alexander Iolas in 1963; I received a grant of 2000 dollars from the Copley foundation on Christmas Eve!, met many interesting people including artists on the up swing - Jim Rosenquist, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, and Mike Hardin, and, of course, many babes of various predations and so forth. Sadly, or maybe it was for my benefit (I needed a rest), I didn't sell and was now too spoiled to work a regular job.

Joshua Abelow, "Interview with Gene Beery." *artblogartblogartblog.com* (March 2013), accessed online.

JA: What was your show at Alexander Iolas like?

GB: Iolas was a gallery that exhibited and was associated with European Surrealists like Man Ray, Duchamp, Max Ernst and some Americans, CPLY, Stevenson, Pfriem and others. I got this show there through my participation in the "Figure..." show at the MoMA. My show was received well, though I don't remember more than a paragraph of a review in ARTNEWS. No sales, but Duchamp gave me fine after-dinner cigar at Bill and Noma Copley's home. The show was black and whites and figures in gold and silver with text. Albus Greenspon gallery has documentation on that period.

JA: Do you ever miss it here?

GB: Well, it is a different New York now. For me what is past is past - unique and instructive - hedonistic and aesthetic and etc. Now, I love my rural life in the Sierra Foothills in California, but I'm always ready for a trip to New York. If someone buys the tickets! The best "Eyes" are there as well as history, and moolah!

JA: I know you did some shows with Mitchell Albus before he joined forces with Amy Greenspon in 2010, right? I didn't become aware of your work until somewhat recently via the Internet. How did Mitchell discover your work and how many shows did you do with him?

GB: Mitchell says he saw a work of mine at the Wadsworth, was impressed and contacted Andrea Miller-Keller who turned him onto myself. Mitchell saved my retreated ego and gave me a show at his Thompson Street gallery - sold a few and got excellent reviews. Both shows there went well, but were cautiously received. The dates of these exhibits elude me. Word works only, some large and many in color. Some good sales.

JA: There's an excerpt from a letter you wrote to Andrea Miller-Keller dated 1979 in the press section on the Albus Greenspon website that I think is great:

"...or was it trying to find out just what Art was by throwing out everything and starting over from the idea on up...not worrying about hard edges or painterly edges because the ideas were coming so fast I wanted to get them down before they slipped away or I got a better idea. With just words, realizing the graphic interest was there - in the background of course in the sense that the letters could be viewed up close or paintings hung upside down for someone who said they are too simple...I also was disappointed nobody else had the 'fun' I did with these paintings...looking back, maybe it is or was neurologically difficult to view symbols or words as Art because of the functioning of the different halves of the brain. You know the right half is nonverbal and aesthetic, the left symbol using and analytical. It might be difficult to synthesize a leap where the word works as art - of course look at Chinese ideograms or calligraphy. They do it...Anyway, you can see I'm still working with words (books lately) mainly because as I told you I got to the point where the most original thing for me to do was to continue to do what I was doing - and isn't that what Art is all about - to do what you think you should in the spirit of freedom, keeping in mind it's nice to find agreement and that the products or actions have some human beneficence."

JA: Have you always made text based work?

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GB: No, I picked that up while guarding paintings at MoMA. I noticed Art viewers were very interested in paintings with scraps of text, newspapers, notes like that. So I thought I'd add some text to my otherwise imagistic work. Words are a tool of the visual art experience; see Balzac, Magritte, Stuart Davis, etc. Eventually, I became interested in signs and their content in everyday society and tried to upturn the meanings to some kind of poetry.

JA: Do you remember the first word painting you ever made?

GB: I'm sure the first word painting I made was text on an image - likely a female figure. I have always wanted to be original in my art and ended up doing text pieces because nobody else was - then.

JA: To me, your work feels fresh and contemporary - it's hard to believe some of this stuff was made decades ago. How long have you been making art?

GB: I have been conscious of doing Art since I was in second grade (I'm finally in third grade, Ha!). I did profiles instead of front view stick figures. I also drew a lot of army tanks and airplanes and war scenes like other boys in my class. The Second World War was on, we were good citizens. Creating Art has always been the frosting on the nourishing cake in my imperfect/perfect existence.

JA: Do you spend a lot of time on the Internet looking at art?

GB: I am a fan of ART BLOG ART BLOG.

JA: Thank you. ABAB is a fan of Gene Beery. Do you have any favorite artists or writers or other points of inspiration?

GB: I think we are subconsciously influenced by other Artist's efforts. I have always admired Frans Hals, Matisse, Magritte and Ergg the cave wall painter. Sol LeWitt is also a very admirable Artist and person as well as all of those who worked and are working that I haven't mentioned including yourself plus all of the Zen writers and Lao Tzu.

JA: I know you're married and I think you have kids. What do they think of your work?

GB: My wife Florence and I have five children, Teresa, Pamela, Elizabeth, James, and Mary. All of their homes exhibit my art. Florence has always backed me up in my artist's vocation without competing and with a real gift for listening. We have 13 grandkids and 5 great grand kids.

JA: They are all very lucky to have your work in their homes. I have three of your paintings in my home and they bring me a lot of joy. My favorite is the one that reads: "DOWN WITH YOUR ART!" That one really makes me happy.

GB: Thank You, I just hope it isn't my ART that is down - Ha! - a nice open-ended universal piece! Part of Art as conscious of itself. It's not yours either!

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JA: It's the voice of our critics! Haha! Do you have a favorite color?

GB: I like them all but Mauve has a deep complexity I like.

JA: At some point you stopped using color and decided to just paint words in black on white canvas. Is that right?

GB: General expedience was my motive. At one time I imagined I should be in a hurry to get all of my ideas realized and black and white was least expensive and I thought more noticeable than the over stimulating blast of color we find ourselves swimming in in our culture. I still think in color in photography.

JA: Do you think of yourself as a conceptual painter?

GB: I think of myself as a Folk Artist for a Folk without Folk Art (although, now the electronic toys are kind of Folk Artiness). I'm not a total Idea guy - I like to do Ideas though that can expand human choices for Behavior and Living - a new way of seeing Life and Art and getting some joy out of them on this tough planet (I guess that eliminates the electronic toys). Humor is a good part of my shtick.

JA: I love all the weird photographs with text you have been emailing me for the past couple of months. How do those come about?

GB: I see Art everywhere like many of us. I like to grab it and Art it with captioned or not photos.

JA: A few weeks ago you sent me a short story about a six-legged dog named POUND0 who can "run as fast as the speed of light." That was fun to read. Do you write a lot of short stories?

GB: Well, I do some writing - a story or two or a humorous paragraph or short story. I also have dabbled in spurious music, videos and comedy skits. Poun0 is in the works. Eric Ginsburg is illustrating.

JA: Sounds great. I'm looking forward to seeing that. Have you ever exhibited music or video in New York?

GB: I also have done Artist's books, YouTube videos, a Music CD, and several Comedy CDs available through Albus Greenspon Gallery.

JA: In the early 60's you said you wanted to find out what art was by "throwing out everything and starting over from the idea on up." That's a very interesting idea. Can you tell us a little more about that? Any closing thoughts?

GB: I can tell you that since then I've found out that starting from rock bottom with Art is a charming simplification. I've learned that Art is much bigger than that, complex, ever re-forming, and probably of an unknowable, bottomless nature. I'm still pleasurablely whacking away at it. So do what you like Artists! Expand the definition of Art! I do like the connection of Art to Beauty and Eros. Art continues to make Artists. Details available in my artworks. Gene B. Beery.

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JA: Gene, thank you for taking the time to speak to us. I know my readers will find your words truly inspirational.

GB: Thanks for the stimulating opportunity Joshua.

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