

# ARTFORUM



Gene Beery, *Mere Decoration*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 19 1/2 × 25”.

Gene Beery

FRI ART

Gene Beery’s ongoing painterly production over more than half a century resolutely undermines the elitism of the dominant art system (and its transatlantic channels of legitimation) as much as it self-consciously expresses resistance to any “high art” convention. The simple material forms, selectively flat colors, imperfect brushwork, and rough, sometimes mottled or yellowing surfaces of his works articulate a peculiarly American nonchalance. The environs of the small Swiss city of Fribourg, which bear a remote similarity to the woods of Northern California under the Sierra Nevada mountains where Beery has lived and worked since the mid-1970s, fittingly emphasized the workaday quality of his “logoscapes,” as the artist describes

his paintings of words, which accompanied a handful of figurative paintings (rare for Beery), and a dozen stapled zines in the artist’s first institutional survey, curated by Balthazar Lovay.

Beery’s paintings are often understood as wry commentary entirely eschewing representation, since most are indeed text-based and can be literally read. But it is the work’s particular painterly qualities—the slapdash smears and irreverent drips, disorderly composition, and exuberantly hyphenated uppercase script—that separate Beery’s cheeky pictorial conceptualism from the dry, bureaucratic exercises of his peers, aligning him with the late-twentieth-century turn to “bad painting” *avant la lettre*. Take, for example, *This Is My Last Serious Painting*, 1960, in which swiftly opposing diagonal strokes of brown and white obscure the title text, which is set beneath a trickle of dark (and stormy) bluish gray that spills perpendicularly until all of the color sloshes together into a no-longer-serene aquamarine “sea” at the lower edge. Or the recent *Life Stars*, 2016, which celebrates existence by awarding it a succinct three and a half out of five. White overpainting not only blots out a prior indecipherable phrase, but also alludes to the variability of the rating system itself; the “blank” stars are also filled in but have been effaced in a kind of subtraction through addition, perhaps reflecting the depletion of energy over time.

But maybe Beery’s attitude is best described through another early work in the show, *Out of Order*, ca. 1960, executed in the aftermath of an event that would shape his entire oeuvre: While making his rounds as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (alongside noted colleagues Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Lucy Lippard, and Robert Ryman), the artist observed an apologetic TEMPORARILY OUT OF ORDER sign hanging on a kinetic work by Jean Tinguely. The placard announcing the art’s dysfunction seemed to have been absorbed into the total assemblage—which must have been the Fribourg-born sculptor’s

Kari Rittenbach, “Gene Beery.” *Artforum* (September 2019).

*Homage to New York: A Self-Constructing and Self-Destroying Work of Art*, exhibited at MOMA in 1960. Beery's primary source material and the engine of his neo-Dada artistic dissent—the romance of oblivion deferred, due to technical difficulties—can be seen reflected throughout his wordy displacements of “painting,” often performed on canvas. In the circa 1960 piece, a rectangular frame positioned on the lower half of a Masonite board excuses itself: SORRY PAINTING IS TEMPORARILY OUT OF ORDER, while leaving open the possibility that its “order” might return.

This sense of art negated—attracting the viewer's attention only to direct it elsewhere, out of frame—was in general evident in the selection of works (including *Out of Order*) grouped as “Wall Dancers,” which approximated Beery's annual release of recent paintings into a disorienting, uproarious salon hang at his home, en plein air. Among those shown at the Fri Art Kunsthalle, *Counter Clockwise Compass Demonstrating the Truth of Worth*, 1965, scrambled the cardinal directions as a function of time, starting from true north but (like the artist) ending out west. The title of *Free Art Work Tomorrow*, 2015, which coincidentally punned on the name of the exhibition space, could be appreciated as either an ever-alluring tagline or unrealized political demand. The small square canvas that one saw on both entering and leaving the show, *Looking for Visual Thrills*, 2010, spelled out its title within a washed-blue border, letters running up against and dangling, lemminglike, on bad breaks on the right-hand edge. The text, not least, represents the grunt work of this reluctant artist—and the “subsequent generations of art viewers” he's projected as the likely audience of his work—as nothing but incomplete.

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