



Gene Beery Photo: Jason Frank Rothenberg

## GENE BEERY (1937–2023)

By News Desk

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Gene Beery, whose irreverent text-based paintings presaged the work of Conceptualists such as John Baldessari and Lawrence Weiner, died on November 19 in Sutter Creek, California, at the age of eighty-six. His death was announced by New York's Derosia and the Los Angeles-based Parker Gallery, which represent him. Various cast, over the course of a career spanning six decades, as a Pop artist, an Expressionist, a Minimalist, and a Conceptualist, Beery was resolutely committed to the idea that words and the ideas they conveyed could alone embody a work of art. Unlike many of his peers, he was unafraid of using humor to comment on the vagaries of the art world. "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," wrote Kari Rittenbach in a 2019 issue of *Artforum*. "The simple material

forms, selectively flat colors, imperfect brushwork, and rough, sometimes mottled or yellowing surfaces of his works articulate a peculiarly American nonchalance."

Gene Beery was born October 13, 1937, in Racine, Wisconsin, where a childhood encounter would inspire his later practice. "When I was a young kid, my grandmother had a boarder that lived at her house," he told *Artforum* in 2013. "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."

Following stints at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and the Layton School of Art in the same city, Beery in 1958 moved to New York, which was then on the cusp of becoming the crucible in which Concep-

"Gene Beery (1937-2023)." *Artforum* (November 30, 2023), accessed online.

tual art would be forged. “My three-plus years in NYC drove me sane,” he told Art Blog Art Blog’s Joshua Abelow in 2013. “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.”

He joined the Art Students League and obtained a job as a security guard at the Museum of Modern Art, where he became fascinated with the explanatory labels accompanying the paintings hanging on the walls and noticed that “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.,” he told Abelow.

Beery began making text-based works on shards of wood and Masonite. A 1961 example, *Out of Style*, is characteristic of his wry take on the art world, depicting what appears to be a wall label meant to accompany the blank spot where a picture once hung. “Sorry / This Painting Temporarily Out of Style,” reads the text. “Closed for Updating / Watch for Aesthetic Reopening.”

At the museum, he worked alongside fellow guards Dan Flavin and Robert Ryman; Lucy Lippard toiled in the print department there, while Sol LeWitt acted as a night clerk. LeWitt would become a lifelong supporter of Beery, whose break came in 1962 with the inclusion of one of his works in the MoMA group exhibition “Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure.”

Among the viewers who saw Beery’s work at the MoMA show was German Dada giant Max Ernst, who recommended him for a solo show at New York’s Alexander Iolas Gallery. Shortly after that exhibition’s close, in 1963, Beery decamped for San Francisco, eventually settling in Sutter Creek. He continued to make and exhibit work throughout the 1970s, with a notable fifteen-year gap in public display occurring after 1980. By the 1990s, he had added photography to his practice, creating intimate portraits of family and friends. The 2010s brought a resurgence of interest in Beery, with a spate of solo gallery exhibitions across the US and a 2019 retrospective of his work at Fribourg, Switzerland’s Fri Art Kunsthalle, which was the under-recognized artist’s first institutional solo show.

Beery produced text works until nearly the end of his life; his most recent solo show was “Portrait of the Artist as a Spandex Tuxedo” at Parker Gallery last year. His work is on view through February 18, 2024, in the group show “Rules and Repetition” at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut.

“I got to the point where the most original thing for me to do was to continue to do what I was doing,” he told Abelow, “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.”

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