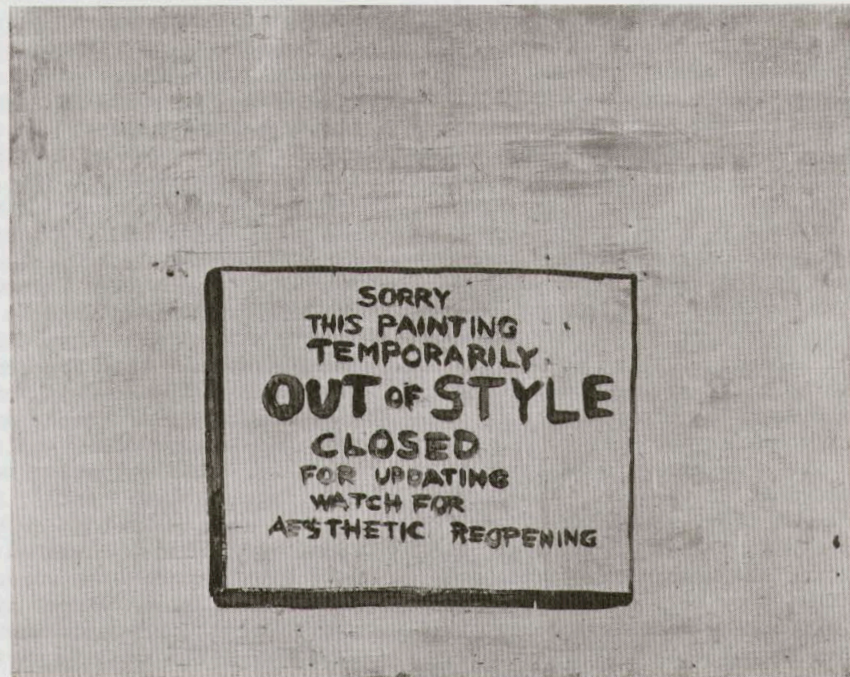


Wadsworth Atheneum
Early January to early March 1980

Gene Beery
MATRIX 55

Out of Style, 1961
Photograph: Irving Blomstrann



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We do what we know before we know what we do.

Charles Olson, as quoted by Robert Creeley in poets of the cities new york and san francisco 1950-65 (Dutton '74), p. 62.

Gene Beery's paintings from 1961-62 sit on the knife's edge. They are the churlish sniggers of a merry-making wrangler from the mid-West tweaking the nose of the regnant New York art establishment. At the same time they raise profoundly serious questions about the making and marketing of art, questions which became dominant in the minds of many contemporary visual artists between the mid-60's and the mid-70's. Experiencing these works nearly two decades after they were painted, it is important to remember the spirit in which they were made and to keep in mind Beery's long-standing commitment to humor and jest as legitimate vehicles for expression in the visual arts. Otherwise, from our perspective of hindsight, these noteworthy works might assume too much of the sobriety of historically significant art objects.

These paintings were strikingly original in concept. As if a "sneak preview" of later developments in the exploration of language and meaning by visual artists, they rely entirely on text while unequivocally holding their own as paintings. Furthermore, these works are unabashedly self-referential given Beery's choice of both the creative process and the socio-political context in which art is made as primary subject matter. (Although the artists did not know of each others' work at the time, Italian-born Ben Vautier painted similarly interesting canvasses in France in 1961: one was block-lettered Pas d'Art; another was scripted Qui vous dit qu'il n'est pas beau ce tableau.)

Subsequent events place Beery's early paintings in such an interesting light we are likely to wonder how and why they came to

be. In 1961, Gene Beery was living in New York City, employed as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art. An intensive reexamination of painting and sculpture was already underway. Many ideas were in the air...Jasper Johns' two beer cans, Painted Bronze, 1960...Claes Oldenburg's Letter Tenement, 1960... The old order, abstract expressionism, was being challenged on many fronts. Most aggressive was the newly emerging pop art which was attracted to the bold use of recognizable daily objects including familiar advertising signage. Beery himself was more interested in "re-ification", the process in which the abstract name for something (the word) is regarded as the material thing. An example of re-ification is his amusing Howdy Podners, 1961, (*Howdy Podners, this painting was commissioned by Life Magazine [for \$1500] on the subject: Western Films*). Life Magazine was soliciting paintings on the subject of western films and Beery submitted this for consideration. It was rejected.

As a museum guard Beery noticed that people were often indifferent to the visual imagery in the paintings on view. Words, however, seemed to grab their attention. Beery says he wanted to make "still lifes with words," and to make "words visual like art." Wrote Beery on a work from that time, "One word is worth a thousand pictures." He called some of these paintings "Logoscapes."

All of the works in MATRIX suggest Beery's easy involvement with language on the most basic level. The words are clearly and casually printed by the artist's own hand and the paint is allowed to drip. The unmistakable feeling of a personal spontaneous gesture prevails.

Beery's paintings also treat the special challenges of being an artist. For instance, he was walking in Manhattan one day, on his way to buy a suit, and noticed a big paper sign in a shop

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window which said TEMPORARILY CLOSED. How simply it stated the situation. It struck him that he too, a painter who temporarily did not have something to offer, could forthrightly paint that dilemma. The result was Out of Style, 1961, (*Sorry this painting is temporarily out of style/ closed for up-dating/ watch for aesthetic re-opening*). He also recollects being amused at about that time by a sign reading "Out of Order" which was hung on a sculpture by Jean Tinguely at the Museum of Modern Art.

Out of Style and the tombstone-shaped Here Lies the Corpse, 1961, (*This painting may double as a he-/ adstone/ here lies/ the corpse/ of anxious creativity/ in the/ Visual Arts/ --- to April 20, '60/ perished during the/ battle for the "as is"/ in the cause of the/ liberty of the status-quo [dynamic]/ R.I.P.*) both reflect Beery's response to the intense pressures within the art world and Beery's sense that as one changes to accommodate to these pressures something is lost in the process. Aware that his "as is" was being laid to rest, Beery paints an "adstone" for himself.

In N.F.S., c. 1962, an abbreviation of Not For Sale, Beery takes an informational sign which commonly appears in gallery installations and makes it the subject of a painting. This hung along side other works in his 1963 exhibition at the Iolas Gallery in New York City. This is my last serious painting. Gene Beery, 1961, is a dead-pan prank for it was never intended to be a final statement of any kind!

At the time these works were made they were not widely exhibited nor were they taken very seriously by most people who saw them. It would seem that they mischanced to enter a little too early and were dismissed as peculiar and inconsequential. Yet, they were seen to be of special interest by a small group of artists including Sol LeWitt,

James Rosenquist and Max Ernst. Today we can appreciate these paintings for their freshness, vigor and vision.

Gene Beery was born in Racine, Wisconsin in 1937. He attended the Layton School of Art in Milwaukee, the Arts Students League in New York City and received a fellowship from the William and Noma Copley Foundation in 1963. Beery left New York in 1964 and has lived since that time in Northern California. In recent years Beery has published a series of his own books, several of which are on exhibition in MATRIX.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of MATRIX

COMMENTS BY THE ARTIST

...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

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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.

Excerpted from a letter to Andrea Miller-Keller, December 17, 1979.

Works in MATRIX:

Out of Style, 1961, oil on canvas, 36" x 48". Private collection, courtesy of the Wadsworth Athenaeum. (Text: *Sorry this painting is temporarily out of style/ closed for up-dating/ watch for aesthetic re-opening*)

Here Lies the Corpse, 1961, oil on canvas, 45" x 29 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (shaped like a tombstone). Private collection, courtesy of the Wadsworth Athenaeum. (Text: *This painting may double as a he-/ adstone/ here lies/ the corpse/ of anxious creativity/ in the/ Visual Arts/ --- to April 20, '60/ perished during the/ battle for the "as is"/ in the cause of the/ liberty of the status-/ quo [dynamic]/ R.I.P.*)

Howdy Podners, 1961, oil on masonite, 48" x 35 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Private collection, courtesy of the Wadsworth Athenaeum. (Text: *Howdy Podners this painting was commissioned by Life Magazine [for \$1500] on the subject: Western Films*)

This is my last serious painting. Gene Beery, 1961, oil on masonite, 24" x 48". Private collection, courtesy of the Wadsworth Athenaeum.

N.F.S., c. 1962, oil on canvas, 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 15". Private collection, courtesy of the Wadsworth Athenaeum.

Laff Device #29 in collaboration with Sol LeWitt, 1964, oil on canvas and wood, 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ " h. x 33 $\frac{3}{8}$ " w. x 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ " d. Private collection, courtesy of the Wadsworth Athenaeum. (Text: *Ha ha H/ o! Ho Laff Device #29*)

Selected publications by Beery (on exhibition in MATRIX): A Nice Painting Book '77; The Author '78; The Great Articulator (Allthumbs Press, Sutter Creek, CA) '79; Title (Front Cover) Author ("Diagnos") '79; Admit One to the World of Tra '79; Beastomania! Right Turning Moose '79.

Selected one-man exhibitions: Alexander Iolas Gallery, NYC '63; Quay Gallery, San Francisco '70.

Selected group exhibitions: Museum of Modern Art, NYC Recent Painting USA: The Figure, '62; Milwaukee Art Center 51st Wisconsin painters and sculptors annual, '65; University of Pennsylvania Institute of Contemporary Art The Spirit of the Comics, '69; Seattle Art Museum 557,087, '69 (exhibition travelled to Vancouver Art Gallery, '70, and was renamed 955,000); Quay Gallery, San Francisco Drawing II, '73; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC 1975 Biennial Exhibition, '75; La Mammelle Artspace, San Francisco '77.

Selected bibliography about Beery: Plagens, Peter. "557,087: Seattle," Artforum, vol. 8, no. 3 (November '69), p. 66. McCann, Cecile N. "Eclipse of the Mood," Artweek, vol. 1, no. 32 (September 26, '70), p. 3. McCann, Cecile N. "Drawings as Attitude," Artweek, vol. 4, no. 31 (September 22, '73), p. 14.

Special thanks to Sol LeWitt, Brooks Jackson and James Rosenquist for sharing their recollections of earlier times and thanks also to Jon Hendricks and Barbara Moore of Backworks for sharing their research of earlier times.

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