

BOMB

The Journey of Getting Close to a Thing: Martin Beck Interviewed by Isabel Parkes

The artist talks about subcultures, collecting, and collaboration.



Installation view of *Martin Beck: I wish it would never get dark*, 2018/19, 47 Canal, New York, twenty-four drawings on paper. Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal.

Down the Rabbit Hole: JB in JT is an exhibition of filmmaker James Benning's work organized by artists Martin Beck and Julie Ault and curator Scott Cameron Weaver whose Los Angeles gallery, O-Town House, has temporarily moved online and east, to Joshua Tree, as a response to California's statewide lockdown. Set in a private residence, the exhibition comprises photographs of objects accompanied by short texts that elucidate a decades-long exchange of ideas and materials. Beck and I met up in Southern California's high desert to talk about lasting friendships and fascinations as well as emblematic moments and how to capture them.
—Isabel Parkes

Isabel Parkes

Tell me about how you work.

Martin Beck

My projects usually emerge from long-term interests in counter- and subcultures, and their lasting impact on ways of being together. I collect books, documents, records, and data on

subjects such as communal living, dance culture, exhibition history, and productivity enhancement. These materials sometimes linger for years before I do something with them. I'm most drawn to moments and paradoxes that resonate and foster insights into the present. I don't use a fixed medium, and my process often requires working with professionals whose skillsets enhance the work. That said, lately I've also been interested in handmade things that I can make alone.

IP

Like what?

MB

In a recent show at 47 Canal in New York City, I exhibited drawings based on visual and verbal rhetoric from 1970s productivity-enhancement manuals. The drive toward self-improvement—making one's everyday life more efficient in order to function better in a capitalist economy—is a subject I've been exploring for a while. I wanted to do something and five hours later see what I had done.

IP

These modes of working evoke questions of time. Can you talk about how time operates in your work and *Down the Rabbit Hole: JB in JT*?

MB

There is an inherent slowness to my process. I require time to accumulate, research, develop, produce, and look. This sense of accumulation also manifests in *Down the Rabbit Hole*, where works on view have entered Julie Ault's and my home over fifteen years, through friendly gestures more than intentional processes. They've also developed from James Benning's urge to constantly do something. He visits us regularly and is always both making and leaving things here without considering them part of a collection or anything.



James Benning and Sadie Benning, *Untitled*, 2010, pencil on cardstock, framed.
Photo by Martin Beck and Scott Cameron Weaver.

IP

Intention seems like another important idea. What role does it play, as opposed to chance, in your work?

MB

I rely both on intentionality and on stumbling upon something too good to overlook.

IP

What's been too good to overlook lately?

MB

One of my larger bodies of work from the last decade has to do with The Loft, the iconic downtown New York City dance party. When, years ago, I was collecting and listening to songs played there, I found documents that inspired me to piece together the playlist for the last Loft party at its 99 Prince Street location in 1984. Together, the event and this list bundle several narratives—social, economic, as well as technological changes around that time—and point to the relations between document, structure, and memory. It felt like finding the perfect storm and eventually developed into a project (*Last Night*, 2013–19) with publications, sculpture, and film components.

IP

A sequence of records suddenly points to a whole context. Would you describe the desert as context for your work?

MB

Not overtly. The only work I've done that relates to the desert was before we had the house here and was a project about Reyner Banham's *Scenes in America Deserta* (1982). I was interested in his description of encountering as a European the American Southwest. Once I lived here, my desire to do work about the desert vanished. I come here to focus, and I don't want the desert to be visible in my work because, ultimately, it's an environment that allows me to think about other things.



James Benning, *Freedom Club*, 2009, wood carving. Photo by Martin Beck and Scott Cameron Weaver.

IP

Its magic is that it's as generative as it is empty.

MB

For me, the magic of the desert is its richness. It's both a place of potential solitude and of deep conversations with friends—James and others. I come with a suitcase of materials but seek not to announce my presence or that anything is being made here.

IP

Which is funny because *Down the Rabbit Hole* is photos from inside your and Julie's home.

MB

(laughter) Mostly the interior, focusing on James's works!

IP

A range of personal and interpersonal objects!

MB

That topic is part of an ongoing, collective discussion that both Julie and Scott Cameron Weaver are a big part of. When we made *Tell It to My Heart* (Kunstmuseum Basel, 2013), a show on Julie's collection of artworks, we talked about what the photo documentation of the works "at home" should reveal or conceal. Julie's practice, as reflected in the collection, requires a personal approach, so we annotated the catalogue checklist with anecdotes and personal histories. We thought it would be interesting to experience publicizing what had been private.

IP

What did that feel like?

MB

Awkward but fascinating to experience people's responses. The intimacy of Heinz Peter Knes's photos communicated very actively and affected people. I really learned something about intimacy in art and the experience of looking. Before working on that exhibition, I wasn't thinking about that quality in my work.

IP

That works themselves can convey both intimacy and information?

MB

Yes, and it has since become something I strive for. Many of my more recent works exhibit a clear formal structure and maintain a high degree of affect. When Scott and I worked on the photographs for *Down the Rabbit Hole*, we tried to capture the works themselves as much as how they exist in different moods that define this domestic environment.

IP

How are you using text in the exhibition?

MB

Honestly. During the first part of lockdown, anxieties and emotions lingered, and we began reflecting on how things in the house came about, relating stories about friendships and taking stock.

IP

The texts offer both facts and the sense of intimacy you've mentioned. How do you feel about documenting your own work?

MB

I'm less interested in photographs that objectify works than in photographs with voice that reflect the journey of getting close to a thing.



James Benning at work on *After Darger (Welcome)*, 2020, acrylic paint on garage door. Photo by Scott Cameron Weaver.

IP

Tell me about your friendship with James.

MB

We met on New Year's Eve 1999 at our friend Dick Hebdige's house and over time became friends. James likes the desert, which figures into a number of his films. We both like to spend time here in the summer, when it's hot and few people are around. We work, swap feedback, eat, and enjoy each other's company.

IP

Has collaboration always been part of your practice?

MB

Always? Always on and off. At art school, I worked individually; in the early 1990s in Europe, I collaborated with friends. In the late '90s, Julie and I started working together on exhibitions, exhibition design, and publications, but also maintained our individual practices.

IP

As a twin, I tell people I've been collaborating my whole life.

MB

(laughter) Absolutely. Most of what Julie or I do is aided by our exchange. It doesn't matter whether we call that collaboration. Exchange, encouragement, and feedback are collaborative and essential.

IP

What are you currently working on?

MB

I'm familiarizing myself with a suite of records from the early 1970s that feature environmental sounds. I learned about it through a friend, the architectural historian Mark Wasiuta, who is currently writing about it. The suite includes field recordings of seashores, wind in trees, dawn and dusk in a swamp, etcetera. Its packaging positions the records as tools to alter environments, to enhance concentration, to become more productive, or to relax and drift—to be somewhere else. The records are impressive technologically as pioneering examples of high-quality nature recordings explicitly made for an emerging hi-fi market. One can stay at home and be in a different place at the same time. I don't know what will come from it all, but for now I'm enjoying spending time with the material.