

Interview on myartspace.com, 24 April 2008;
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THURSDAY APRIL 24, 2008

Art Space Talk: Lisa Beck

The art of Lisa Beck is driven by certain preoccupations and obsessions, that can be seen as divided between the earthly - nature, the landscape, elemental forms - and the heavenly - science, astronomy, the universe. Lisa graduated from Rhode Island School of Design with a BFA in 1980. Since that time she has had several solo and group exhibits, including exhibits at Feature Inc. and White Columns. Lisa has been reviewed in ARTnews, Artforum, Frieze and several other publications.



Glimpse (detail), 2003; acrylic paint on wall, lucite balls, cable; 80 x 50 x 40"

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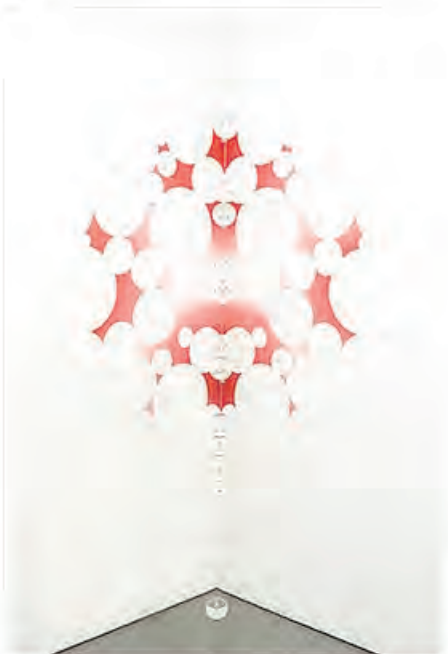
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Brian Sherwin: Lisa, you studied at Rhode Island School of Design. Can you tell us about your academic years? Who were your mentors at that time? How did your education prepare you for the decades to come?

Lisa Beck: My time at art school was the era of high conceptualism and semiotics- we studied everything in light of that. You know how, as a kid you make up games with other kids, and spend all your time arguing over the rules and no time actually playing? That's how it was. A lot of discussion about the system of the interpretation of art- not much feeling or visual appreciation. We didn't get much technical instruction. Painting was viewed as an anachronism, or an unhealthy fetish.

I did some installations and a film- in fact I got my BA in film, but I still made paintings throughout my time there. No one really paid attention to painting, so it was free of the rules of coolness and intellectuality. I'd say I got the most out of school from my interactions with my peers and just uninterrupted concentration on my work. How did this education prepare me? I guess I learned to be wary of "isms," and to rely on my own judgment.



Glimpse, 2003; acrylic paint on wall, lucite balls, cable; 80 x 50 x 40" installation view, White Columns, NY

BS: Since that time you have had a successful exhibition history in New York. You have been involved with several exhibits at Feature Inc. and White Columns... you have exhibited at Paula Cooper Gallery, Envoy, PS 1... the list goes on. What do you enjoy most about exhibiting?

LB: I most enjoy making the work, and in the case of the wall paintings, getting it to succeed in public, because of the deadline factor, and the fact that my studio is pretty small, and even though they are planned out, it's always different on site. People are watching you work – it's a bit nerve wracking. I don't like to go to my own openings so much. I like for people to see my work, but I don't like to be on display myself. I've been told that On Kawara stipulates that he will not attend his own openings- that sounds perfect to me.



View, 2002; acrylic paint on wall; 80 x 50 x 40" installation view, Feature Inc.

BS: Lisa, your art has been reviewed in *Artnews*, *Artforum*, *Frieze* and several other publications through the years. One could say that you have been very successful. What is your definition of success as far as creating art is concerned?

LB: That is a huge question- it can be answered in so many ways. A review- I guess that means someone noticed the work- that's ok. Does someone else's approval make it better, or their disapproval make it worse? A sale- I guess that means someone wanted to own the work- that's ok. Did they understand it? Who knows? After a review or a sale, I still have to wash the dishes.

I think that an artwork is successful when it has an air of inevitability- when it seems to have reached its ultimate form.

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Fountain, 1998; oil, alkyd on wood; 52 x 40"

BS: Allow me to ask some specific questions about your art. You have stated the following, "I've always appreciated the way we refer to an artwork as a "piece." For me, the artwork is a selection out of a continuum, like a snapshot is a piece of stopped time."... can you go into further detail about your views?

LB: An artwork is finite – even a film has a limited amount of time in which it takes place. Our perceptions and ideas are amorphous and evolving- at least mine are. So an artwork is an encapsulation of a particular moment in that evolution. There are other possibilities that may come out in other work or they may remain unexpressed.

BS: Would you say that you follow a certain philosophy with your work?

LB: No. There are certain concerns, certain interests that I have, and I employ different means to address them. Maybe the piece takes the form of a sculpture, painting, a combination of those things. Maybe it is completely abstract, or not. It's whatever works.



Red (heaven/hell) for S.P., 2006, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 56"

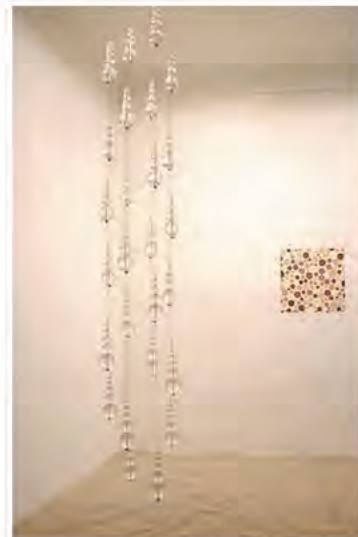
BS: My understanding is that you feel a work of art is never finished in that the manner in which the work is completed has unlimited possibilities to reach that end, correct? In that sense, would you say that a work of art is a continuing cycle... a life of its own, if you will?

LB: All of the work is part of a continuing process. It's not that a particular piece is never finished, but that the thought process is never finished. So I may address a particular idea in several different ways, but individual artworks do come to a conclusion. It's just that I don't feel that there is only one valid conclusion. I don't believe that any particular work or notion is "the answer."

To allow for or to encourage things I never saw coming, I've made installations that have components which can be rearranged: paintings combined with reflective objects, paintings with multiple parts, paintings on top of wall works, paintings that can be looked at through glass balls. And often, these are all in a room at once.

BS: You value the use of negative space and you connect it to the natural world and aspects of the universe. Can you go into further detail about that?

LB: Well, in solid matter there is a lot more space between atoms than there are atoms, even in really dense materials. This proportion of nothing to something hold true across the boards; another example is the "dark matter" that makes up the majority of the universe. I recently heard a discussion of this where a string theory scientist was explaining this phenomenon as the evidence of alternate, concurrent reality or realities. This is so interesting to me! What is unsaid or unseen is helping to form what is expressed. In my work I try to demonstrate the involvement of nothing with something. Nothing keeps it all together.



Influx, 2001, acrylic balls, cable, hardware, 14" diameter, var. height
Pseudoisochromø #1, 2001, acrylic paint on wall, 24 x 24"
Installation view, Grazer Kunstverein, Graz, Austria

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BS: So in your work you seek these connections, correct? Do you search for these connections in the work of others?

LB: My work is driven by certain preoccupations and obsessions, that can be seen as divided between the earthly - nature, the landscape, elemental forms - and the heavenly - science, astronomy, the universe. What interests me is the earthly AND the universal — the place where they meet or interact or blend. The earthly is a shorthand name for the observable aspects of reality, the stuff around us. The universal is a shorthand name for things that are really too vast or too tiny for us to grasp completely — that necessarily becomes a kind of abstraction. I'm concerned with where I stand, or where anyone stands, in relation to these aspects of existing reality ... the act of observation of that place in between; visual awareness and perception as a way of understanding, like a filter. There's everything and there's us, and although we're part of the everything we also stand outside as we perceive, analyze, and annotate everything.

This is what interests me. Some other artists' work deals with this too. Some doesn't. If it's there, hopefully I see it, but that isn't the only criteria I have for appreciating the work of other artists.

BS: Speaking of other artists... are you influenced by any specific artist or art movement? Tell us about your influences...

LB: It's not only artists, but writers and musicians as well. There are too many for a complete list, and it's always changing. Here is a selection in no particular order: Charles Burchfield, Alien Beings, Barry Le Va, Hiroshige, NASA, Pavement, Imi Knoebel, Haruki Murakami, Daniel Figgis, the Wiener Werkstadt, Pema Chodron, landscape architect Jacques Wirtz, William Eggelston, Ernst Haeckel, Inuit poem entitled "Into My Head Rose", My Bloody Valentine, James Tiptree Jr., Tadanori Yokoo, landscape by an unknown artist I saw on a Chinese restaurant calendar, Giotto frescoes I saw in Italy last year, Ansel Adams, Flaming Lips...

BS: What are you working on at this time? Will you be involved with any upcoming exhibits?

LB: I am working on multiple panel paintings. There are some exhibitions planned for next year.



Reflection, 2004; acrylic balls, concrete; 24.75 x 8 x 8"

BS: Do you have any advice for emerging artists?

LB: For me, art making is a means for addressing questions or feelings that really don't have concrete answers. So I would pose some questions. What don't you already know? Is this artwork that you're making leading you there? Out of all the options that you have, why are you doing this?

BS: Finally, would you like to close with some more information about the thoughts, methods, and motives behind your art?

LB: Symmetry and mirroring are important in my work in terms of different kinds of reflection or refraction — the way that water mirrors in nature on a horizontal axis, or the way that a Rorschach pattern mirrors in abstraction on the vertical. Symmetry works as a way to make sense, with the emphasis on "make." Because really, it's a very simple device — you can take any bunch of stuff, dots, let's say. The first dot paintings I made were based on the paper towels I used to clean brushes with, and on their own they're just random. But if they repeat, a pattern is born. I guess it's a coping mechanism for the brain to look for, and to construct patterns in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the barrage of perceptual information. It's an artificial view. But it also occurs in nature, and everywhere.

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Circles are another constant for me. They have so many references: star, cell, atom, hole, whole, infinity. They appear most often in patterns, either as the positive or negative aspect. The acrylic balls that I use are part of the fascination with roundness. They focus and condense what's around them — a whole room in one small sphere. Easy to grasp, literally and figuratively. But the reflection is upside down and backwards. So it reveals itself as an illusion, although a very pretty one. And maybe it doesn't matter if we fool ourselves with this illusion that things match up and dance together in an orderly fashion. Because maybe there really is order beneath the chaos. Sometimes with art or science or with drugs one can catch a glimpse.

Lately I've been interested in mixing representational and abstract imagery. I can't say exactly how I translate those images to an artwork and I don't want to. I mean, I can have a picture around for years and one day it suddenly finds its way into a work, like a lost puzzle piece that finally turns up. Or maybe it just remains an inexplicit influence. I find planning too far ahead extremely boring. I can only go so far in that stage and then I have to start working and change my mind, change it back, mess it up, deal with that.

With the multiple panel paintings, I've developed some new guidelines. One is that I can combine whatever types of imagery comes to mind. Another is that I don't have to plan ahead how it will play out, thus the ability to change the order of the sections. I've looked at Japanese painted standing screens, and one of their attributes is that each section works as an image on its own. Because I'm separating the panels, I want them to be able to hold their own, so to speak. Each moment is part of a continuity of time, but when you stop to think about it, it separates from the flow. There's a slight delay in the brain for the processing of perceptions, our eyes are blinking, we go to sleep, so our experience of the world is not continuous. We fill in the blanks. But the blanks are important too.

You can learn more about Lisa Beck by visiting the following website-- www.featureinc.com. You can read more of my interviews by visiting the following page-- www.myartspace.com/interviews.

Take care, Stay true,

Brian Sherwin