

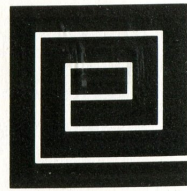


BEAUCHAMP



# ROBERT BEAUCHAMP: AN AMERICAN EXPRESSIONIST

Organized and introduction by Ronald A. Kuchta  
with an essay by April Kingsley and a self-  
interview by the artist



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# THE FLOATING WORLD OF ROBERT BEAUCHAMP

At night, in the dark, the backyard gardens of Provincetown can become intensely mysterious places. For one thing, they can seem to go on forever, not to be bounded by such mundane limits as fences, roads, or property lines. For another, many of them seem to descend, to flow downward in ever narrowing arcs toward a dimly perceived distant bottom level. (Numerous kettle ponds and pocket dells punctuate the Cape, mute reminders of the glacial activity they mark.) You can lose yourself in these gardens at night, as in a maze or on Goethe's magic mountain. Fireflies provide flashes of illumination; half-glimpsed glows from distant porchlights or flares from nearby cigarette lighters only add to one's spatial confusion. Figures are come upon suddenly, looming instantly in one's path, or they are heard, whispering, somewhere indefinably far away. Rustlings, seagulls' cries, a dog barking in the distance, the murmur of voices and music in the house, muffled laughter — everything seems disconnected, both spatially and temporally. Such is the setting of a Provincetown party. Anything seems possible, permitted. In the dark garden lovers find pleasure, dreamers find shadows, writers plot murder mysteries or muse on Dante's *Inferno* and Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*; and painters like Robert Beauchamp find pictorial imagery to last nearly a lifetime.

In the three decades since Beauchamp began exhibiting his work, certain adjectives and descriptive phrases have repeatedly been used by reviewing critics — demonic, wild, grotesque, fantastical, nightmarish, horrid, phantasmagoric, ferocious. Comparisons have invariably been made between his paintings of figures and animals in landscape and the paintings of Bosch, Nolde, Ensor, Bacon. It has even been hinted that he made a pact with the devil in order to gain entry to the Walpurgis-Night orgies on the magic mountain. But, reality is at least as important a



source of inspiration for Beauchamp as the imagination. His early paintings were inspired by the actual experience of nocturnal skinny-dipping and partying in Provincetown, just as surely as the animals he paints are viewable in the local zoo, and the excruciatingly painful portraits of his dying brother Gene were painted out of real anguish and love.

Beauchamp doesn't deliberately set about to paint a particular scene unless it is a portrait; he simply has a phenomenally retentive visual memory coupled with a profoundly expressionist temperament. "I paint a floating world where everything is possible, organized abstractly," he writes. "I distort, fantasize and pile in the images."<sup>2</sup> A drawn curve may spark affinity to a woman's thigh; a slash of paint may suggest the mane of a horse flying in the wind; symmetrical lobes of pigment may seem like a baboon's behind. Beauchamp "finds" his images in the paint while in the process of applying it autonomously or semi-unconsciously to the canvas. Harpies, witches and animals bubble up to the surface of his "floating-world" picture space and he either helps them to remain buoyant or resubmerges them beneath washes or waves of more pigment.

In the first paintings Beauchamp showed (at the co-op Tanager Gallery in 1954) abstract "slashes, swirls, blots and cuts of the brush" filled "every inch of his nervously handled canvases," according to the reviewer, who added that "from this welter some savagely distorted heads appear, uncomfortable images that are well-served by (his) agitated manner."<sup>3</sup> He had returned to the figure only the year before, when, on coming back from Provincetown and having decided to end his three year apprenticeship to Hans Hofmann, he found the reality of an impecunious artist's life in New York too intense to be ignored entirely in his paintings. "It was an emotional thing. I felt abstract art was too remote from immediate life,

that I had to wear blinkers when I walked out onto the street."<sup>4</sup> He added that he "reverted to what had preceded Hofmann," which was taken to mean German Expressionism, but Beauchamp has consistently disclaimed an involvement with those painters and paintings. Instead, he undoubtedly refers here to the figurative drawing style of his first teacher Boardman Robinson. Beauchamp says he admired that style so fervently in his youth that he could imitate it perfectly even before he studied with Robinson; the method was learned from Robinson's former students. He didn't think much of Robinson's paint handling, but he had, by this time, a thorough grounding in painterly technique from Hofmann, and, by osmosis, from Pollock and de Kooning.

A few other factors are important to these pivotal years — 1953-7 — of Beauchamp's shift from abstraction to figuration, from Hofmann's aegis to flying his own colors. First, a number of other Hofmann students, and other Provincetown artists were working figuratively in defiance of the current, dominant, abstract-gestural mode. Jan Muller and John Grillo were working with "mosaics" of color patches; brilliant hues abutted to create an active unified surface. Grillo's abstractions in this manner went on to influence Al Jensen; Muller's figurative scenes — bacchanales and dream-like *fetes champetres*, dappled with patches of bright color that pulled the imagery up to the picture surface — were important for Beauchamp and others, like Tony Vevers. On the New York Cedar Bar-Tenth Street Co-op-scene many rumblings of dissatisfaction could be heard amongst the booming prevailing voices of second generation Abstract Expressionists. Among them, Nick Marsicano's fluid pigment and George McNeil's scumbled paint were beginning to coalesce into vaguely figurative images; Nora Speyer and Sideo



Fromboluti began their long struggle to make thick, expressionist paint define the figure; Lester Johnson, Elaine de Kooning, Wolf Kahn, Gandy Brodie, Robert De Niro, and Grace Hartigan all retained references to reality in even their most gestural paintings. All these, and Mary Frank too, especially toward the late '50s, provided Beauchamp with a supporting network of like minds amid the ambitious power-brokerings of the abstractionists in those years.

But neither was Beauchamp moving toward realism. "For me realism gets in the way; it but mirrors surface reality. The forms are too small, the colors prosaic. I do not paint abstractly because it leaves too much out," he states. "I want to paint objects with the subtleties of natural forms and the subjectivity possible through abstraction. I would rather paint a nude than lay down a plane of color."<sup>5</sup> In the paintings of the late '50s with which this exhibition begins (most of the mid-fifties work having been lost or destroyed), nude women, often conversing in pairs, are seated amid bucolic wooded and beach landscapes. Some are titled *Witches* (Cat. No. 4), others simply *Two Sisters* (Cat. No. 6) or *Three Nudes on a Beach* (Cat. No. 2), but all contain the same kind of heavily maned, doe-pawed, angular nudes in casual, simian poses. They exude animality. It is as though the human female form is being viewed generically, where it intersects with the female of every other species. The landscape, dappled both with sunny hues and dark tones, does not reveal what time of day or night is intended. In one beach scene, a reclining figure supports a dog on the upraised soles of her feet as though it were a beach ball, and in *Initiation*, (Cat. No. 7), 1960, some kind of nocturnal rite seems to be occurring. A back-lit, youthful, female nude stands at the edge of a small pond in a dancer's *plié* pose while numerous females of the same generic type sit with

upraised, crossed legs in clusters all around her. Rivulets of black paint run off the edges of thick brushstrokes at various places in the painting, especially around the pool, and some of the figures are rendered in only a few lines. Nothing sinister seems to be happening, yet the tone is otherworldly — not at all far, in fact, from what Faust and Mephistopheles might have seen that night in the Hartz Mountains.

Beauchamp's females move or sit with utter disregard for the rest of the world. They walk with their heavily-tressed heads held high; they communicate wordlessly with one another like members of a secret society. Their sharply-edged noses and prehensile hands confer a potential for viciousness — if one were to arouse their ire; but for the most part these mysterious creatures remain supremely indifferent to what's going on about them. He calls them harpies or witches, and says he's been painting them all his life but he doesn't know why. Perhaps growing up, as he did, in a depression-era family that had been female-dominated since his early childhood has had an effect. (His father, like many other fathers in the same Denver tenement had abandoned the family.) The women with whom he has formed relationships as an adult have all been strong, self-reliant artists with careers of their own. Beauchamp is not given to volubility. He is most comfortable when doing something physical — particularly battling a bluefish into the boat. When he's been drinking hard at a party he's been known to take off all his clothes and dance madly, wildly around the room, or, situation permitting, outside in the rain. He loved the rambunctious artists' parties of the early '50s and continued to celebrate them in both painting and life long afterward.



His painting process is always muscular and physically active, and in some of the paintings of the early '60s pigment all but buries the imagery. In *Red Tree and Nude* (Cat. No. 9) it has cut out everything except a negative silhouette of a woman squeezed beneath looming masses of paint; it threatens to do the same to the insect-like *Angel* (Cat. No. 15), and to the shadowy women in the Museum of Modern Art's large untitled painting of 1962 (Cat. No. 14). Lights flicker in and out of the dark passages of that canvas like firelight and moonlight through smoke and grasses and moving figures at a beach party: the painting has a suspended, mesmerized quality that is not at all unlike staring into the bonfire on such an occasion. In drawings, such as the Metropolitan Museum's marvelous *Nine Figures* (Cat. No. 10), of 1960, one gains a better understanding of Beauchamp's process of picking a shoulder or a head out of an automatically drawn curve. One can also readily imagine how many figures may populate the nether regions of any given finished canvas of that period; figures which have been subsequently overlaid with pigment.

By the end of the '60s his subject matter began to exhibit an exuberance that matched that of his paint handling. Figures began to fly around in the picture space, to leap and tumble and float upside down, whereas they had remained fairly stable up until the mid-sixties. If a figure was horizontal before then, you could assume it was lying down, and all the figures were logically oriented within the painted landscape. This changes dramatically later in the decade, as does scale. All of the pictures we have been discussing have included figures of relatively similar size: if a figure was small it implied a more distant position; large, more closeup. Now, some figures are tiny even though there is nothing to indicate they occupy a different location, and heads pop up from the

canvas edge or legs descend from the top as if implying a continuing maelstrom of incident of which we are given but a section. And finally, one further major change is ushered in by such bizarre mid-sixties creatures as the warthog-cum-giant rat in *Magic Blue Circle* (Cat. No. 18): demonic beings — animal, avian, insectile and piscine.

Beauchamp once said about demons, "if you can't lick 'em, join 'em," and if he doesn't exactly do that, he does enjoin the frightening, out-of-control aspect of the creatures he paints. More often than not they are fairly ordinary beasts — hogs, horses, camels — that one can visit in any local zoo or farm. The birds tend to be more exotic, while the fish, snakes and insects are of the home-grown variety. But Beauchamp's eye will be struck by the outrageous clumsiness of a camel, for instance, and his remarkable visual memory will record it that way later on; or the paint will suggest a wild-eyed horse, or a leaping fish.

Something happens in the painting process that exaggerates the creature's wildness, even to the point of distortion, and when it happens Beauchamp seems to touch some deep level of the dark side of existence — a place we all fear.

In 1969 Beauchamp made an inventory of his imagery for *Art Now*:

A nude girl jumping rope, horses, blue-bottomed baboons, fish and fish hooks, octopi, pregnant woman, water, bricks, flower, feet, erections in the rain, hair, bees in flight, teeth, teardrops, scorpions, fruit, flies, belly buttons, cheese, light bulbs, crowing roosters, and fighting cocks and barking dogs, a view of the alps, a maple seed, check marks and X marks, a wet handkerchief, skin tone, meat, snakes, fangs, and snake bites, floating feathers, dancing girls and running diving tumbling men.<sup>6</sup>

He left out camels, apples and matches, but they became more common a little later, in the early '70s. The Hirshhorn Museum's *Yellow Bird* (Cat.



No. 22] shows the scale discrepancies of this period most clearly. A large figure will frequently be isolated in a space filled with myriad small creatures moving in furious melee in these pictures. In *Blue Nude* (Cat. No. 19) (for Matisse?) a figure sits serenely amid such activity on a ground plane shared with none of the animals — except where it is interrupted in the lower right by a small horse galloping frenziedly out of a lighted tunnel within it. The “sky” above this ground plane is divided into two equal rectangles of color, each with its own coterie of images.

*Safety Pins, Etc.* (Cat. No. 20), of 1967, is completely scale-disjunctive with objects of various sizes tumbling disorientedly throughout the picture space. Beauchamp had added to his 1969 *Art Now* statement that “like Jackson Pollock, I fill the painting up, like Cézanne a little here a little there I build.” Nowhere is it more clear than in this painting that he shares a *horror vacui* with Pollock, particularly Pollock’s earlier, mythic, and more turgidly hand-painted pictures. Pollock never had de Kooning’s facility with the brush, and so his early pictures are convulsively wrought in paint that the artist seems to have dragged across the canvas the way an animal does its prey; pouring paint liberated him. Beauchamp has long been admired by other second-generation Abstract Expressionists for his de Kooning-like gifts. The freedom of his paint handling, the lightning speed of his line, the cut of his brush can be awe-inspiring. In fact, today, there is probably no painter who can match Beauchamp’s technical skills and the range of his painterly effects.

Beauchamp reaches back to Delacroix’s manual dexterity — and, most importantly, to his colorism. Fiery reds abound, but not always in the company of greens, the way they do in German Expressionist paintings. Instead, blues and yellows, pinks and purples will often fill out the

spectrum of his palette. Sometimes color carries the main burden of emotion in a picture; at others the drawing tells all. Often a single arcing line will dominate the composition as it does in *Witch and Devil on a Tightrope* (Cat. No. 21), 1967. Here, the devil appears from out of nowhere to balance above two yellow-eyed, white-maned, red horses which are below a mermaid-like witch who swims purposefully up through a dark blue sea-sky. In *Icarus* (Cat. No. 24), of the same year, the dramatic descending curve at the left expresses the fall more graphically through its diminution than does the figure of Icarus itself. Even when the line is accidental, like the blood-red rivulets raining down across the picture plane in *Red Sky* (Cat. No. 25), it is emotionally charged. And when the arc turns into a circle, it carries the connotation of a charm: in *Magic Blue Circle* (Cat. No. 18), of 1966, it protects the figure on the right from the animal; in a large drawing of 1969 a woman jet-streams through a “magic circle” on the back of an alligator-like creature (Cat. No. 26).

The line goes on automatically and starts a chain of visual associations, actions and reactions. So does the paint. The edge of one form suggests another; an area of blue calls for another of yellow. Forms metamorphose into other forms (à la Picasso); positive shapes flip into negative ones. Empty areas demand filling. Though much rubbing out occurs, it only remains visible in the drawings. In the oils, one color obliterates a previous hue, one animal permanently alters the form of another. Sometimes, when an accident “makes” an entire painting, Beauchamp feels that spirits must have taken over. *Camel in Red Mist* (Cat. No. 29), 1971, is such a miraculous painting. He still can’t get over the way the cascading flood of red paint was stemmed at the camel’s knee bringing it out of the mist at just that one spot.



*Icarus*, 1969  
oil on canvas, 70 x 80 in.  
Cat. No. 24



A major shift in the balance of dark to light occurs in the early '70s though it is temporarily obscured by a concurrent change in subject matter. Ever since he had begun to incorporate representational subject matter in his paintings way back in the '50s, light had emerged out of the dark, like the planets out of chaos. Slowly but surely, light began eating up more and more of the dark area. By the mid-seventies, when he painted many misty canvases splattered with myriad small dots of pigment, the overall color emanation of a given painting had become quite high-keyed, and light hues outnumbered darks. In the recent work, dark spots are interstitial, usually negative spaces, and are far outweighed by bright color. *Melting Butter* (Cat. No. 31), c. 1971, epitomizes this shift, but at the time Beauchamp was mainly involved with depicting huge apples isolated on a single-color ground. These apples were frequently painted in very thick pigment that cracked open like a mud flat in a drought, and were usually accompanied by flaming matches. He says he guesses that some

kind of elemental symbolism might be present in these paintings — earth, air and fire, or Eden (the apple) and the destruction of it all (the match) — but in other paintings of this series, a camel appears leaping wildly over, through or under the apple. In still other works, the apple form is replaced by a tooth. One should never overestimate the consistency of Beauchamp's intended symbolism.

The depicted world literally begins to disintegrate in Beauchamp's paintings of the middle seventies. *Celestial Spectral* (Cat. No. 36), and the untitled canvas of 1975 in the Herbert F. Johnson Museum (Cat. No. 38) are polar examples of the spread from empty to full modes within this atomized style of painting. Edges are lost, and with them the incisive bite of his line. There is a gain, though, in plasticity, in the fluidity with which forms move about in the picture space; and in the ease with which recognizable objects can emerge and resubmerge in the matrix — now you see them, now you don't. The imagination has freer play this way than when images are clearly defined. Naturally it is tempting to read the artist's personal life into these paintings. One of his brothers dies of alcoholism, another, already paralyzed by a form of polio, contracts cancer and begins his own physical disintegration. The artist's voyage into fatherhood ends tragically. His world does seem to be falling apart, his life haunted by spectres and demonic spirits. But again and again, one must avoid too literal a reading of the paintings. Beauchamp's relationship with his wife Nadine Valenti remains strong, and his painting continues to deepen. This is a highly experimental period for him, one in which he is beginning to let his emotions surface more and more directly in the paintings. The faces of those he loves, and his own face, begin to obsess him. They appear out of the mists in these canvases as they must constantly rise to the surface of his consciousness



Pictures filled with myriad incidents become rarer as the '70s progress. *Girl's World* (Cat. No. 42), and *Bananas* (Cat. No. 40) are charged all over with tension, and are scale disjunctive and hyperactive in the way his '60s paintings were. However, their mottled faces and frighteningly distorted heads relate more closely to the single-figure paintings which are so prevalent that they constitute the norm in 1978 and 1979. Over and over again, he stares into his own face, painting self-portrait after scathing self-portrait. Flesh takes on a near-biblical, fire-and-brimstone-seared quality in these pictures. His dark eyes burn as if searching his soul for answers to the riddle of his own existence. Some small comic relief is given when he paints his head as a sculpture on a stand along with others modeled equally violently in clay (Cat. No. 50). (He has, in fact, been making such sculptures recently.) In another he points to his much-loved Grandpa Snoozy who is scrawled graffiti-style on a blackboard (Cat. No. 43).

For the most part, though, we look at his self-portraits failing to understand why a man who seems so objectively handsome paints himself so caricaturishly. He brings out features that seem to belong to another face (perhaps one of his brothers') and makes himself look grotesque. But we should understand that he's letting us glimpse the darkest places inside himself, and that through this purgative action, this flaying open of his raw interior, and through the self-mockery it entails, we have been given access to a level of psychological reality not often reached in painting. The few times such depths have been plumbed, from Rembrandt to late Picasso, are too well known to need citation.

Beauchamp's paintings of his stricken brother Gene are, if such a thing is bearable, even more anguished. They go on, increasing in brutality — the smashed, gouged, splattered, scumbled and smeared paint standing in for what is happening

to his beloved brother's flesh — until *Gene* #27 (Cat. No. 59), a painting too terrible in its indictment of nature's inhumanity-to-man to look upon without rage or tears, or both. Though painted near the time of Gene's death, it does not mark the end of the artist's obsession with this image.

Living in Georgia during the last few years, Beauchamp has taken up a group of new subjects — a *Georgia Farm Couple*, snakes and their religious-fanatic "handlers," a dog snarling at a big-nosed man, unicorns, clowns and *The Men from Circle X* (Cat. No. 49). Then too, Gene left him a legacy of wild visions from his final illness, including the red alligators which appear both with him and with Beauchamp. Most of Beauchamp's recent images cut close to the bone. They put pressure on the thin edge between us and the abyss.

April Kingsley  
Cape Cod, Summer 1984

#### Notes

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, Trans. Bayard Taylor, (New York: Illustrated Editions Company, c. 1920), pp. 209-210.
2. Joan Marter, "Robert Beauchamp: Haunting Images," *Arts Magazine*, February 1979, pp. 146-147.
3. S.P. probably in *Art News* reviewing his guest show at the Tanager Gallery in 1954.
4. Robert Beauchamp, quoted in "The Reappearing Figure," *Time*, May 25, 1962, p. 62.
5. Marter, p. 147.
6. Robert Beauchamp, statement in *Art Now*, October 1969.