

John Beech at Elizabeth Leach, Portland

July 2011

by Sarah Vaeth

John Beech's show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, Oregon is a tightly focused presentation of intimately scaled works, showcasing the shared themes in recent but otherwise unrelated sculptures and works on paper.

At first glance, Beech's *Blagen* series constitutes a historical in-joke. A raw mass of congealed enamel paint is folded into the crystalline confines of a plexiglass box: art's most formless impulses (expressionism at its most indulgent) crammed into a rational minimalist prism. Of course it's funny, this forced alliance of opposed camps. Although they're notably more refined, they resemble the kind of mid-60s "soft" modular objects dubbed *eccentric abstraction* by Lippard. Poised between minimalism and postminimalism, these broke from the cool rigidity and machined quality of the prevailing nonobjective sculpture and, to one degree or another, leaned towards sensuality and Duchampian games of "absurd" juxtaposition. If Beech's *Blagens* are more finely crafted than their predecessors, it's because the art world in 2011 doesn't turn on questions of preciousness and commodity. Clumsy or exquisite, it's more a personal choice, and Beech has played the field; elsewhere he has filled cubes with used paint rags or chunks of dirty foam.

Previous critics have discussed Beech's objects as irreverent send-ups of minimalism; and this assessment holds for much of his prior work. However, to treat the *Blagens* as satire, as if the paint peelings function only to complicate the cube, is to neglect the way the juxtaposed terms affect *each other* and become a unity. He pitches form and formlessness against each other and, in small ways, order and chaos bleed together. The interior mess of dried enamel (studio detritus peeled from the bottom of milk jugs) is shored up with fresh additions of poured paint: form tweaked out of formlessness. The plexi encasement is scratched and smudged in places, and elsewhere subdivided with deep vertical and horizontal scoring: slippages in the integrity of the form. Underlying the Dadaist humor is poetry: the partial retrieval of form from disorder and an escape of form back into disarray. A notion of evasion is amplified by the way access to the interior is frustrated. Always there are hints of hidden layers within the candy-colored paint mass. The series title gives some hint of the work's slipperiness: "The word *Blagen*," says Beech, "is what I presumed to be a non-existent German sounding word that I made up. It turns out that it is an archaic German word, meaning loosely 'unruly child.'"

Pairing the *Blagens* with Beech's *Dumpster Drawings* was a deft choice, enriching the reading of both. We see that both are containers for refuse, transmuted by the artist into something revered. The drawings consist of single or paired black and white photographs of a dumpster, centered and taking up most of the picture plane. An undistinguished object in an undistinguished urban landscape. Only, Beech has masked the entire silhouette of the dumpster with a palpable coat of enamel paint: an aestheticized form pulled from a banal source. Shades of Baldessari are undeniable, but where that artist censors, Beech distills. His overpainted dumpsters are purified into flattened minimal icons. Then, some of them begin to dissolve—the dripping physicality of the paint taking over to mutate the form. Here again is a feeling of slipperiness.

It's to the gallery's credit that this show focuses on one cohesive thread in the artist's oeuvre. However, there is a looming question regarding a larger curatorial decision impacting the show. Beech's is one of three concurrent exhibits in a space that was designed for two. His has been relegated to a quasi office space in the back. Presumably the gallery is angling to take advantage of timing, as the show will overlap a small exhibit of larger works by Beech at the Portland Art Museum (through October 18). Fair enough; but by temporarily moving some bookwork off-site, Elizabeth Leach could have optimized the impact of this show.

John Beech: *A Selection of Recent Works*
2 June—16 July 2011
Elizabeth Leach Gallery
417 N.W. 9th Avenue, Portland

<http://peterblumgallery.com/press/artwrit/july-2011/john-beech-at-elizabeth-leach-portland>