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DIRECTIONS

ERICKA BECKMAN

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Golden Boat, 1984. Type C print, 30 x 40 in. Joshua Galef, New York.

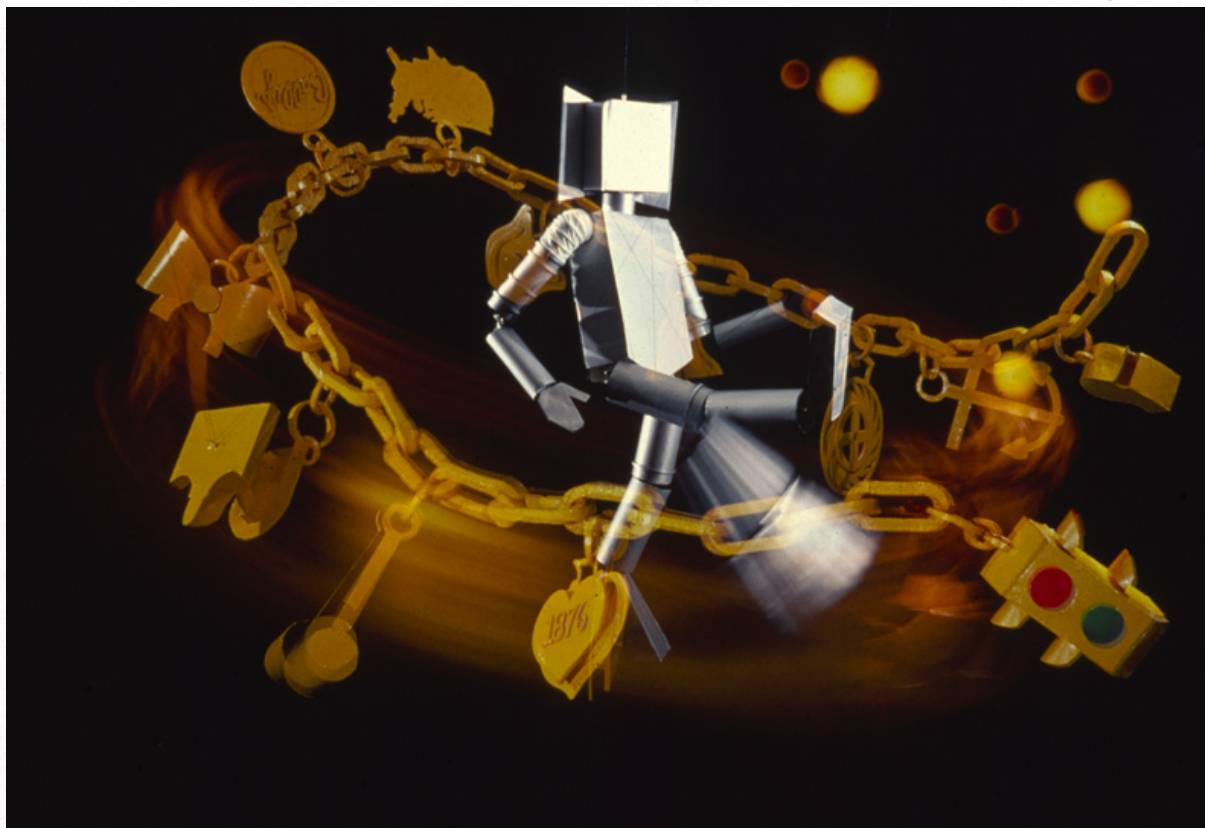


Fig. 1. *Lucky Charm*, 1984. Type C print, 30 x 40 in. Joshua Galef, New York.

ERICKA BECKMAN: RECENT WORK

Ericka Beckman first gained recognition and is best known for her Super-8 and 16-millimeter films. Although trained as a painter, she was inspired by interdisciplinary, multimedia, and performance art experiments at the California Institute of the Arts in the mid-1970s—experiments that John Baldessari, her mentor, called “post-studio art.”

Perhaps the best way to approach Beckman’s work from the 1980s is by considering what it is not. Although the end product is often a photograph, she does not consider herself a photographer; her scenarios are not in the tradition of photojournalism or fine-art photography; her images are not computer-generated although their color, crispness, and accessibility often give them a

comparable high-tech vividness and immediacy. A black background space is characteristic of her style. Visions often seem like stop-frames from longer narratives. Scenes that at first appear playful and disarming may operate on different levels, just as fairy tales and toys can reflect cultural mores as well as individual desires.

Rather than depicting a particular experience or memory, Beckman’s images come from the fugitive visions of her dreams. Relying on her dream diary, Beckman recreates what was subconsciously so vivid. She constructs desktop models or room-scale sets, which she then photographs, manipulating the lighting and using slow exposures to add ethereal drama. “How I [create] image[s],” she has said, “comes from how I go about making props and from making jumps in my reason.”¹

Most of the photographs relate to motifs for films. The haunting golden ship in *Lucky Charm*, 1984 (cover), for example, began as a dream and was to have become the vision of a gambler in a film, "signify[ing] that reality was withdrawing from him." The scene is simultaneously apparition-like, resembling a bubble that could disappear in an instant, yet stately and romantic, recalling the opening or parting sequences of an old epic movie. The rolling swells glistening just beyond the ship are rendered in a different scale, perhaps even a different moment in time, than the calm sea upon which the vessel sits. This suspension of time suggests that *Lucky Charm* is a visualization of how mythic things persist in the past and present.

Ferris Wheel, 1983, was also sparked by a dream: A tidal wave inundating an amusement park is tamed when the ferris wheel tilts to harness the flow, scooping it up like a water wheel. Beckman interpreted this imaginary spectacle as "imply[ing] how symbols of amusement and diversion can rally to become tools." The ferris wheel's spinning motion offsets catastrophe, just as subconscious thought can foster problem solving.

In the early 1980s Beckman toured plants and factories, gathering insights for a series that used industry as its theme. How the notion of the individual as a link in the chain of industrial progress has been altered by the shift in modes of production and the displacement of skilled labor is the focus of *Break in the Chain*, 1984 (fig. 1). The "charmed" life of the worker, which is supposed to lead to progress and prosperity, is ruptured, perhaps irrevocably, as an automaton kicks through a gold chain of mementoes. The bracelet (the model was sixteen feet long) is still in motion—in play, Beckman suggests, as are some of the ideas tied to a nostalgic faith in industrial advances. Beckman's robots are not menacing; they herald and spoof the ever-escalating pressure for efficiency at the expense of other human values.

A similar theme also underlies Beckman's most recent and ambitious film, *Cinderella* (1986). The artist turns the classic tale into a game. The heroine must navigate a maze of barriers to be fit for the prince. Beckman's darkly playful version is a series of puns on the word "forge."² Cinderella is not a housemaid, she works in a forge where coins are cast. During her initial foray to the ball, she flees too late, forgets to leave her slipper, and gets zapped like the victim in a lethal video game. This Cinderella resists the mold and myth of being forged into another mass-produced, dancing doll. How Beckman's commentary on the pressure to con-

form is slyly encased within this fictional format is itself a kind of forgery.

Spoonful, 1987 (fig. 3), is a reprise of a television cereal commercial from the 1960s, but when wholesome milk becomes a stylized explosion and berries are launched, the scene suggests bombing, impact, and fallout. Beckman has used art to imitate advertising, calling attention to how subliminal sales pitches link desire with power.

In *Nanotech Players*, 1988, a mental pinball game replaces the seriousness and rote efficiency of robotics. Beckman redefines nanotechnology (the methods and materials used to develop minute machines composed of even-smaller parts) to mean a process by which the components in an object or substance are altered, which transforms the original object. She co-opts the term to poke fun at the authority and obscurity of scientific terms, borrowing the word for its sound and improvising its definition. After a player hits a red ball with a bat, the ball changes forms, literally going through the hoops of a process (fig. 2) that in Beckman's conception requires heat, speed, and finally a cooling bath. The energy and transformations involved in the process imitate the internal and external sensations of life in the age of high tech.

Beckman is a director who calls our attention to the stages of perception and cognition. Her themes emphasize how play triggers associations and revelations. She confounds the relative scale and apparent volume of objects—a surrealist tactic, as in *Pirates' Cove*, 1989—and uses lights and lighting that animate and blur to produce vibrant effects and afterimages. The darkness in which scenes hover seems sometimes computerized, sometimes conjured. *The Memory Core*, 1989—a set—offers clues to a mystery to be improvised by the viewer's imagination. As in all Beckman's images, installations, and films, the viewer's mind inhabits the scenes and the processes of the mind are their subjects.

Kelly Gordon
Curator of the Exhibition

1. All unattributed quotations are from a December 19, 1988, interview with artist.

2. Vera Dika, "Cinema: A Feminist Fairy-Tale," *Art in America* 75 (April 1987): 31–33.

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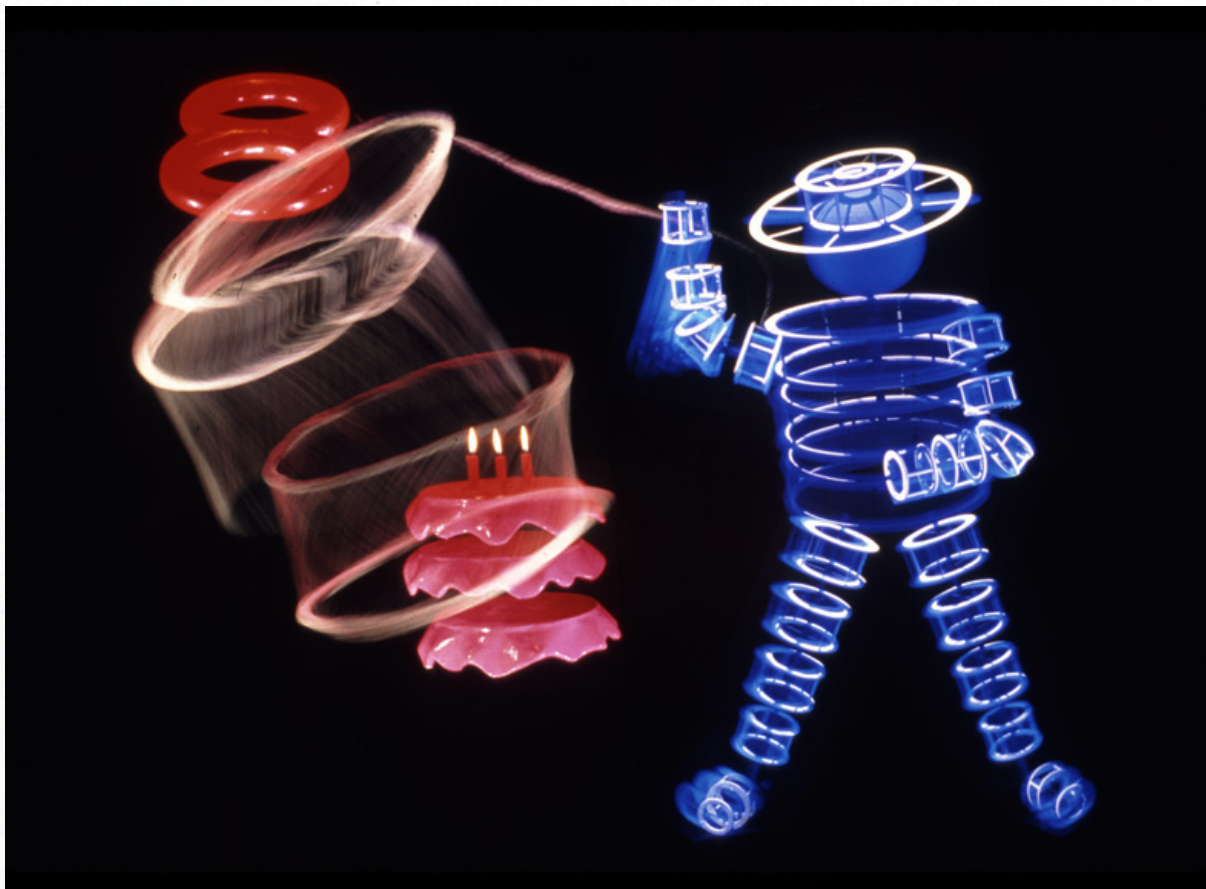


Fig. 2. *Nanotech Players: Lasso Thrower*, 1988. Type C print, 40 x 60 in. Collection of the artist, courtesy Bess Cutler Gallery, New York.