Ericka Beckman

Ericka Beckman's films are category outliers. The work of an art school graduate, they were once fixtures in the world of experimental cinema, but they correspond at least as well to the context of contemporary art—with its discourses, its modes of interpretation, and its eager historiography.

I believe a lot of my friends and myself looked to images that we could appropriate from our past, because we were so radically transformed by the TV and radio we watched and listened to. We clung to their short-lived status and listened and looked deep into their sounds and images. The media experience of my youth was linear and each new one, sequel, news story, or new album changed or wiped out the one before, in a blotter effect. —Ericka Beckman

Beckman makes films without plots in a conventional sense, rather constituting them from themes: socialization, acculturation, competition, and the organization of thoughts and memory. Since they're structured largely according to games, they don't have characters; they have players. And those players exhibit such vague, indeterminate characteristics that it's no great surprise that actors appear alphabetically in the credits, without any identifying information about who they played. Like everything else about the films—the scenery, the props, the animation—the players are representative, stand-ins contributing to Beckman's abstract ruminations on culture in a time-based medium. The fact, though, that Beckman's films from the 1970s and 1980s cast her artist-peers as players, is meaningful.
The actors came from two, at times overlapping, contexts. Firstly, there's CalArts, circa 1976, where she was a student in John Baldessari's "Post Studio" class. There, she met several of the other artists who would become important figures in her generation as well as in her filmmaking practice: among them, Ashley Bickerton, Matt Mullican, Mike Kelley, Tony Oursler, James Casebere, and James Welling. (Other students from that era include Barbara Bloom, Troy Brauntuch, John Miller, and Jim Shaw.)
In the years immediately following, Beckman and Mullican were in regular dialogue. In his 1982 essay in Art in America titled "Back to the Studio," a review of an alumni exhibition celebrating the ten-year anniversary of CalArts, Craig Owens hit upon the similar bases underlying Mullican's and Beckman's practices: signs and subjectivity. Mullican, Owens wrote, was focused "on the ways in which we project ourselves into the world via the signs that we employ"—meaning the visual iconography that constitutes culture. And as he saw it, "Ericka Beckman's Super-8 films show us, not things themselves, but signs which represent those things." In other words, Beckman cut to the very foundation of culture's visual vocabularies. In a conclusion intending to address all of the artists in the show, Owens wrote that their works "deal not only with the artist's activity of encoding information, but also with the viewer's activity of decoding the image" [...] Beckman's films don't really lend themselves to description. Her formal language is highly specific, highly detailed, and constituted from concrete elements —largely mundane and nameable objects, character types, settings, actions, shapes, and colors. What's more, her work is an attempt to render these elements mutable. Beckman strips them from any narrative and sets them in motion within the context of game-like activities, which are themselves a patchwork of numerous extent games. At times, these activities devolve into abstractions, still constituted from concrete elements, or they stretch from a realistic time and space into the past, the future, a dream, or a virtual realm.

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