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"A Place to Rest"

by Terry R. Myers (Artpress, April 1997)



For a few years now, Julie Becker has given herself a great deal to do, even when much of it is to be put off for the time being. In fact, this is a delay based in a 'work ethic' that purposely displays the meaning of her work (and the convictions of its ideologies) as being fully maintained by the methods and materials of its characteristic production, much more than by what it looks like (not to suggest that style isn't an issue on some levels), or by what inferences we may make (not to imply that we have no accountability here). By definition, it seems, her work demands that everything real and imagined that is inserted into it be left literally and metaphorically suspended (in place, or in time, if not in the air; or even 'suspended' like being kicked out of class at school, but we'll get to that later), not only in order that we mentally take in extraordinary amounts of substance worth returning to again and again as we experience her work over time, but also that we learn very quickly that conclusions to be drawn here are few and far between, not to mention ultimately rather distracting.

Idiosyncratic Resolve

After all, what are we to make of a highly organized and rambling piece like *Researchers, Residents, a Place to Rest*, from 1996, which conflates the last thirty-or-so years (at least) of art practice and structuralist/post-structuralist thinking (take your pick) with the likes of Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining* (don't forget, it was a Stephen King novel first); the little girl Eloise who lives in the Plaza Hotel; a real-life clairvoyant named Voxx consulted by Becker; and radio station K-Earth 1010, broadcast from the artist's home base and home town of Los Angeles? (By the way, it's meaningful to note here that Becker's practice invigorates the potential of the conceptual and material parameters set up in the installation-based work of recent "post-scatter" artists like Ave Gerber, Jason Rhodes and Rirkrit Tiravanija.) Debuted publicly by LA's MOCA curator Paul Schimmel in his portion of the aptly-or-haphazardly-titled 'Universalis' section of last year's Sao Paulo Bienal, and soon to reappear

Researchers, Residents, a Place to Rest is made up of three primary sections, zones which quickly situate us in what I would suggest are parallel universes which have no possibility of converging: places where we simultaneously do and do not inhabit our bodies, the space, and/or the art. The first room passes for an actual reception area, complete with interchangeable plastic signs ("REAL ESTATE AGENT," "CONCIERGE," "WAITING ROOM," "PSYCHIATRIST" etc.) A drawing of a floor plan hangs framed on its wall. Moving through a narrow corridor, we enter what more easily reads as a "gallery" space. In it are two models of fairly elaborate interior spaces, raised slightly on platforms (actually, each of them is resting on a metal twin bed frame) so that we loom somewhat over them, almost Gulliver-like in what first seems to be intended as a physical affirmation of our omniscience, especially given that these constructions are based upon the floor plan hanging in the previous room. Everything changes when we notice that the first room in the first model is a reproduction of that waiting room we just passed through: from then on we enter these concentrated spaces with no clear sense of our position relative either to them or to their surroundings. In other words (unlike, let's say, in the work of Matthew Barney), this has nothing to do with winning.

In these models, Becker has distributed the accoutrements of unknown and identifiable

inhabitants-the "researchers and residents," one is led to believe. The meticulous nature of her diminutive fabrications is not accidental; instead it suggests a "true-to-life" scenario which is always a possibility in such structured, even "scripted" circumstances (this is the part of Becker's practice that makes her very much like a filmmaker). Found here are tiny pages from tiny handwritten journals and typed manuscripts; miniature furnishings, posters, paintings, etc.; and more than the occasional specific popular culture reference.

For example, the first model contains Danny's room-as in Danny Torrance, the son of the psychopathic killer played by Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*-where pages from the boy's notebook lie abandoned on the floor. Like all of the miniature written materials presented here, they are legible: the impact of reading them is not unlike the sensation we have in Kubrick's film when we get a look at Nicholson's deranged handiwork at the typewriter: "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Work and leisure-both Kubrick and Becker make clear-are by no means fixed categories: consider the second model which contains Eloise's room in the Plaza Hotel, a place which houses a privileged child in an exclusive milieu. (Not that Danny Torrance's snowbound residence/playground/hell hotel wasn't upper class when it was open for business, but we know at least early on in the film that he didn't come from that particular class.) Eloise's room is fully a refuge, an escape not from ghosts or a murdering father but from responsibility and labor. It is important to note that this was the case in the original 1950s storybook Eloise character: in this new context Becker turned the tables dramatically as soon as she had the girl write in her notebook such loaded questions (to herself?) as "Do you think people say the stupidest things to get what they want?"

Work and Play

The never-ending discriminations made between work and play in society at large are brought home by Becker most forcefully in this second room by the presence of a few (actual-size) cardboard refrigerator boxes, placed in niches which flank the two models.

Ostensibly standing in for real people (almost like witnesses in terms of their invocation, once again, of human scale, an attempt at anthropomorphizing which reminds me that Becker also considers the "out-of-scale" and functioning desk lamps that illuminate the architectural models to be impassive observers as well), these boxes conjure up the open space of pure imaginative play (of children, who use them to create a fantasy in their own backyard), and the oppressed space of inadequate shelter, homelessness, and an inability to solve genuine problems. That Becker can sustain both readings here (and many found in-between) is my view a real accomplishment, and an indication of what types of ideological, even political readings we might possibly attempt in the final room of the installation. In this third section, we find what Becker calls (in an unpublished artist's statement) "an obsessive workshop, storage, or resource library crammed with abstract clues; evidence of the frustrating process involved in building the installation: piles of project notes (abandoned versions of the project), 'scientific' personality profiles, drawings of floor plans, building facades and mazes..."-all of which adds up to an honest yet tangled acknowledgment of the work's ideological grounding in its material conditions, whether these are found in the paperwork required to pull off a large installation in a major international exhibition, in small cardboard models of the refrigerator cartons, in Danny Torrance's life-size notebook, or in clips from *The Shining*, itself playing on a small television-not to mention the additional sources of information like numerous slides taken during the travels of Becker's grandmother (many of which depict individuals possibly meant to be misread as "residents" in this context), or a video still from the artist's conversation with the clairvoyant named Voxx. (There is even a Xerox machine provided, just in case we want to make copies of any documents to take with us.) It is no accident that the last thing Becker added to her installation was the security badge (complete with photo; almost like a selfportrait) which facilitated her movement around the institution while she worked: she doesn't need it anymore since her job was done when ours started, the moment we walked in the place.

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