

Rosemarie Beck: A Painter's Reality

BY LORRAINE GILLIGAN



ROSEMARIE BECK's apartment is startling for the number of books lining its walls and its air of ordered simplicity, which is in marked contrast to her paintings. Beautiful landscape studies and preparations for her *Orpheus* and *Tempest* series of paintings fill the walls.

Curiously, Beck, who has remained a private person in the midst of an aggressive New York art world, categorizes herself as an abstract painter. How can this literate woman, who has obviously been inspired in her choice of subject matter by the books vying for space in this apartment and who paints recognizable objects, consider herself an abstract painter?

In this seeming contradiction may be the thread running through Beck's work. Her studio contains numerous interpretations of the *Orpheus* theme peopled with contemporary men and women. The story of Orpheus, a Greek myth, is one of a man whose prowess could enchant man and beast. When he played the lyre and sang, no one could resist him. Among those who succumbed to his spell was a maiden, Eurydice. She became his wife only to be tragically lost from him by a viper's sting. Orpheus was heartbroken and decided to go down to the world of Death, seek out Eurydice, and bring her back. On his journey down he enchanted all who were obstacles to finding his beloved. The Gods permitted Orpheus to take Eurydice upon one condition: that he would not look back at her as she followed him, until they had reached the upper world. Thus Orpheus led the way back, longing to see Eurydice. As he stepped into the daylight, he turned to her. It was too soon, and in an instant she was gone, crying farewell. Yet his journey of hope and sorrow remains eternal.

A familiarity with the myth may heighten the emotional impact of Beck's paintings, but she is hardly after an illustration of certain passages of the myth—or any story, for that matter. Her goal is quite different: "In paintings," she comments, "the great rule, if indeed there is any one that is primary, is simply that you always think in the language of painting. Nothing else will do. To the untutored, it's a foreign language that creates reality: the painter's reality. Hence, the more abstract the language, the greater the objective reality. In short, the drama is always in plasticity: every stroke is form-making, not merely form-filling, and, whatever else it may be, it's very specifically an essay on painting."

But Beck is not interested in writing a book about art every time she paints; her goals have always been modest. As a young woman studying the violin at Oberlin College (in Ohio), she found some of her most rewarding moments occurred when she was making quick sketches of people and surroundings. After graduation from Oberlin, Beck moved to Woodstock, New York, where she lived and painted for a number of years. Here, among other painters, she was able to develop a sense of what separated the dedicated artist from the dilettante.

Beck came to New York to study at Robert Motherwell's school. Her reflectiveness has given her a tolerant understanding of those early days: "When I was younger, it was easier to paint. One belonged to a group or coterie where you could stay on the fringe and feel somewhat revolutionary." Her identification with a group of artists was not one of personal relationships but of sharing a sense of dedication about a way of painting and expression.

The "revolutionary Beck" was caught up in the spontaneous assertion of the artist's will on the canvas as embodied in the Abstract Expressionist movement. Her early works from this period show the influence of Abstract Expressionists Phillip Guston and Bradley Walker Tomlin in particular. She says, "I learned to become a painter by studying Cubism, by learning to transform form. I used many of Guston's and Tomlin's strategies." The security of identifying with a group of painters permitted Beck to be influenced and to share in certain trends that allowed a vital stage of development. But identification is a phase to be gone through, not a niche in which to remain: "If you are talented, you imitate and you feel a sense



Above: *Janna*, oil, 1968, 16 x 12. Collection Rus Pinieri.

Opposite page: *Self Portrait*, 1974-75, oil, 60 x 50. Collection the artist. Photos Geoffrey Clements, Staten Island, New York.

Right: *Orpheus and Eurydice V*, 1971, oil, 30 x 42. Collection the artist.

Opposite page: *Orpheus among the Beasts*, 1972, oil, 42 x 50. Collection the artist.



Below: Study for *Orpheus and Eurydice*, 1970, oil, 18 x 24. Courtesy Genesis Galleries, Ltd.



of power that really isn't your own."

By the early '50s Beck discovered that the drama of the period no longer appealed to her: "The magic had gone out of many of my generation, and I had a feeling of repetition in my work. The more I painted in the abstract vein, the more dissatisfied I became. I had a feeling that the abstract subject had less and less substance and that soon it would vanish away." Dating from this period is a large self-portrait in which Beck's features appear to be either crystallizing or disintegrating. The work is a seminal piece, a departure from abstract depiction to a reference of the real world; a walking away from and a timid greeting to, synthesized in one painting.

The choice to no longer embrace Abstract Expressionism and to commit herself to a more realistic mode forced Beck to confront problems that were uniquely her own: As an abstractionist Beck was able to imitate and be influenced by the artists around her. By venturing into Realism, Beck had to rely on her intuition

to answer important questions. What would be her subject matter? How would she compose it? Would she work indoors or out? How much would her imagination enter into a work? And how would she feel about the final results? Would she like her painterly interpretation of the outside world?

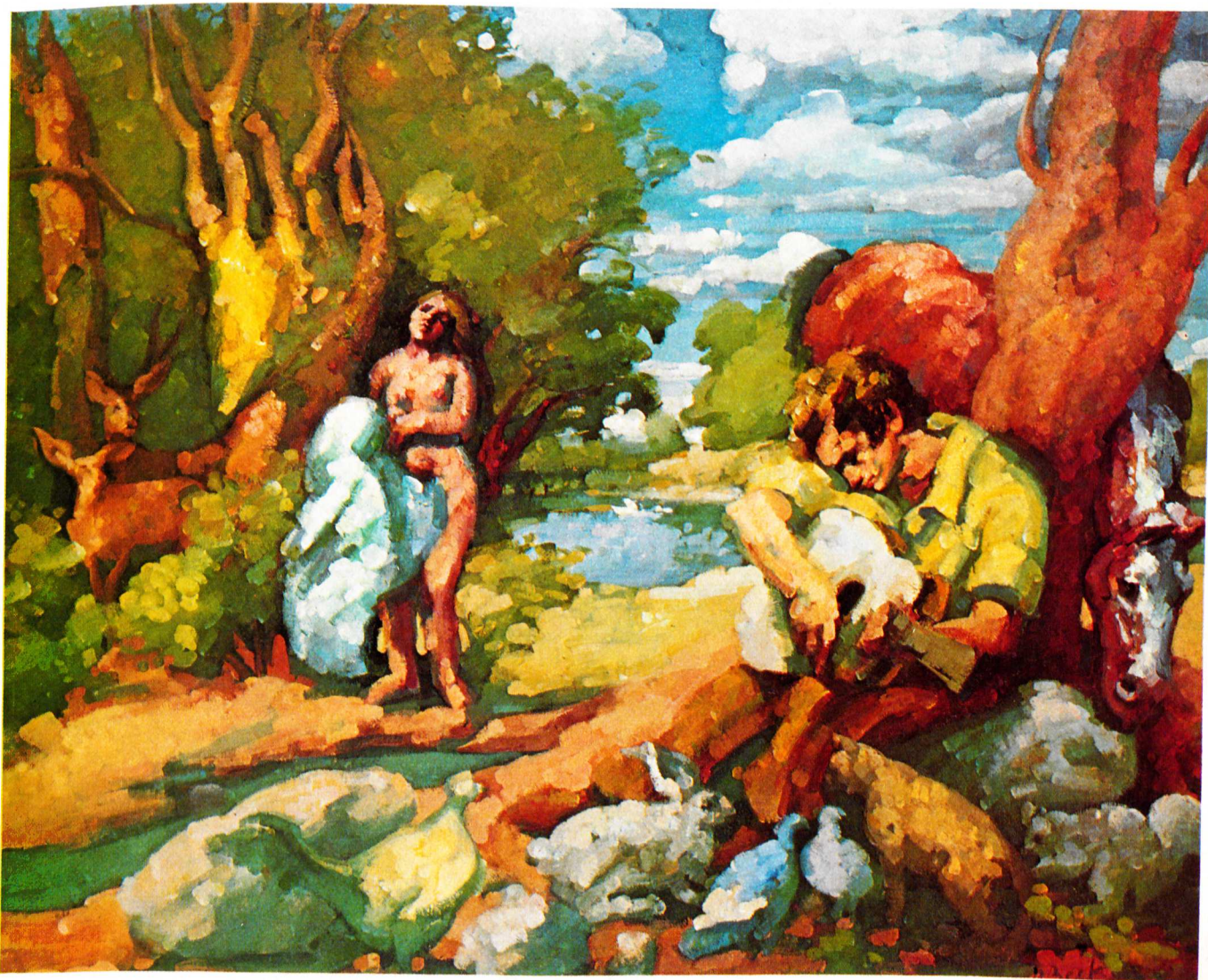
Here was her opportunity to blossom into an artist with her own character, her unique self. Not only was her departure from abstract art an effort to refresh herself, it was an area she was drawn to more than she dared to admit: "Once I put my foot in the stream, I didn't come out. I've been there ever since." Like the stimulating moments taken at Oberlin sketching, her attraction to Realism was a secret part of herself that was finally acknowledged.

Beck, who has taught painting in various institutions throughout the years, found her role as a teacher helpful in supporting her decision to embrace Realism: "I found teaching useful. I couldn't teach people to be

abstract painters, but rather to develop a sensibility to discern what was necessary for them to progress. This helped to reconfirm my own decision. The main thing in my contact with my students was to talk about the issues of painting, to be conscious of its paradoxes, and to allow them to gain a confidence from practice that is guided."

While teaching may have led to an affirmation in the choice of her direction, her circle of artist friends was silent and puzzled. American painting of the '50s is generally characterized as a period of non-representational subject matter, as exemplified by richly painted and gestural works of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning and the more introverted, quiet sensations of Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. Beck's decision to follow a path of realistic portrayal courageously recognized and accepted her need to depart from a style of painting that had become unfulfilling to her.

The advantages and limitations of her new direction became apparent.



Opposite page: *Orpheus and Eurydice*, (large detail) 1975, 30 x 24. Courtesy Genesis Galleries, Ltd. Here the central area of the picture is enlarged to allow for a closer look at Beck's brushwork.

The choice of a theme, whether it be based on women preparing their toilets, two lovers, or more literary choices such as the *Orpheus* or *Tempest* themes, presents its own restrictions. Yet the limitations are liberating. They force the imagination to invent, exploring ways of presenting a theme.

Beck usually starts with an invented composition and uses reality as a reference for clarifying and refining her work. She considers her work to be more conceived than a composite of studies from life. It is important for Beck to "constantly refurbish the imagination and not to constantly use poses directly from life."

Beck's world gives the same priority to people as to still life: "I want to be able to tell myself that this shape is behind this other shape; it has a bottom and sides. I want to be clear about the parts as well as the whole, to separate them, as it were. And I am now convinced that if the anguish of paradox is not somewhere felt—the paradox of a patch of paint being also a hand or an apple—we are still hungry; there is not enough food for the mind."

Looking around Beck's apartment, one cannot help but feel in good company among loving couples: women preparing for an evening of unknown adventure, pensive men and women situated in carefully constructed environments.

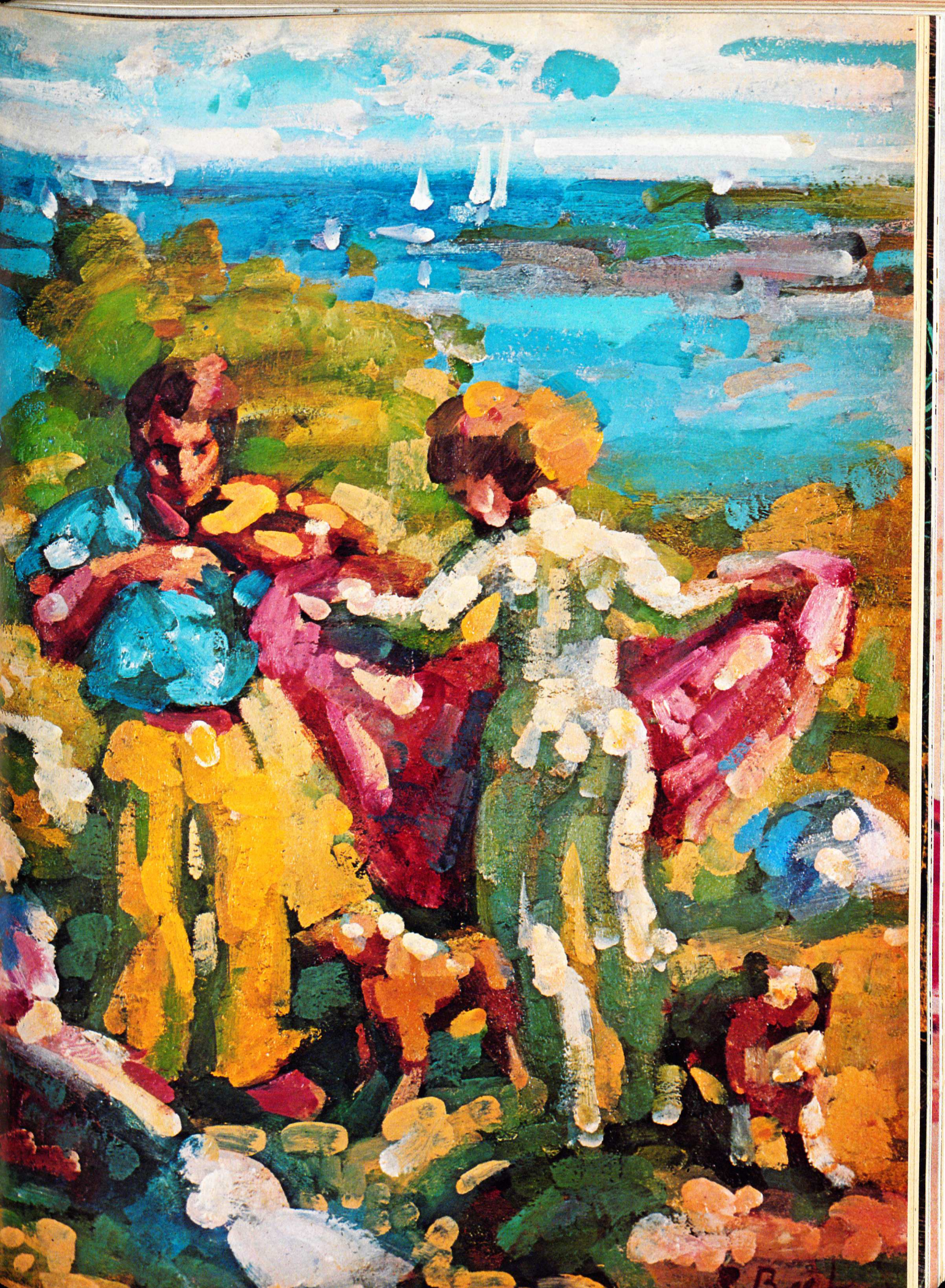
The aloneness sets in when she walks into her studio every morning to work. Her studio is on the floor below her apartment, and although it is small, she feels it as an improvement after years of working in her apartment. The two windows in the room face the dismal gray facade of a popular daily publication. The windows are clouded with the grime of the city, and Beck depends upon a single fluorescent fixture rather than having a studio too strongly lit. A large easel is set up by the window, and, close by, an enamel-topped table serves as a palette. Brushes are neatly arranged atop an unused fireplace, and paints and tools are organized on the shelves lining the wall. The studio space is wide open and free of clutter.

Oil painting's rich, sensuous quality appeals to Beck and is her preference. She works on stretched, sized canvas.

Continued on page 74

Below: *Orpheus and the Furies*, 1973, oil, 30 x 40. Courtesy Genesis Galleries, Ltd.





When the entire picture nears completion, I go back in to add details and shadows with brushwork and pull out highlights with the X-Acto blade. Usually at this point, after several weeks of excitement, I hate to see it all end, so I will occasionally begin at least the drawing for another painting and savor the "fun time" spent in completing the present one.

There is a certain smugness about that blank white surface staring back at me that is scary and exciting at the same time. I have heard people comment (with well-meant intentions) that watercolor is the most difficult medium. It works well for me, and I enjoy it, but I don't think there is an easy medium in any artistic endeavor. It's all hard work, but it can be incredibly rewarding for either amateur or professional. It simply depends on how much you challenge yourself and how far you want to go. •

BECK (from page 49)

her paintings ranging in size from intimate to larger works of five or six feet. Beck's own physical ability to handle a painting determines the maximum size she is willing to use.

"When I have time—usually in my studio—I paint thinly and build up the painting. If I'm out of doors, I usually

paint quickly and apply the paint heavily," she comments. Her palette is arranged according to the needs of a specific painting. There are occasions when she enjoys limiting her palette to certain colors, and she frequently sets up specific limitations and problems within her work.

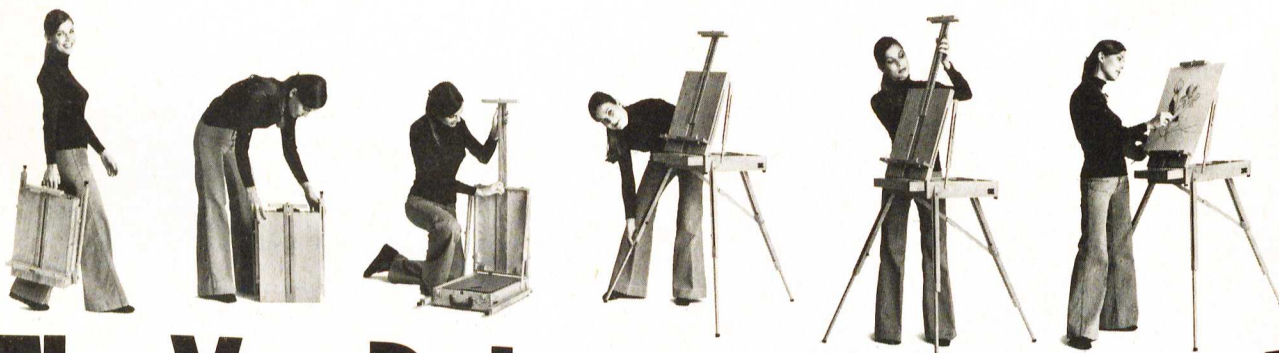
Reflecting on some of her past work, Beck muses: "I was often interested in beautiful formal arrangements—gratuitous activity—complicating the canvas with objects and colors. Now it would be impossible for me to paint this way. My needs and interest have changed."

Beck's primary concern is "carving out pictorial space." Light is a major part of this: "When I'm painting, I'm thinking in terms of form and light, not a face or a lion's head. In an early painting from the '50s, I took lights and the intervals between them and made my face. In more recent work Beck also uses light to illustrate the passage of time. She does many of her paintings indoors, in her studio, but occasionally goes out of doors to paint. Her point of view—and therefore technique—depends on locale. The studio pieces, a blending of actual objects, invented or actual studies or poses, have a sense of constancy. The fluorescent light will glow even if the morning is gloomy. The freedom of

painting indoors is the play of calculations available to the artist: When Beck invents an arrangement, she chooses one source of light to create highlights and shadows.

Painting outdoors leaves Beck with different sensations: "Landscapes are harder to describe—the daylight in the country invades you. Out of doors I am confronted with the discipline of time. Outdoors I've only 20 minutes to capture the light; you get that image, and that is enough; time is important, and the tempo of your activity is changed." In many instances the landscapes are rendered with a freer brushstroke, and the necessity of time makes her use the paint more heavily.

In many of the studio pieces Beck's stroke is repetitious and tight. The strokes are small lozenges of color, fragments of light that Beck uses to build up the composition. The small strokes of color seem to vibrate against each other, and it is apparent that it is not how she mixes colors that counts but rather their conjunction to each other. The vibrations that result from the placement of color are not a question of value relations or rhythm but tension of edges: "I want to create a kind of vibration. It is this positive ache for some principle of structure. Everything for me becomes an edge. It's my obsession. The tension created



The Van Dyke® portable easel: it carries itself well.

Here's a portable easel with the fine qualities you expect in a standard easel.

The Van Dyke portable easel from Eberhard Faber. It features a kiln-dried, solid oak construction for years of solid performance. Plus a variety of special features including a fully adjustable canvas holder, storage drawer, and telescoping

legs that adjust to a variety of working heights. What's more, the Van Dyke portable easel comes with dual brackets for carrying two wet canvases.

Get the easel that acts like your own portable studio. The Van Dyke portable easel: it carries itself well.

Stock No. 7120

EF EBERHARD FABER, INC.
CRESTWOOD, WILKES-BARRE, PA. • 18703
PRODUCTS FOR GRAPHIC COMMUNICATIONS

by two shapes in two directions as they approach each other." Her intention is not to make us tense; she would like to make the painting "still, yet float; a balance, not a flux."

These lozenges of color vary in feeling from painting to painting. They may start out as tight in one painting with a gradual loosening up as the paintings are sequentially examined.

Beck concedes that she seems to go through cycles in terms of her brushstrokes, from a compact one to a more expansive one. Beck takes pleasure in quoting a line by Picasso: "You know, we need one tool to do one thing, and we should limit ourselves to that one tool. In that way the hand trains itself. It becomes supple and skillful, and that single tool brings with it a sense of measure that is reflected harmoniously in everything we do."

The landscapes that are rendered so rapidly have a deceptive feeling to them; is it their feeling of spontaneity? She nods at the paintings surrounding her: "A painting is conscious and inspired in the same breath; luck is rarely involved. If you chase spontaneity, it dies. The moment you can be spontaneous is when you've been working for days and are too tired to think of anything."

Spontaneity is sometimes mistaken

for a false freshness, a gesture without connection. Beck is not concerned with a "one-shot" image. Some paintings are worked on steadily for months, others are abandoned and resumed until she's satisfied. "Too many painters stop too soon," she comments, "before they arrive at the place where it hurts, where it hurts to give up something fresh and spontaneous or beautiful. Hence, at best, their work looks open and uninhibited and may have, in fact, the unwitting aspect of first statements, but rarely does it convince us of its cause. In the imagination it remains thin. The point at which the picture stops is one of the elements—maybe the most important—which determines an artist's style."

Beck's style, her interpretation of form, is a blending of her technical views, her brushstroke, and, to some degree, her background in literature and art history. Not only is her connection with the first generation of the New York school enough historical baggage to carry around in her past, but lessons from the past centuries seem to creep into her work. Beck is very conscious of the works of Piero della Francesca, Cézanne, Braque, Picasso—"classical painters," as she calls them. A trip to Belgium whetted her appetite for Rubens, and she main-

tains enthusiasm for Rembrandt.

Occasionally events are portrayed serially within a work. There are poses reminiscent of 15th century Flemish painters, allusions to the Three Graces, and other mythological and astrological personages appear throughout many of her paintings. She refers to her own paintings and studies in overall compositions much as Matisse did in various works: one draws not only from the past but from the wealth within oneself.

Her interest in literature has enabled her to go from her general subject of lovers to more specific characters. But she considers the possibility of moving away from literary themes for a while. She sighs, "I have chosen an art that does not please. I don't think I've come to something lovable in my art. There may be more respect and empathy for human creatures." •

REECE (from page 57)

artist for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The cover stands up at just the proper angle for an easel and holds small "canvases." The other half, which rests in his right palm (he's a south-paw), holds a few tiny tubes of paint, brushes, and a miniature palette. This shirt-pocket kit has traveled with him

Soft, Smooth and Beautiful REMBRANDT Pastels

Rembrandt Pastels are a portrait and landscape artist's dream. Magnificent color range, smooth, soft perfection. Try it and see!



The Big Name in Artist's Colors

The Morilla Company

43-01 21st Street
Long Island City
New York 11101
5435 W San Fernando Rd
Los Angeles, CA 90039



Introducing READER EXCHANGE

You now have the opportunity to trade, sell or exchange your paintings, pottery, weavings, etc. (Galleries not accepted.)

Say it in a classified ad in American Artist and say it to over 400,000 responsive readers—amateur, professional and commercial artists, art students, teachers and collectors.

See page 90 for rates, etc. Next deadline is September 1st for the November issue.

Other Classified Categories Available for your Needs:	
PRINTS & REPRODUCTIONS	BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES
BUSINESS SUPPLIES	EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES
EXHIBITION OPPORTUNITIES	WANTED TO BUY
UNTITLED PUBLICATIONS	MISCELLANEOUS
SERVICES	LIGHTING CONSULTANTS
CLEANING SUPPLIES	STUDIO ARCHITECTS
WEAVING SUPPLIES	POTTERY & CERAMICS
DO-IT-YOURSELF KITS	ARTISTS WANTED

Write: Murray Dorf, American Artist Classified
1515 Broadway, New York, NY 10036.
Or call Toll-Free 800/223-7524.
In New York State: 212/764-7431.