

FIGURE / GROUND

A Conversation with Gina Beavers

© Gwendolyn Zabicki and *Figure/Ground* Gina Beavers was interviewed by Gwendolyn Zabicki 15th December, 2015.



Gina Beavers is a New York-based artist creating sculptural relief paintings made with acrylic on canvas, pumice and/or glass beads. Beavers has exhibited as a solo artist at Clifton Benevento Gallery, New York; Nudashank, Baltimore; James Fuentes, New York; Fourteen30, Portland, Oregon; Retrospective, Hudson, New York; and Material Art Fair, Mexico City; “Let’s Get Figurative” at Nicelle Beauchene and with Michael Benevento in Los Angeles. Beavers works from photographs, social media and book, reproducing the smallest of details. Her respect for the original image can be said to extend photorealism to parody.

After seeing so many eye makeup tutorials, has that changed the way you paint or the way you do eye makeup?

I’m actually terrible at doing my own makeup. As far as the work though, I just received an LA Times review for my show (Popography at Michael Benevento), saying it was very focused on makeup. I guess I have to own that. Some people who go to my shows and see that body of work might run out because they think, ‘oh it’s makeup; it’s not for me’. Mostly it’s men who think that – when I say ‘some people’. But makeup’s in women’s lives whether you wear it or are acting against it. It’s a presence – it’s not a nothing! When I started with these paintings I was really thinking that this painting is looking at you while it is painting itself. It’s drawing and painting: it has pencils, it has brushes, and it’s trying to make itself appealing to the viewer. It’s about that parallel between a painting and what you expect from it as well as desire and attraction. It’s also interesting because the terms that makeup artists use on social media are painting terms. The way they talk about brushes or pigments sounds like painters talking shop. I also had certain paintings in this show that were much more about costume makeup, that were going away from beauty. That’s the thing that gives me hope. When I go through makeup hashtags on Instagram, there will be ten or twenty beauty eye makeup images and then one that’s painted with horror



makeup. There are women out there doing completely weird things, right next to alluring ones. Personally, I don't usually wear much, if any, makeup. Sometimes I want to look like I made an effort, and I don't even care what kind of effort it is – it could be weird or bad. But if I'm going to a party, I want the host to know I cared enough to try something.

I think that's when makeup gets interesting, when it's a symbol of something. When the wearing of makeup is more of a placeholder than about actual beauty. When it's a signifier of something.

I saw the most amazing costume at a Halloween party ball this year. People really go crazy with their costumes for this event. There was a guy, with white leather pants and a military, sort of Prince Charming, jacket with gold epaulets. He had incredibly short blonde hair and giant fake lashes and a tiara. It was a perfect mix of male and female signifiers. It was so crazy hot and confusing. If there is a negative aspect to makeup, it is the time. The money spent and the time that is spent on makeup could be spent on anything else. It's a burden on women that most men don't have to ever think about.



The first works of yours that I saw were the food paintings. Did you know when you google search “Gina Beavers”, it suggests related artists? Wayne Thiebaud is the first to come up -that's quite an honor. Your paintings are appetizing like Thiebaud's, but also grotesquely funny and lurid. I want to touch them and eat them and I can't stop looking at them.

The food series started much more abstractly. A friend posted a picture on Facebook of short ribs that he was making and there was something abstract about those brown forms on this blue cloth, which appealed to me. I was working with acrylic mediums at the time and building things up. It was around 2010 and I started to notice a lot more food photos in my feed. I will make a painting from any source. I try to be very democratic about it. If it seems interesting, I'll make it and then later decide

if it works in a show. That's really how the food got in there. The fact that the medium is built up so much is done as a way to run interference for myself. If I painted directly from the photograph, I would just paint photo-realistically. But, I was looking for some kind of painting language, and painting around, underneath and in reality, against these built-up forms, became a formal strategy for me. Photographing these paintings while I work on them has also become a part of my process. I really like the way the relief casts a shadow; it makes the piece look almost uncanny, like it's animated. I experience my works a lot through photographs, even though they are meant to be viewed in person. I like that there are two ways to experience my work – one of them is online in a photograph and the other is to be in real space with it. It lives online and in person, in the same two ways as we do.

It's also part of a historical genre. It's vanitas painting.

That's what's interesting to me. People are taking photographs and they are making artistic compositions. Their decisions may be partially based on whatever knowledge they have of still-life paintings, but it may also be based on food advertising. Are they imitating a Dutch master or an advertisement or an advertisement that is influenced by or an imitation of a Dutch master?

There is also a desire to make the food look recognizable, to capture it in a way that is ideal, the ideal

image of a sandwich.

I remember growing up when no one took pictures of their food. It was mostly Japanese tourists who did that, and they were taking pictures of everything. Now it has become completely ubiquitous. It's something that came with the camera and maybe even the influence of Japanese culture. Along with that, is this idea that food is replacing art among a certain class of creative, urban people: talking about food or meals you've had, or visiting the newest restaurant seems more exciting or accessible to many people than going to an art museum.

Thomas Frank wrote an essay about that in Harper's Magazine called, Chicago is the Future. He made a strong case that food culture has supplanted the underground music scene and that it now has all the problems that were once found only in art: fussiness, exclusivity, and an endless search for the authentic. I was just thinking about how music has changed.

When I was a teenager, we would go to a concert to be cool. We would associate ourselves with certain kinds of music or certain songs and now it seems like music is less the center of youth culture. Now it's just one of the many things that's in there. Youth culture seems more diverse: there are smaller and smaller groups who are into idiosyncratic things.

Have you seen Twitch? You can watch other people play video games online and talk to them and interact with them. It's a whole community. You could be a teen boy on a farm in rural Illinois – it doesn't matter where – and be a part of something. Have you found a community through social media?

I feel like I wasn't really showing until I was on Facebook. I started to go to people's shows and people would get in touch with me. Would I have felt as if I was part of the art community without Facebook? Would we be doing this interview without it? When I was working towards a show and in my studio for forty plus hours a week, I could go on Instagram or Facebook and connect with another human after being by myself for so long. It translates to the studio so perfectly – alone without being alone.

When I bought an iPhone in 2010, it really started to influence me. I started to make a lot more work about communicating and work that communicated something. I lost my more abstract way of working and became more narrative. That's definitely the influence of social media. On the other hand, as my use and consumption of social media has grown, my paintings have just also grown – bigger and heavier. I made one for my last show that was 6 x 6 feet and took like five people to move. They are extremely heavy and of the world.

When I saw them online I knew I needed to see them in person, the depth and heft of them. You've started to make paintings with compartments in them, divided sections with white borders. What is that feature called in Instagram?

They're called collage apps, which I think is strange. I think of collage as being more overlapping, more interwoven. These apps place images side by side in different arrangements. That was the second phase of the food pieces, including the collage app look. The hashtag for food porn includes more than 38 million photos. You could spend hours going through there and you're going to find interesting compositions and



funny ones. Sometimes the really bad photos are the ones I love most.

Let's go back. You were born in Athens. Your father worked for the State Department. Yes. He's really smart. Passing the Foreign Service exam is very competitive – you have to know a little bit about everything. It's not a very glamorous job though. He ended up issuing visas, basically an office job. They bring you back to the United States every three or four years between posts because they don't want you to lose your connection to the U.S. or your American identity – you could have been turned into a spy or something. So we went to international schools and I lived in Greece, Malaysia, and Denmark.

Has that travel influenced your work?

Europeans have told me that my work is so American. I don't know if that's me overcompensating because I spent so much time out of the U.S., but I'm strangely fascinated, as much of the world is, by American culture. I've lived in the United States for a long time now, but I still feel a little bit like an outsider. A lot of people feel like they're an outsider, and if you moved to a big city, it's often because you felt alienated where you were. I used to be very shy and the Internet brought me out of my shell. This was good because you can't really participate in the New York art world, if you can't hang out. A big part of being an artist, and one of the most wonderful parts about it, is the sense of community and time you spend at openings. When I was still teaching, the other teachers were so surprised that I had a life. I'd go out on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday night, but they'd go home and watch TV. And, most of these outings are free; sometimes there's even free drinks and food! You go to shows and hang out with people while a lot of the world doesn't have similar social structures.

You went to The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and were awarded your masters degree. How long did you stay in Chicago and when did you leave?

I left right after I graduated in 2000. I love Chicago so much and I loved my situation. Those years right after Grad. school would have been so much easier if I had stayed, worked on my work, had a cheap studio, and then made the move to New York. But I also felt that I was getting really attached to Chicago while my family is all on the east coast. I felt that if I didn't rip off that band-aid, it would be much slower and more painful later. I had a friend from Grad. school who was going to move to New York to live in Vanessa Beecroft's studio, so I was going to live with her there. It was going to be a fun and wonderful thing. However, then two weeks before we were supposed to go, this friend was like, 'sorry you can't stay there because she doesn't know you'. I called my dad crying, and he helped me move. I was so young, 25; I had gone to grad. school when I was way, way young. I wish I'd been older when I went. I moved to New York in June 2000. I hadn't been here very long when September 11th happened. Until about 2006, I worked a bunch of odd jobs. I worked in marketing at an Olive Company, I was a coat check girl and I had a small studio, but I wasn't making much there very often. I was just trying to figure everything out and was pretty desperate. Mixed in there was a heavy dose of trauma. I worked in Tribeca and had seen people jumping out of buildings on September 11th. It was crazy. For weeks afterwards, they had Canal Street blocked off and you had to show a business card to prove that you needed to get down near 'ground zero' to get to work. I'd just be walking down these empty streets by myself, so there was a fair amount of PTSD wrapped up in my first experiences in New York. For five years I had no idea what I was doing. I had a job, but I wasn't making work in any real way. In 2006 I started a real studio and I made a commitment to myself. I told myself, I have five years to work on this and see if I can really make anything of my artistic life. Within five years, about 2011 or 2012, I was having solo shows. When I look back, I just see this girl who was clueless about money and shy. I had so many things working against me, most of all my own baggage. Sometimes I feel like I'm about five years behind. I look at my peers and I am a little bit older, but I needed more time. I had a lot of built in anxiety when I came back to New York after Grad school. 9/11 was traumatic for everybody. It changed me and it changed my work.



How did you support yourself during that time, when you decided to get serious about your work?

I was teaching. From 2003 to 2005, I was taking classes at night to get my masters in education after I had finished my other master degree. This is going to sound really lame, but my husband worked nights in the restaurant industry and I was watching TV and thinking about what I was going to buy or what I was going to wear. I'd married and I was thinking about what I was really good at. How can I distinguish myself? I could try to buy the coolest clothes and be the coolest, best wife. I remember that occurring to me and then I thought: I will never in a million years be in the top ten percent of that. I could never compete even if I put all my resources into that. There will always be more beautiful,

wealthier people out there, things beyond my control. But I thought if I went back into my work in a more serious way, that that was a place where I could contribute. I could be part of the conversation. I was super disciplined. I would leave school and go straight to my studio and work six hours. It was almost like punching in and punching out, butt in chair. I was working 20 to 25 hours a week in my studio while I was teaching. I was a terrible teacher when I first started. I had no control over my classroom, but making art saved me in a way. I could leave the teaching field where I was hopeless and felt like a failure and I'd go to my studio and try to build something. It saved me and made me feel so much better about what I was capable of. Teaching was not satisfying in that way at that point for me.

I've heard something similar from other artists: art was the only thing they could do, so art wasn't a choice for them. Art was the only option.

During my first year teaching, one day at about three o'clock in the afternoon someone asked me, 'Gina, are you limping?' I looked down and I had two different shoes on, a heel and a flat. It was three in the afternoon and I still hadn't realized. Just to give you an idea of how tough that job was and how fried I was. There were two years there when I didn't even go out. I worked late Friday and Saturday nights in my studio and was excessively driven and disciplined about it – to get to the studio and have four hours even if I might not work the entire time. I used to be able to, but that was pre-social media

All of your work feels connected. The trajectory makes sense to me. If you are true to what you want to do and are listening to yourself, it ends up making sense. Sometimes, you need the perspective of a couple of years for it to be visible. That 2012 show taught me that spending one or two years investigating just one thing was worth it. It's really not that long, but before that I would make two or three paintings in a series and then I was done. The 2012 show forced me to slow down and focus.

