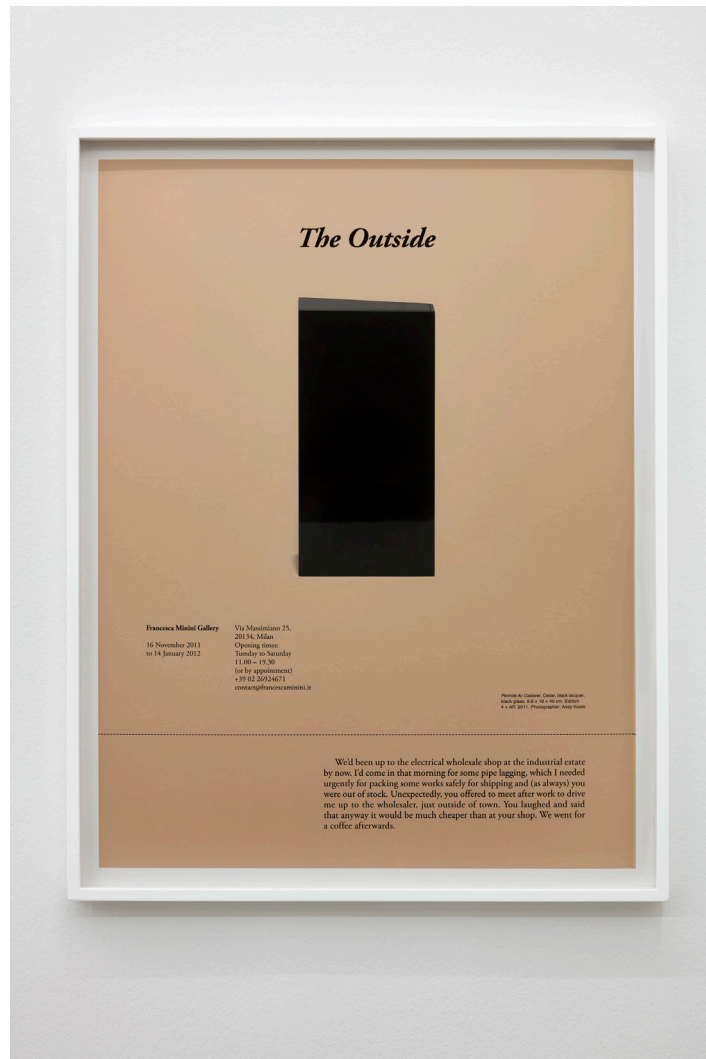


ArtReview

Becky Beasley Lake Erie from the Northwest
Laura Bartlett Gallery, London 12 February -17 April

May 2016
 By Sean Ashton



Foresight, 2015, poster prints, 80 x 60 cm.
 Photo: Andy Keate. Courtesy Laura Bartlett Gallery, London

I admire the elegance of Becky Beasley's sculptures and photographs, but sometimes balk at the supplementary information I'm expected to reconcile with my sensory experience. The backstory, though vital to the work's conception, rarely aids my contemplation. Literary Green (2009), a large photograph in two separately framed parts, in front of which sits a glass-topped steel table, is a case in point. The table's zigzag design echoes the folding partition depicted in the image, an element 'inspired', we are told, by the 'high green folding screen' behind which Bartleby sits in Melville's story 'Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street' (1853). The title and vitreous pall of the work are more than suggestive enough to set our appraisal on a metaphysical rather than merely

sensate footing - is 'literary green' a psychic as well as chromatic state? - but the insistence on the Melville reference as the touchstone of our interpretation arrests these musings. Similarly, with Camera I-V (2014) - a set of five triangular boxes of black-lacquered walnut, with a hole in each, presented on a modernist table- the birdbox-pinhole-camera hybrids suggest a melding of avian and human optics, or the idea of the camera as a place of gestation, only to be gainsaid by the knowledge that their 'exterior dimensions are based on a 1977 Penguin paperback edition of Saul Bellow's existential novel, Dangling Man'.

At their worst, these supplements feel like false intellectual provenance, functioning to divert us from the material essentialism we might otherwise ascribe to Beasley's modernist style. It's a different matter when text is actually integrated in the work. Foresight (2015) is a set of six posters advertising Beasley's past shows, the sculpture Perinde Ac Cadaver (2011, not present materially in this show) used as a monolithic emblem for each, with the venue and date also given. But running beneath this official information is a sequence of vignettes that chronicle the artist falling in love with the owner of a hardware store and their subsequent long-term relationship. The bit that got me was when her father is described as 'flinching with confusion' at her new partner as they arrive at a private view. I rarely feel any emotion when looking at contemporary art, but I was ambushed here. In fact, the realisation that contemporary art has gone post-emotional was a minor epiphany of that day. Art concentrates so much on looking like art, and on being analytically consumable, that its structural self-awareness forestalls emotional investment. Here, on the face of it, was a work in that vein, by someone known for making inscrutable, baffling things. But the personal disclosures ran counter to its 'constructed' nature, the results pulling you two ways. 'A woman of candour presenting herself as an enigma, I jotted down, in an uncharacteristically Jamesian outburst. But then, it was April Fools' Day.

The posters changed how I saw the other pieces, less auratic works in their own right, now, than components of a system of interdependent things. The video A Man Restored A Broken Work (2015) depicts a man doing exactly that with an earlier piece of Beasley's, and the two photographs Build, Night (2012) show its parts laid out for reassembly. But I still didn't need all those pointers. Beasley's approach - her imbrication of an ostensibly modernist autonomy within a narrative register - is compelling enough when the works address each other across her oeuvre rather than via the intermediary of a press release swarming with 'references.