

ARTFORUM

Becky Beasley GALERIA PLAN B | BERLIN

By Martin Herbert

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View of “Becky Beasley,” 2021–22. Photo: Trevor Good.

Becky Beasley’s art is nothing if not autobiographical. In a text accompanying her latest show, “H.S.P. (or Promising Mid-Career Woman),” the British artist alludes to her own depression and drinking. The initials, we’re told, stand for “highly sensitive person,” and the display is described as a “coming-out exhibition.” In 2020, she received a late diagnosis of autism. She also identified herself as progesterone intolerant, and her life experiences—“I was an odd ball, a bit weird, unusual. I was also called unstable, needy, obsessive, demanding, intense, scheming, a monster, a witch”—made belated sense. The primary constituents of “H.S.P.” are photographs, ceramics, and fabric, and that all of these can be classed as “sensitive surfaces” is no accident. Here, Beasley is avowedly owning, even embracing, the capacity to be strongly imprinted.

Ten of the photographs are titled *BACK!*, 2021, with various subtitles. Eight of them, ranged around the walls, repeat a black-and-white image—from a reverse-printed negative—of a tin of black paint. Each image is tinted a different shade taken from the palette of Eric Ravilious’s 1939 painting *The Bedstead*, seen in reproduction elsewhere in the show. The paint is a German brand that Beasley used in Berlin two decades ago to paint sculptures before photographing them. Accordingly, “back” refers to the back of the flipped image, to being back in the city, and to the artist being in some way restored to herself, while also suggesting an insistence on personal space. Reiterating that, the show repeatedly cycles between past and present. Hung in one of three vaguely medical booths with peach-colored curtains, shaped to spell out H, S, and P, the photograph *Me as Andy* (1996), 2021, made when Beasley was twenty, shows her in a Warholian silver wig and staring out at us, trying to escape herself in a retrospectively poignant fashion. Arranged on the floor, meanwhile, are a succession of old wooden stools topped with glass cubes, vitrines containing books (monographs on ceramicist Lucie Rie and artist Valentine Schlegel, *Everyman’s Dictionary of Fictional Characters*, and a reference work on photography) and Beasley’s ceramics. These volumes and objects at once appear to advertise her interests—what touches her and what she has touched, what helps—and mark a kind of distance. They’re closed books, and we don’t know exactly how they’ve affected her.

Such is the double play of “H.S.P.,” which constantly attests to strong subjective experiences, fragments of life, and then suggests that they can only be pointed toward, not shared. The third and final room features *Me & You* (1975–2021), 2021, four more vitrines containing black-and-white photographs of a folded striped shirt and a matchbook, plus real matchbooks and the occasional ceramic bowl. These objects, though, sit on glass-topped tables into which Beasley has inserted, in quarters, an editioned Christopher Williams photograph she’d bought and found too large to frame. Her formal solution is a literalist way of manageably displaying something unwieldy, and the very sense that she’s found an answer and given form to her experience is the emotional tenor of the show. Beasley’s diagnosis didn’t “cure” her. She calls it, in the handout, “possibly one of the strangest of happy endings—not exactly happy and certainly no end,” but some quality of resolution, even restitution, is palpable here.