

# ART

Monthly

## Still Life

By Mark Prince

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Becky Beasley interviewed by Mark Prince

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# Still Life

The artist discusses the importance of doubt in photography, the tension between exteriority and interiority, distance and intimacy, the pictured space and the frame, colour versus tint, and chasing after green.

Becky Beasley interviewed by Mark Prince



*BACK! (B/W), 2021*

**Mark Prince:** The current exhibition looks back to some of your earlier work – there is a photograph taken during your college days of you in a wig, as Andy Warhol, and a new series of prints of a tin of gloss paint, which you have made from a negative you shot in Berlin in the late 2000s. As I understand it, during those years you went from photographing things you had found to things you had made, in order to short-circuit the referentiality and indexicality of photography and found-object sculpture. And yet much of your work since then has been based on eclectic references to other artists and writers, such as William Faulkner, Bernard Malamud, Thomas Bernhard, Robert Walser, Marcel Duchamp and Lawrence Sterne. You have referred to Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, who said, 'I would prefer not to copy,' yet you wrote to me that you never make things up. Is alluding to the work of others a way of escaping yourself, your tastes, your predilections?

**Becky Beasley:** Not at all. Quite the opposite. It has been a search for identity through what I call modeling. *Bartleby* becomes a ghost out of his refusal to copy. He haunts the building. Eventually, he refuses to eat. He dies in prison. Ultimately, *Bartleby's* profile is highly autistic. He is different. He is tolerated. He is experienced more as a piece of furniture than as a man.

I have recently been formally diagnosed as autistic. Social death – not being experienced, and thus not being treated as a person – is one of the more painful aspects of being autistic.

Early on I saw the space of the photographic image as a tomb, a memorial space. This cup [points to a cup on the table] was there once, and here is the photograph to prove it. I revisited the problem of photographic anteriority, or retrospection, in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, in which he reproduced the image of a man on death row, awaiting execution, and wrote: 'By the time you see this photograph, he will be dead.' For me, the future perfect is the tense implicit in my relationship to an image: the time between the taking of the photograph and now, or, for the man in the picture, between the taking of the photograph and his death.

Early on, I was working exclusively in black and white, hand-printing silver prints. The serial photographs in the current show are of a tin of gloss I used to paint structures I made for some of my early photographs. Each print is digitally tinted a different pastel tone, creating a personal rainbow of colours. For quite a few years I used coloured Plexiglas in the framing stage to tone my prints, but at intervals I have hand-tinted images, and more recently I have been working digitally.



What is the difference between tinting a black-and-white photograph green and using a sheet of green Plexiglas, which is placed over the image in the framing?

I began using coloured Plexiglas for framing when I was living in Germany and wanted to introduce colour into my monochrome practice, but without it having anything to do with painting. I didn't want to tone the works or hand-tint them. I like that the Plexiglas was a technical solution, not a gestural one. The space inside the box frame recedes. The prints I have tinted green – for example, the postcards in *Flora, A Life* – have a different effect. It is more about image than space. It creates a darkness, into which you look to see the image, but also an intimacy, a sense of the image having been touched, which I associate with the history of hand-tinting photographs.

The tint emphasises the interior space of the image behind the box of the framing, while also holding you back, resisting the assumption that the pictured space is accessible. It veils the image rather than being invested in it. When you photographed objects underneath a rubber mat in the early 1990s, it produced a similar effect: that something was not available.

For me the distance it creates is, paradoxically, what allows you in. It goes back to the idea of a den. I was an avid den-builder as a child, and I was never very good with shared studio space. I need to be alone to work, and for a long time used

my bedroom. A photograph is always an imaginary space, an inhospitable, uninhabitable space.

The use of coloured Plexiglas also coincided with when I first began to work with a gallery and had the opportunity to have works properly framed. I was asking myself, what is this frame for? What is it doing other than, at the most basic level, protecting this piece of paper? I wanted more from it than that. I had to use the Plexiglas even at the printing stage because it affects the contrast. I would print them at a lower contrast and the Plexiglas would produce the exposure effect I wanted once it had been framed. I wanted a meaningful relation between the work and the frame. I also wanted to work meaningfully with respect to editioning.

What do you see as the meaning of the number of prints in an edition?

I think you have to go back to silver printing, which is a black-and-white, chemical, photographic process. I was mainly only making two prints. I didn't want to deny the reproducibility of the medium – in the Walter Benjamin sense – by making one print. I wanted to avoid the 'aura' and emphasise the reproducibility, so two prints became an interesting number. I had always had a strong connection to Bas Jan Ader's 1971 piece *I'm Too Sad To Tell You*, the film of him crying. For years I hadn't actually seen it: you couldn't simply go online in the 1990s and see the film. I saw it once in an exhibition. But I felt the film captured this emotional event, this personal moment. Then, some years later, I discovered that he'd made it two or three times, and I felt so disappointed.



*Je dors, je travaille (Lucie Rie), 2021*



'H.S.P. (or Promising Mid-career Woman)', 2021, installation view, Plan B Cluj, Berlin

Because you discovered that it was performative?

Yes. Well, it was always that for me, but his having done it twice undid the effect of the single event. Andy Warhol said that sex is nostalgia for sex. It was through that disappointment that so much opened up for me.

You associated the doubling of the photograph, its reproducibility, with artifice?

Not with artifice, but with depleting some expectation around what this sentimental moment might have been about. It separates out: there's one thing here, but there will always be another one there. It has come up with collectors. There are two, why not one?

Would having an edition of three, rather than two, reinforce or weaken your sense of being released from the singularity of the unique art object?

Whether there are two or three prints in an edition is specific to each work. Three gives you a triangle, which creates a space. I'm very interested in three-part equations. I first explored this in the opening room at Spike Island, for the 'Spring Rain' exhibition in 2013 (Reviews *AM364*), with the juxtaposition of the linoleum floor, the life-size photograph of my partner holding a cucumber, and the large-scale life-sized photograph of a gingham tablecloth with a hole in the centre for a parasol.

There's an introduction to George Perec's novel *Things: A Story of the Sixties* in which he quotes from a lecture he gave at a university in the UK. He said he saw *Things* filling the void between four other literary works: Barthes' *Mythologies*, Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* and two others – I forget their names. And the structure of these four works created a space for him to write in. Similarly, over time, I began to understand the space I wanted to work into as a three-part equation.

You often cultivate analogies between spatial narrative and textual narrative. In your previous show here at Plan B, in 2018, you included one of your 'Brocken' sculptures. When I first saw these in London in 2009, I assumed they must be minimalistic objects, then realised from supplementary textual information that they were structured around quotes, the language analogous to the relative proportions of the lengths of wood and the links between them. In your 'Spring Rain' show, the links between the galleries were associated with the tripartite structure of a short story. Here the letters of the initialism HSP – Highly Sensitive Person – are ranged across the space as three pink linen hanging curtains. The attempt to translate textual material into artistic material is a fertile problem for many artists who take literature as their source material.

I see the hermetic core of human beings as their mystery. It is what fundamentally connects and separates us. Art is one way of breaching this. Being autistic makes me extremely sensitive to other people, and I experience this actively in each social decision I make: both the risk and the opportunity of the other.





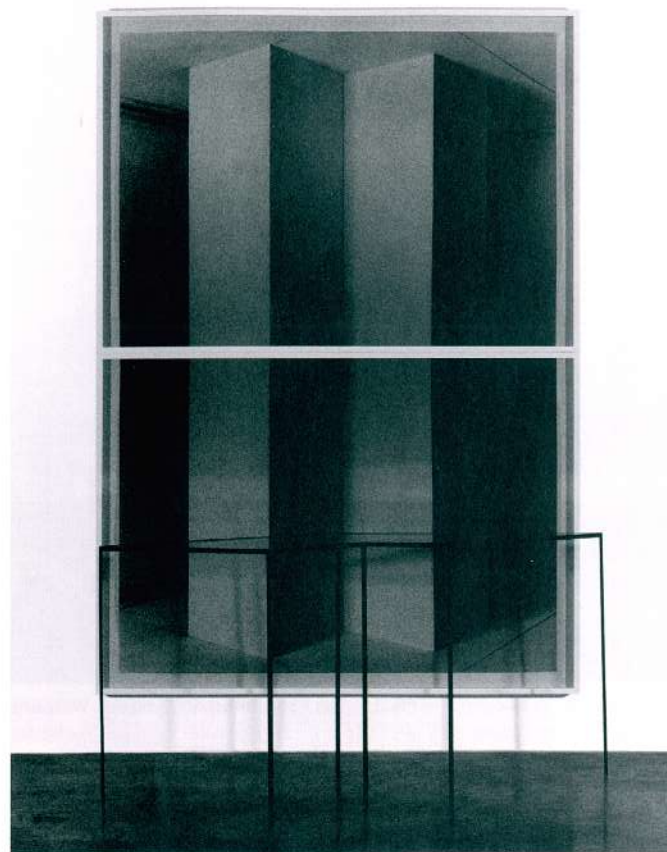
*Me as Andy (1996), 2021*

The three-part structure is literary. It is literally the stuff of fairy tales, but also the Christian Trinity, so I'm not inventing. The woodworks were based on the lengths of my ageing dad's arm span and joints. The title, 'Brocken', can be translated from the German to mean 'literary fragments'.

These days, since my autism diagnosis, I prefer the term 'model' to 'reference'. The models often come from literature, but also from works by other artists, Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, for example. It's a question of what I can learn for my practice by going in close to a thing over time. The first time I visited Casa Mollino in Turin I felt I could work out some things with respect to colour and photography by engaging with the interior. But the question of colour first came up when I began to use coloured Plexiglas for framing.

Secret spaces appear repeatedly in your work. *Étant donnés* is a semi-illusionistic space, visible only voyeuristically through two peepholes. Duchamp worked on it secretly over the final two decades of his life. Casa Mollino is an interior which Carlo Mollino extravagantly decorated as an apartment he would retire to in an afterlife he imagined for himself, although he never actually lived in it. Do you make a connection between the hermeticism of the spaces represented in the images and the fact that they show objects you have made yourself?

One way of looking at it is that my career is the sum of what I have managed to do on my own. At the Royal College I realised I could shoot, process, contact and print black-and-white film all in a day, without having to speak to another human being. The reality is that



*Literary Green, 2009*

there are always practical limitations on what you can do. But more generally I see the hermetic core of human beings as their mystery. It is what fundamentally connects and separates us. Art is one way of breaching this. Being autistic makes me extremely sensitive to other people, and I experience this actively in each social decision I make: both the risk and the opportunity of the other.

**In your 2016 show at Laura Bartlett Gallery there was a photograph of a shopfront in Athens which faced a visitor on entering the gallery. It provided a jolt of contrast, an escape valve out of the exhibition's self-enclosure. Although the rest of the installation alluded to works of yours and other artists, there was nothing else visible which you hadn't made yourself.**

I have introduced more documentary photographs at intervals over the years. *Fig Tree (Amwell Street)* and *Sedum Joy* are other examples. Maybe they are like rabbit holes. The shopfront photograph is titled *The Left Door*. I flipped the image, so the door handle appears in reverse. Benjamin once wrote – I'm paraphrasing – 'all the best moves are made left-handed'.

**The Athens picture was more than a decade old when you chose to exhibit it, and in the current exhibition you have printed from negatives you shot in the mid 1990s and the late 2000s. What prompts you to return to photographs so long after they were taken?**

I have always understood each negative as a raw ingredient, not necessarily for the time it was shot. A language is present, but it may be for the future. I have often worked with parts of negatives or print

With other art-making processes you start with nothing and add, but with photographs everything is already in the frame. Yet it is so far away, which allows you to look at the thing, think about it, and go back to it.

offcuts in this way. The works for my two-person show with Michael Dean, 'Our Blindsides', were all made from offcuts from my 'Curtains' trilogy. The works in the current show have been produced in the past year, subsequent to my being formally diagnosed autistic. I can now see my obsession with the relation between the interior and the outside in that light. Once I began to have the opportunity to exhibit regularly, from around the age of 30, I understood that my self-presentation through art was being well-received by other people, and that the work had found a place in the world. But outside of art, you learn from a very early age, as an autistic female, that it is not publicly acceptable to reveal your interior reality, so you learn to mask. I learned that it was not OK to be myself. Mainstream society is oppressive for many people. Now I'm 46 and slowly processing my life and, due to my career opportunities, I have had the privilege to look back over the shows that I made. The public space I have been given was so vital because the private was so difficult and disempowering.

**In the title of this show, you use the phrase 'mid-career woman', and over the past few years your exhibitions have become increasingly self-referential. The last exhibition here was a mini-retrospective.**

I was parodying the recent film, *Promising Young Woman*. I came to understand that I was mid-career, and I communicated with a few colleagues about what this was and what it meant and why it felt odd. Now I know. I did my research. The period you are referring to, from around 2014 to 2018, when I was working curatorially with existing works from the previous decade, was a period of breakdown, miscarriage, pregnancy, healthcare negligence. I made the decision to revisit works I had made over the previous decade to learn about where I had been and where I wanted to go. I was thinking archivally, curating works which came from their own distinct larger projects around themes I wanted to explore. 'Spring Rain', for example, was about the carnival of adult life. For the last show here in Berlin, 'Depressive Alcoholic Mother' in 2018, the lino floor was new, while the rest was curated by Mihnea Mircan from my existing works. The current show is all new work.

**And yet the objects in vitrines, arranged on stools, are composed out of mostly found material – old editions of novels, and matchbooks from hotels and restaurants. They have the look of keepsakes or souvenirs, traces of a personal past, although the composite arrangements they form under the glass have the effect of transforming them into new wholes. Previously, when book-like objects have appeared in your installations, they have been wooden sculptures in the dimensions of particular editions, but never the books themselves. Do the vitrines distance the foundness of the objects in the way that the tinted Plexiglas has distanced the photographs?**

This is the first time I have incorporated found objects and included the ceramics I started making in 2019. Certainly my relation to images is embodied by the effect of the glass boxes on the objects assembled inside. The colour of the Plexiglas, from which the vitrines are made, is called 'Glass Effect'. It's slightly greenish, optically affecting the colour of the objects they contain. There is an 'ish-ness' about the chromatic relation between the objects. It's like putting what you thought was white paper next to white paper and finding that one looks yellow. The colours are very gentle, but I would like to think that some strong content is being filtered through this soft, whimsical palette.

**Each of the vitrines creates a mini-narrative by triggering a process of association among the elements it contains. This is a persistent dynamic in your work, by which disparate references to remote content are corralled together, the arbitrariness of the conjunctions overcome by the intensity of the focus you bring to them. In 'Spring Rain' there was the floorplan of Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, figured as a linoleum floor design, in relation to a reference to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* – in the photographs of the curly cucumbers – and to the Malamud story in the show's title.**

Isn't this bringing of intensity to arbitrary conjunctions what we call life? 'Spring Rain' was an investigation into what it means to be an adult. Titles are like headlines. They hit the world first. I made the titles of the current show, 'Highly Sensitive Person', and the previous one, 'Depressive Alcoholic Mother', as aquajet-cut words in a circle on a linoleum floor, which you encounter as you enter the gallery foyer. The titular figure becomes literally ground.

**And the personal becomes the formal. I associate this with your effort to render photographic space less indexical by limiting its contents to objects you have made specifically for it. It works against the evidential power of the photograph, which confirms that 'this was here'.**

Doubt has always been an important register to me. Doubting Thomas was the apostle who interested me the most as a child. With my early photographs there was always the question, or doubt, as to the prior existence of the things which appeared in the photographs. I think a lot of them felt more like drawings, which are not evidential at all, except for the process which made them. The evidential quality was diminished by the process. I was pushing against the limits of photography by printing too large with an average enlarger for the medium-format negatives I was using. The effect was to take out some of the tightness of the grain detail, weakening a sense of realism in the image, and raising the question of what is it that we're looking at.



In the current exhibition, the letters HSP are presented in the form of pink linen curtains, hung on shaped frames, which would only register as the letters on which they are based if viewed from the ceiling or higher. They do not speak the language they imply to a viewer.

Unless you're a drone or a fly, the shapes are only made explicit on the floor plan. The letters are experienced rather as a series of intimate spaces. As someone brought up Catholic, and still traumatised by confessionals, as I finished the show I began to think about how it reflects our attempts to make our own spaces, spaces we can live in, out of the experience we bring with us out of the past. Jean-Luc Godard said, '*L'adulte n'existe pas*' – there is no such thing as the adult, just the boy and the old man.

**Did sculpture in your work come out of photography, in the sense that it began as something to be photographed then took on a life of its own?**

Yes. Still life was the genre I loved most when I was young. At a certain point I made the decision to create my own objects, free from the commotion of nostalgia and cultural baggage. My first sculpture was a floor-based print-pile work called *Stumbling Block*. I moved to the floor and set something out there, unmoored. I had always loved and collected objects, and then I made the decision to design my own things, because I also always had an interest in design.

And your installations have a distinctive identity as design – the lino floors with their formalistic shapes, and the minimalistic objects, which are both sculptures in the gallery and what the photographs represent – and you have referenced the history of modern design, from the Casa Mollino to your collaboration in the current exhibition with Christopher Williams, an artist very much concerned with the history of design as it intersects with art.

With respect to interior design, I have always had a love affair with foyers. I remember going to Oxford for a Jannis Kounellis show, where he was giving a talk, and he spoke about how, in Greek homes, the atrium was where you would lay your dead for mourning, but also hang up your coat and hat. The foyer space at Plan B is this type of entry space.

**You create narratives by negotiating the space, as well as by establishing relations between the works in the space.**

For my 2017 exhibition 'A Gentle Man' in New York I mapped Broadway in linoleum on the floors through all five rooms of the gallery. I imagined a man walking up Broadway, a hybrid of my dad and Bernard Malamud. There was a big bay window facing onto Washington Square at the front of the gallery, but no other windows in the other five rooms. As I began to work with the floorplans, I realised I didn't need to use any interior lighting. The front space had daylight, which filtered through to the second room just behind it. I eliminated the third space by creating a corridor with curtains on either side – a palisades – and in the back spaces there were larger video projections, which created their own light.

Much of your work, including this current show, has an autobiographical strain running in parallel with a more objective allusiveness to objects in the cultural field, available to us all. How do you balance the personal and cultural, or are they finally the same thing? You don't seem to make any distinction between the casts you make of twigs your father gathered as windfall after a storm and the lines you quote from Glenn Gould or Thomas Bernhard.

I came to Glenn Gould through Thomas Bernhard, not through music. And I have been making work in relation to my father since I was 17. These are all figures to me. I understand now that my pursuit of all these white males, in art and literature, is related to trying to understand my relationship to him. I think I recognise different aspects of my father in all these men. Edward Hopper's last painting, *Two Comedians* from 1966 – of two clown figures, male and female, standing on a stage – has always been key for me. I saw the figure of my father in this way: this lanky, sensitive person who was my formative man. And when I visited the Casa Mollino, I thought a lot about Mollino's strange night activities, his monastic bedroom, his love of secrecy. I saw these as ways of maintaining one's opacity, which brought me back to colour. What was it for and what did it mean to me? From there I went on to read Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*, which led to my goldish and silverish photographic works. A personal experience takes me out into the culture.

In that book, Wittgenstein worried away at a distinction between green as potentially transparent, as in the form of green glass, and white as innately opaque, like milk. You can't think of a transparent white, he points out. Green has been a touchstone, from the Plexiglas frames to your tinting of your black-and-white photographs of your parents' garden green, in 2014, and giving them away as postcards. It's like looking at nature or art underwater, as if the pressure has been altered.

The green is an expression of intimate distance. My first relation to photography was a sense of its being both intimate and distant.

**Which sounds like a paradox.**

I think it was Ian Jeffrey who applied the word promiscuous to photography. With other art-making processes you start with nothing and add, but with photographs everything is already in the frame. Yet it is so far away, which allows you to look at the thing, think about it, and go back to it. I have been chasing green for a long time now. *Literary Green* is the work which perhaps best expresses my quest. I like green and I like when it shows up. I recently asked the novelist Tom McCarthy what he made of the words 'literary green' and he quoted a line from Andrew Marvell's poem *The Garden*: 'To a green thought in a green shade.'

Becky Beasley is an artist whose 'H. S. P. (or Promising Mid-Career Woman)' was at Plan B in Berlin until 5 February.

Mark Prince is an artist and critic based in Berlin.