

Curatorial Statement

Sarah Howard, Curator of Public Art and Social Practice, USF Institute for Research in Art

RICHARD BECKMAN: Outside the Curve of Reason is a selection of sculptures, drawings and related materials by Richard Beckman (1957-2004), a beloved artist, professor, colleague and friend who remains an influential presence in the USF and Tampa Bay arts communities. The works featured in the exhibition are drawn from private and institutional collections in and around the Tampa Bay region.

I met Richard when I was a graduate student in the USF College of Fine Arts in 1997. He was my professor and mentor. We remained friends and colleagues after I graduated with my master's degree in 2000. In 2004, Richard took his own life, leaving a hollow absence in our lives and community. Richard's sculptures, crafted with controlled structure and precision into universally accessible geometric forms, embody the struggle between order and chaos present within the artist himself. His pursuit to resolve this constant tension is reflected in the significance of his artistic impact in our community, and I am honored to present this exhibition at USFCAM.

Richard's work was an ongoing quest to contain and mark the tension "that exists as the anxiety between dichotomies—between chaos and order, dark and light, mind and body, head and heart."¹ Referencing and expressing this tension, his human scale sculptural forms are poised for movement, caught in a state of suspension between inhale and exhale. Dilated, constricted and filled with potential, the sculptures respond and engage with each other, and with the viewer, in a dialogue, struggle and synthesis of the mind-body duality. Synthesizing this duality in both form and construction, Richard adeptly engineered rigid industrial materials such as steel, wood, resin and terrazzo, often using repetitive patterns to form elegant and seductive curvilinear shapes. These forms entice and engage the viewer in their relational scale, providing as points of entry orifices that offer access to his rigid materials and construction techniques.

The occasion of this exhibition provides a unique opportunity to reassemble Richard's corporeal sculptures in context with archived material from family and friends. A video of his early sculptures being performed at Raw Space Gallery in New Mexico is on view with sketches, drawings, journal spreads and maquettes for sculptures and public projects. This material allows an intimate glimpse into Richard's exploration and investigation of the grid, cube, circle, sphere, and spiral, which he referenced throughout his artistic career. Vessels appear as organ-like functional forms, which do not contain but remain porous and open, referencing the body and what may pass through it, inside and out.

Richard often collaborated with other artists, incorporating their investigation of form, and inviting it to intertwine with and inform

his own. *The Truth About Beauty* is a series of drawings created collaboratively with sculptor Kay Hwang in 2000 at the invitation of Cathy Byrd, then guest curator at Agnes Scott College's Dalton Gallery. The abstract drawings signal the beginning of a transition to Richard's later work, a release of the controlled, stylized and geometric forms into an increasingly more chaotic, spontaneous, free-form approach to making. Richard embraced this new instinctive approach with childlike playfulness, describing it as "a space somewhere between repulsion and beauty, between reeling back and falling in."² Honing a technique he called weld splatter, Richard explored a variety of new shapes, dripping tendrils and bulbous growths, free from the constraints and limitations associated with his previous mold-making, casting and patterning modes of production. Richard would continue this intuitive exploration of his constant struggle and tension until his death.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the personal insight, reflections, and research materials offered by Colleen Beckman, Richard's widow, and so many other friends, collectors and colleagues I connected with who knew Richard professionally and personally. Kathy Gibson, local arts advisor and curator, originally generated the impetus for the show, and I feel privileged to have been able to pursue and expand her initial concept for the exhibition. Curator and writer Cathy Byrd, who contributed a thoughtful and insightful essay for this brochure, provided curatorial knowledge and experience from previous projects with Richard; the title of the exhibition, *Outside the Curve of Reason*, derives from her earlier review of his work. Rudolfo Carrillo, a former student of Richard's at the University of New Mexico, contributed his thoughts and memories of Richard in a republished blog post, *Stars Formed from Steel*.

I would like to thank the generous boards and staffs of the lending institutions, as well as the corporate and private collectors, for their appreciation and dedication to Richard and his work. I am honored with the opportunity to curate this show, and I extend my deepest gratitude to all of my colleagues at USFCAM for their dedication and efforts, specifically Margaret Miller, Alexa Favata, Noel Smith and Shannon Annis for their invaluable guidance, expertise, and logistical support in organizing this exhibition.

I will always value the memories, conversations and discoveries stimulated by the research for this exhibition, and the opportunity to share the reflections that were generated while revisiting Richard Beckman's work as an artist, professor and friend whose presence is continually missed.

1. Richard Beckman, artist statement, undated
2. Richard Beckman, artist statement, 2000

Foreword + Acknowledgements

Margaret Miller, Director, USF Institute for Research in Art

The USF Contemporary Art Museum's exhibition program is dedicated to presenting exhibitions that offer critical perspectives on current art practice. Educational programs, including catalogues and symposia, are designed to provide context and illuminate issues and ideas addressed by artists.

Sarah Howard, Curator of Public Art and Social Practice, curated the exhibition *RICHARD BECKMAN: Outside the Curve of Reason*. Howard was a student of Beckman's and then a colleague; she engaged in a dialogue with him about his life and practice over a number of years. In addition to the survey exhibition, she has arranged for the installation and dedication on the USF Tampa campus of Beckman's welded steel mesh sculpture produced in 1990, *Half the Truth*. It is a gift to the USF collection from Richard Beckman's family.

Richard Beckman came to Tampa from New Mexico in 1991 and served on the School of Art and Art History faculty until 2004, when he died at the age of 47. He received his bachelor's degree in fine arts from the University of Oregon and his master's from the University of New Mexico. Beckman was devoted to his teaching and to his practice and was able to show widely including exhibitions in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. He received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1995 and two State of Florida Individual Artist Fellowships.

Beckman's early work was often characterized as following in the tradition of Minimalism. Minimalist sculptures of the 1960s focused on the phenomenological relationship between the object, the space and the viewer's body in relation to the work. This exhibition locates the performative and even playful nature of Beckman's Post-Minimal sculptural practice. Although Beckman continued to produce reductive shapes and used "hard" materials, his sculptures offered associative readings, and their placement in a given space produced a conversational relationship between viewer and object. Beckman often offered multiple possibilities for installation, allowing the sculptures to become metaphors for human behavior and discourse.

Sarah Howard is acknowledged and thanked for her research and insight into Richard Beckman's life and practice. She has tracked down works in local collections and consulted with colleagues, friends and family to organize the exhibition. The USF Contemporary Art Museum's staff, under the able leadership of Deputy Director Alexa Favata, has assisted with the organization and presentation of the exhibition. Shannon Annis arranged for the loans and organized transportation for the artworks. Don Fuller designed the announcement, banner and brochure; Will Lytch photographed the works for the publication. Tony Palms, Peter Foe, Vincent Kral and Eric Jonas consulted with Sarah



Kisser, 1992–95. Collection of Neiman Marcus (photo: Will Lytch/Graphicstudio)



Sieve of Logic, 1995 (photo: Will Lytch/Graphicstudio)

Howard to design and prepare the installation, and were assisted by Ville Mehtonen, Andrea Tamborello and Ian Foe. Taylor Pilote is recognized for his consultation and restoration advice for sculptures in the exhibition. I thank Sarah Howard, Rudolfo Carrillo and Cathy Byrd for their texts.

The generosity of lenders to the exhibition is most appreciated. Colleen Beckman assisted with research and loan of drawings, maquettes, process materials and an early video of Richard Beckman's performance at Raw Space in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Institutional and corporate lenders include: Polk Museum of Art, Tampa Museum of Art, Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art and Neiman Marcus. In addition, many of Beckman's friends loaned drawings, maquettes and sculptures including Cathy Byrd, Irineo Cabrerros, Mark Naugle, Cat Thompson and Julie Zenz.

Peter Foe, Curator of Collections, worked with Steve Lafferty from USF's Facilities and Planning to determine the location and installation of the sculpture. *Half the Truth*, that is now part of the permanent collection of USF.

This exhibition will serve as a testimonial to the lasting potency, richness and joy we can share in viewing Richard Beckman's sculptures.

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Outside the Curve of Reason

Cathy Byrd, Director/Producer, Fresh Art International

In his search for shapes that lie outside the curve of reason, the artist offers seductive alternatives to prototypical notions of how we define space.¹

Written for a *Sculpture* magazine review in 2000, my observation about Richard Beckman's artistic practice continues to resonate. This 2014 exhibition at the University of South Florida conveys the intelligence of an artist who struggled against and embraced the challenge of transcending self-conscious limitations. Before his death in 2004, Beckman had built an impressive portfolio. His writing, drawings, maquettes, and sculptures represent a creative mind that never stopped exploring the tensions between instinct and intellect. Retrospectively, this is our opportunity to consider the significance of his quest.

In the beginning, Beckman expressed his lyric sensibilities with words, publishing his first poems at the age of 21. The organic minimalism of artists Martin Puryear, Mark Lere, and Peter Shelton influenced Beckman's approach to industrial materials and the fabrication process, most notable in his early years of artmaking. Soon invited by various curators to exhibit his work, he found his own voice, juxtaposing his evocative aluminum, steel, and cement sculptures in ways that allowed them to talk to each other and engage with viewers. For his 1987 solo exhibition at Raw Space Gallery, Albuquerque, Beckman staged an experimental interactive performance to test the dynamic potential of his relational theory. In a video document of the event, pulsing spotlights sharpen the silhouettes of dancers as they animate his figural metallic installation. An *Artspace* review described how the live sound effects merged with a prerecorded audio recording of the same moving forms to create a stunning symphonic soundscape.²

The energy in Beckman's subsequent work continued to push against what one writer referred to as "the blunt indifference of the materials."³ Both the rounded wooden shape of *Domino: We All Fall Down* (1994-95) and the epoxy resin swirl of *Under the Pink* (2000), for example, suggest pending trajectories. The undulating figure of *Chantella* (2000) intimates the curves of a perfect woman. Spheres, tubes, spirals and cored forms convey the sensual force of male/female, dilation/contraction, and inside/outside in works such as *Sleeve of Logic* (1995) and *Kisser* (1992-99). Deciphering the metaphors in these well-wrought constructs is a sensory activity for the intellect.

In 1995, the artist wrote about his perspective on the formal sensibilities of the beautifully crafted sculptures that had earned him a 1995 National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artists Fellowship: "My work is on a human-scale so that the form creates an empathy with the viewer's own body." Beckman expressed his drive to deepen this rapport by achieving a "sense of dialogue and



Where'd My Bunny Go?, 2002

synthesis," while noting that "the closest it comes to attaining this is in its longing."⁴

His oeuvre is clearly Cartesian—a self-reflective, object-based testament to our dual nature. Anyone encountering this artist's work would recognize the inherent oppositions. Critics pronounced the sculptures "elegant and awkward,"⁵ were struck by how his familiar objects resisted descriptions,⁶ and defined the spatial dynamic of his forms as "organic geometry."⁷ Beckman's resolve to control the space between open/closed; ordered/chaotic; active/passive; figurative/abstract; and sensual/conceptual is evident in how he constructed what he called the "skeletons and skins" of his exaggerated forms. At the same time, a more restrained quest for spiritual and physical balance comes to light in the pierced metal pod of *Ombodhi* (1999), and in the undulating positive/negative form he created in *Song of Kabir* (ca. 2000).

These dialectics grounded Beckman's artmaking from beginning to end. His journals and artist statements returned again and again to the mind/body split and his desire to "bridge and obscure" that fissure. While writing about his art's psychological "need to eat its own shadow," the sculptor continued to fulfill a need to produce objects. Ever obsessed with the circle, he observed, "...I have always thought in the way a circle must be predestined to think and that is: to make whole, to complete things, and attempt to make

Domino: We All Fall Down, 1994-95



order by putting a ring around something and thus be able to say I know this thing now contained...My art, like my own psyche, has apparently needed to find containers..."⁸

"The Truth About Beauty," a 2000 exhibition at Agnes Scott College's Dalton Gallery, juxtaposed Beckman's corpulent *Chantella* and other sensual curvilinear forms with *Generation*, a visceral wall installation by artist Kay Hwang. Invited to engage in a drawing dialogue, the two artists' individual desires to control each composition gave way to a shared preoccupation with imagining the sinuous canals and chambers of an inner body and the transformative rupture of birth.⁹

In the years that followed their collaborative exercise, Beckman started to compose objects from weld splatter, comparing the process to building drip castles at the beach. He confessed a desire to bring into light all that had been concealed in the carefully built forms for which he was known. "My new work," he wrote, "spills forth as if squirted out from the pressure of having been held hostage...is freeform, spontaneous, playful." While his previous sculptures were scaled to the viewer's sense of their external body, deceptively playful new works such as *Where'd My Bunny Go?* (2002) entered an intimate space that Beckman defined as "an interior terrain—a fluid landscape" where he intended to explore an internal psyche.¹⁰

Remarkable in Beckman's practice was how adeptly he translated his concerns into repeating, yet discrete figurations. The philosophical questions he posed are legible in his nuanced work. Still, we are left wanting more, longing for answers. How did this sculptor hope to resolve the paradox that still haunts his oeuvre? What did he discover when he released the contents of his conflicted vessels?

All we can know for certain is that by venturing beyond the curve of reason in his creative practice, Richard Beckman showed us how we might dare to push past our own perceived limits.

1. Cathy Byrd, *Sculpture*, 2000
2. Jason Knapp, *Artspace*, 1988
3. Kathryn Shields, *Art in America*, 1991
4. Richard Beckman, artist statement, 1995
5. *Los Angeles Times*, 1989
6. Jason Knapp, *Artspace*, 1987
7. Kathryn Shields, *Art in America*, 1991
8. Richard Beckman, "The Ouroboros Comes Wagging Its Tail," not dated
9. "The Truth About Beauty," Dalton Gallery, Agnes Scott College, Decatur, Georgia, 2000
10. Richard Beckman, artist statement, 2002

A globally recognized independent art curator and critical writer, Cathy Byrd directs and produces *Fresh Art International*, an online media platform designed to inform and inspire the world's contemporary cultural producers. *Fresh Talk*, Byrd's signature audio podcast series, features conversations about creativity in the 21st century.

Stars Formed from Steel

Rudolfo Carrillo

There is a collection of objects at the place where Girard, Monte Vista and Central intersect. Methinks it's called Triangle Park. It's not a park in the conventional sense, vasty green, filled with automatic sprinklers or all that.

At the edge of this urban array, there's a neon-lit tower spanning Central Avenue. That comparatively rough concrete form is festooned with colors of all sorts. In its span across the wide street, this bridge of sorts announces the entrance to the Nob Hill District in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

There are some benches made up to look inviting, a police substation on the east side of the triangular area, and a few forlorn trees, too.

Nearby, the bus stops frequently.

For a long time, now a long time ago, there was a Chevron station and an eponymous bar at the confluence. I only went into the booze joint one time, but I used to use the air hose at the gasoline dispensary almost daily, to fill up the tires on my ride.

In case you want to know, the car I drove was a 1974 Peugeot. It was the same model driven by the chairman of the art department where I studied, except mine was a station wagon, sables?

It was a classic alright, but I let some deliriously jazzed out music student paint the whole damn thing with paisleys, so it really looked like hell, like a bunch of hippies were responsible for the decline of European automotive power.

But that is a different story altogether. The stuff with the Peugeot was happening around the same time as some of the events in this narrative, so I thought I'd throw it in for sauce. I'll tell about that art-damaged junker some other time.

On the west side of the park, there is a bronze sculpture. Richard Beckman made the sculpture. It is called *Star*. I am not going to post a picture of Beckman's construction because I want you to come over here, out where the desert remains, to take a look at Beckman's star. When you can.

Beckman studied and taught at the University of New Mexico Department of Art and Art History when I was an undergraduate.

In his plain-spoken manner, Beckman was the real deal, authentic in a complex world of artists, those who wanted to be artists, and the adroit charlatans who sometimes tagged along for fun.

While at UNM, Beckman made formidable metal structures that seemed almost to have been engineered, so precise were they in their

handling of materials and construction: clean and angular, objects rendered with industrial formality.

The work on display at the entrance to Nob Hill comes from a period of immense production in Beckman's career, as he was concluding his studies at UNM.

At the small community of artists where Beckman worked and studied in the late 1980s, many of the other students, myself included, were totally freaked out by the quality of Beckman's work. Hell, the faculty felt rightly flummoxed by the dude. He was way more talented than the old masters that ran the show, casually and constantly productive.

Beckman fascinated everyone. The undergraduates who listened to the Descendents while pounding away on pipes and plates of steel in the metal shop wanted to buy him a beer at a watering hole called the Fat Chance Bar and Grill.

Some gal from the ceramics division left a joint taped to his locker, sealed with a kiss made from a slip. The full professors waiting to hear from the biennial committee at the Whitney would walk around and around his output, adjusting their spectacles and clearing their throats.

I worked and studied with Beckman off and on, took his welding tips and writing criticism because he was a nice guy and did not want to bullshit about this or that theory of postmodernism; he did not come off as pretentious or lofty and had the spirit of a working man.

One time, I volunteered to be part of a performance piece of Beckman's that was centered on a collection of steel objects he had crafted. He was quiet, polite and focused, very measured throughout. I danced around the sculptures in a bizarre new wave fashion heavily influenced by hours of watching "The Truth About De-evolution."

Those early performances took place at an art gallery called Raw Space, though Beckman also presented his steel objects at performances related to the UNM Centennial and a visit by John Cage in 1989.

Raw Space was downtown in the place now occupied by a restaurant and a shoe shine shop. In the late 1980s and early 90s, Raw Space was a popular place for UNM art folk.

I had a show of my shitty paintings there once and a band called the Ant Farmers played at the reception. One of the songs they played was called *Shower Curtain*.

Meanwhile, Richard Beckman graduated and went on to have a substantial career in the art world. He taught at the University of South Florida, exhibited widely, had public commissions and essays written about his work.



Star, 1991

His later work took a departure; Beckman began to explore organic and quasi-biological forms with the same honesty of spirit as his earlier endeavors.

I only know this because I did some research on Beckman for a history project I was writing. I also found out Richard Beckman died nine-and-a-half years ago.

Most of that 80s crap I wrote about at the beginning of this essay—the gas station, the bar, the Peugeot and the wacky jazz musician with spray paint and paisley stencils—have all but vanished. The sculpture lab is pretty much the same though, down to the perplexingly aloof faculty and buzz-saw swinging students, I reckon.

But Beckman's work is scattered grandly, memorably across America; some of it is here in my town. So cross the river in your path, go down to the place I told about; take a look. In the rain, amidst the desert flowers or anytime, forever, Beckman's *Star* is wondrous.

A native of Albuquerque, New Mexico, Rudolfo Carrillo studied art at the University of New Mexico. His work has recently appeared in literary journals such as *On Barcelona*, *Truck*, and *Unlikely Stories*. His long term experimental art/literary project, *Infinity Report*, was selected for presentation by The Southwest Popular Culture/American Culture Association in 2013 and 2014. Carrillo is also a frequent contributor to the alternative press, where he writes extensively on the subjects of American culture and rock and roll music.

This essay was originally published at *Things in Light*, a site about New Mexico arts and literature managed by Rudolfo Carrillo and his wife Samantha Anne Carrillo.

Exhibition Checklist

All works by Richard Beckman

Chantella
2000
plywood
84 x 60 x 60 in.
Tampa Museum of Art, Partial Gift of Colleen Beckman and Museum Purchase with monies provided by the Friends of Richard Beckman 2006.018

Half the Truth
1990
welded steel mesh
50 x 100 x 30 in.
Gift of the Family of Richard Beckman, University of South Florida Collection

Kisser
1992-1999
wood, enamel and wax
43 x 48 x 32 in.
Collection of Neiman Marcus

Know-Eye-No-I
1996
terrazzo
19 x 45 x 19 in.
Polk Museum of Art Permanent Collection 2000.21.3

Pod Yod
1994
plywood, chalkboard paint
74 x 29 x 29 in.
On loan from the Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art, St. Petersburg College, from the Gulf Coast Collection, GC1994.004

Sleeve of Logic
1995
plywood and resin
23 x 44 ½ x 23 in.
Collection of Sarah Howard and Bob Ballard

Song of Kabir
ca. 2000
plywood
84 ¾ x 39 ½ x 31 ½ in.
Collection of Mark Naugle

Richard Beckman and Kay Hwang
The Truth about Beauty
2000
12 drawings from the series
ink, graphite, charcoal, pastel and photocopy on paper
11 x 8 ½ in.
From the collections of Colleen Beckman, Cathy Byrd, Sarah Howard and Bob Ballard, and Mark Naugle

Under the Pink
2000
epoxy resin
25 x 56 x 27 in.
Gift of Colleen Beckman, University of South Florida Collection

Jim Zum
1997-98
steel
36 x 60 x 36 in.
Polk Museum of Art Permanent Collection 2000.21.2

Jim Zum, 1997-98. From the Permanent Collection of the Polk Museum of Art (photo: Will Lytch/Graphicstudio)



Archival Materials:

Sculptural Performance at Raw Space, Albuquerque, New Mexico, December 19, 1987
30:31 min.
Sculpture by Richard Beckman, Choreography by Marcellea Davis
Courtesy of Colleen Beckman

Richard Beckman's journals and sketch drawings courtesy of Colleen Beckman.

Maquettes and material/process samples courtesy of Colleen Beckman, Irineo Cabrerros, Cat Thompson, and Julie Zenz.