

Meet Robert Beck/Robert Buck

By STEPHANIE BLACK, May 2018



Artist Robert Buck in his Manhattan studio

Artist Robert Buck is a cisgender white male in his late fifties and he wants to smash the patriarchy. On his website, the name in the header reads “Robert Be/uck” – the “e” of “Beck” crossed out in favor of a “u” – indicating the nominal change. Ten years ago, Robert Beck made a decision to cosmetically change one of the most important identifiers – the name-of-the-father – by one letter. Thus in 2008 began the manifestation of Robert Beck’/Buck’s investigation into the faulty, flawed second-hand nature of the name-of-the-father that has culminated in the latest of his two-part exhibition with Uterior Gallery in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, Second Hand.

Seemingly superficial, Buck’s name change signified a departure from his personal and professional history as Robert Beck, as well the art-making philosophy that came with a maturation of an already anti-establishment personality. He challenges contemporary constructs of the patriarchy and authorship, utilizing common devices (readymades of different sorts) and manipulating them to bring his self-defined “mental art” alive.

This notion of a “mental art” associates with ideas of chaotic grandeur – Buck enjoys that the word “mental” can be used similarly to “deranged,” terms that both come with ideas of madness and delusion. But “deranged” can also more literally translate over to “de-ranged,” to operate with no boundaries on an open range, and as much as it begs for experimentation from the artist this derangement requires the viewer to make connections between imagery and concepts both hidden and explicit.

Informed by his film and television background (Beck graduated from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts’ Film and Television Department in 1983), Beck/Buck’s work is often executed as a montage, splicing images together in a logical rather than chronological manner. While a student of the Independent Study program at the Whitney Museum of Art, Beck/Buck began investigating ideas of identity, masculinity, and relationships through printed media in his thesis, “The Tail Gunner’s Vulgar Revenge”. Beck/Buck used found images and constructed text to examine his father and his role in the air force in World War II along with additional staged photographs to investigate rituals of masculinity, identity, sexuality, and the intersection of auto-biography and social history. Lacanian in philosophy, Buck evokes the unconscious in

his montages as part of a method of infusing and exposing The Feminine, which he considers superior.

The first of Buck's exhibitions with Ulterior Gallery, entitled Vestiges, was an installation of staged "real-time" polaroids from 1979-80 when the artist first moved to New York. Installed in a manner that required the viewer to contort their body by stretching, crouching, and perching to immerse themselves in the space, the photographs invite interpretations of Buck's staged images through what he refers to as gestalt, a "body experience." This physical interaction provokes a reading as the viewer pieces together the montage on display – a shot of a kid in high school is followed by a house, and then an image of a courtroom; the story goes on.

When Beck composed these images in 1979-80, the idea that he was constructing these narrative opportunities with images rather than words was nascent. He views them now, in a time



Robert Buck in his studio



*Blond with thrown cherry tomatoes
1980, Kodak instant print*



*Hair into darkness
1980, Kodak instant print*



*Jeb in trees
1979, Kodak instant print*



*Thrown banana peel
1980, Kodak instant print*



*Yellow dress
1980, Kodak instant print*

inundated with selfies and images without words, as predecessors of that notion, observing "You can see the kernel of what happens later. This idea of staging was interesting. The body is outfitted now with images and not words".

Buck is referring to social media, most particularly Instagram, where identity and time are presented logically rather than chronologically, and most notably outfitting the original poster's personality with images rather than words. Buck asserts that the images posted are more meaningful than the captions themselves. In this, we find contemporary staging, much like Beck/Buck touches upon in his original polaroids. In both instances the subject, or body, is adorned and posed - a feminine position. Citing feminist theory, Buck asserts that as a society, particularly under the influence of social media and instant images, the future is feminine and open to change, fluctuation, and enlightenment.



Installation view, Robert Buck, doctored thrift store paintings accumulated and edited over the 10 years

Instant images, or readymades, play prominently in Buck's newly opened installation at Ulterior. Buck unveiled doctored thrift store paintings accumulated and edited over the 10 years since his name renaissance, notarized with his new signature. In part to build a body of work under his new name and to legitimize the act, Buck played with signatures and nomenclature on objects that had been recirculated – in this case, thrift store paintings. Repurposing names found in gallery sign-in books, Buck transcribed them over a grid strategically woven into the features of each thrift store painting, with signature and readymade paired based on certain characteristics; Buck paired them together as a riff on metonyms, asking viewers to explore these paintings with their minds and navigate the synapsys that bring the different aspects of the painting together.

The grid anchors the name, and a grid anchors the painting to Ulterior Gallery's wall. Sticking true to his Lacanian inclinations, in psychoanalytic terms, Buck assigns these paintings as existing in the center of the imaginary and the symbolic, feminine in nature. We, as humankind, moving forward towards a more feminine existence, operate on a grid – and even though that's relatively cut and dry, being on a grid and having distinct squares of existence allows us to escape the boundaries of polarities by granting us that extension. **WM**