

SILVAN FAESSLER FINE ART



# BILL BECKLEY

AN ANSWER FROM THE SILENCE

12.11.2014 – 23.1.2015

## Pathways to a Self by Carter Ratcliff

Some works of art drive us into a speculative frenzy. Others leave us calm and happy to scrutinize their inscrutability at length. In neither case does looking come to an end with the certainty that we have discovered the truth that an artist wanted to convey. To put it the other way around: a visual image counts as a work of art only if its interpretation is potentially endless.

In the spring of 2000, Beckley suddenly simplified his art, photographing small crowds of stems against monochrome fields. This series began as recollection of a work from 1974 – Rose Are, Violets

Are, Sugar Are (Illustration 1) – which incorporates rose and violet stems. These more recent stems are mostly green, and some have blossoms attached. The backgrounds are variously tinted: red, pinkish yellow, blue, white, and grays and beiges



Illustration 1

in a range of variations that resists the effort to name them precisely. Sumptuous colors saturate forms as sharp and clear as technology can make them. When Cibachrome prints (a Swiss process) became available, in the early 1970s, Beckley was the first artist to use them. As innovative in matters of technology as in aesthetics, he always gives his works immaculate surfaces. With his recent works, he has attained a new level of refinement.

These images glow and on first encounter one is tempted to admire them for their startling accuracy, as if Beckley had become a hyper-documentarian. But documentary photographs are bits of evidence. These pictures prove nothing. Often it is impossible to tell even what sort of flower the artist has photographed. Stems stand vertically, and they preserve that orientation when they appear in Beckley's panels, which are usually higher than they are wide. Some panels are shown singly. Others are gathered into series, to form horizontal configurations. Occasionally, these pieces are wall size, like paintings by Pollock or Barnett Newman.

In the Old Warrior series of 2002, stems are spindly. Dark, wilted blossoms tilt and sometimes nod. Sooner or later, one realizes that these plants were too fragile to have stood for their pictures. To take their pictures, Beckley must have hung them upside down. To exhibit the finished works is to return the plants to their original positions. All the stems and flowers in Beckley's recent work were upside down when photographed, and they all look gracefully at ease when shown right side up – as if, having grown into this posture, they had never left it. So an elemental sort of make-believe permeates these pictures. More subtly, their metaphors persuade us that nothing about Beckley's flowers is to be taken literally.

The series called Gothic Attempt (2002–4) shows fresh green stems standing straight, arcing, intertwining. Sometimes, as two of them curve toward one another, they try to form a Gothic arch. The results of such attempts are always approximate. Organic forms can never imitate architecture precisely, not even Gothic architecture, which mimics interlaced vines and curving branches. Still, the stems in Beckley's Gothic pictures often have the scale of cathedral vaults and pillars – or they do if one stays alert to their title. In the Three Graces series (2003–4), stems appear in patterns very like those of the Gothic Attempt pictures. Yet the Three

Graces are classical, not Gothic – human in scale, not architectural – and this difference brings one close to images of a kind that seemed grandly distant when one saw them in the imaginary light cast by a title with other implications. When the title changes, the scale shifts.

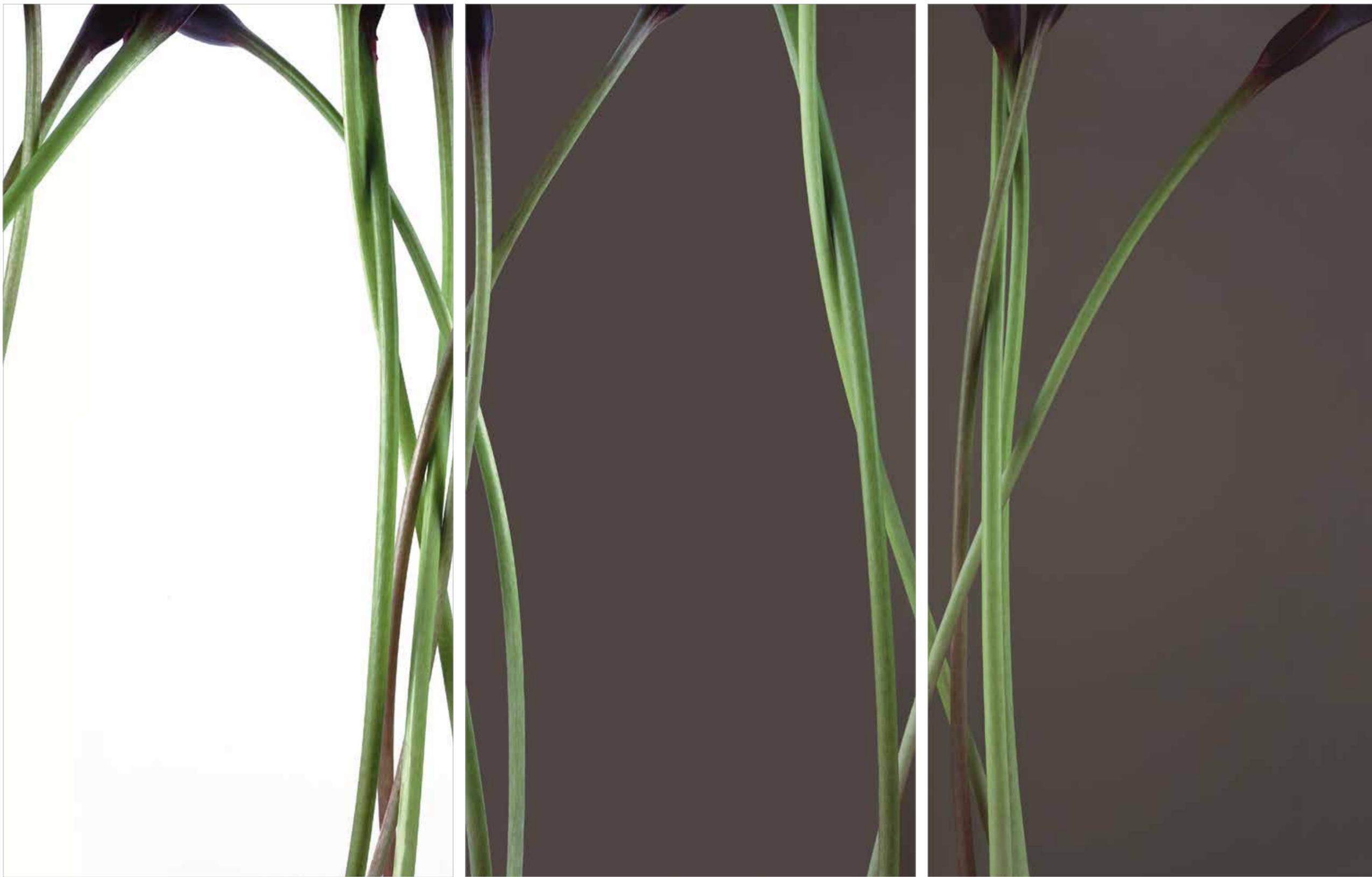
Beckley's stems suggest Barnett Newman's thin, vertical lines, or "zips," as he called them. And with Stations, the name of a series from 2001, Beckley refers directly to Newman's Stations of the Cross. Newman said that his "zips" were gestures of placement, means of measuring off a painting's field of color and taking possession of it. Beckley's floral "zips" don't work in quite the same way, partly because they appear against colors very different from Newman's. But this is not just a matter of paint versus Cibachrome. It has to do, as well, with different kinds of enclosure. To stretch a canvas is to ensure that a painted image has palpable edges, a physical boundary. Newman invented his mature style in the struggle to break through that boundary – not literally but metaphorically. Placing his "zips" on a field of color, he gave them a rhythm that ignores the frame. Attuned to their expansive energies, one sees the field as unbounded, potentially infinite. By contrast, a photographic image records a portion of ordinary space, which is infinite not in potential but in ordinary fact. So the edges of a photographic image always look more or less arbitrary, and Beckley feels no need to defy them. Instead, he arranges his linear forms – the stems – to give a contingent order to fragments of the utterly unstructured space we all occupy. One could say, then, that Newman achieves the infinite by drawing lines. Beckley's achievement, by contrast, is to induce readymade lines to map, however tenuously, an infinite he also finds readymade. >>



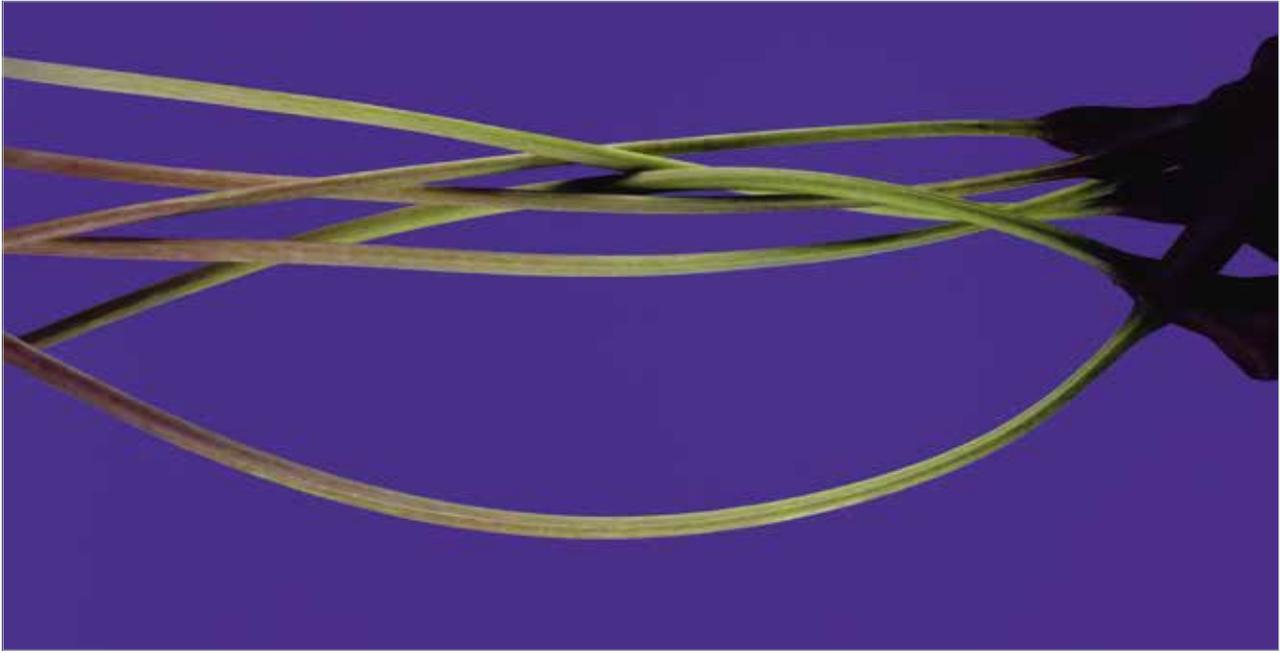
**Standing Bouquet 2**  
2014



**Standing Bouquet 2A**  
2014



Gothic attempt 14  
2002



**Bouquet at Rest Lavender**  
2014



**Old Warrior Mauve**  
2002



**Yellow Aspiration 1B**  
2014



**Capote White 3B**  
2010

>> Stems are limber and so are the arcs and arches, the crisscrosses and curves, that structure Beckley's recent images. Their order always looks improvised, never frozen into a cautious clarity. That is why the stems look gestural, like the inventions of a liberated hand. Scale remains fluid. Beckley's linear elegance would be at home on a small sketch pad or a massive wall – and Gothic Attempt 21 (2004) is among the works from this series that has been exhibited mural size. As meanings drift, lines that allude to architecture could just as readily be seen as cartographic: unsettled borders on a map in progress, a possibility suggested by the title of a work from 2005, Shall I at Least Get My Lands in Order. A three-part image of lilies, this work has an elegiac edge. The mood shifts in pictures of poppies, lovely flowers with dire associations the artist makes explicit with titles that mention heroin and Afghanistan.

It is difficult to know how to take the poppy series entitled Oh to Be Young Again, Carefree and Gay (2005–6). As unflaggingly lovely as these images are, their title plagues them with a flock of troubling associations – some of them autobiographical, no doubt.

Beckley's work of the past five or six years looks as new as the new millennium, and yet for years he has exchanged the ruled line of the minimalists for the less predictable linearity of stems and branches. After painting trees in the late 1960s and early '70s, he pictured twigs and stems in photo pieces of a few years later. In the 1980s, he mimicked blades of grass with lengths of green aluminum pipe. Over the decades, metaphors evolved, allusions ramified. Because there is never one true meaning to be extracted from a work of art, it remains endlessly open to interpretation. Inviting and eluding the attempt to make sense of it, the work brings one, eventually, to a sense of oneself.

Who am I, who must I be, to feel a kind of horror as I linger over Beckley's gorgeous images of poppy plants? I don't say that I am right to feel this, that these images are truly horrifying. Nor would I ever declare my reading to be wrong, for art raises no question of truth or falsehood, truth or error. Truth is at issue only when a work of art has led one to see – or to get a glimpse of – who one is. Because it is so inviting, and so generous to those who accept its invitation, Beckley's art leads us by innumerable paths back to ourselves. Rescuing interpretation from routine, he lures our habits of feeling and thought to light. He brings facets of our humanity into focus, to be recognized and, it may be, refined.

## Werkliste

### **Standing Bouquet 2, 2014**

Digitaler C-Print auf Laserchrome Papier, Diasec  
195,6 x 99 cm / 77 x 39 inches  
Auflage: 3 nummerierte Exemplare plus 1 AP

### **Standing Bouquet 2A, 2014**

Digitaler C-Print auf Laserchrome Papier, Diasec  
195,6 x 99 cm / 77 x 39 inches  
Auflage: 3 nummerierte Exemplare plus 1 AP

### **Bouquet at Rest Lavender, 2014**

Digitaler C-Print auf Laserchrome Papier, Diasec  
99 x 195,6 / 39 x 77 inches  
Auflage: 3 nummerierte Exemplare plus 1 AP

### **Yellow Aspiration 1B, 2014**

Digitaler C-Print auf Laserchrome Papier, Diasec  
152,4 x 96,5 cm / 60 x 38 inches  
Auflage: 3 nummerierte Exemplare plus 1 AP

### **Capote White 3B, 2010**

Digitaler C-Print auf Laserchrome Papier, Diasec  
152,4 x 96,5 cm / 60 x 38 inches  
Auflage: 3 nummerierte Exemplare plus 1 AP

Frontseite (oben links) und Plakatseite

### **Patriotism Spelled Backwards 2, 2004**

Digitaler C-Print auf Laserchrome Papier, Diasec  
Dreiteiliges Werk: 195,6 x 99 cm bzw.  
195,6 x 28,7 cm / 77 x 39 inches bzw. 77 x 11 inches  
Auflage: 3 nummerierte Exemplare plus 1 AP

### **Old Warrior Mauve, 2002**

Digitaler C-Print auf Laserchrome Papier, Diasec  
195,6 x 99 cm / 77 x 39 inches  
Auflage: 3 nummerierte Exemplare plus 1 AP

### **Gothic attempt 14, 2002**

Digitaler C-Print auf Laserchrome Papier, Diasec  
Dreiteiliges Werk: je 195,6 x 99 cm / 77 x 39 inches  
Auflage: 3 nummerierte Exemplare plus 1 AP

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