

# REGEN PROJECTS

Williams, Maxwell, "House of Games: A Look into the World of Walead Beshty," Art + Auction (January 17, 2015) [online]

**BLOUIN**ARTINFO

## House of Games: A Look into the World of Walead Beshty



Walead Beshty in front of his latest series of photograms at his South Los Angeles studio, set in a former warehouse.  
(Photo by Noah Webb)

"The studio is the apparatus," says Walead Beshty while looking at a model of his current exhibition at the Curve gallery at the Barbican Centre, mounted on a wall in his 6,000-square-foot workshop in south Los Angeles. Occupied by Beshty for four years, this studio, in a former warehouse, is a monument to function, even performing as a synecdochical camera — as he fancied for "A Partial Disassembling of an Invention Without a Future: Helter-Skelter and Random Notes in Which the Pulleys and Cogwheels Are Lying Around at Random All Over the Workbench," on view in London through February 8. It took Beshty more than a year to create the show's 12,000 cyanotypes, which depict every object in his workplace, but the studio-as-apparatus metaphor is deeply embedded in much of his work.

Bearded and professorial, the 38-year-old beckons me into the expansive main studio, which is brimming with work. Hanging on the walls are a set of floor-to-ceiling photograms; scattered throughout the room are tables on casters, laden with sketches and source material for collages, a new series of flat-screen televisions with holes drilled through them, ceramic works made in Mexico, and two more exhibition models. During our chat, the place was humming full tilt, prepping for three more shows: "Gastarbeiten" at Berlin's Captain Petzel and "Crystal Voyager," a one-work collaborative piece with Kelley Walker at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, both of which closed last month, and "Marginalia" at Thomas Dane in London, on view through January 24.

The show at Captain Petzel offered several of the surfaces that compose the artist's "Copper Surrogates" series. To make the pieces, Beshty replaces an exhibiting gallery's desk and tabletops with mirror-polished copper for a period of time leading up to a show. The blemishes incurred on the reflective metal complete the objects, which are then hung on the gallery walls. Beshty explains his thinking thus: "Games aren't constituted with a particular outcome. Games are constituted by the rules that are used," he says, leaning on a table full of magazine clippings. "It isn't whether or not it produces one sort of outcome, but how all these rules react to one another and how it defines a set of relationships. In that same way, I don't think of any particular object as being particularly significant. It's much more the system that generates it."

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The same could also be said of the artist's popular series of glass vitrines that Beshty ships via Fedex, subsequently displaying the cracked remains along with the boxes in which they were transported. Another series features rolls of film that are intentionally damaged by being sent through airport X-ray machines, resulting in standard snapshot compositions washed in odd colors created by the chemical reaction.

The space between the random and the controlled has been the main site of artistic investigation for the whole of Beshty's career. "I think of them as a readymade means of production," he says, referring to his expansion on the practice, established by Marcel Duchamp, of offering up found objects as completed artworks. "I'm using a preexisting structure that has its own purpose out in the world, appropriating it, and using it alternatively. Rather than an appropriation gesture of taking an image or a product from somewhere, I'm taking a process from somewhere. There are certain kinds of rules that govern how the material is developed and how the tools that are used in relationship to it were developed historically, and I use those to define a procedure."

Matthew Witkovsky, the photography chair at the Art Institute of Chicago, draws a line to Beshty from artists like Sol LeWitt, who made projects grounded in sets of rules in the 1960s and '70s. With Beshty, "The rules don't describe the scope of the project, and as much as you try to refine and multiply roles and parameters, the projects always escape logic in some exciting way," says the curator. Of the artist's early experiments with photograms, he says Beshty created all sorts of rules to make his work: The photographic paper had to be as long as a stretched arm could handle. There were certain ways the paper had to be folded, and specific times the image would be exposed to certain kinds of light sources. "In theory, the rules should have told you exactly what you were going to get even before he started doing it, and they ended up being glorious, serious things that you couldn't quite figure out," says Witkovsky. "They're very mysterious."

The photograms, which are made by first exposing photographic paper to CMY light in the darkroom and then feeding them through an antiquated photo processor, belie a theoretical aspect to the artist's project. He often picks apart the meaning of a photography-based art practice, and throughout our conversation he refers to certain works as "technically photography," perhaps alluding to the fact that he's not simply a photographer in the strictest sense.

Beshty earned his undergraduate degree from Bard and his MFA from Yale in 2002; he then moved to New York and quickly made a mark, presenting a series of photographs of abandoned shopping malls at MoMA PS1 in 2004. "Walead has grown up in a niche in which concerns of photographers who are producing fine art have merged entirely with concerns of other creative individuals who want to be recognized as fine artists," says Witkovsky. "He's been able to concentrate on certain issues that come out of photography training: questions of light and its sources; questions of fragility; questions of duplication, replication, enlargement, and scale." But the copper surfaces, the shipping projects, and the cyanotypes all play with the mechanisms behind the conservancy of moments in time. Beshty has "been able to address concerns that have their home in art in general," says Witkovsky, who also sees issues of exclusivity, economies, and the contrast between live art and the mediated digital culture against which it is set.

The implications of process are at the very core of what makes Beshty's art so intriguing. His work is inherently penetrable, lucid, and edifying — especially his titles, which often contain relevant information — and yet open to interpretation. Take, for example, the work he made in Guadalajara for a recent show at Regen Projects, his

Los Angeles representative. He worked on-site at Cerámica Suro, the famed Mexican ceramics factory. Beshty is a collected man, rarely breaking from a lilting, academic timbre, but when talking about the economic realities of the world, he becomes slightly more animated. "What

I noticed is that the ceramics factory is only functional because the labor is cheap," he says. "That's why it's in Guadalajara and people produce there. So, there's a way that it was very much about exchange and cross-border traffic. The only viability that it has is in different standards in cost of labor." Beshty understands the oddly political bind that this put him in — he, too, could create objects only within the economic reality of the factory. So he created collages in tribute to the workers from the daily tabloids they read.

The artist's political streak can also be seen in "Crystal Voyager," his recent foray with Kelley Walker — the first collaboration he's ever done — an homage to the 1970s film of the same name and a comment on what is known as the Nixon Shock economy, when the dollar was taken off the gold standard. But it's also in his practical sustainability: Even his sculptures came from the ceramics factory floor. "I noticed that they had all these fragments and broken things around," he says, gesturing to a lumpy ceramic sculpture in the middle of the room. "They just kept everything. It was tons of stuff. So I proposed to [factory owner] José Noé that I take the remnants. so that's a Baldessari bedpan, there's a Jason Rhoades donkey in here. It was just using their waste glaze, too."

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On that note, Beshty brings me into an office to unfold the works in the Thomas Dane show. They're spillovers from the cyanotypes on the drop cloth canvases from which the Barbican works were born, which he says remind him of Nouveau Réalisme paintings. Of course they are "technically photographs" because they are cyanotypes. From there we walk to the backyard of his studio, where he pulls back a tarp from a planter box filled with the drying mulch he's created from discarded, never-shown pieces, a series cleverly titled "Selected Works."

"Waste is part of the system," he says of the apparatus where he's churning out works that add up to his own fingerprint on art history. "It's about how things are made," he says, inadvertently boiling his work down to a few choice words. "In a lot of ways, that's how I keep working: That produces another question that I then have to adapt to. It keeps me busy."