

REGEN PROJECTS

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ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES

Walead Beshty

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Around 2006, a transition occurred in Walead Beshty's work that brought him from the margins of photography-as-art to the center of art photography: the catalyzing "Travel Pictures," 2006–2008, a group of photographs shot in an abandoned Iraqi embassy in the former GDR using film that, in transit back to the US, became imprinted with the X-ray "eye" of an airport scanner. In the finished images, the record of the machine's probing rays appears as an abstracting layer of colored bands atop a succession of relatively "straight" documentary views of the derelict embassy to encode a timely aesthetic event: the chance meeting of image-capturing technologies on a border-crossing conveyor belt.

Photographic equivalents of late-modern stripe paintings, Beshty's new "Black Curl" photograms, 2011–, dominated "PROCESSCOLOR-FIELD," the L.A.-based artist's first solo show at Regen Projects. Though devoid of overt social content, this series is nonetheless related to his earlier work in that it likewise illustrates the process of its own making: Lengths of photosensitive paper (roughly the dimensions of the artist's body) are affixed to the darkroom wall with magnets and then exposed to the CMY spectrum through a horizontal enlarger. Were it not for a host of environmental contingencies—architectural vibrations, atmospheric shifts, the magnets slipping, etc.—the prints would be uniformly black. Instead, these surfaces are broken into vibrant bands of color.

Certainly Beshty's technique of "manufactured chance" invites all sorts of allegorical in-readings, suggesting that, even despite the recent resurgence of post-painterly essentialism, art could never really be wholly exempted from, as Clement Greenberg once put it, "the ideological struggles of society." The point is clinched from the get-go, as the first "Black Curl" work encountered in the gallery had been copied from the artist's most recent JRP|Ringier catalogue and then enlarged so that it matched the scale of the original piece, which occupied the facing wall. The telltale grain of halftone printing and a gutter running through the center of the duplicate image clue us in to the difference between production and reproduction, while also extending the incremental structure of Beshty's darkroom process ever further out into the

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View of "Walead Beshty," 2011.

world. At every stage along the way, the image accrues another layer of data, all of which are ultimately itemized in the works' lengthy Chris Williams–like titles.

For example, take a piece by the name of *Make Ready 1: Uncut Signatures* [Walead Beshty: *Selected Correspondences 2001–2010*, Bologna: Damiani: Editore, 2010, *Grafiche Damiani*, Bologna, Italy, July 4–6, 2010], 2001–10. Having arranged with the contracted press to retain the test prints—prints that are run through the machines on paper recycled from previous jobs—for each of the catalogue's 128 pages, Beshty used these test sheets as *Make Ready*'s material base, which in turn brought to view the visual residue of the printer's past projects, including everything from corporate annual reports to restaurant menus. Here as well, we were encouraged to relate the work of art, already at several steps' remove from its final state, to a range of outlying or wholly non-art contexts, and to treat the gallery as just another nodal point in a much broader social and economic network.

Also included in the exhibition were a number of raw copper surfaces (some oval, others rectangular) that, for a monthlong period, had been substituted for Regen Projects' tabletops to gather traces of the gallerists' daily activity. Dubbed "Copper Surrogates," these works emphasize their dual role as stand-ins for both furniture and photography—the index of administrative use restaged for this exhibition as aesthetic, gestural markings. Of course, Warhol showed us ages ago that gesture in the age of mechanization only survives as an event of misregistration, demonstrating the fundamental incompatibility of machine and organism, but Beshty is among a group of younger artists intent on updating this insight for the digital age. Mining that ever-narrowing gap between our technologies and ourselves, Beshty conjures images from the dark, producing a complexly sedimented record of the unseen historical forces that nevertheless give art visible form.

—Jan Tumlr

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