

Art in America

February 2007

PITTSBURGH

Kim Beck at the Center for the Arts

As part of the reward for being named the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts' Emerging Artist for 2006, Kim Beck got to install an expansive body of thematically related work in a variety of mediums there. Beck, who teaches at Carnegie Mellon University, used a cluster of three galleries to display a foam-and-cardboard wall installation, a series of charcoal drawings, cutout paper constructions and a hand-drawn animation. The works all stem from a long-running interest in the architecture of the suburban landscape, highway travel and other symbols of contemporary middle-American life.

Most of Beck's work sticks to a black-and-white palette, so the glow emanating from the room-size installation *Holymoley Land* (2006) was a visual shock. Against the back wall, she built up overlapping layers of hot-pink insulation foam cut into shapes appropriate for a board game about road trips: billboards, highway overpasses, fast-food marquees, road signs, etc. *Holymoley Land* reached almost to the ceiling and then sloped down to the floor, where these ubiquitous yet easily overlooked emblems of transient existence were heaped one on top of the other, as in a landfill—or a livelier, more whimsical Louise Nevelson assemblage. The rest of the piece was subtler, with similar shapes in shadowlike cardboard much more sparsely populating the far ends of two facing walls. In some places, pencil outlines peeked out behind gangly

lampposts, giving the work an air of neglect that matched the abandoned lots illustrated in the works in the adjacent gallery.

A series of 13 geometric charcoal-on-paper drawings, each numbered and titled *Thing* (all 2006, 30 by 44 inches), come from the same sources that inspired *Holymoley Land*. They include blocky images of empty filling stations, strands of triangular, used-car-lot flags and clumps of overgrown weeds. In *Thing #10*, two towers of crooked, stacked signs of the kind you might find at the entrance to a strip mall are cut out and "superimposed" over parallel, intersecting power lines. The less figurative works in this series resemble some of Barry Le Va's recent drawings.

Most of the work in a third gallery narrows Beck's focus to one particular variety of the semi-urban space: the long-term storage locker. The largest and most intricate is *Cut Storage* (2005), a four-panel horizontal spread, with each panel consisting of two or three sheets of paper layered one on top of the other. The basic architecture of a storage shed, as seen from dozens of slightly different angles, is cut out from each sheet of paper. Beck's construction challenges the structural simplicity of the generic storage shed with a dizzying depth and complexity that do justice to its function as a garbage dump for accumulated personal effects. On the same subject is *Ideal Cities* (2004-05; also the name of Beck's Web site), a three-minute hand-drawn animation that unfolds like a live version of *Cut Storage*. A storage shed is drawn again and again, like an over-active Etch-a-Sketch. The best sequence

begins just as a tangle of frantically drawn lines have formed a complete shed, at which point the drawing process reverses and the mess is cleaned up by being slowly erased.

—Leigh Anne Miller

View of Kim Beck's *Holymoley Land*, 2006, insulation foam and cardboard, dimensions variable; at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts.

