

“Kim Beck Looks All Around Us” by Sherrie Flick /*Pittsburgh City Paper*, May 22, 2008

Kim Beck's *Looked Overlooked*, at Artists Image Resource, reminds us that what we often discard, overlook or yank from the ground can be haunting and poetic. In two of AIR's gallery spaces sprout colorful images of silhouetted weeds, while a third is reserved for stark, evocative prints of signs, lampposts and billboards.

Beck is an associate professor at Carnegie Mellon University, and this exhibition is the result of a Heinz Endowments Creative Heights grant. The prints were produced at AIR, in a workshop environment with assistance from its staff.

The main gallery's lithographs duplicate pages from the 19th-century *Field Guide to Weeds*, which Beck discovered at Carnegie Mellon's botanical library. Colorful, silhouetted weeds are screen-printed over the book's diagrams and text, which reminds us that weeds are "the enemy" and "a plant out of place." Throughout the exhibition space, a variety of life-sized drawings of fences are stenciled onto walls in brown, black and silver. They add to the lonesome simplicity of Beck's work. No people inhabit this fenced-in world. That's where I come in -- the viewer. The weeds and fences and lampposts are the set, the before and after. My mid-morning musings, passing through, completes them.

In a second-floor gallery room, large panels of Plexiglas bearing the same weed silhouettes are now printed on both sides. The Plexiglas is mounted away from the wall to create a buffer of air and space, so the weeds seem to float within as I amble by.

In the third gallery there are dense, aquatinted prints. Small brown trees stenciled onto the walls are lifted from photos of parking-lot landscaping, and they take on the role of innocent bystanders and add an air of objective hospitality. In silhouette, the black-and-white objects in the prints (highway signs, lampposts, billboards) are often primary geometric shapes -- and evoke a minimalist set for a socialist stage play. I sense something is about to happen -- or has just happened -- and I'm left to anticipate it, whatever it is, or take in the aftershock. In this way, an overt tension is created between art and viewer, as my own anxieties and experiences play out in these scenes.

The prints have been scratched and etched, as though aged, which removes them from contemporary time and makes me wonder about other viewers. This sense that I'm not the first one to venture into this world is, I think, necessary to enter the environment Beck creates -- a modern urban/suburban landscape that is also somehow Victorian in its sensibilities. In examining the unexamined life, Beck is a sublime (sub)urban Thoreau, who instead of walking to the pond, walks out her back door, past the privacy fence, down the alley, to the abandoned, dimly lit parking lot at the end of the lane. We're all the better for it.