

RAWVISION

OUTSIDER REPORT

RV 95

AUTUMN/FALL 2017

\$14.00 £8.00 €15.00



DANIEL MARTIN DIAZ • FRANK BRUNO • CUBA • BALKANS

BRIGHT, DARK LIGHT

Thickets of inky lines with luminous blacks and browns reflect Beverly Baker's ambitious, creative spirit

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Photos of artworks courtesy of Institute 193, Lexington, KY

Untitled, 2015, ballpoint pen on paper, 19.5 x 25.5 ins. / 49.5 cm

Traditionally, how artists transform their materials, the themes they choose to explore and the messages they convey through their creations are some of the essential aspects that shape their respective bodies of work. Together, they help express a particular art-maker's philosophical, political, aesthetic or other vision. But what can – or should – viewers in search of meaning in art (for some, a clear sense of an artist's intentions serves as an anchor of understanding) make of abstract works whose ambiguity can be as puzzling as it is compelling?

Although that theme has been kicking around for more than a century in mainstream modern-art circles, in which artists informed by their knowledge of academic art history have produced abstract works in dialogue with

it, that question has not really been a concern of art-makers in the related *art brut*, outsider art and self-taught art fields who have worked in abstract modes. For those artists, their natural, unfettered impulse to do so has not come from theory-fuelled starting points.

With this in mind, the distinctive works on paper of the self-taught American artist Beverly Baker, which lately have been earning considerable critical praise, feel all the more singular and alluring. Baker was born with Down's syndrome in 1961, and lives in Lexington, Kentucky, in the east-central part of the United States. Lexington lies at the heart of the Bluegrass region, which has long been known as a centre of Thoroughbred horse-breeding. For many years, Baker, who began making art at an early age, has participated in the art-studio programme at Latitude



Untitled, 2015, ballpoint pen on paper, 11.25 x 16.75 ins./ 28.6 x 42.5 cm

Artist Community (also known as “Latitude Arts”), a facility founded in Lexington in 2001, primarily to serve people with disabilities.

A few months ago, Institute 193, an independent, not-for-profit arts centre in Lexington, working in collaboration with Latitude Arts, presented an exhibition of Baker’s works. Earlier this summer, a version of that same small survey went on view at LAND (League Artist Natural Design), an art-making workshop for disabled people in Brooklyn, New York. In both of these shows, the labour-intensive, even obsessive character of Baker’s art-making technique and the richness of her finished drawings were evident.

Bruce Burris, an artist who co-founded Latitude Arts with Crystal Bader-Webster, recalled in a recent telephone

interview from his current home in Oregon that, prior to joining the Lexington facility’s art studio, Baker had taken part in another social-services agency’s programme whose practices he found to be “troubling”. “At the time, Beverly, who is mostly non-verbal, was living at home with her parents”, Burris said. “One day I stopped by that other place and noticed a young woman drawing with a ballpoint pen on scraps she had rescued from a paper shredder. It was Beverly. Her designated task was to shred all sorts of confidential papers she had been given from that social-service agency’s office. But it was clear that she was making art, and that no one was helping her to do something creative like that. She had taken the initiative to change the dynamic of her situation, but no one was encouraging her or even aware of her effort.”



Burris was able to bring Baker into the new, art-focused programme he and Bader were setting up. "The motivating idea in social services is that we're supposed to support the interests of the people we serve", Burris explained. Even Baker's parents did not understand that Beverly's "scribbling" was, in fact, a form of artistic expression offering their daughter a deeply personal way of communicating. Burris encouraged them to stop throwing away Beverly's drawings.

In Paris, Maïa Ferrari studied at the École du Louvre and worked at the Fondation Dubuffet (the organisation that catalogues Jean Dubuffet's works and preserves his

artistic legacy) before moving to the United States. She is now the creative director of Institute 193, whose curatorial and educational activities, and related publishing programme focus on the art, music, and culture of the American Southeast. She said, "Baker's works had not been shown publicly here in her home state for more than a decade, and we felt strongly that they deserved to be seen again." That interest in Baker's work led to the art centre's recent exhibition.

Like Phillip March Jones, Institute 193's founder, Ferrari pointed out that Baker's concentrated use of ballpoint pens to make her drawings echoes that of other



Untitled, 2016, ballpoint pen on paper,
15 x 22 ins. / 38.1 x 55.9 cm

Beverly Baker at work in the art studio, 2007,
photo: Phillip March Jones



contemporary self-taught artists, such as the American Dan Miller or the Japanese Yuichi Saito, both of whom have also created remarkably dynamic compositions with little more than ballpoint, felt-tip or gel pens on paper. (Similarly, in England, the self-taught artist Nigel Kingsbury, who died last year, produced voluminous images of elegant women using only pencils on paper; his compositions were made up of nearly sculptural passages of energetic, wiry strokes.)

Admirers of classic modern art might recognise in Baker's dark, monumental-feeling, silhouetted forms, which often fill nearly all of the sheets on which they are

drawn, unwitting affinities to the black, oil-stick-on-paper, abstract drawings of the American artist Richard Serra (b. 1938), which are formally related to his massive, steel-plate sculptures. Baker's all-over, mark-filled abstractions also call to mind a strain of minimalist drawing that can be found in Japan; it is evident in some of the works of the Japanese artist Takesada Matsutani (b. 1937), who uses plain graphite strokes to meticulously and completely cover large sheets of paper or expanses of canvas.

In Baker's pictures, looks can be deceiving; what at first glance, from a short distance, might appear to be



broad strokes of pitch-black paint or ink are actually dense swathes of ballpoint-pen ink strokes upon swathes of ink strokes. The artist seems to layer them to create dark, silhouetted forms or all-over dark expanses dotted with occasional, small patches of white, like openings in a thick forest's cover at night, pierced by starlight.

Baylee Werline, an administrator at Latitude Arts who

helps promote its art-makers' works by developing relationships with galleries and the local community, also serves as a facilitator in its art studio.

"There is a lot of emotion in Beverly's work", Werline observed. "Over the years, we've watched her whole creative process. She's very ritualistic in her behaviour. She arrives in the morning, goes to the art-supplies wall



*Untitled, 2015, ballpoint pen on paper,
17.5 x 23.5 ins / 44.5 x 59.7 cm*

Often Baker begins a new picture by repeatedly drawing the letter B, from her own name, with a black ballpoint pen, or by drawing other letters or numbers, or perhaps a word lifted from one of her magazines, over and over again. Eventually she begins covering such markings with upward-directed strokes she slowly builds up to create dense passages that in turn give rise to the larger shapes that dominate her compositions. Sometimes her efforts result in all-over, dark colouring that effectively obliterates her original under-markings. It can take her up to a month to complete a single drawing.

Occasionally the artist allows some of her initial marks in a particular drawing to remain visible through or to the side of one of her big, dark forms. Frequently, as her paper's surface becomes ever more thickly covered with ink, she scrapes into it with her pen point, creating varied textures that are evident when a finished drawing is viewed up close.

"Beverly tends to be very quiet," Werline explained. She added, "But when she gets excited or seems to be expressing her enjoyment of what she's doing, she may burst out with 'ABC!', or 'Chocolate!', or the pet names she uses to refer to her sister, or a phrase or short sentence." Nowadays Baker resides in a home in Lexington that she shares with other disabled persons; it is managed by professional care-givers. Werline said, "It's part of a new effort to integrate disabled persons into the community and, as with our outreach efforts at Latitude Arts, to help make the broader community aware of their presence, too."

"I see Beverly's works as fitting into a tradition that might be identified as that of artists who have worked with the precise line of ballpoint pen and within the aesthetic of this medium", Institute 193's Ferrari noted. She said, "There is a strong, expressionistic impulse in her drawing. She starts out slowly and then almost seems to carve as she draws, sometimes allowing a little bit of colour to show through a dense, dark composition. The way the textured surface of one of her artworks catches the light – every day, as the light changes, it's a new and different drawing. You can tell that Beverly is definitely trying to communicate through her art."

As much as the precision and intensity of Baker's creative method may seize a viewer's imagination, it is that palpable, even urgent sense of her will to express herself – to convey something that, alas, may remain forever indecipherable and unknowable – that may well be the essence of her ambiguous art's peculiar allure.

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to get her things, and then arranges everything neatly on her worktable." Sometimes Baker lays out a selection of magazines in front of her work area, open to picture-filled spreads that interest her. One time, obviously, a dark, silhouetted shape that emerged in one of her drawings imitated that of a breaching whale she had seen in a magazine photo.