

HYPERALLERGIC

Haddad, Natalie. “Ericka Beckman’s Surreal Visions of Late Capitalism” Hyperallergic, March 17, 2025



Ericka Beckman
Study for Industrial Series, 1982-83
Oil on paper
30 x 60 in
76.2 x 152.4 cm

“Though often associated with the Pictures Generation, Beckman’s work shifts focus from deconstruction to archetypes — and from the commodity to the human”

The expansive front gallery of the Drawing Center may get the most attention, but the smaller back space and the lower-level one have hosted many quietly intriguing exhibitions. *Ericka Beckman: Power of the Spin* is such a show.

Though Beckman, best known as a filmmaker, is often associated with the Pictures Generation, she came of age at the California Institute of the Arts in the 1970s amid a more unstructured experimentalism. The distinction is subtle, but it has resulted in a body of work that shares the New York group’s fascination with mediated images, but shifts focus from their emphasis on deconstruction and authorship in a capitalist sphere to the archetypes and stories through which we absorb images more typical of her CalArts cohort — in other words, from the commodity to the human.

Power of the Spin is comprised mostly of drawings related to Beckman’s films, from sketches and storyboards to elaborate scenarios rendered in saturated hues, such as “Power of the Spin (You the Better)” (1982), depicting a kind of roulette wheel in the middle of a body of water, surrounded by people who seem to be escaping onto it, with someone furiously rowing a boat in the foreground. A study for her 1983 short film “You the Better” starring fellow artist Ashley Bickerton, the drawing combines Beckman’s interest in games of chance with the possibility (or illusion) of human agency.

Visually, the schematic images are closer to Russian Constructivism and even some of Giorgio de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings than to anything from 1980s New York: In many drawings, faceless, automaton-like figures appear to be trapped in alienating scenes — the charcoal drawing “Cinderella 6” (1985) portrays a character being repaired or, more likely, tortured by a machine — while quick circular lines signify motion, in contrast to the stiffness of the bodies.

The highlight of the show, however, is Beckman’s film “Stalk” (2023). Here, vivid color and controlled movement come alive in a revamped take on *Jack and the Beanstalk* that critiques our current corporatized agriculture industry, according to the Drawing Center’s website, but with a decidedly surreal aesthetic.

Presented live at Performa 2021, the film juxtaposes farmers working in unison with big-city stock market scenes and, most strikingly, the towering beanstalk itself. With a Manhattan skyscraper in the background, Jack climbs the beanstalk, sometimes clinging for life, while a dancer as a personified sprout shimmies upward à la Cirque de Soleil, beckoning him along.

It can sound didactic on paper, but Beckman has a fantastical vision that leans into humor and the grotesque. Ultimately, though, human behavior is at the heart of her work — even within abstract social systems, we can still find ourselves.

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