

MICHAEL BECK

Casting shadows

Michael Beck isolates a well-used object, most often a toy, in a dramatically lit setting without context and invites “the viewer to consider it as a thing of curiosity on its own. Many times, viewers’ stories will bring new insight about what an object is and how it can be seen.”

In his exhibition of recent work at George Billis Gallery in New York, January 26 through February 27, is *Rough Rider*, 2013, a dramatic 4-by-6-foot painting of a hobby horse, probably lovingly made in a basement woodshop by a father for his child—simple cuts, screen door springs, black paint and rudimentary decoration comprising a now well-used toy. It is, indeed, “a thing of curiosity on its own,” conjuring memories of similar toys in our own lives and, perhaps, the slam of a screen door when those springs were too tight.

Beck’s dramatic lighting casts the shadows of the playful objects as vaguely threatening shapes on the wall behind, sure to cause nightmares in the child looking up at them. But the light and the shadows are the first clues these are paintings, created to make the viewer consider light, shadow, color, texture, form, etc.

Two bright light sources cast overlapping shadows of the horse on to the wall. They wash out the color of the wall where they are the brightest, and the wall’s color returns as the light diminishes with distance from the source. Beck invites us to



1

1
Deep Blue Waters,
oil on canvas,
68 x 58"

2
Rough Rider,
oil on canvas,
46 x 72"

3
She's Going Places,
oil on canvas,
38 x 44"

4
*I'm Off...To My
Future!*, oil on
canvas, 14 x 22"



2



3



4

consider color even more within the shadows we “know” are black, but discover to be full of the color of the wall, as well as the reflected green of the shelf.

A pink Sky Princess tricycle from the 1930s stands out from a blue background in *She’s Going Places*. Beck chooses the background color to push the object forward, although he paints the object first and the background second. The color pink for girls and blue for boys became codified at about the time the bicycle was designed. For many years, the gender associations with the colors were just the opposite. Again, the lighting creates ominous shadows which, along with the title, suggest the girl won’t follow stereotypes and will be her own person. ●