

Spaces for Understanding: Kevin Beasley at Hill Art Foundation

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I'm thinking of the breath, of the comma. In the title of Kevin Beasley's exhibition, a comma interrupts the clause "a body revealed" like a fulcrum, delays the revelation, and creates two ideas out of one, aiming them away from each other. "A body" becomes the end of some unknown, unseen phrase; "revealed" begins another. Somewhere between the two, on the precipice of meaning, some body is still its own, and unseen.

"For the works to hold up," Beasley says, "there have to be things in them that people don't have access to." Denying access is a strategy for longevity as well as an ethic. If he were to give the game away, there's nothing for Beasley's growing number of viewers—to say nothing of future viewers—to contribute. The strategy largely takes the shape of denying faces, skin, and unmistakably familiar forms. Beasley tends to merely hint at the everyday, to hook us with the familiar just enough to draw us into an encounter with difference. From there, we must find our own way. We can see this in an untitled 2020 work in the hallway at the Hill Art Foundation—a thin, floral dress saturated by resin, hovering near the front desk. One shoulder strap curls over something we can't see...a collarbone? No—that space under the strap is thin as a novella. Looking further, another clue: the other shoulder of the dress is gathered up, high and close to the wall, looking always a half-second away from slipping the grip of neighboring clothes in a closet, as if it has been selected by someone unseen. This dress—its height off the floor, its float



Kevin Beasley, Untitled, 2020.
Housedress, resin, 37 3/8 x 11 x 7 7/8
inches (95 x 28 x 20 cm).

and structure, the way it captures an intimate, familiar moment—charges the air, makes a scene play out around, before, and even through us. Beasley gives us enough to register what he *hasn't* given us, allowing us to fill in the rest with what we know from our own experiences.

Beasley's work is often associated with ghosts and the ghostly. Understandably so: the clothes in his works stand on their own or hold their shapes in ways that induce us to see what is not there. It's possible, though, that ghosts aren't quite right for describing these works. Ghosts are too old, too available. They're always in the room before we get there, appearing to everyone the same way. By contrast, if Beasley's works can conjure figures, they rely on us to manifest them. The works aren't haunted by anything that doesn't already haunt us, which is to say that any presence evoked by the work arises through the viewer's experience. In *Visual Thinking*, his 1969 book on perception and thought, Rudolf Arnheim claims that thought, and indeed experience itself, requires "a stable world" where space, time, and the edges of the self are solid enough for our

faculties to orient themselves. Perception, Arnheim argues, takes shortcuts for the sake of maintaining that all-important stability: finding patterns in seemingly random arrays, categorizing objects at hand to avail them to thought, creating whole shapes out of mere suggestive parts. For the sake of understanding, we can't help but manufacture solidity out of thin air.

To exploit the nature of perception, Beasley confronts us with spaces, pieces of things. *Bird* (2022), for example, stands atop its pedestal without an interior support structure. It contains only the materials we see: gold-colored, densely packed cotton and baroque waves of textiles, soaked through with resin until it holds itself up. There is empty air where the legs should go; the breastplate is merely cotton, with visible gaps. But in the legs and the chest, when we imagine them to be whole, we do so by filling strategically placed gaps that Beasley outlines with material. And the “spaces” in his practice aren't just physical—some are memories, or particularly personal associations Beasley has with the objects we see. Du-rags, fitted caps, t-shirts, Larry's teeth: they await our gaze and carry no inherent value, abstracted from both bodies and meaning until we see them and fill them with associations of gender, class, and race. (That is, memories of past bodies that have worn these things.) The works hold concepts in tension—space and material, abstraction and figuration, opacity and understanding, individual and universal—allowing us to enter into communion with these works *and* to find productive differences in them. Beasley's work uses pat, binary concepts against themselves, making room for fluid experience somewhere between the two.



Kevin Beasley, *Bird*, 2022. Polyurethane resin, raw Virginia cotton, housedresses, kaftans, t-shirts, du-rags, altered t-shirts, gold powder, 148 1/2 x 69 x 31 inches (377.2 x 175.3 x 78.7 cm).

In trading on images common to (let's say Western) culture, however, Beasley runs into a problem. The stakes of visibility for these works—what becomes available for the viewer and how, and what happens next—describe something of what it means to be visibly Black in a society built on the continual, violent expropriation of Blackness from itself. Some bodies, some people, and some stories are best left unavailable to a visual culture that circulates explicit

images of dead and dying Black people until such deaths become routine, or non-events. Thus, Beasley's practice is both protective as well as productive. He never represents flesh, choosing in sculptures and sound performances to introduce several careful degrees of separation from any representation of a person. These works, then, by preserving the figure while denying access to flesh and skin, hope to provide a safe place to explore Black life in the visual field without placing people's bodies at risk.

The works alternately open up and close off aspects of themselves, like a hall full of doors, as we view them from different vantages. An experience with *THE REST (A Hall)* (2021) illustrates this. It appears, at a distance, to be a hall covered in wood paneling, as if the entryway continues through the gallery into a wholly different room. The image comes from a mobile home belonging to Beasley's family but might as well be Nana's living room or an old church basement. Warm light beckons through an open door at the end, sweeping the floor. At left, another door is cracked to reveal a cheap, exposed mattress. The image of the trailer is both vivid and large enough to envelop us and consume our imaginations. But this is a sculpture—a more-or-less flat, solid piece of what must be thousands of bits of raw cotton, packed together with resin and pressed to the density of stone. The scene is printed on an uneven grid of twelve different cotton t-shirts cut in half down the sides. We can't see the image as whole while also seeing the individual shirts on which it is printed. At every moment, we have to choose. The experience of looking at *THE REST* is one of unstable equilibrium; we stand there for a bit, vacillating between illusion and material, magnetized alternately by the space of the photograph and by the ripples and bubbles on the resin-coated surface. The work pushes and pulls against our attempts to define our relation to it. Its fixity, its stability, is entangled with our own. By refusing to be wholly available, Beasley's artworks get to be several things at once and allow us to experience the same, to see how lush an experience instability can be. *THE REST*, manifold in its meanings like many of Beasley's works, is a photograph, a slab of cotton, a stone relief, striving, like us, to own its body.



Kevin Beasley, *THE REST (A Hall)*, 2021. Polyurethane resin, epoxy resin, raw Virginia cotton, dye-sublimation printed t-shirts, carbon fiber, 83 1/2 x 93 x 2 inches (212.1 x 236.2 x 5.1 cm).