



Rosemarie Beck in her studio at 6 East 12th Street with works from the "Lovers" series (1966). Courtesy of the Rosemarie Beck Foundation.

# **Rosemarie Beck**

## **Letters to a Young Painter and Other Writings**

**Edited by Eric Sutphin**

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## Introduction

### Eric Sutphin

*“ . . . as narrative painters we want some of the same privileges accorded writers. We want to be as witness-bearing or specific as any letter-writer.”<sup>1</sup>*

The work of Rosemarie Beck (1923–2003), best known as a narrative painter, remains difficult to classify. Though she began her career as a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, her work has been associated with groups and movements as varied as abstract impressionism and painterly figuration. In the late 1960s, Beck became a central figure in a loosely aligned group of painters, which included Leland Bell, Neil Welliver, Paul

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1 Rosemarie Beck, “The Meaning of Persona in Narrative Painting” (1980), p. 77.

Georges, and Paul Resika. The group organized themselves around the Alliance of Figurative Artists, which began in 1969 and held weekly meetings at the Educational Alliance on East Broadway in New York's Lower East Side. The Alliance, which lasted until the early 1980s, became a hub of an often-heated exchange centered on issues concerning contemporary figurative painting; it formed, in fact, because the work of the painters in the Alliance was virtually ignored by critics, whose attention was fixed on Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art. To many critics, the return to figuration was seen as regressive or revivalist, and though a handful were sympathetic to this new generation of representational painters, their work generally lacked a cohesive body of criticism. If critics did discuss their paintings, it was often framed in opposition to the ascendant avant-garde movements; abstraction pitted against figuration served as a way to enliven copy, ruffle feathers, and sell magazines.

Artists, including Beck, wrote criticism as a way to engage directly with the work, to discuss its formal and conceptual motivations, and to foreground what the work was, rather than what it opposed. Beck's own critical writing arose out of utility, and she used it to situate herself, and her work, within a shifting and expanding art world.<sup>2</sup> Though she never identified herself as a critic *per se*, Beck's writing can nevertheless be understood in the context of other painter-writers from this moment, such as Fairfield Porter, Sidney Tillam, Louis Finkelstein, and Rackstraw Downes—all of whom oriented their criticism toward a more nuanced and complete account of contemporary figuration. In 1974, Rackstraw Downes published, "What the Sixties Meant to Me," an eloquent article

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2 "Why artists should try criticism: responsibility for establishing values." Rosemarie Beck, *Journal #1* (March 1, 1954), p. 19.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Hundred Guilder Print*, 1649. 11 x 15½ in. (28 x 39.3 cm). Etching, engraving, and drypoint; second state of two. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Rosemarie Beck, *Self-Portrait*, 1953, oil on canvas, 34 x 24 in. Courtesy of the Rosemarie Beck Foundation.



Rosemarie Beck (1923–2003), *Number 3, 1954, 1953–54*. Oil on linen, 50 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 46 in. (127.2 x 116.8 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Living Arts Foundation Fund 55.51. © The Rosemarie Beck Foundation.