

# REVIEWS

WASHINGTON, D.C.

## WALEAD BESHTY

### HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

Walead Beshty's title for the recent showcase of his work at the Hirshhorn, "Legibility on Color Backgrounds," was borrowed from the museum's internal style guide detailing how its logo should be printed in press materials. The works themselves were arranged on a grid to create visible tension within the circular gallery space. A helpful parallel can be drawn between Beshty's curatorial decisions, which bring the museum's marketing and architectural designs into play, and his recent photographs depicting the forces at work in the fabrication and exhibition of his art: a studio assistant, a curator, a color printer. The titles of the portraits—*Assistant (NP) Los Angeles, California, February 20th 2009*, for example—do not focus on the people depicted, who are identified only by their initials. Instead the emphasis is on the roles these subjects play in relation to his art. The photographs, as well as the choices that went into their presentation at the Hirshhorn, demonstrate Beshty's desire to let his works bear witness to the backstories of their own creation and exhibition.

I first saw Beshty's work in 2007, at his studio in Los Angeles, where three or four framed photographs he had taken of the abandoned Iraqi Embassy in Berlin were leaning against the wall. The artist told me that before being developed, the film for these photos was put through an X-ray machine at an airport security checkpoint on his return to the U.S. It turned out to be a happy accident. The resulting images, bathed in swaths of color caused by the film's reaction to the scanning, gave him the idea of using systems put in place by others—in this case, Homeland Security—in creating his work. This procedure enables him to forgo his own intuition, a word he identifies as "shorthand for convention." To be sure, Beshty enjoys tension—between artists and institutions, between his process and its appearances in his finished works, between his photographs and the words used to discuss them.

The Hirshhorn show contained a more recent embodiment of Beshty's semideliberate artmaking during transport: several glass cubes displaying cracks and corrosion sustained in the course of being shipped via FedEx between his studio and the galleries where they are exhibited. Since the X-ray incident, Beshty has also become interested in how his works can provide visible records of their

own creation, and in the darkroom as a place where his processes can unfold from start to finish.

Beshty's cameraless darkroom methods are among his most fertile. With these, he continues to edge his process closer to the surface of the photographs produced while also reevaluating their materiality. In the black-and-white "Folds" series exhibited at the Hirshhorn, creases are visible where the photosensitive paper was folded before exposure. In his subsequent "Six Color Curls" series, he reveals a world of darkness traversed by bright overlapping colors where the paper was exposed to light. These photographs are not recorded images but irreproducible material ones. And although they possess a stand-alone physicality traditionally limited to painting and sculpture, their most surprising quality is not how they answer the question of what photography can and can't do but how they bring process and other typically invisible systems to the forefront. —Alexander Wolf

#### FROM LEFT:

Walead Beshty, *Fold* (60°/120°/180°/240°/300°/360° directional light sources), June 30th, 2008, Annandale-on-Hudson, Foma Multigrade Fiber, 2008. Fiber-based black-and-white photographic paper, 42 x 76 in.

Walead Beshty, installation view of "Legibility on Color Backgrounds," Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., April 30–Sept. 13, 2009. Background: *Six Color Curl (CMMYYC)*; Irvine, California, July 18th, 2008, Fuji Crystal Archive Type C, 2008. Color photographic paper, 98 x 51½ x 2½ in. Foreground: "FedEx® Large Kraft Box ©2005 FEDEX 330508 REV 10/05 CC" series, 2009. FedEx boxes, safety glass, shipping labels, metal, silicone, tape. Glass cubes: 20 x 20 x 20 in. each. FedEx® boxes: 20½ x 20½ x 20½ in. each.

