

# Locating a Landscape: Donald Beal in Beech Forest, Winter

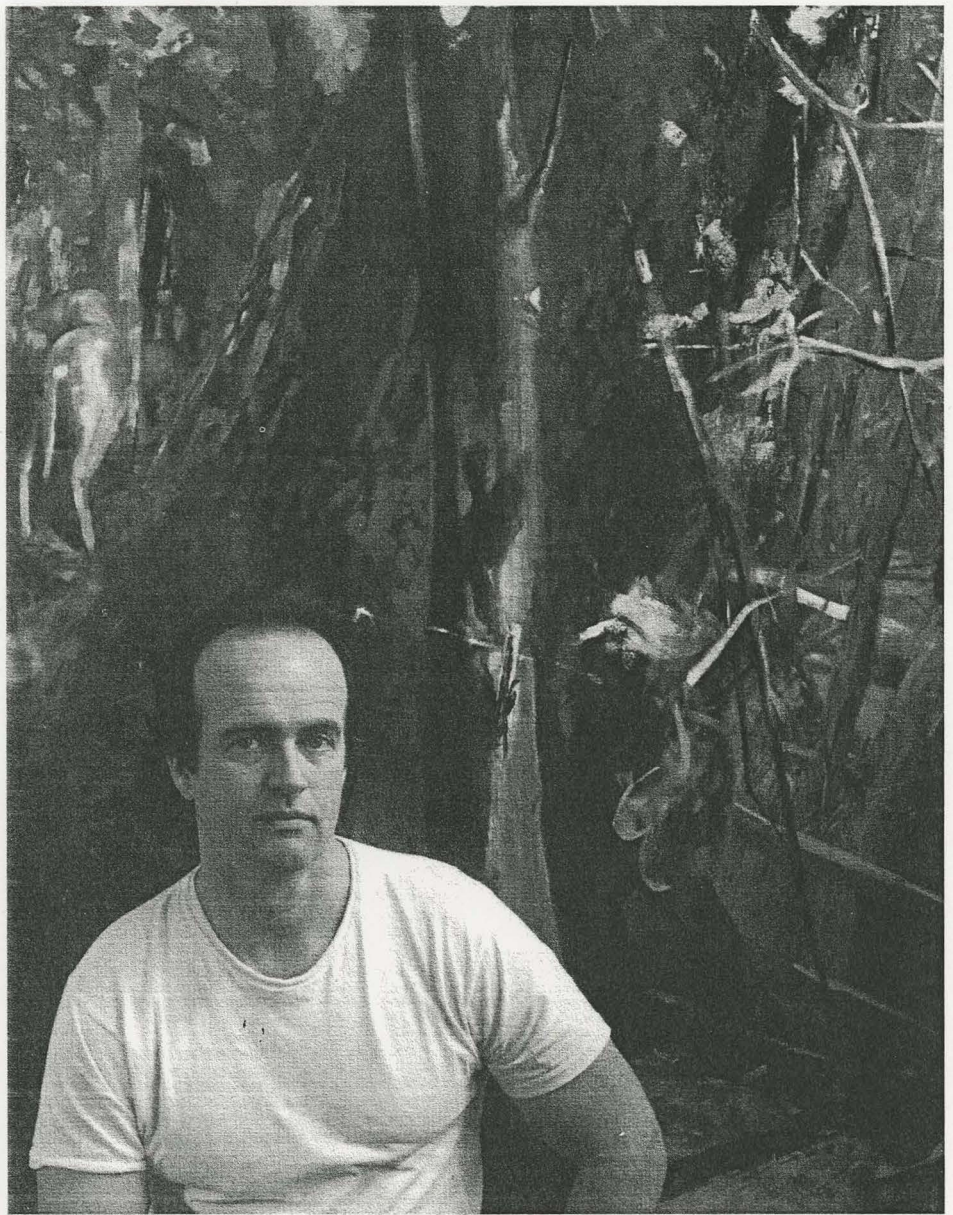
BY MAURA COUGHLIN

When the lushness of summer drains from the Beech Forest in Provincetown, a particular truth or beauty that was waiting there all along is exposed. For Donald Beal, winter affords uncluttered time to engage with a landscape free from people and insects, and it offers startling revelations of formal structures that are usually hidden in the leaves. He remarks, "The light there in the winter is so peculiar, so specific to that place. There's this dead, silvery color—ghost branches standing out against screaming green moss. It's utterly unexpected, and always difficult to understand. It's shocking and inexhaustible—there's no easy way to comprehend it—and that's why I keep going back to it."

After several years of living in Provincetown and painting its immediately appealing vistas of limitless sand, sea, and sky, Beal looked for a different kind of landscape. Beech Forest is so much less sublime, much less easy to generalize: it shifts with every footstep and changes with the seasons. It was without an obvious horizon, focal point, or delineation between fore-, middle-, and background, and Beal found it endlessly challenging, demanding its own complex visual language.

His recent Beech Forest paintings are charged with temporality, offering tangential, fragmented visions rather than universal pronouncements on a nature that stands apart from lived time. Many grapple with frozen violent relationship between fallen and leaning trunks, some represent formless sandbanks in the painting's empty center, others negotiate abstract negative gaps in lattices of branches and sky. The result is a representation of the ever-shifting, transcendent experience that moving through this intimately known landscape conveys, a squinting of the inner eye, a re-framing or de-centering of the picture-worthy in the land. Having located a specific, ocular language, Beal brings these formal problems back to his studio, as did all 19th-century landscape painters. Reinterpreting Emile Zola's definition of realism as "nature seen through a temperament," Beal's landscape are truly contemporary subjective responses to nature.

The tendency to paint individualistic, almost sentient trees in the romantic landscape tradition was described by Ruskin as the "pathetic fallacy," by which human feeling is attributed to inanimate objects. One of Beal's largest canvases in the studio this winter featured a mad red tree trunk that



DONALD BEAL. PHOTO KRISTINE HOPKINS

thrusts through the center of the vertical canvas, splitting the distance in two. It emerged on the canvas, Beal says, "from an attempt to register a figure, or maybe from nothing at all, but then there was a red tree going up through the center of the painting and it reminded me of Rembrandt and Soutine's animal carcasses, of Titian's Flaying of Marsyas. These paintings rattle around in my head a lot—but I'm not sure there's any kind of narrative there." Visceral and truncated, yet immobile, the tree has a weighty corporeality that does seem to invite these formal analogies. Beal's encrusted, painterly surfaces invite inevitable comparisons to Courbet and Cezanne who also localized their landscape practices in well-known landscapes. Though the Beech Forest paintings evoke elements of traditional landscapes, they are simultaneously the products of a contemporary painter well-versed in modernist abstraction.

Beal recently began introducing animal and figural presences within several Beech Forest paintings. The occasional dog, horse, or figure darts from the trees like shades of Pisanello. They came into the paintings to up the ante, to go beyond description of place or subjective vision. Because Beal was

wary of the narratives such figures would induce, they successfully maintain a strangely non-narrative presence, neither nostalgic nor polemic.

The Beech Forest paintings are singular and compelling responses to Cape landscape that deny the easy pleasure of postcard seaside vistas. They beg the question: why is there not a stronger landscape school in Provincetown? Given the community's impressive painting legacy, one would expect a more vital and ongoing artistic dialogue and a greater sense of urgency in describing its land.

After periods of sustained looking and painting in the Beech Forest for a few winters, Beal occasionally returns to the shore with changed vision, one that makes him ask very different questions, painting the Atlantic as turbulent, turgid, whipped-up, and bruised: anything but a vacationer's paradise.

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# The real Beal

Provincetown painter's landscapes at CMFA

By Gerry Desautels

BANNER CORRESPONDENT

Donald Beal's relationship with Provincetown's Beech Forest is as volatile and strong as any can be. It is at first distant, then intimate, and eventually challenging with the march of time. It's one he willingly shares in his quest for personal meaning amidst the gentle woods of scrub pine, lichen and carpet moss which flirt with him year-round in the National Seashore Park. But it's the upcoming fall and winter seasons that he loves best, hording the time like the Beech Forest squirrels and birds who share the quieter, stark terrain in which he's left alone to paint.

A major show of Beal's oil-on-canvas works opens this Saturday, Sept. 18, at the Cape Museum of Fine Arts, 60 Hope Lane, Dennis, and runs through Nov. 7. (He will give a gallery talk at 2 p.m. Oct. 15.)

The show, entitled "Locating a

Landscape," was curated by two of Beal's longtime friends — Provincetown artist Rob Dutoit and art historian Maura Coughlin, both of whom share an intimate knowledge of his work. The show features larger studio landscapes and smaller subject sketches depicting Beal's modern abstract expressionist palette of lush oranges, deep reds, blues, greens and pinks — colors which mix the seasons into a bold mélange of natural and manmade art.

"As beautiful as the woods are there in bloom, the vegetation cover up the interesting shapes that lie below the surface," shared Beal recently in his Alden Street home and studio. "It feels too happy for me as an artist; it doesn't satisfy what I'm looking for. It's too easy. I have to chase a painting and work from my instincts to realize it without giving up too much."

An accomplished carpenter and builder, Beal has learned to make the most of Provincetown

spaces in more ways than meet the eye.

"When I first came to town in 1984, I did what every painter does when they first come. I painted the harbor. It's the most obvious thing in the world, but it got to a point that it wasn't very satisfying. So I searched to find something as different as I could find and went out into the woods. It broke up my whole notion of building space on a painting surface. It was only then that I also began to see objects between shapes, for instance, how space is framed between tree branches," he says.

For 12 years now, Beal has derived a language of expression from the forest where he obeys his impulses and follows the paint wherever it takes him. He chose Beech Forest as a nearby and familiar reliable place to return to and interact with year in, year out. Losing any differentiation between subject matter and secondary space, Beal was freed and

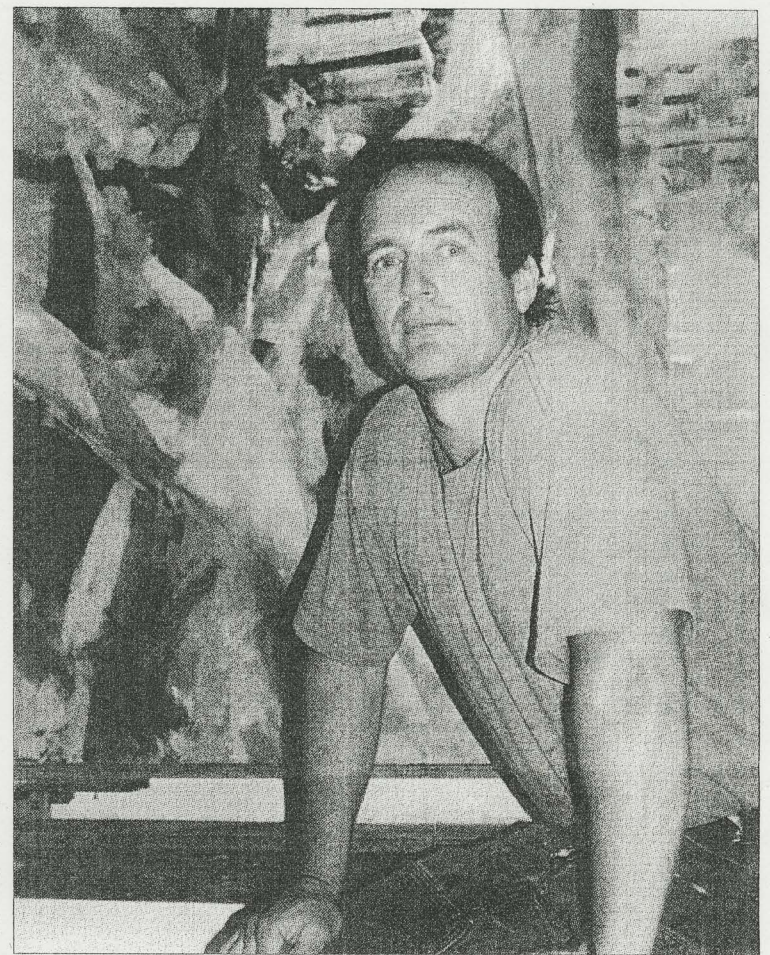


PHOTO GERRY DESAUTELS

Provincetown artist Donald Beal in front of one of his paintings on view at the Cape Museum of Fine Arts through Nov. 7.



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challenged to paint what he had once not recognized.

Truly contemporary, Beal's work represents subjective, uniquely non-narrative responses to nature and he credits some of his inspiration to two starkly different painters: the great 19th-century realist French landscape artist Gustave Courbet and the modern Dutch-American abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning, who died in 1997. "They were both so visceral," explains Beal.

A graduate of New Bedford's former Swain School of Design, Beal later pursued a master's program at Parson's School of Design in New York, where he studied with Paul Resika. Today he teaches drawing twice a week at UMass-Dartmouth. The rest of his time is his to paint.

Though he admits he can't truly paint anywhere else, Beal remembers when he also struggled with his art right here in Provincetown. "I was doing one unsuccessful painting after the other," he says. But after 20 years, he has comfortably settled into his home with his wife and son, and his painting, with which he plays, exploits and experiments without fear of losing his self along the way. "With the Beech Forest forms, I feel flexible to do anything," he says.

Life figures have also emerged into his work of late: a dog inspired from his childhood, an unlucky rabbit killed in the forest, a dog walker on a forest path and a sunbather posing by the pond. He's also returned to the harbor, embracing his evolved style, this time painting a stormy abstract Atlantic shrouded and dwarfed by violent, dark clouds overhead, trapped in space and heaving with emotion.

"If an image starts to surface in my work, and it seems strong enough, I let it survive and work with it rather than squash it down or paint over it. It's these shapes that prevail and work together to form something vital. It's much more intrinsic to the way we see as humans," Beal says. □





DONALD BEAL, "BATHER," 1994, OIL ON CANVAS, 5' X 4'  
PHOTO COURTESY GALLERY MATRIX

## Donald Beal

BY LUCY GREALY

I NOTICED DONALD BEAL BEFORE I MET him. It was at an opening for another artist's abstract sculptures. I noticed Beal because he bears a slight resemblance to my brother, whom I had not seen in many years, and I noticed Beal because he is much more handsome than my brother could ever be, despite my brother's dearly held misconceptions about himself. That evening I also couldn't help but notice that Beal looked a bit uncomfortable at the opening, a bit unhappy in his own skin, as if he wanted out. Sometimes feeling is immediately translatable into idea, and luckily my feeling that this man was an artist proved right, even though it would be several months before we finally met through a mutual friend, and several more months after that before we developed our own separate friendship. It's been a friendship based on troubles and answers: troubles in life we answer through art, troubles in art we answer through living.

This last thought might sound trite, or perhaps overly idealistic, except for the fact that few people I've met live out their lives through their art as indefatigably as Beal. I know this because I've sat with him for endless hours in his studio, looking at lines, color shapes, becoming acquainted with how these basic visual events are the central vocabulary to how Beal answers, or tries to answer, questions about meaning, form, value, and even those "big" questions concerning beauty and truth; immense issues that can only honestly haunt us if we are willing to re-

turn again and again to the simplest, most minute details. The most gorgeous, voluptuous beauty dwells in the most unadorned gestures, complex meanings reside in the most rudimentary angles.

"It's tricky," he told me recently. "You're trying on one hand to create something, but you're also really just trying to express something that already exists, that doesn't need to be created, because it's already there. I feel all I can do is try to be honest in my attempts. Of course, the trouble there is, how do you know you're being honest? How do you know you're not just kidding yourself?"

For a long time, Beal was doing a great many landscapes. When looking at these landscapes, it's easy to feel that one's neck is craning upward, one's eyes peering up through and past the league upon league of branches that occupy most of these paintings. It's a dizzying sensation. Other landscapes, all of them taken from Cape

Cod's Beech Forest, have you peering down actual or only suggested paths, guiding your vision past more trees and leading toward a continuous promise of ever greater space. Despite the densely wooded locations, these small canvasses filled with kinetic and usually opposing lines offer not a sense of claustrophobic enclosure but rather one of inexhaustible openness and space existing just beyond the line of vision. It is this use of space, this involvement of the language of painting, of line and plane, which make these landscapes compelling, for it is immediately apparent that there is no false mystery here, no mere attempt at an optical illusion.

By being fluent in the language of his art, Beal is able to render his love of space and light in a manner which honestly and openly accounts for, even welcomes, the truth that all of this volatile movement is taking place on a static, two-dimensional surface. As the skewed lines lead us simultaneously off and onto the canvas, passing through colors which are basic and subtle in their range, and even in the most recent of the landscape series, with its more dissolved lines which do not rest in any clearly definable fore, middle, or background, there is just the right degree of ambiguity and tension, that razor edge where the world and preconceived notions of it meet and fuse.

This same inexhaustible trust and mistrust of space and any attempts to represent it also makes for equally compelling figurative paintings. "For me as an artist," he said, "the human figure is the one form which compels me endlessly. Many artists think the figure is *passé*, that there isn't anything left to do there. But I think the opposite is true. One needs both an incredible amount of audacity to try and render something as complex as space and light onto a flat plane, but you also need a great deal of humility, a reverence for, not just your subject at hand, but for the whole of life, for being alive. Why

things engage us is and should be a mystery: that they engage us is sometimes the most tangible thing we can know about them. Our rapture becomes our knowledge."

Beal's figure paintings employ a similar though often darker use of color than in the landscapes and they depend less on the primary strength of his lines. If the Beech Forest paintings are arenas for the stark conflicts between different levels of perception, Beal presents us now with paintings more concerned with the meditative attempts to resolve these conflicts. Even in "Embracing Figures," which physically and allegorically divides the two seated subjects with dark, heavy vertical lines, there is an open acceptance of the artificial which makes the separation taking place within the canvas that much more poignant, and the overall visual union of what is on the canvas that much more penetrating. In the "Seated Figure" series there is an insistently straight line used to describe the subject's outstretched legs, a line which has nothing to do with what "real" legs are, yet, somehow, despite every idea which previously informed us to the contrary, have everything to do with how real legs appear. The dark figure, which remains shadowed and pensive even as she looks outside a window made up of almost pure white, a window that is less about what is seen through it than it is about existing as a thing and a presence, resists becoming clear to us, hovering instead just behind and beyond our sense of her. In the more abstract "Pink Nude," the dynamic of how we perceive being equally to and inseparable from what we perceive is played out even more, or perhaps I should say even less, because the brazen flatness and inorganic shapes of the painting demand even more sharply that we examine, via their absence, the three-dimensional fullness of form we usually assume a work of art is going to attempt, and necessarily fail, to render for us.

Most recently, Beal has been working out this relationship to the three dimensional through the most obvious path: sculpture. Working small most of the time ("my studio is small"), Beal has been doing clay and wax self-portraits and portraits of his son, Max. "I'd like to work more with granite," he said, "and marble, of course, but sometimes it's hard to come by the materials. Working with such solid masses works two ways on my psyche; I'm both very, very careful, because stone doesn't let you take any move back, and, I'm very, very open to new avenues. Once something happens, is literally set in stone, your only choice is to move forward, to possibly abandon and reinvent an idea or image you'd held very dear only moments before."

Beal's two largest recent sculptures are both of the human figure. "Walking Woman," in limestone, is simple, streamlined, elegant, and impossible. The angle of the figure's pelvis does not correspond to her shoulder. Beal said he felt, "on an instinctual level, even as my measuring tape told me I was wrong, that her shoulders



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had to go that way. The difference between different kinds of reason is that some are easily evidenced and made manifest in the world by rulers and laws: others, just as valid, are more invisible."

The second sculpture, my favorite, is of Marysis, the ancient hero of myth who was flayed alive. The torso is beautifully crafted, as much for what is left out as for what is left in. Beal chose to work around a defect in the stone, not realizing how raw, how simultaneously vulnerable and heroic the figure would end up seeming. It is as if the material, rose alabaster, a pink, highly veined stone, crafted the piece, and that Beal was simply guiding it. "It started out as just a male torso, but once I started polishing it, the alabaster started showing me all this flesh, all this drama. It was really startling. It seemed more than simply fortuitous."

One can't help but enter Beal's work. There is a mixed sensation of a painting or sculpture and, at the same time, of a world beyond the work, full of a difficult, on-going drama impossible to articulate. The strength of the work lies in that one senses the artist is never exhausted by this drama, only endlessly drawn toward it, searching for it. ■

*Lucy Grealy is the author of the widely acclaimed memoir, *Autobiography of a Face*, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1994. She teaches at Sarah Lawrence College.*