



SELF PORTRAIT C.1947 ETCHING 4½" X 6"

JEAN MORRISON BECKER  
1917-1994



Grace Glueck

# Jean Morrison Becker

I FIRST KNEW JEAN BECKER as a friend, rather than an artist. She was shy about showing me her work, but when I saw it I realized the same warmth and energy that I saw in her as a person.

Subject matter didn't concern her much. Nor did she aspire to paint the figure. She was most interested in two basic elements: color and line. "Color is of greatest importance to me and trying to find something to hang it on is, I suppose, my main objective," she once told an interviewer. She admired Rothko's gift for "putting slabs of color on," and working them without the need for subject matter other than the colors themselves.

Becker didn't quite know how her interest in color began. Among other stimuli, it was the bright red fire engines she saw on the streets of Cranford,

New Jersey, that fed her childish ambition to be a fire chief; it was the glowing hues of the leaves as they changed during autumn and their green freshness in the spring.

"I see color all the time," she told an interviewer. "I'm fascinated with the color of the early green leaves against the purple-gray tree trunks. Something like that gets me started on a painting because I feel I've got to use those colors someplace."

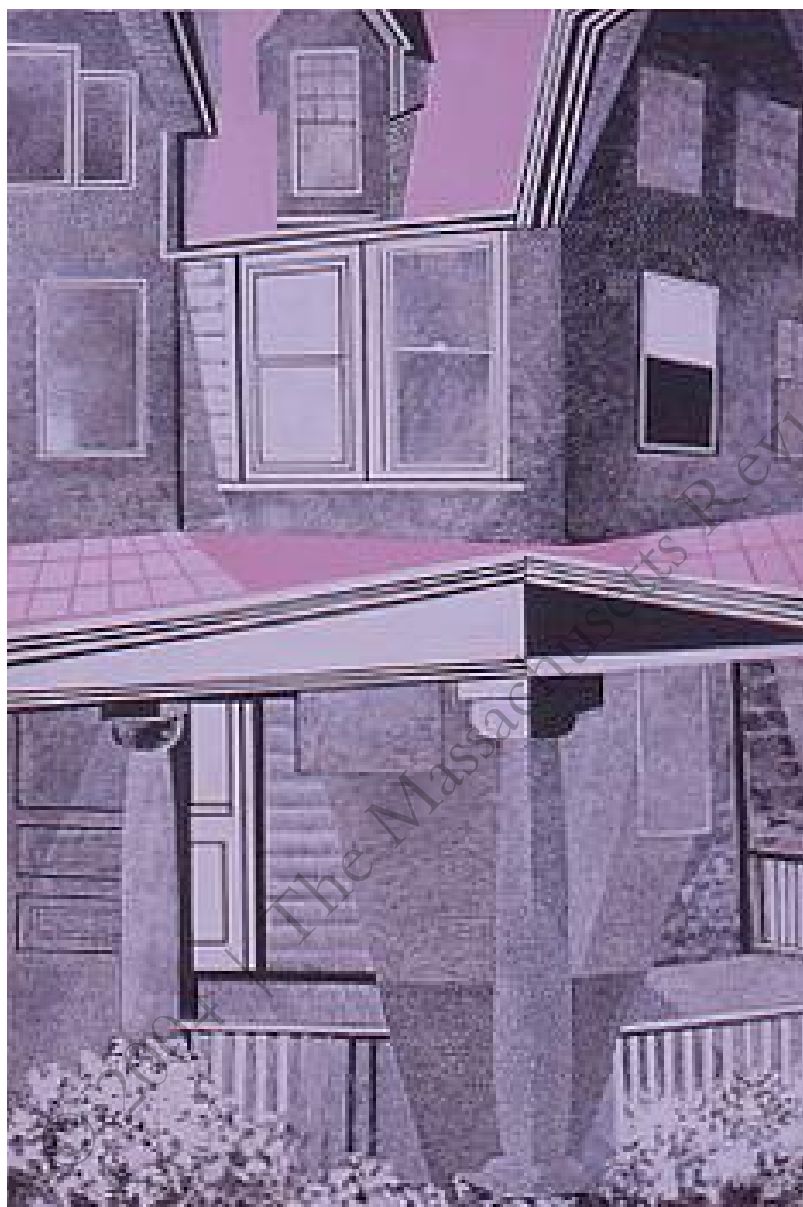
At Sarah Lawrence, where she studied with the painter Kurt Roesch, she felt that the pursuit of color and its mixing was the best thing that came out of his program. "We spent a lot of time on color, analyzing it, dissecting it, attempting to make it pure; not mashing it up. Using color contrasts, trying other colors to change the key of one, tone it down or brighten it up, these things played a very important part."

Along with color, her interest in exploring line and its spatial connotations was encouraged by the advanced theories and techniques taught at

Atelier 17, the famous workshop run by the Paris-based English engraver Stanley William Hayter, who worked in New York during the war and post-war years of 1940 to 1950. She found the intense atmosphere and bonhomie



UNTITLED c.1948  
ETCHING 7" X 11"



HOME 1982 ACRYLIC ON BOARD 24" X 36"

---

of the workshop stimulating. It was there that she met Miró and the modernist painter Alice Trumbull Mason, with whom she shared a studio for a while and—more importantly—the printmaker and teacher Fred Becker. She married him in 1949.



THE KITCHEN EPISODE 1986 ACRYLIC ON BOARD?? 22½" X 30"



LEAVING 1988 ACRYLIC ON BOARD 33" X 24"

The couple lived for many years in St. Louis, where he taught at Washington University, and she too began teaching painting and design classes, specializing in combining structure and color. In 1968 they moved to Amherst, where they both taught at the University of Massachusetts, Fred as a printmaker, and Jean conducting evening classes in painting. She completed her MFA at UMass in 1978, a step that led to a revitalization of her own painting.

She had always been intrigued by architectural forms, particularly those of houses, which appear in many of her paintings. One dated 1982 and titled "Home" depicts in grays, whites, and pink the façade element of a comfortable old house, from a skewed Cubistic perspective. Windows, including a dormer, doors, and a railed porch whose roof is supported by fat columns make up the nostalgic mix, which almost certainly evokes Becker's own childhood home.

"I had a love of linear work, putting lines in juxtaposition with other lines and trying to create a space out of them," she said. In another, more abstract painting, the skeletal forms of houses are deployed in blues, grays, and blacks. Geometric shapes: triangular upper stories supported by rectangular outlines of walls, door frames, floor planks, beams and such are cleverly orchestrated over the canvas, using multiple perspectives.

And she dealt with interiors as well. Although she denied an interest in the figure, and hadn't much use for "subject matter," among her most successful

---

#### NONENTITIES IN THE KITCHEN

1989 ACRYLIC ON BOARD 48" X 36"





ANNUNCIATION 1990 ACRYLIC ON BOARD 23" X 24"

works are a series of lively canvases from the late 1980s and early 1990s that focus humorously on women working in, or departing from, the kitchen. They suggest her feelings on the subject of feminine domesticity.

“Nonentities in the Kitchen” (1989) shows two women at kitchen duties wearing aprons, while another, dressed for departure, strides blithely through, obviously on her way out. In another, “Leaving” (1988), an apron floats away from a lone woman as she runs out of the picture.

In both paintings, the sketchy room, constructed like a stage set with Becker’s typical attention to flat geometrical planes, is floored with a checkered pattern of black and white tiles in two different sizes, a pattern that Becker said particularly engaged her. The floor tiles appear again in another witty interior, “Annunciation” (1990), a takeoff on the famous Merode Altarpiece (Circa 1426), presumably by Robert Campin, a.k.a. the Master of Flemalle.

In the Becker version, the angel appears to Mary in a spacious Romanesque room, backed by a series of arched windows that look out on the packed buildings of a Medieval town. But modern accoutrements, a sink, a toilet, and

a bathtub, sit below the windows between the angel and Mary, who obviously does not welcome the angel's news of her pregnancy's outcome.

Yet Becker disclaimed any real attempt at feminist comment. "For a while I was going over to women's subjects; I felt that I should be doing something that had to do with the political scene, particularly with feminist politics. Something that reflected the time, because it is difficult sitting in a room painting some sort of ethereal thing with the death and destruction that goes on around us every day. Yet actually I did these paintings simply because I was fascinated by the interior of the house," she said.

Although Cubism, Kurt Roesch, Joan Miró, Abstract Expressionism, and other sources obviously influenced her—she was determined, as a young woman, to be involved with modernism—Becker was very much aware that painting was apt to have its own way with those who took up with it.

"I do rely heavily on accidents to help me," she said, "although they can be a negative source to lead you away from your original intentions. But I have a divine belief in paintings; that they kind of make themselves. I'm just someone with a brush at the end of my arm, and I hope it all works out."

*Grace Glueck  
New York City  
October, 2004*

---

PREPARATIONS 1990 ACRYLIC ON BOARD 13" X 15"





© SUBURBAN BUILDINGS 1980 ACRYLIC ON BOARD 24" X 32"

MR

THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW  
WINTER 2004-2005

*This special section was made possible by a grant  
from the UMass Alumni Association*

