



# A POET OF PAINT

With the approach of a career retrospective at the Michener Art Museum, Bucks County artist Robert Beck is focused on what really matters.

By PATTI VERBANAS | Photo by LAURA PEDRICK

“I love listening to the birds. It’s my heaven,” says Robert Beck, standing in the studio he designed (as he did the adjacent house) on a woodsy two-and-a-half-acre tract in Solebury, Pennsylvania. The studio’s design is Prairie style, featuring simple lines that highlight Beck’s artwork and allow nature to intrude. By the front window, bathed in northerly light, his painting station faces an expansive back wall where he completes larger works—some as wide as 12 feet. Though he keeps a studio in Manhattan, it’s here, among the birdsong and rustling leaves, where Beck feels most at home.

A self-described “rural guy who loves animals and feels at home alone in the woods,” Beck was 13 when his family moved to Bucks County. When asked why he stayed, he counters, “Name someplace better! There’s beauty and water—I grew up falling out of trees into creeks—and there’s such a wonderful cultural mix of people here who have given me a lot of support.”

Growing up in Chalfont, just fifteen miles from his current home, Beck saw creative possibilities everywhere. He knew that acclaimed novelist James Michener hailed from Doylestown, that master furniture maker George

Nakashima toiled in nearby New Hope. He even watched his father make drawings. “You’d see paintings by local artists in the schools, Nakashima tables in people’s houses,” Beck recalls. “It taught me that making a living through art is possible, that I can do it, well, because everyone here does it.”

Beck creates his oils-on-panel in his studio as well as en plein air from life. He’s known for his wide range of genres and subjects, including a number of series he created by immersing himself into the lives of those inhabiting other worlds—towboat operators pushing barges along the Mississippi River, racing team members in the British Grand Prix, fishermen in coastal Maine. He could spend days discovering how a painting’s narrative unfolds, changing details as he proceeds. “I’ll have an idea or a feeling and do a course of studies and sketches, but much of my process happens while I’m painting,” Beck says. “I don’t know where it’s going to end up.”

Beck derives his paintings from memory or impressions. He describes them as encounters that capture a “before-and-after of the moment,” with a movement that suggests there’s more than this slice of time. “Duplication—like working from a photo—is a lost opportunity,” he says. “A memory is a refined version of an event—and it’s usually better.”

Beck was 40 when he left his career as a graphic artist to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and pursue painting full time. That was three decades ago. Today, he says, he wants to create works that matter. “If I can understand why I’m

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*Opposite: Robert Beck inside his studio in Solebury, Pennsylvania. Below: Lobstermen depicted in Stormtide, one of many paintings Beck has done in Maine.*







Martini, showing *The Swan* bar in Lambertville.

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Beck considers next year's retrospective of his work at the Michener Art Museum "the high point so far."

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drawn to the scene I'm painting, it'll help me create a work that will matter to people, regardless of what country they are in, because the viewer and I are similar—we share the same human nature," he says.

As an example, Beck points to *Skating Party*, in which ice-skaters huddle around a crackling fire on the far banks of a frozen pond slashed by skate blades and pockmarked with ice bumps and branches. "If you've ever been skating on a pond, you'll respond to this pond, which is not super smooth, and the cuts from the blades in the ice," he says. "What makes it look like ice is your memory of having been there."

**I**n August 2021, the Michener Art Museum in Doylestown will launch a retrospective of Beck's work, his fourth museum show. It will be accompanied by a career catalogue, which includes other projects, such as his radio show, and a volume containing a selection of essays and images from his 15 years of writing his "A Thousand Words" column for *ICON Magazine*. Beck considers the show an honor—"a celebration, a re-acquainting, the high point so far."

The exhibit's curator, David

Leopold, has known Beck's work for two decades. "Robert turns the typical Bucks County scenes on their head," Leopold says. "He captures an experience in a way that is perhaps more vivid than the experience itself. He has a great eye for the telling detail that will trigger memories and bring you into the experience. He is a real poet with paint."

Curating an exhibition of about 60 pieces from an oeuvre of approximately 4,000 works compiled over 30 years is a formidable task, but one that Leopold thinks is overdue. "If they write a history of the arts in this area 50 years from now," he says, "you won't be able to tell that story without Robert Beck, since he plays such a crucial role." 

*Patti Verbanas, a former editor of Art & Antiques and New Jersey Life, wrote about the artists Candace Bassett and David Cann, of Moorland Studios, in the Summer issue.*



Robert Whitely in his Studio, which Beck painted live while the noted woodworker, who died in June, toiled in his studio in Solebury.



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