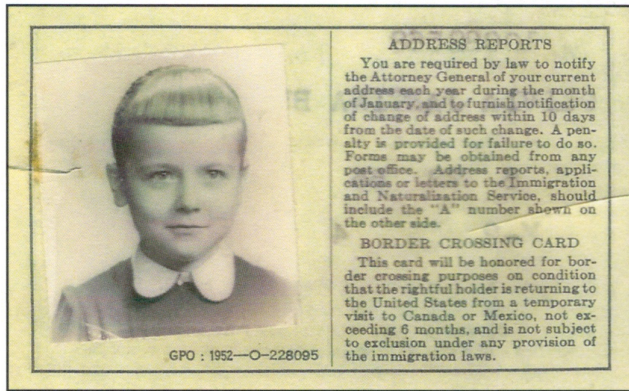


THE STORYTELLER



OLIVIA BEENS
THROUGH THE DECADES

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A Permanent Resident Card, or “green card,” issued by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 1955

Interdisciplinary Dutch-American artist Olivia Beens creates artworks that are helixed around the sacred and profane. Buoyed by identity, spirituality and feminism, her lyrical sculptures, potent wall reliefs and extensive performances explore the self, while encapsulating ideas of transformation. Working both figuratively and abstractly, her extensive body of work draws upon a longstanding interest in the Baroque and Renaissance periods, and places aspects of these movements alongside imagery gleaned from her intricate personal history.

Born in 1948 in Holland to a Czech mother and Dutch father, Beens' cultural identity can be described as more of a fragmented nature, not unlike her sculptural works. Three years after she was born, her parents separated which led to a temporary relocation to Portugal with her mother. In 1955, Beens' mother remarried and they immigrated to Flushing, Queens. Feeling alone but curious, the young artist took it upon herself to learn English and study American culture through television programs like *Father Knows Best* and *Roy Rogers*. Throughout the 1960s Beens attended New York City public schools and Catholic boarding schools before matriculating to Pratt in 1973. During her tenure at Pratt she fell in love and had a son with a fellow art student. After graduating with highest honors, Beens enrolled in the MFA program at Hunter College, where she studied with renowned Minimalist sculptors Robert Morris and Tony Smith. With her family spread out in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, Beens tried to reclaim and relearn her heritage but felt hampered by the idea of having no baseline. As such, Beens' artistic practice developed largely out of her personal experiences with relationships, loss and religion.

Inspired by seminal women artists of the 1970s, such as Louise Bourgeois, Ana Mendieta and Hannah Wilke, Beens looked to sculpture as a way to create art that she could relate to, whether it be women's attitudes about their bodies or the struggles of being an artist and a mother. Working in clay, found objects and performance, she forged relationships and meaning between the materials and her ideas through a form of extrasensory perception. “Clay is a way for me to process the world; there's

very little thinking required, my hands do the work. I look and make changes but my ideas are synthesized through an intuitive tactile process," states Beens.

Using the body as a site of transgression, Beens found personal strength through sexuality and a connection to her culture and diverse heritage, attitudes seen in her ongoing series of mystical reliefs, *Icons* (1990-1999). Presented as body fragment works, they recall iconic female imagery with totemic busts, bare torsos and religious poses. Created only on the occasion of a "vision," each piece unlocks a feminist consciousness with depictions of ovoid shapes, hooded folds and voluptuous curves. Set against copper grounds which function as a conductor of universal forces, earthly materials like bits of human hair, feathers and bones become sacred relics from an unknown past. Beens remarks, "The Icons are at my core, a single female figure. They developed from my interest in feminism and fertility figures. Women giving life, preserving civilization and passing it on to subsequent generations."

Connected to the *Icons* series is *Object Spirit* (1990-1999), a group of assemblages, which use found objects from nature and urban settings as essential elements. Comprised of bones, feathers, wrapping, seaweed and wood, each piece is intended to be a peephole or portal to other worlds connecting heaven and earth. During the creation of these pieces Beens' psyche wanders through history, myth, magic and religion. Building upon this meditative exercise, she also mines her family albums as a way to learn more about herself and her heritage.

Beens' ancestral roots take shape in different ways throughout her body of work, and are profoundly evidenced in *Column of Tears* (2006-2012), an architectural cascade of ceramic teardrops. Comprised of multiple clay parts, the modular columns represent a specific emotional response to a political event, personal experience or memory. Each drop is individually created by hand and glazed in a variety of pastel colors. "The capital of the column creates the context while the drops form the flutes of the column, and the base grounds the sculpture. The clay drops initially referring to tears have become

oil, blood, sweat, buds, pods – the essence of the man, nature, heaven and hell. Some of the pieces are more like chandeliers or mobiles, but I still refer to them as columns since their origin is the column," explains Beens. Triggered by an electrical storm during a family visit in Prague, Beens recalled the Byzantine pillar, *Column of Tears*, located in a cistern in Istanbul, Turkey. The memory triggered an emotional response about her personal obsession with tears from childhood. Airy yet pendulous, it seemed as if the natural world set the stage for a body of work that was both personal and public.

Occupying another metaphysical place in Beens' oeuvre are *Baroque Passages* (2012-2018), a collection of metallic clay heads. Ranging from poignant to poetic, each sculpture embodies a sense of movement with organic forms and alluring patinas. Evolving after her mother's struggle with death, these pieces are inspired by images of the afterlife often seen in churches that Beens observed as a child. Works such as *Hecate's Daughters* (2017), a conical bust inspired by the ancient Greek goddess of protection, magic and witchcraft (for the Women's March on Washington), and *Four-Sided Girl* (2016), a four-sided sculpture comprised of shifting shapes that embodies the female aspect of the Buddha, each touch upon religious conceits in a contemporary context. Current pieces, like *The Storyteller* (2018), a life scale, mixed media icon that is emblematic of a maternal female archetype and other clay works tell stories that involve myth, history and culture.

Beens' sculptures, performances and installations are bound together in such a way that they resist perceptual cleaving. Steeped in issues of identity, feminism and spirituality, each work is part of a continuum that is based upon feeling and intuition. From childhood to the present day, Beens has occupied the role of artist and cultural anthropologist, but perhaps most importantly, that of the storyteller.

**– HEATHER ZISES, co-editor
of 50 Contemporary Women Artists
(Schiffer Publishing Ltd.),
and independent curator.**