

For JB 7.24.14 (Catalogue Essay for his artist book *Lone Rail*)

John Beech's *Lone Rail* prints originated with an invitation. The Marfa-based printer Robert Arber had sent him a set of clear Mylar sheets on which he could draw whatever he liked before returning them to Arber to be made into lithographs. Beech frequently works this way, and enjoys being prompted by external stimuli. When asked to mount an exhibition in a distant venue, for instance, he will often arrive early and make new pieces in response to local conditions and available material. For the *Lone Rail* series, Beech got underway using various black media – ink, paint, china marker – working quickly on several drawings at a time in his Bushwick studio. At first, he drew without referent, letting one mark lead to another. But after a while, he felt the need for “input from an object,” and his eye caught an 8-inch section of railway track that was sitting on the floor nearby. In the following weeks, Beech used the rail as a touchstone for several of the nearly forty drawings he sent back to Texas, though it is clearly identifiable in only one of the thirteen lithographs – all set against a uniform taupe background – that he chose for the final portfolio.ⁱ

To the uninitiated, the mostly abstract *Lone Rail* prints might, at first, seem peripheral to Beech's enterprise. Widely known for large-scale paintings and drawings that use mounted photographs of Dumpsters as their support, and for container-like sculptures that turn minimalist pieties on their head, Beech is not obviously an abstract artist. Real objects and utilitarian materials (like dolly wheels, work gloves, industrial-strength lazy-Susan hardware and duct tape) are omnipresent in his work, grounding its colorful, sometimes-comedic pleasures to disregarded corners of daily life. But over the course of the past seven or eight years, the gestural grammars of Abstract Expressionism – long present in the drippy enamel brushwork with which he slathers his photographs and sculptures – have come to the fore. Indeed, in the paintings he has made since 2010, and now in these lithographs, mark making itself has become a vital preoccupation.

Careful study of the *Lone Rail* prints reveals that most result from at least two lines of attack: an underlying set of vaguely architectural or object-like motifs is either covered over with scratchy secondary marks or more forcefully blotted out. The effects of these obscuring techniques may

look formless or random, but they are intentional and characteristic of Beech, who regularly constructs his work by layering one set of visual information over another. Art, for him, often happens when order meets disorder – when, for instance, a perfectly good window is hit by a stone, and “explodes in a drawing.” In fact, Beech was thinking about shattered windows when he made the *Lone Rail* drawings – not as source material to represent but as an example to follow. If mark making is at the heart of these drawings, then Beech himself was both pane of glass and stone.

Considered as a whole, the thirteen prints of the *Lone Rail* series describe a spectrum of gestural possibilities. A few are solo riffs; others are dense with engagement. Looking back and forth between them, noting their similarities and differences, their echoes and recurrences, one senses a through line, a kind of story. It is a tale of mark making in search of itself, of gestures flirting with their capacity to represent something familiar, and deliberately not doing so. Like the *Lone Rail* itself, knowledge is elusive. Beech’s prints conjure but do not conclude. Their subject is uncertainty.

Steel Stillman

ⁱ Beech found his section of railway track in a Brooklyn junk shop. By coincidence, Robert Arber has a similar piece of rail in his print studio in Marfa, a town whose diurnal rhythms are punctuated by long, slow-moving freight trains. Arber’s rail section shows up in the prints on pages 20 and 21, which, like their companions on pages 22 through 25, were made during visits Beech made to Arber’s studio while the *Lone Rail* series was being printed. These later images were drawn, not on Mylar, but directly on lithographic stones.