

frieze

When James Benning Goes to Joshua Tree

An online presentation organized by Julie Ault and Martin Beck documents the artists' friendship and creative exchanges

BY [GRACIE HADLAND](#) IN **REVIEWS** | 07 JUL 20



Rarely do we get to see an artwork in its permanent resting place, outside of an institution. Most privately owned art can only be viewed while it's out on tour, removed from its perch in a home or collection. Alongside an artwork in a collector's home, you might see unwashed dishes or muddy shoes – a personal, intimate experience that feels almost forbidden, like seeing your teacher at the grocery store. For 'Down the Rabbit Hole: JB in JT', organized in collaboration with O-Town House, artist-curators Julie Ault and Martin Beck invite viewers into their Joshua Tree home to browse their collection of works by James Benning – a close friend and frequent houseguest. A photographic tour of the house reveals Benning's works placed in corners or removed from drawers for display. The images are presented chronologically according to when each work was gifted to, purchased or informally commissioned by Ault and Beck, acting as a timeline of the artists' progressing friendship.

Most of the works are homages to historical artists that inspire Benning or collaborations with other living artists, including his own daughter, as well as Ault and Beck. Ever the well-mannered guest, Benning never seems to arrive at the Joshua Tree cottage empty-handed, each time bringing a new drawing or pinecones from his home in rural Los Angeles County (Two sugar pine cones (*Pinus lambertiana*) from Hatchet Peak near Pine Flat, c.2005). Sometimes, he assumes the role of flamboyant handyman, adding personal flourishes to objects in the house (Clock, 2006; June 2nd, 1984, 2015; Ault + Beck, 2019). These 'commissions' keep him busy during his stays. The stories behind each of the works are told in detail by Benning, Ault and Beck in extended captions, including the making and installation processes, and the occasional admission of mistakes made.

Unlike so many virtual exhibitions at the moment, this show refuses, in the transition from physical to digital, to present itself like an online store or to re-create the chill of a

white-walled gallery. Its photographs and text read more like a blog entry. Isn't such intimacy what we desire from the internet?

Nothing in 'Down the Rabbit Hole' is for sale, since all the works have already been sold or gifted to Ault and Beck. Instead, moments of transaction are alluded to via inside jokes: *Three Paper Airplanes* (2014), for instance, is a work comprising three US\$100 notes folded into paper airplanes that Benning sold to Ault for US\$600; a sum Benning, in turn, donated to the film department at CalArts. This is an economy of friendship.

As we spend so much more time at home during lockdown, we begin to look at our own possessions differently, considering their significance, sentimental value and origins. Books we usually keep on the shelf have been dusted off and cracked open. Delving into a personal collection can be a way of reckoning with the past and present: to perform archaeology in your own backyard, to go down the rabbit hole, as it were. This show concludes with a work that does not yet exist: *After Darger (Welcome)* (2020), a painting on a garage door. 'James had the idea for it over the holidays but wanted to wait for warmer weather to paint it,' Beck writes. 'We thought including a mock-up here might ensure it happens – hopefully [as] soon as he can safely come to JT.' The collaboration between friends on display here is continuous and, in that sense, this show will go on.