A Gentle Man

an exhibition by

Becky Beasley

80wse gallery presents A Gentle Man, an exhibition by Becky Beasley inspired by a short story by Bernard Malamud. The great problem of the short story, as Bernard Malamud puts it, is “to say everything that must be said and to say it quickly, fleetingly, as though two people had met for a moment in a restaurant, or a railroad station, and one had time only to tell the other they are both human, and, here, this story proves it.”

In a time where ceaseless brevity of encounter and communication is a way of life, the short story feels more vital than ever and the short form is at the heart of this exhibition. A Gentle Man is a video installation with a linoleum floor and a decor that transforms the length of the gallery’s five rooms into a journey, from day to night. This newly commissioned four-part video portrait of an imaginary man from birth to the present (1940—2017) explores gentleness through its four discreet chapters: The First Story, The Second, The Third, Walking Up Broadway. The work presents four short films of brief encounters, offering them as minor transgressions of engagement, reality, and profound choices. Each chapter’s location, along a floor design that traces Broadway through Manhattan, represents, symbolically, a different time of day — morning, afternoon, evening and night — and, emotionally, an unspecified interior or exterior. In the exterior scenes it is always raining. The floor design sparely maps the space of Bernard Malamud’s early writing, and the short story, “Spring Rain” (1949), which is set around Morningside Heights. Malamud’s free education — from Flatbush to Harlem — is also mapped. British actor Russell Tovey (Looking, HBO; Quantico, ABC; Angels in America, Royal Noel Neill Theatre, London) narrates.

“Spring Rain” — written by the Brooklyn-born Malamud when he was 28 — was not published until 1969, three years after his death, and has received little attention. Malamud’s biographer Philip Duch has confirmed this. Beasley has been fascinated by the story for a decade, and at 80wse she has taken the opportunity to chase the story in Manhattan itself. “Spring Rain” is a tender picture of interiority and a glimpse into a man’s life and an evening flash into clarity for a moment as a result of watching a young man die at the beginning of the story and, later, while walking in the rain with his daughter’s boyfriend. Using only existing light, the exhibition moves from day—night rooms on Washington Square to unit rear spaces, illuminated here by large video projections. Kissing Chairs, designed as a multi-part sculpture by the artist, is presented in each of the rooms of the exhibition for visitors to sit on.

Cartographer Molly Roy’s beautiful map, Oscillating City — which charts population density in Manhattan by day and by night — from Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas (UC Press) by Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro will be in the first gallery.

1. Conversations with Malamud, Edited by Lawrence Lashez


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5/11 – 6/29/2017

To schedule an interview or to attend the opening reception on June 14, 2017 please call: (212) 982.4240

Bernard Malamud

Bernard Malamud (April 26, 1914 — March 18, 1986) was a Brooklyn-born American and short-story writer. Along with Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, he was one of the best known American Jewish authors of the 20th century. He studied at Erasmus Hall High School, Flatbush (1931, BA), City College (1936 and Columbia (1942). He was president of PEN American Center from 1979 to 1981. Although he granted occasional interviews, Malamud led an intensely private life. In an interview with Joseph Wershba in 1958, Malamud commented that he had not (as yet) made a living from writing, only from his teaching, and that “the books have paid for car repairs, an encyclopedia set for the children, maybe a washing machine” (Not Horrific but Sadness”). Joseph Wershba (1958) in Conversations with Malamud, Ed. Lawrence Lashez, University Press of Mississippi, 1991. p7

Erasmus Hall High School located in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, was one of the oldest (founded 1786), largest (5,000 students) and most Jewish public high schools in America. It has many famous alumni. Founded as Erasmus Hall Academy, the private institution of higher learning was named after scholar Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch Renaissance humanist. During the 19th century Erasmus Hall, Ferry, and Vassar were the only girls in population, causing the originally small school to enlarge. The City of New York designated the school as a landmark in 1966, describing the school as one of the oldest secondary schools in the country. Due to poor academic standing, the school was closed in 2011, turning it into Erasmus Hall Educational Campus and using it as the location for five separate small schools. (See also “The Lost World of Jewish Flatbush” by Joel Dinan in Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas, Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, University of California Press, 2016, p74–75.)

The City College of the City University of New York (more commonly referred to as City College, CCNY, or City) is a public senior college of the City University of New York (CUNY) in New York City. Located on a hill overlooking Harlem in Manhattan, City College is affectionately known as the “Harvard of the proletariat” and has graduated more Nobel Prize winners than any other public university in the United States. Founded in 1847, City College stands as the first public institution of higher education in the United States. It is the oldest of CUNY’s 24 institutions of higher learning, and is considered its flagship college. Other primaries at City College that help to define its history include the first student government in the nation (Aca- demic Senate, 1867); the first national fraternity to accept members without regard to religion, race, color or creed (Delta Sigma Phi, 1869); the first public institution of education for women; and, in defense of the use of the name of the college, which it had not trademarked, with the court opining that even if the name had been registered as a trademark, it was by now so widely used that it had become generic. Under its current name, it is considered to be the first product name to become a generic term. In 1873 the American Linoleum Manufacturing Company opened the first U.S. linoleum factory in New Haven, Connecticut. The company was named Lino- leumville. After the factory closed in 1928, the name was unanomously changed to Travis in 1930. Linoleum, also called lino, is made by oxidizing linseed oil to form a thermosetting natural rubber with a high degree of permanence. The cement is cooled and mixed with pine resin and wood flour to form sheets on a jute backing. Forbes’ linoleum, Marmoleum, is made from 97 percent natural raw materials. It is 100 percent biodegradable and will grow back within 10 years. Marmoleum is made with 43 percent recycled content to reduce the need for virgin raw material. Marmoleum is 100 percent biodegradable.
A Gentle Man
A film with decor by Becky Beasley, 2017

Prelude
Oscillating City
by cartographer, Molly Roy

Chapter 1
Morning, Interior — The First Story
Commissioned video (part 1 of 4), color, sound, 7:30 min
Man: Peter Beasley
Voice: Russell Tovey

How a man came to engage as a writer and to write his first published stories / News of war from Europe / Recording the quotidian signs of ordinary life.

Text extracted from Robert Giroux’s Introduction to The People & Uncollected Stories by Bernard Malamud, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989

Chapter 2
Afternoon, Exterior (Spring Rain) — Me For You
Commissioned video (part 2 of 4), color, sound, 7:30 min
Man: Peter Beasley
First voice: Russell Tovey
Second voice: Benjamin Beasley
Music: “Mir sol sein far di”, sung by Irving Grossman (1931)

“Mir soln sein far di”, or “Me for you”, is a Yiddish mother’s lament, which Malamud affectionately relates instead to his father: “One day during the Depression, as I was lying in bed with a heavy cold, miserable because I had no job, (my father) came up the stairs from the store, and after we had talked a minute, he took my foot in his hand and said ‘mir soln sein far di’ — ‘I’d rather it were I than you, I’ve always remembered that’.”

MalamudPapers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Austin, Texas (HRC 29.6)

Extract of “Mir sol sein far di” translated from Yiddish:

Every mother prays,...
If I could only suffer for you, if only I could suffer instead of your little bones, instead of your little teeth, my dear child,...
It's hard to forget her tender words:
“If I could suffer for you”

Chapter 3
Evening, Interior — In the Rain / MAMA
Commissioned video (part 3 of 4), color, sound, 7:30 min
Voice: Russell Tovey
Text: Extracted from ‘Spring Rain’ (1942) by Bernard Malamud

“When Malamud was making notes on his friend Howard Nemerov’s collection of poems, The Western Approaches (1975), he suddenly sketched out in the midst of them a little frail poem of his own. Written more than forty-five years after her death, it was headed ‘In the rain / MAMA’.”

In the rain / MAMA
Don’t go in the rain
Not in the rain, my son, she said
Or it will make you catch a cold
You will get sick
So don’t go in the rain.
Mama, when you died
I walked in the rain.

“I walked in the rain” meant that finally no one could or even should protect him. To become a free man with even a normal life meant taking defiant risks and feeling the pain and the loneliness that went with them. It felt like necessary disobedience and yet was still a cry of lostness.”


In the rain / MAMA: the original script can be found at the Library of Congress: Malamud Holding LC II 12.14

Décor
Linoleum (black, lilac & yellow)
‘Broadway’ floor design, six colored metal ‘kissing’ benches, four ‘sweater-cushions’, and ‘Palisades’ curtains.