

ART

Previews

Chip off the ole Beck

Pop star Beck mounts a tribute to his grandfather, the artist **By Martha Schwendener**

Many celebrities crave recognition in other fields, but pop musician Beck Hansen has never wanted to be an art star—not so surprising when you consider that his biggest hit to date contains the chorus "I'm a loser, baby / So why don't you kill me?" So when Wayne Baerwaldt—the curator of "Beck and Al Hansen: Playing with Matches," which opens this Wednesday at Thread Waxing Space—came across a cache of Beck's collages and wanted to exhibit them, Beck at first declined. "I had a lot of reservations about that," Beck says, speaking from his home in Los Angeles, "musicians who come out [saying], I'm an artist now."

Baerwaldt had found Beck's work, such as *OK Jet*, a Warholian collage of an airliner, among the effects of Al Hansen, the late Fluxus artist who was also Beck's grandfather. Beck had created them during sojourns to his grandfather's studio in Germany in the late '80s and early '90s—and completely forgotten about them. Beck says that when Baerwaldt contacted him, "I was like, 'What collages?'" Beck laughs. "When I finally saw them again—it was nostalgic, I guess, but I didn't really want to show them. I wasn't that proud of them. I thought some of them were good and they were aging nicely, but they were mere artifacts. I could see [from them] that I was homesick for America."

Beck's reluctance to enter the art-world fray springs partly from an innate self-deprecation, but his reticence is also born of the

tremendous respect he has for artists in general—and for his grandfather in particular. As a member of the ur-conceptualist Fluxus movement, Al Hansen's career spanned 30 years and two continents. His work included Happenings, Pop Art-inflected collages and assemblages, and artist's books like *Why Shoot Andy Warhol?* (1984). He exhibited with some of the best-known figures of his generation, including Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg and Yoko Ono. Al Hansen, who died in Cologne in 1995 at age 68, had a large impact on Beck, who speaks fondly of "Al" as the kind of guy "who would sit in the bar all day and [tell] story after story, his version of the world inside and out. He never really bought into creating his own success. I'm sure he frustrated gallery owners because he didn't play nice-nice and build a career. But he turned on a lot of people."

It was the chance to honor his grandfather that finally convinced Beck to participate in "Playing with Matches," which debuted last spring at the Santa Monica Museum of Art.

"We sort of talked about it in the context of [the show's] being more about Al," Beck explains, "and having pieces of mine represented with the music and video work that I'd done." The Thread Waxing Space will present more than 100 works by both Al and Beck, including collages, assemblages, photographs, drawings, audio loops, videos—and even some new works by Beck.

And how did that new work come about? "I finally got off tour [after] two years, and I started doing some [art] again. I was having a hard time settling back down into my life, and working on these was good for my sanity. I ended up making a bunch of new pieces." But he's reluctant to show these latest pieces—he thinks they look "almost too new."

An opening benefit preview and performance on Tuesday will include a recreation of an Al Hansen performance by Channing Hansen (Beck's brother). Beck isn't sure what he'll do yet, though for the Santa Monica opening he did a piece about New Age culture, which "combined elements of a Yanni concert with [informercial inspirational speaker] Tony Robbins."

Beck is undoubtedly the star attraction, but his attempt to deflect attention from himself to his grandfather is touching. "He was on the cusp of breaking through in America before he died, and he died a little too soon," Beck muses. In this respect, the Hansen family's participation in "Playing with Matches" is really just an effort to "finish the work he was doing," he says.

So, now that he's agreed to play "nice-nice," does Beck have any further aspirations to show his art work? "Not for a while," he says. "Maybe in 20 years. Most of my creative energy [in the near future] will go into the albums and the live show and the visual stuff for that. My next tour will have more sets and more of an installation effect." And who knows? Maybe in another ten years someone will find a bunch of works somewhere that Beck doesn't remember creating.

"Beck and Al Hansen: Playing with Matches" opens at Thread Waxing Space Wednesday 16 and runs through October 24 (see Soho).



BECK TO THE GARDEN
Beck with Al Hansen's *Cigarette Butt Venus*, 1991.

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