

## Curatorial Statement

Painted by Beck when she was in her mid-70s, the "Phaedra" cycle was the last of her great mythological cycles. Beck had recently retired as a Professor of Art at Queens College, and was teaching at the New York Studio School. Prior to Phaedra, Beck had worked from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the myth of Orpheus, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and several narratives drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Drawn to literary and mythological subject matter, this daughter of Hungarian Jewish immigrants started out as an Abstract-Expressionist painter in the early 1950s, when she studied with Robert Motherwell and Philip Guston, but by the middle of that decade, forms and figuration had begun seeping inexorably into her canvases. From then on, she forged her own path as an unabashed figurative painter, steeped in narrative yet also fully Modernist.

The tragedy of Phaedra, based on a play by Euripides, is the means by which Beck framed the series' primary figures: Phaedra's Nurse and the Attendants. These latter working women - perhaps a nod to *Las Meninas* by her venerated master, Velazquez - busily adorn the walls around their queen with large bolts of cloth, as if to mark out the space as female territory. These women are always on their feet, engaged in physical labor that seems incidental to the drama playing out in their midst. Yet their omnipresent labor cannot be ignored. The image of a woman handling cloth with professional skill inevitably leads us back to Beck herself, a woman who demonstrates assured mastery of the wrought canvas. In addition to painting, Beck was a gifted seamstress, whose small jewel-like textiles are so lavishly embroidered with deftly sewn threads that they resemble her paintings in all their richly-hued detail.

The seated and inclining character of the Nurse, the wise older female confidant who listens and advises, is one with which Beck also identified throughout her adult professional and personal life. For instance, the Cassandra-like character of Donna Elvira in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, who warns and is fatally ignored, is one that Beck used as a personal moniker in her correspondence. Her recently published lecture series, "Letters to a Young Painter", modeled on Rainer Maria Rilke's "Letters to a Young Painter", emerged out of her role as teacher and mentor, a role which galvanized her and which she took very seriously.

- Doria Hughes, Collection Manager & Archivist, Rosemarie Beck Foundation

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I first came unto Phaedra without knowing much about the character that inspired Rosemarie Beck to pursue this narrative series. I took in the painting on its own terms, impressed by the intense color: greens of a curtain at the back morph into a teal waterfall of fabric in the foreground; a folded purple blanket spreads over a warm green bed cloth. The figures in the deeper space of the image seem frozen, as if time has stopped them in a moment of action. Or perhaps they are all but one woman, each figure conveying a different instant in her routine. Together they create a frieze of variations on the theme of 'accompanying' 'waiting' 'caring for' another in the throes of an adjacent destiny, one that can be experienced coolly since it is detached from one's own.

The movement in the painting is in the folds and volumes of cloth. I take cues from the figure on the top right corner, with her back to us, pushing the front of her body against the mass of a green curtain. Her action reveals a hidden theme in the painting: fabric is the liquid, water-like, tactile substance that the figures inhabit. Its color is a shared destiny. Fabric that is not just dense, it is luminescent. Like in El Greco, it is an energy field. In the foremost space a young figure is absorbed in the craft of sewing. She is the maker - or repairer? - of this luminous substance that enfolds it all.

- Eva Jiménez-Cerdanya, Artist  
Rosemarie Beck Foundation Studio Intern