

David Beck

A Contemporary Sensibility

David Beck's references to tradition, to the past, to the heritage of Western culture, might situate him in another era. He is in fact a quintessential artist of our time. *L'Opéra*, Beck's homage to the lyric opera tradition, demonstrates an encyclopedic complexity, and yet its visual appeal and extraordinary use of materials make it as much a sensual pleasure for our jaded times as a postmodern intellectual marvel. Rich with overt and hidden narratives, and displaying a seamless synthesis of past and present, Beck's complex, animated sculptures share an attitude toward method and memory reflected in the work of other innovative contemporary artists. Liza Lou and her beaded environments come to mind, as well as David Hockney with his mammoth painting of the Grand Canyon consisting of 60 separate panels and as many visual perspectives.

Not long ago, beauty as a component of contemporary art came under suspicion and many artists sought to avoid the often disparaging reaction inspired by work that dared to delight the eye. A taste for the beautiful is now once again acceptable and artists have found both conventional and unconventional ways to satisfy the public's hedonistic appetites. While New York installation artist Pepon Osorio's intricate ensembles represent a kind of alchemy in which cheap manufactured trinkets become dazzling objets d'art, Beck painstakingly handcrafts every component of his elaborate sculptures himself. The result in both cases is, however, quite similar: sumptuous banquets to be consumed by both eye and mind.

Beck has often chosen the metaphor of a public performance—a concert, a movie, in this case, an opera—as the premise for his constructions. The fact that there is likely to be a story that comes with each piece adds to the engaging character of these creations. So often the narrative in contemporary works becomes the entryway for appreciating the art. Here Beck has fashioned a palimpsest in which numerous references to familiar operas, from *Aida* and *I Pagliacci* to *The Magic Flute* and *The Ring Cycle*, provide us at once with a neat anthology of tales covering the spectrum of human triumph and tragedy. Though his allusions to the tales are made with obvious, irresistible humor, Beck offers much to be observed and pondered over time. “Those who stay,” Beck predicts, “will be rewarded.”

Contemporary artists are more challenged than ever to arouse our wonder and to transport us from the distractions of the ordinary world into another, whether they employ elaborate installations, video projections or more traditional media to do so. Taking a unique approach, Beck relies on the miniature scale, remarkable detail and irrepressible whimsy of his ideas to achieve this desired effect.

Beck recalls that as a child he was part of frequent family excursions to the local drive-in movie theater. This exposure to the cinema made all the difference in keeping his mind operating in the boundless realm of the imagination rather than the limited context of reality. With extraordinary deftness, Beck has insured that all of us, whatever our distractions and limitations, can enter a universe of delights that feels both familiar and remarkable, contemporary and timeless.

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