

DAVID BECK

There is an element of surprise and discovery in David Beck's work, and a restlessness which insists that nothing is what it seems. His is an obsession with the-atics and props. He acknowledges the masquerade and explores behind the scenes to show us a world in caricature, an elastic allegory. We see a constant comparison of the gregarious natures of the human and animal world and their orders of hierarchy and odd behavior. In the smaller pieces, he studies the mechanics of our antics with a Rube Goldbergian sense of technology that is delightful for its crude extravagance. Working from a freestanding sculptural tradition, his pieces are set out for display alone or in wood and glass cases; the pieces may open to become the exhibition arena themselves. In a reversal of natural orders of magnitude we see life-sized animals like some bizarre peep-show with open windows, sliding doors, and hinged flaps. A series of tiny animals are built with reversible hinges so that they fold inside-out to become their own little case. In the largest pieces, the life-sized realism of the shell contrasts the cartoonlike caricature of the tiny inhabitants within. Thus, it is with a burlesque of Lilliputian satire that Beck charges his work. Like a specimen in transit, we confront a huge alligator enclosed in a wood and glass case. Its imposing facade opens with a small oval window in the center of the block. Leaning over and peering downward we see the deck of a picture-puzzle schooner beneath a layering of cartoonlike clouds. Below the deck the scene suddenly shifts again to become a green planking of jungle floor with a lagoon and miniature alligators. The Corinthian columns supporting the clouds which frame this little scene seem no more out of place than the deck hand, which is as much a visual pun as the hint of recent tragedy at some lonely mutiny.

In another work, the leather hide of a bewildered baby rhinoceros opens in about 60 doors all over its body. Patiently examining the many stories and troubles of this shy beast, we encounter the tiny caricature inhabitants of an urban apartment complex



David Beck, *Room with a Gnu*, 1980. Mixed media. Courtesy Alan Stone Gallery.

filled with crusty interiors. Below a row of rhinoceros teeth we discover a lonely suicide who hesitates, groaning in despair with a loaded gun on the table. A waiting room contains two men hav-

ing an ugly face contest. One tears at his hair and the other sticks out his tongue and thumbs his nose. Another tiny man, seen from below, is taken by surprise and reaches for the floor beneath him which has just disappeared to permit our viewing. A blind musician in the corner of his room sings lonely songs while a flight of flamingos penetrates the walls of his and many other rooms. The flamingos are everywhere, their gregarious nature taking them to the dwelling places of a bizarre humanity. They suggest a natural order and delightful fantasy. Flying in unison they contrast the isolation of most of the other occupants of this Rhinorama.

In the belly of the rhino we find the main room: a shabby little theater where we see the performers and audience of a 3-D picture show. Little red- and green-lensed glasses describe our penchant for novelty and also the desire to make things seem more real. Oblivious to the show, even the couple making out in the back row maintain their rose and emerald vision despite their preoccupation. The bizarre show on stage is that of an unlikely rhino fraternity during what seems to be its initiation rites. The men saw each other in half to conform to the awkward fit of their rhino costumes, and off-stage we see an arrow in the back of one recalcitrant initiate. Two keys in the mouth of the rhinorama are guarded by sleeping policemen. If you can suffer the indignity of opening the two locks beneath its tail, you will discover a compartment containing a rhino horn hat and a pair of one-size-fits-all rhino hoof shoes. Thus we are permitted to join the show.

In his most realistic and recent work there is a life-sized pig covered with hand-set hog bristles. Its eyes are hinged doors which allow us to "see through a pig's eye." The belly opens with two sliding doors to reveal a scene with a drive-in movie. When you turn the pig's tail like a hand crank, the screen begins to move. Dancing girls pump their legs while a row of bongo players beat out the rhythm. The huge faces of two lovers attempt a kiss that looms larger than life: every time the frustrated

male purses his lips and moves closer, his fickle mate opens her eyes and pulls away. Always teasing and rarely satisfying, the pig becomes a sculptural metaphor of our consumer society and the great American ritual of the drive-in movie.

We delight in finding a series of small boxes about the size of a cigarette package. It is an intimate and personal scale. The pieces become a satire on biological structure and metamorphosis. One of them contains a fetal pig curled in on itself. Suddenly the ingenious viewer will discover that the hinges reverse themselves and the pig is transformed from a biological specimen to a form of wild life domesticated to accommodate our carnivorous nature which pretends to benevolence. He stands on his feet with tail, legs, and head sticking out of a crate.

A viewer gets the sense of Beck's attack on the mundane even more poignantly in the smaller individual boxes which are among the best of his work. The anticipated tragedy of *Bobby, oh Bobby?* is the most macabre. *Even Educated Fleas Do It* is one of the most delightful. The melancholy mystery of *Room with a Gnu* seems to be a comment on the sad plight of animals kept in the tiny stalls of a zoo.

My favorite piece is a small box which opens in two parts. On the top half is a stage filled with an acrobatic team making a comical pyramid. Among all the empty seats in the bottom half is an audience of two characters. One falls asleep, clutching a box of popcorn which spills into the aisle. The other is so immersed in the action on stage he reaches forward in surprise to warn them of the precarious balance of their athletic drama. The world inhabited by Beck's little people is filled with everything from the ridiculous to the sublime. Constant shifts of subject and point of view impel our attention; visual puns and comic antics supply a generous humor. Beck is a born entertainer and showman; he has given us some of the oddest combinations of sculptural ideas this writer has ever witnessed. (Alan Stone, April 1-29)

John Deckert