

## FAUNA AND FIGURES: The World According to David Beck

The mixed media constructions of artist David Beck contain miniaturized worlds filled with constant surprises. They also make profound and sometimes moving statements about the world in which we live.

Initially the senses are entertained by the extravagant detail of the carving, the intricate movements of his mechanical figures and the curious sounds they sometimes produce. The works invite wonder in the same way a marvelous and complicated toy captivates a child. And then they are often simply very funny so that even the most solemn observer finds himself disarmed by the absurdity of the narrative situations they represent and the hilarity of the mechanical antics of his tiny figures. And if the works are entertaining they also often involve themselves in the furnishings and trappings of entertainment, the movie screens, the orchestra pits, proscenium arches and stage curtains not to mention the opera singers, dancers and orchestras themselves. The viewer is enticed by the promise of fun and diversion only to find himself as often as not in a world that can be both alarming and tragic. In one piece a man sits and plays a violin cheerfully enough but above him hangs a light on a long brass pole, a fixture so

long and ponderous that it has become both threatening and ridiculous. In many of the large pieces the sheer plethora of absurdities and dislocations of scale and narrative become subversive rather than humorous.

It is possible to identify some, but probably not all, of the artistic and technological traditions on which David Beck builds. His animated constructions are related not only to sophisticated eighteenth century automata, but to simple nineteenth century crank toys, and even whirligigs. The vigor of much of his carving and the use of lowly, found materials recall folk, naive and 'outsider' art. But his use of exotic materials, ivories, elaborate inlays and fine laquers show an acquaintance with some of the more refined techniques of European cabinetry while the handling of his subject matter is not without the influence of everything from comic book art to Balthus.

It goes without saying that David Beck is a master craftsman and an ingenious mechanic. He has developed a fascinating repertoire of moving parts, gorgeous surfaces and strange materials and he takes great care about when he shows off his methods and when he covers his tracks. But it is the coherence of his vision, the creation of a world at once cheerful and unnerving, hilarious and tragic, wildly absurd and utterly mundane that marks him as a true and wonderful artist.

**Movie Palace, 1990,**  
mixed media construction.

David Beck deployed a wide range of surfaces and finishes to create this rich, sumptuous, and spectacular movie house - a palace indeed. Like so many real theatres the architecture blithely mixes up a whole slew of styles; a Renaissance cupola, Islamic archways and quasi-Egyptian caryatids in the form of overscaled ushers. A series of reliefs on the tower represent major movie themes; the Western, Comedy, Romance, Film Noir and the Heroic Epic (Ben Hur). A nicely uniformed girl sells tickets in a lobby replete with a lovingly recreated concession stand. The audience is already seated and behaving badly, dropping popcorn, cuddling and talking to each other. They are watching the climactic scene from King Kong which the artist has carved as a relief. We are viewing it in a mirror, the scene itself being set beneath the audience.

**This is Not a Pipe Organ, 1984,**  
mixed media construction.

The title of this piece is a reference to the famous painting *Ceci n'est pas une Pipe* (This is Not a Pipe) by Belgian Surrealist Renee Magritte. But while Magritte's painting of a pipe certainly wasn't itself a pipe Beck's pipe organ is indeed a pipe organ - of sorts.

Beck has reimagined the traditional mechanics of the instrument as an array of animals. The bellows are in the form of exotic blowfish which feed into an alligator reservoir while the pipes themselves are nothing more than elongated bird's necks topped by a set of improbable heads. The keyboard operates a line of wooden ducks who provide percussion by bashing the duck in front of them and a line of sad besuited men who each kick a bell. A tiny conductor, completely overwhelmed by the scale of the proceedings, stands presumptuously on a sumptuous podium, his baton at the ready.

**Bandshell for Myopic Orchestra, 1982,** mixed media construction.

David Beck's "Bandshell" pursues the humour of the arbitrary as well as the absurd. Set in a beautifully crafted shell a fully mechanized orchestra plays with hilarious zest. But the traditional instruments have been replaced by animals arranged, according to the artist, in a quasi-evolutionary scale from fishes at the front to pink flamingoes at the back. As if to underscore the dubious artistic ideals of such an outfit the artist has provided miniature portraits of pianists Chico Marx and Liberace and bandleaders Spike Jones and Lawrence Welk on the corners of the pedestal. At the front, as a sort of admonition to the audience, Beck has included paintings of the

bearded Smith brothers - once the trademark characters of a brand of cough drops. A golden shell behind the orchestra slowly opens as the musicians play to reveal Botticelli's Venus playing a saxophone - a reversal, perhaps, of the status of a real orchestra in which the sublime is now playing the absurd.

**Turtle, 1992,**  
mixed media construction.

David Beck's elaborately carved turtle contains a glimpse of Paradise or at least Paradise according to David Beck. Viewed through eight windows set into the shell a fabulous grotto houses a rich tropical landscape. On center stage a group of blue footed Boobies, a Galapagos bird, are singing joined by a line of frogs to one side and more birds in the trees. Meanwhile snakes dance and near a pool covered with lily pads a number of turtles and lizards join in the fun.

The entire scene constitutes a highly imaginative reworking of The Peaceable Kingdom a theme popular with Nineteenth Century American primitive artists - most famously Hicks. Beck has replaced their literal version of the Biblical paradise showing charming arrangements of prey and predators with a more Darwinian version in which each animal is in its own place and doing, albeit ridiculously, what it does best.

**Dodo Museum, 1980,**  
mixed media construction.

This rather grand edifice purports to be a kind of shrine to the Dodo. The Dodo, the most famous of extinct creatures, was a species of ungainly, flightless bird which once formed a large population on Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean. It was massacred wholesale by early European settlers and the animals they introduced. In a parody of the dinosaurs of the Museum of Natural History in New York Beck places a delicate carving of the skeleton of the bird in the central hall of his feathered museum. On the mezzanine the story of the Dodo is told in an unlikely remaking of the famous fifteenth century French tapestry series "The Hunt of the Unicorn." The graceful unicorn of the originals has been replaced by the awkward and hapless Dodo.

(not shown)

**The Violin Player, 1983,**  
mixed media construction.

45 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

(not shown)

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