

# DYLAN BECK

# CHRONICLING

## THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

BY LIZ HOWE

*I see the shapes, / I remember from maps / I see the shoreline / I see the whitecaps / A baseball diamond, nice weather down there / I see the school and the houses where the kids are / Places to park by the factories and buildings / Restaurants and bars for later in the evening / Then we come to the farmlands, and the undeveloped areas / And I have learned how these things work together / I see the parkway that passes through them all / And I have learned how to look at these things / I wouldn't live there if you paid me / I couldn't live like that, no siree! / I couldn't do the things the way those people do / I couldn't live there if you paid me to . . .*  
—Talking Heads

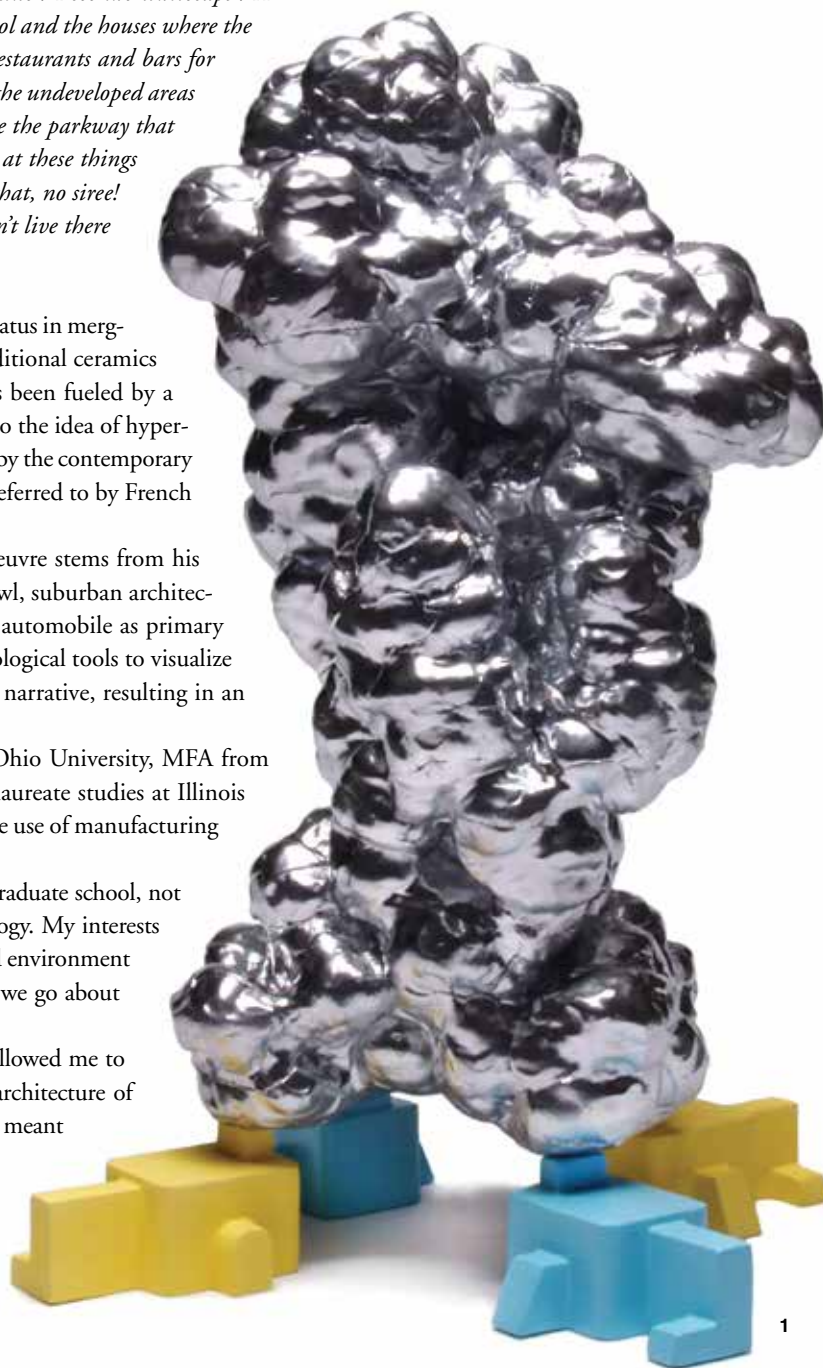
Dylan Beck has ascended this past decade to pace-setter status in merging the use of technological tools and concepts with traditional ceramics processes. His steady rise to recognition in the field has been fueled by a concentrated, culturally relevant focus on issues related to the idea of hyper-modernity. Hyper- or super-modernity is often illustrated by the contemporary building construction trend toward big-box structures, referred to by French anthropologist Marc Augé as examples of non-spaces.

The success and development of Beck's sculptural oeuvre stems from his informed understanding of current trends in urban sprawl, suburban architectural design and the post World War II reliance on the automobile as primary means of transport. A fascination with and use of technological tools to visualize and manufacture his work advances and informs Beck's narrative, resulting in an engaging, evolving series of sculpture and drawing.

Beck has a solid education in ceramics (BFA from Ohio University, MFA from Tyler School of Art, Temple University, and post-baccalaureate studies at Illinois State University) and early on sought inspiration from the use of manufacturing technology. Beck states:

"I started to use technology in my work in undergraduate school, not just tech tools but also the visual language of technology. My interests lie in our attempts to modify the natural landscape and environment to suit our needs. Technology is a major part of how we go about doing that.

The use of technology in my studio practice has allowed me to integrate the aforementioned ideas directly into the architecture of the work. By using technology to create work that is meant to be an interpretation of built spaces or manipulated landscapes and stimulate critical discussion about issues surrounding our current land and resource use, I am using the very same language that is used in the actual built landscape. My practice is a hypermodern way of interpreting the hypermodern landscape."



Talking Heads (1975–1991) lead lyricist David Byrne—a creative lodestar for Beck—is perhaps one of the first contemporary satirists to tackle issues of hypermodernity. Throughout their career the band’s tongue-in-cheek characterizations touched on modern life and anxieties. Talking Heads influenced an entire generation musically, culturally, and philosophically and served as the conceptual sound track for Beck’s creative evolution. Ideologically aligned with the work of this seminal 1980s band, Beck embraced ideas of banal technical progress, glutinous consumer consumption, unsightly urban sprawl and birth of the mobile lifestyle. The pulsating punch of Talking Heads’ staccato dance hooks translate into thrusts of color and biting satire in his work.

Bands like Talking Heads and a propensity for probing cultural phenomena continue to inform Beck’s work and thinking. Acting as detached commentator on the world we inhabit, Beck examines, critiques and draws humor from absurdities and banalities inherent in the current cultural landscape. The artist states:

“My interest in the Talking Heads is nicely illustrated in David Byrne’s movie *True Stories*. It has a quirky irreverence and is subtly insightful, pointing to many of the issues that I am concerned with—poor land use, nondescript and purely functional architecture, and how this type of manipulated landscape affects a culture’s psyche. There is a scene in *True Stories* where David Byrne is standing in the expansive lawn of a corporate research and microprocessor manufacturing facility. Byrne, wearing a cowboy hat says, completely straight faced, “This is the VeriCorp building just outside of Virgil [TX], ...it’s cool, ....it’s a multipurpose shape, ...a box.” I hope that my work embodies the various moments of seriousness, silliness, celebration, and the contemplative monologue and dialog seen in *True Stories*.”

Beck’s early work focused largely on mass construction of the suburban structures (or boxes) within which we live and the resultant destruction of our natural resources. His investigation has been realized in multiple materials and approaches while maintaining a consistently strong conceptual foundation.

Early performance pieces such as *Boomburb* (2005) and *Emulous Blight* (2006) consist of the artist unpacking and placing ceramic modules in a tight, quickly expanding configuration reminiscent of suburban building developments. These performances lasted approximately 30 minutes and entirely filled the gallery space. Cramming every bit of floor space, the artist and attendees were forced up against the walls and ultimately out the gallery doors. Skillful observation and wry humor are evidenced by Beck’s clever titles that creatively circle back to the underlying solemnity of his subject. In *Boomburb* and *Emulous Blight* he strengthens and conceptually situates the work by citing suburban building booms and a competitive desire to destroy.

*WAL\*ART* (2007), another early piece in Beck’s satirical oeuvre, is a series of slip-cast colored porcelain cogs of muted blue, taupe, green, and mustard arranged in simple, symmetrical, geometric patterns. Derived from casting the negative spaces in Styrofoam packaging and referencing innocuous hotel lobby ‘wall art,’ these neutral cogs are adhered to plywood panels for display on the wall. Beck treats them impersonally and without expressive

gesture, maintaining physical distance from the impressionable materiality of clay, the slip-casting process itself referencing mass-production. The text and subtext refer to the role of WAL\*MART in promoting inexpensive, impersonal objects manufactured for mass-consumption.

Wall sculptures *Can You Hear Me Now?* (2008) and *How Many Bars Do You Have?* (2009) expanded Beck’s investigations to include



1 *Concerning the Production of Clouds*, 20 in. (51 cm) in height, ceramic, paint, 2015. 2 *Boomburb*, variable dimensions, colored porcelain, wood, stretch wrap, 2005. 3 *Flyover Country*, installation view, variable dimensions, mixed media, 2013. 4 *Normal Field Instability*, 24 in. (61 cm) in width, porcelain, underglaze, resin, 2011.





**5** *Overburden*, 4 1/3 ft. (1.3 m) in width, ceramic, digital print on vinyl, 2015. **6** *How Many Bars Do You Have?*, 5 ft. (1.5 m) in length, porcelain, steel, rubber, paint, 2009. **7** *Accumulation*, 10 ft. (3 m) in width, bisque-fired porcelain, 2013. **8** *Laminate Filigree*, 15 in. (38 cm) in diameter, porcelain, carpet padding, plywood, 2010. **9** *Supermodern Landscape No. 01*, 5 ft. (1.5 m) in width, vinyl, nylon rope, 2013. **10** *Borrow Pit*, 18 in. (46 cm) in width, ceramic, hydrocal, wood, foil tape, paint, graphite, 2015. **11** *Dylan Beck's Oil Still*, 6 ft. (1.8 m) in height, ceramic, unfired glaze, various petroleum products, 2014. *Photos: Mario Gallucci.*

the effects of a growing mobile communications industry upon the natural and built environments. In direct reference to the increasing phenomenon of cell-phone transmission, these works for the wall offer a dynamic overlapping of imagery. Subdued colored, slip-cast porcelain cell-tower antennae decorated with romantic silhouette-style landscapes of street lights, banal architectural structures, electrical wires, and ubiquitous grassy knolls make visible the artist's focus on the physical impact of technological advancements. Beck states:

"I am particularly interested in the historical hierarchies of architecture and how these hierarchies can change depending

upon the needs and desires of a culture. In the past few years, cell-phone signal repeaters have become ubiquitous in the urban landscape, often competing with traditional architectural elements. We benefit from an uninterrupted cell-phone signal and the owner of the structures where the repeaters are perched is compensated monetarily by the cell phone company. What is the intrinsic cost of this practice?"

In recent years Beck's aesthetic investigation has focused largely on our use and extraction of natural resources and the resultant effects of global warming. This conceptual shift is evidenced through expansion of the artist's visual vocabulary. His current

lexicon includes handbuilt cumulonimbus (storm) clouds, multiple small slip-cast jet planes, and dull airport landscapes. Intense, acerbic color saturation infuses this work with visual thrust while Beck continues layering and juxtaposing two- and three-dimensional work.

*Supermodern Landscape No. 01* and *Supermodern Landscape No. 02*, which consist of 36×60-inch vinyl wall panels with SketchUp-generated drawings, are pivotal and defining pieces. Each drawing maps out futuristic aerial-perspective airport plans while vigorously employing Beck's piquant palette. The artist cuts, copies, and pastes layers of windmills, planes, landing control towers, and three-lane highways that begin and end nowhere into a landscape of chartreuse green, acid yellow, and cyan. These brightly colored expanses lack any evidence of human touch. The computer-drawing process flattens and simplifies visual space, reducing design to a system of symbolic, color-coded planes and angles. Beck preserves the dominant signature of his software, perfectly distilling his apprehension toward employing computerized manufacture in the design of physical, natural spaces.

The artist's simultaneous fascination and repulsion with these tools and the resulting aesthetic spark a dynamic conversation, one that has masterfully broadened since Beck began more boldly juxtaposing three-dimensional handbuilt and cast forms with two-dimensional computer-generated drawings.

*Oil Still* (2014) combines handbuilt ceramic forms with vinyl-printed imagery and petroleum products to comment on the still prevalent use of oil in all aspects of contemporary life. The monumental handbuilt ceramic cumulous cloud atop two tall black pillars of thick oily petroleum sits upon and in front of a large vinyl computer-generated landscape background. Beck's simplified two-dimensional skyscape and flattened green landscape animates the conceptual weight and visual drama of the black-and-white sculpture. Impressive verticality and energetic handling of the massive cloud serves to complement Beck's proven technical adroitness at slip casting. The direct handling of clay impressively widens his oeuvre by adding layers of human interaction and touch to a catalog largely built upon mechanical representations.

Beck's landscapes continue to provocatively map the ways in which we, as a culture, determine the use and manipulation of the spaces we inhabit. The strength of his work rests on a continued ability to narrate serious environmental incongruities while remaining the playful provocateur. His sardonic view stems from the critical concerns of blindly and collectively placing our trust in technology to secure our species' future. This subject is void of inherent humor, yet through his masterful amalgamation of words, forms, and images, Beck deftly employs parody and sincerity to navigate the *Road to Nowhere*.

technology to secure our species' future. This subject is void of inherent humor, yet through his masterful amalgamation of words, forms, and images, Beck deftly employs parody and sincerity to navigate the *Road to Nowhere*.

*Well we know where we're goin' / But we don't know where  
we've been / And we know what we're knowin' / But  
we can't say what we've seen / And we're not little  
children / And we know what we want / And the  
future is certain / Give us time to work it out /  
We're on a road to nowhere / Come on inside /  
Takin' that ride to nowhere / We'll take that  
ride... / We're on a road to nowhere / We're  
on a road to nowhere / We're on a road  
to nowhere . . .*

—Talking Heads

the author Liz Howe is an artist and instructor living in Bennington, Vermont. To learn more, visit <http://lizhowe.com>.

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## Dylan J. Beck

### career snapshot

2004 Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts, summer staff, Newcastle, ME

2004–05 Studio Assistant to Brad Schwieger, Ohio University Professor of Ceramics, Area Chair

2008–13 Ceramics Area Chair, Assistant Professor of Art, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS

2013–present Department Head of Ceramics, Associate Professor, Oregon College of Art and Craft

### Residencies

2007, 2011, 2014 Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts, Newcastle, ME

2009 SIGGRAPH conference for computer graphics and technology, Residency and Lecture, New Orleans, LA

2014 Ceramic Surface Symposium, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN

2015 Ash Street Studios, Portland, OR  
Caldera, Sisters, OR

### Education

2005 BFA, Cum Laude, Ohio University, Athens, OH; 2006 Post Baccalaureate Fellowship, Illinois State University, Normal, IL; 2008 MFA, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA

### Service

2015–present National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) 2017 Portland Onsite Liaison, NCECA Board member; 2014–Present ArtAxis Organization Inc, Board President 2014–16; 2012–Present Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts 'Young Advisors' Board of Trustees; 2009–10 Kansas Artisans and Craftsmen Association, 2010 Conference Site Chair and Treasurer

### Influential travel

2016 Iceland; 2012 Barcelona, Spain; Hong Kong and Guangzhou, China; 2011 Hawaii; 2010 Western US Road Trip to 8 National Parks

### Exhibitions and Publications

12 solo and 80 juried and invitational exhibitions

6 published writings: Ceramic Art and Perception, CFile, NCECA Journal, and Lark Books

2013 lecture, represented NCECA at College Art Association (CAA) conference

2012 Emerging Artist Lecture; 2011 Lecture, "Supermodernity, Emergence, and the Built Environment" NCECA conferences

2010 Kansas Art Education Association conference panel, "Integrating Criticism into All Levels of Art Education"

### learn more

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