

tommy becker tape number one





animal, animal



twisting ball



spring  
for  
jump from behind

Becker's works are intriguing because they rarely let go of their absurdist tension. Only one piece is longer than three minutes and it is within these song-length durations that Becker quickly establishes a level of anxiety that does not overcome the viewer, but likewise does not let the viewer go. In *animal animal*, the simple trope of repeating the title (again, in a distorted and disturbingly singsong voice) is just enough like nails on a blackboard to keep the viewer on edge. The visuals in *animal, animal*—quick burst of black and white imagery—impart the sense of a skewed educational documentary, contrasted with an unerringly lonely boy/bird sculpture.

Even when a work's subject is overtly ominous—as with the murky, rolling subject of *twisting ball*—Becker never descends entirely into the dark. While this ode sung to the twisting ball itself includes such gloomy sentiments as **“your deepest black turns youth to death,”** there is an emphatic tone of optimism layered within the work. Even a dark tumbling ball is not, in the end, a symbol without some measure of hope: **“you nourishment, you hopeful mess / you invisible wave, you star drenched wreck / you powder keg, you metled gun / you laughing, stumbling / torched black sun.”** There is some sense of undeniable energy and life, something ebullient and appealing, at the core of Becker's dark ball.

While many of Becker's short works are so pictorially specific they could conceivably be presented as photo collage pieces, his soundtracks profoundly augment and amplify the emotional tone and it is hard to imagine the works without them. It is not merely the intentional oddness of Becker's sounds and voices that resonates so effectively, but also his choice of line breaks. While effective as written text pieces, a work like *daddy kill* (**“daddy kill green grass with son...”**) is made particularly dynamic by the terse, staccato manner in which Becker delivers the text. Set against the shadowy image of the legs of a father and son, the piece manages to speak simultaneously to paternal affection and paternal distance.

In *bobby xp1*, an alienated narrator—depicted occasionally as a clutzy amalgam of man and machine—throws passing questions at strangers he meets in an effort to overcome a pervading sense of estrangement. His awkward efforts to connect are further interrupted by the inclusion of sudden, startling questions directed at these strangers: **“sad lady with funny neck works with hands / could I bring you a tissue to capture your tears in?”** Or even more disquieting: **“please don't, please don't grab me. / I'd like to stay but it's getting late”.**

Even when *bobbyxp1* encounters a friend, *ralph*, there is an underlying tension: **“ralph, are you going to put that circuitry inside me?...”**



g to life while laughing  
orm a fist and cry  
nd hand and scare another color

colored glove exercises

**ralph, do you still want to runaway with me? / ralph, I love you too.**” Within a short span of time, Becker triggers a wild trajectory of emotion, from the ludicrously humorous vision of bobbyxp1 stumbling down the street to the uncomfortable awkwardness in his choice of words to signifiers of a darker trauma mixed with a deep, soulful affection.

In *the dyes of daylight dried*, sampled imagery of a suburban home and family car are edited with sampled photographs of carousing teenagers, an empty park bench, and a train, all in rapid succession. The past comingles with a sense of desire and aspiration and just a hint of lost possibility. **“a thought of time past / stepped on a tone humming in an old park...”** Even the title is a wistful ode to the crackling of memory.

Perhaps the most patently absurd piece in *Tape Number One* is *colored glove exercises*, in which three figures with different pairs of colored gloves respond to the textual instructions on the screen by acting them out with the gloves: **“color jumps on a trampoline while giggling...color climbs a rope while shivering...color jumps over your arm and makes a fart sound on landing...color gets a restless night’s sleep while making whistling sounds...color is a**

**screeching car that crashes into your hand...”** It takes a moment to realize what is going on, but after a short duration there is a cumulative effect to this triple shot of freakish gestures and we begin to feel as though we are experiencing some compacted version of the human condition.

This happens again and again throughout Becker’s work. It is remarkable, in all of these works, how rapidly we move between emotions. How a disturbing or unsettling moment quickly blossoms to reveal some warmer truth within. It is this gesture that suggests that any cynical allusions in the work, any desultory or disturbing elements, are not Becker’s emotional lynchpins. His sentiments, in the end, are deeply sincere and deeply humane, a difficult posture to convincingly maintain in works of contemporary art, a field often dominated much more by cool detachment.

In the end, despite all the various shifts in Becker’s emotional road, he returns repeatedly to blunt, honest sentiment, as he does in *Tape Number One*’s concluding piece, *I can be happy trapped in a living room with a rabbit that has no eyes*:

**we are, i am afraid, always looking to tomorrow’s location  
to find inner happiness  
when that happiness is always inside, no matter the location...  
I can be happy trapped in a living room with a rabbit that has no eyes...**

We have arrived at a sentiment of inner peace. Titling his work *Tape Number One* is a key indicator of Becker’s earnestness. Mix tapes are highly personal forms of expression. Labored over with great care, they tend to represent a deep and evocative sensation directed toward a friend, loved one, or object of affection. A mix tape is rarely a casual apparatus. It is an expression of love beside which the most heartfelt greeting card withers and dies.

It means the world. No less than that.

*John Massier*  
*Visual Arts Curator*



the dyes of daylight dried



In the series of video works compiled under the title *Tape Number One*, San Francisco artist Tommy Becker employs a concise set of elements—image, sound, text—to express a complex set of emotions. Humor, anxiety, trepidation, unabashed affection—a wide panoply is laid bare before the viewer, often in a manner evoking the poetic and unanticipated logic of dreams. And like dreams, Becker’s works collect and meld disparate and dissonant elements into expressions of lasting emotional resonance.

Clocking in at a deft 22 minutes, *Tape Number One* opens by blunting establishing its tone with *pulling down the sky to give you the sun*. The title alone expresses Becker’s forthright emotions and the piece illustrates the eloquent, absurdist length the artist will go to share some measure of warmth. Dressed in a yellow outfit, he leaps up before a sky blue screen and is captured repeatedly in staggered still shots, becoming the sun set against the sky. It is a warm, generous gesture, artist to viewer: Not only will I give you the sun, I will become the sun. The piece begins by revealing the artifice of the artist preparing to leap before his false sky, hung up in a wooded area outdoors. By disclosing the effort behind his artifice, Becker’s heartfelt sentiments are even more believable.

*pulling down the sky to give you the sun* also illustrates formal traits that will remain evident throughout Becker’s mix tape. Primary colors punctuate many of the pieces. The audio track—original material clearly composed by the artist—moves smoothly from an almost childish tone to a darker, but more energetic character. There is no textual element in this piece, which leads it to serve as an overture for the remaining works. It is, after all, the opening track on the mix tape and, as mix tape aficionados know, establishing tone is key to a successful mix.

In *come deer children*, Becker introduces the spoken audio element of his work, with a distorted timber that will recur in other works and perpetuate the tension throughout *Tape Number One*. Recurring images of high school kids, seen from the rear, holding antlers to their heads underscore the notion that children are an endangered or hunted species, targeted by each other or society at large. Meanwhile, Becker’s audio is a call to action: **“piss on the flowers / drench them / drown them with your toxic fluid...play loud, hurt one another and curse freely...lie to authority with a smile...forget about all the world has to offer and come / come deer children / take aim / and piss.”** It is the age-old call of *carpe diem*, seize the day, made more urgent by the unnerving vocalizing and images that affect an ominous touch.



pulling down the sky to give you the sun

bobby xpl



i can be happy trapped in a living room with a rabbit that has no eyes

TOMMY BECKER • *Tape Number One* • March 1 to April 5, 2008

Tommy Becker is a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute and the California College of the Arts. His videos combine raw poetics with performance, music and costume design to create sentimental vignettes for his never-ending saga titled, "TAPE NUMBER ONE". Becker's carefully orchestrated delivery of words drives his visual collage works while juxtaposing unusual word-image combinations. In his video performances, spoken word highlights the humorous yet melancholy state of his characters as they struggle to overcome adversity. Becker's work embodies a sensitivity to the transient, fluctuating states of our being while keeping an eye on the beauty of vulnerability in passages of time, changes in relations and shifting of perspectives. Videos from the tape have been presented at film screenings, as single channel installations and performed as spoken word videos. Becker's work has been either screened, installed and performed live at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Pacific Film Archive, White Columns Gallery, New York, Art in General, New York, Aurora Picture Show, Houston and The PDX Festival, Portland. [www.tommybecker.com](http://www.tommybecker.com)

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