

Simply art

Tony Feher sees zen- like beauty in found objects. Will you?

By Michael Morain

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One of the sculptures that recently arrived at the Des Moines Art Center consists of a few dozen marbles scattered across a scrap of brown carpet.



For real.

So it's not the kind of stuff your kids *could* do. Most likely, it's something they've already done.

Maybe they've wadded up empty potato-chip bags? Or found something outside and stashed it in a jar for safekeeping?

Well, give those kids a cookie: They have a lot in common with the New

York artist Tony Feher, whose provocative new show remains through Sept. 2 before setting out on a national tour. The 60-piece exhibition is the first comprehensive look at the artist's three-decade career and, frankly, it's hard to take seriously. The show's catalog admits it right up front.

"Feher's art can be initially challenging in its apparent ordinariness, in particular when it comes to the nature of his materials," writes the show's curator, Claudia Schmuckli, director of the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston.

Bottle caps, loose change, wire hangers, tangled bits of nylon cord — it's all stuff you probably have in a junk drawer. And unlike Tara Donovan, who transformed zillions of drinking straws and plastic cups into remarkable landscapes for an Art Center show three years ago, Feher's work doesn't involve any sort of magic transformation. He presents the objects pretty much as is, like Marcel Duchamp's notorious "ready-made" urinals and bike wheels from a hundred years ago.

So what's the big deal? That's a good question, and Art Center Director Jeff Fleming has a good answer.

"Nothing exists in a vacuum," Fleming said. "Obviously, (Feher) is following Duchamp and Warhol and Picasso in looking at found objects in another context. What I enjoy about them is the simple, direct, honest gesture, the way they find the extraordinary and the magic and the beautiful in the everyday."

It can be a big leap — with a big "if/then" — but the payoff is big, too. *If* you believe the artist's message, *then* you'll see art all around you.

"If you can accept a soda bottle with condensation on the inside as a work of art, then maybe that's a way of seeing a broader picture, or of seeing the world from a different point of view," the artist has explained.

the low end of someone else's scale. The idea that they don't have value is simply ridiculous. A single pebble on a beach is as extraordinary as a mountaintop."

If you accept that, then you'll understand the show's zen outlook, which can be both simple and deep. If not, then this show isn't your cup of tea — or bag of chips, as the case may be.

Feher was born into a military family in 1956 in Albuquerque, N.M., and spent his early years moving from one city to the next in the South and Southwest. His mom made him donate toys to Goodwill before each move, which probably triggered the pack-rat habits he developed as an adult.

"I feel bad about everything I've ever given away," he said.

He studied business for a while and then architecture before deciding to become a painter.

"You're an artist," he told himself. "You're probably a bad artist, but that's what you are. So you can either go for it or deny it and be miserable selling insurance."

So he went for it. He moved to New York in the 1980s and started working behind the scenes at a gallery. He painted in his spare time.

And then: the "aha!" moment. In 1987 he walked past a popular toy store called Dinosaur Hill and spotted a jar of marbles on display, which caught the sunlight in a way that he had been trying, unsuccessfully, to paint.

He bought the marbles, put them into an empty honey jar and called himself a sculptor.

"It represented my transition from being a struggling painter to being a struggling three-dimensional artist," he said.

The discovery preceded a scarier one two years later, when a doctor told him he'd contracted HIV from a blood transfusion.

"That makes you think differently," he said. "It forced a whole generation of people to consider their mortality 20 years earlier than they would have otherwise."

Feher's fascination with everyday objects took on a new meaning. He became the archaeologist of his own life, pocketing whatever odds and ends he spotted on the streets and sidewalks. He enshrined them in jars in his apartment, like the ancient-shipwreck loot and religious reliquaries he'd seen on a trip to Italy.

"These plastic bottles are our amphoras, they just happen to be made from petrochemicals," he said.

He thought carefully about each item's physical properties and started experimenting with different arrangements. He stacked Styrofoam packing crates into towers. He tangled up cord from a weed-whacker. He noticed condensation on the inside of a water bottle and realized it, like a cloud, sealed into its own tiny atmosphere.

"That was a revelation that was somehow both profound and ridiculous," he said.

He started selling his found-object sculptures from the back room of the gallery where he worked until, soon enough, he started presenting full-on shows. A couple of positive reviews in the mid-'90s, including one from the New York Times, attracted a wider following, and now his now his

His work “never ceases to inspire shock and awe,” noted Schmuckli, the curator. “Shock, because he seems to do so very little with just about anything, and awe, because the effects are so powerfully affecting — aesthetically, emotionally and intellectually.”

No one is more shocked by his success than the artist himself. During his visit last week to the Art Center, he stopped himself during an explanation about a plastic bottle’s impact on the environment, the global economy and the human psyche.

“Then I got over myself a little bit,” he said. “I’m just very, very lucky.”