



## Feher exhibit makes the mundane profound

By Molly Glentzer | October 16, 2012 | Updated: October 17, 2012 1:42pm



Artist [Tony Feher](#) was having trouble getting started.

"It's a big deal," he said. "I'm ... don't put that camera on me. I'm going to cry now."

Tears puddled his eyes, and he walked away in a circle, trying to gather his emotions. This didn't look as easy as collecting the humble materials of the artworks on view around him in the newly renovated and renamed [Blaffer Art Museum](#) at the [University of Houston](#). Feher makes magic from things like empty plastic water bottles and jars, little metal washers and clear tubing filled with colored water and draped from walls, ever so vulnerably, with push pins.

"It's a big deal," he said again, "the opening of the museum and being the first show."

Feher, 56, looked just grizzled enough to be someone who, as he suggested, was schooled on the streets.

Wearing black jeans and fresh Vans, and with a half-dozen strips of blue masking tape stuck to one side of his black T-shirt, he stood near a table scattered with seemingly random and mundane small objects.

Titled "[Take It Up With Tut](#)," the table is one of the first pieces that greets visitors to a 25-year survey of Feher's career.

"If I'm in a space more than three days, and there are any flat surfaces, it just begins to accumulate. If the housekeeping staff at that hotel in Istanbul had saved what I left behind, they'd have the largest collection of Tony Feher works anywhere in the world," the artist deadpanned, finding his wind with humor.

It looks as though someone could have just tossed it all there in five minutes. But not so. Feher said six weeks could pass before he added "gestures" to the display.

Claudia Schmuckli, the museum's director, spent three years on this survey, which contains about 60 pieces also documented in a hardback monograph. The show opened in Des Moines,

Iowa, (because of construction delays at the Blaffer) and travels next to Massachusetts and New York.

Schmuckli has watched Feher's work for years. He was among the first artists to deal with the AIDS crisis, she said before the two of them walked a group through the exhibit. "Apart from that," she added, "he's a very important American sculptor who happens to be from Texas who has not had a midcareer survey."



Feher, who's from Corpus Christi, moved to New York soon after graduating from the [University of Texas](#). He didn't have an art degree but knew he needed to make art. He also knew he wasn't a good painter and had been discouraged in high school by teachers who told him his drawing was poor. Feher hit upon his signature in 1989 when he saw a bowl of marbles glimmering in the window of an East Village toy store: colorful, light-reflecting

and refracting materials that begged to be exploited as artistic material. He bought marbles in different tones of red and put them in some honey jars.

"The precedent for the use of accumulated objects was there because I hadn't cleaned my apartment in 10 years," he said.

Soon he was dragging home larger objects from the streets, including plastic soda and milk crates that he could stack like Legos.

Not many in the art world saw his early work as a significant step in sculpture, but Feher knew otherwise. "I realized that ... anything was a possibility, and there were no materials, no objects, no shard of anything too humble or common or cheap to ignore," he said.

He began to think of himself as an urban landscape artist and an archaeologist of his own life, although his work is not about recycling or repurposing, he emphasized.

"That's a different agenda," he said. "I'm making art. I happen to be using these objects that are within arm's reach."

A master minimalist, he opens our eyes to things we might never have considered before, like the myriad shapes of plastic bottles. He also loves how condensate can form in them - liquid that represents the essence of life.

Sometimes he "paints" with colored water by lining up bottles and filling them at different levels to create a wave effect. Sometimes he dangles them in messy clusters from rope or suspends them on mobiles made of wire coat hangers.

"All through human culture, vessels have been a metaphor for the human body. These just happen to be our contemporary version," he said.

For those who need that sort of thing, Feher's sculptures are also rich with art historical references. The [Alexander Calder](#)-inspired coat hanger mobile that shimmers at the top of the Blaffer's new stairwell, awash in natural light, references not only that giant of 20th-century

kinetic sculpture but also Feher's childhood. He made a simpler version of it in a first-grade art class, he said.

Its artistic poetry becomes more clear later, when he lets on that to him, those rakishly tilted bottles resemble hanging bodies.

Feher didn't mention AIDS until we went to the upstairs gallery, where works with a more melancholy sensibility are displayed. He tested positive for the disease in 1989, just six weeks after having his stomach split open during emergency surgery to correct a rare genetic condition that causes internal bleeding.

Once you grasp this element of his story, every water bottle looks like an IV, every splash of red - whether on a jar top or in liquid form - suggests blood, and every bit of blue looks as vivid as a New York September sky. You understand the emotion and the profundity of it all.



Hiram Butler Gallery is also showing recent pieces by Feher, including "A Work in Four Parts," which consists of stacked and filled bottles displayed on four shelves to mimic a musical score. Butler also has some small works Feher makes by flattening McDonald's French fry boxes and coating them with glitter.

"They're a bit decorative," he suggested, self-deprecatingly. "But I like them, and I keep finding room to make new versions."

Schmuckli noted that Feher was the first to explore his simple, found materials consistently and persevere without compromise. "The work resonates with so much joy and charm and beauty you wouldn't necessarily be aware of the difficulties," she said. "It's very serious, very rigorous formally and conceptually speaking, but it has this levity about it."

The Blaffer exhibit holds 60 pieces. It's roughly chronological but also allows viewers to discover Feher's genius in much the same way he discovered many of his materials: through happenstance.

Schmuckli has brilliantly placed "The Penny Piece" upstairs on a back wall. Consisting of a jar and a line of pennies on a shelf, it's about coming to terms with HIV and mortality. There's a penny from each year of Feher's life, starting with 1956; and on each birthday he adds one signifying another year of survival.

"I have room to be 96 years old on the shelf," he quipped. "And if it falls off the edge, I'll be happy to add another shelf."