

Houston Press

Beauty in a Bottle Cap

Tony Feher turns the debris stream of daily life into art at the reopened Blaffer Art Museum.

By [Kelly Klaasmeyer](#) Wednesday, Nov 7 2012

There's a lot of sculptural work around right now that is heavily reliant on piles of random crap, sometimes found, sometimes purchased. Portions of [Andy Coolquitt](#)'s installation at last year's Texas Contemporary Fair were actually thrown away by janitorial staff. Sometimes those scatters, piles, arrangements and accumulations manage to connect with and convey something visually or conceptually striking to the viewer. Sometimes they are just (intentionally or unintentionally) mute, hermetic and irritating.

Tony Feher's sculptures are largely composed of cast-off objects and materials, collected for him by friends or by the artist from the streets of New York. Not all crap piles are created equal, and [Feher](#)'s selective accumulations are better than most. "**Tony Feher**" is the debut show for the newly remodeled and reopened [Blaffer Art Museum](#). Curated by Claudia S chmuckli, Blaffer director and chief curator, the exhibition presents a 25-year survey of Feher's works.



Washers, caps and plastic gaskets make up *Round Things with a Hole in the Middle Most of the Time*.

Schmuckli offers up some perceptive observations on the state of sculpture in her essay for the exhibition's accompanying monograph. She remarks on the confrontational, even antagonistic, nature of recent sculptural production and its emphasis on dissonance and ambiguity, which not only reflects, but also creates, the disconcerting, sometimes infuriating, uncertainty of our times. Schmuckli singles out Feher's work for its ability to "restore order and beauty where there is chaos and ugliness."

Born in 1956, Feher is of a different generation from the youngster crap-pile artists out there. Maybe this is why he makes work that still values a formal beauty as well as a quiet poetry. He's got an

almost archaeological attitude when it comes to valuing seemingly valueless bits and pieces of contemporary material culture. Feher culls little gems from the debris stream of daily life, finding beauty in a bottle cap or bit of packaging. And when his collections, combinations and manipulations of objects work, they are strikingly effective. But working this way successfully is much harder than one might think. There is a fine line between something that clicks with the viewer and something that looks like an accidental pile of junk. Admittedly, for some artists the latter *is* the point — but for me, Feher's more selective and/or manipulated works are the most successful.

Mountain Home (2004), a pyramid created from green plastic berry baskets (Feher accumulates multiples of things rather than buying bulk), looks like a ziggurat of consumer detritus. Other ironically "monumental" works are a "mastaba" created from plastic bottle trays or stacked chunks of molded-[Styrofoam](#) electronics packaging that feel oddly Mesoamerican.

Other works are wonky riffs on minimalism. In looking at an untitled, 2007-09 stack of cardboard boxes with their interiors spray-painted in vivid hues, I imagined some high school underachiever executing an art assignment to knock off a [Donald Judd](#). I mean that in a good way. In two wall pieces, *Honcho Grid 1* (1999) and *Honcho Grid 2* (1999), Feher strings tiny cocktail straws together into regular and irregular grids. The rigor and pretension associated with the minimalist (capital "G") Grid becomes fragile, flawed and handmade.

An untitled 2012 piece by Feher is really wonderful. It's a classic example of the artist's use of something banal and cheap to create surprising impact. Tiny torn pieces of one-inch, blue painter's tape are stuck to the wall in concentric circles that create an imperfect oval. The two-inch bits are adhered on only one end, leaving the other sticking up. This little bit of three-dimensionality means that as you walk past the work, its color shifts from all blue to blue-plus-white-wall back to blue. It works the same way as the finely crafted color slices of [Carlos Cruz-Diez](#)'s optically experimental work — except it's *masking tape*.

Other [Home Depot](#)-channeling work includes *Swimming with Galileo* (2012), hung next to the tape piece. Neon-yellow nylon string hangs down from a galvanized curtain-rod-like pipe in concentric loops. It reads like a retinal afterimage from an early Stella. *Blossom* (2008) is crafted from four-by-eight-foot rectangular sheets of pink insulation board folded into a crisp fan shape. It's stupidly simple, cleanly executed and quite lovely.

Feher offers up a number of works using glass and plastic bottles, partially filled with colored water or variously hued commercial liquids. These are more hit or miss. The varying levels of blue water in the row of identical clear glass bottles of *Just So* (2002) are simple and beautiful. They look like the ebb and flow of ocean waves. *Pinks* (2007), Feher's DIY Calder-esque mobile of white-wire coat hangers and chubby plastic bottles filled with reddish liquid, has a precariously engaging construction. But a number of the artist's hanging collections of bottles fall short. They either aren't arranged in a visually interesting way or aren't numerous enough to push them into new territory.



Long Term Pillow is a wry, lovely and poignantly humble DIY tombstone.

Feher grew up in [Corpus Christi](#), and a lot of the work in the show reminds me of beach-combing on the Texas [Gulf Coast](#), where flora and fauna are often outnumbered by stuff like tar balls, broken bits of plastic, old bottles and cooler lids, the occasional hypodermic needle, two-by-fours from the last hurricane and eroded flip-flops that floated down the Mississippi and into the Gulf. But that doesn't mean it all has some worn patina. Some bits and pieces show a little history, and some look like they were just dumped out from a junk drawer crammed with lone playing cards, marbles, cheap plastic toys and old Monopoly money.

But when he crams tables with stuff, as in *Take It Up with Tut* (2008), there is too much going on to highlight any individual moments. It's hard to take anything away, and there isn't enough going on to make it overwhelming in its totality.

The show could stand editing, and the weakest work seems to have been relegated to the upstairs gallery. Here are the middling collections. A variety of clear glass jars clustered into a square on the floor isn't expansive enough to be overwhelming, nor does it feel like some fascinatingly comprehensive assemblage of types. Four glass bottles with various colored fluids ([Windex](#), coolant, brake and transmission fluid) are just insipid. A piece of white wood on the floor with four red-lidded jars is similarly lackluster, and I can't believe the gallery actually paid to have it shipped in. There may be some big backstory, but I don't know what could make the piece pay off. A collection of multicolored marbles resting in the lines of a square of sculptured shag carpeting sort of works but is too visually disjointed.

But Feher's floor circle of little circles is nice. Washers, caps, plastic gaskets and the like are part of the ongoing collection of *Round Things with a Hole in the Middle Most of the Time*. And the pieces that deal with mortality work especially well — Feher was diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1989. *Penny Piece* (1995-present), the artist's ongoing collection of pennies from every year since he was born, is direct and thoughtful. They're neatly placed in a line on a shelf and shown with the glass jar Feher uses to store them. The oldest are the darkest, and even if you don't know the story behind the piece, the progression of the aged copper conveys information on its own. (Feher apparently left space for 96 pennies, 96 being the number of years his grandmother lived.) One of my favorite pieces is also upstairs. For *Long Term Pillow* (1997), Feher set multicolored plastic flowers into concrete poured into a cut-down cardboard box. The box has been removed, but the concrete created a perfect cast of its interior. It's a wry, lovely and poignantly humble DIY tombstone.

When Feher is good, he's really good. And if he'd just edit a little more, he'd be really good most of the time.