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Throwaways, Put Together Just So

Tony Feher's Retrospective at the Bronx Museum

Melanie Fidler for The New York Times
Plastics in "Mountain Home" (2004).

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Almost anything, even the most banal object, can be beautiful if you see it in the right way. If you're not good at seeing that way, it helps to have someone present things to you in certain arrangements. That's where the sculptor Tony Feher comes in. A much-admired but less-than-famous New York artist (born in Albuquerque in 1956), Mr. Feher organizes the kinds of things that most people throw away into simple but surprisingly exciting configurations.

His palette consists almost entirely of cheap manufactured objects, including glass and plastic bottles; metal and plastic bottle tops; marbles, coins, nuts and bolts, metal rings, plastic bags, broken pieces of glass, rope, plastic cord, shredded paper, cans and cardboard boxes.

He gets a lot of mileage out of bottles. “Glass Square,” a piece from 1997 in “Tony Feher,” a 25-year retrospective at the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#), consists of 100 clear glass jars of different sizes but all less than seven inches tall and arranged in a square on the floor. “(Birth Stone)” (2008) has about four dozen dark green wine bottles gathered into a circle on the floor with a brick-red marble placed over the mouth of each. Hanging overhead from a rope stretched diagonally across the museum’s largest exhibition space is a clear glass gallon jug half full of blue water, a piece from 1993-94. Works like his provoke a heightened state of perceptual attentiveness, which a susceptible viewer might carry away into the world beyond the museum walls.

How Mr. Feher’s pieces are installed is a crucial factor, and the Bronx Museum has risen to the challenge. Organized by Claudia Schmuckli, director and curator of the [Blaffer Art Museum](#) at the University of Houston, the show as presented here is a joy to peruse.

There’s an infectious quality to Mr. Feher’s works that has partly to do with how easy they apparently are to make. He taps into an elemental decorative instinct. You might feel the urge to produce similar pieces yourself. Lots of people who know nothing about contemporary art display things like pieces of sea glass and ocean-rounded stones in bottles in their homes. “Just So” (2002), in which 28 clear glass bottles on a white shelf have different levels of blue water in them, creating a wave form rising and falling from one end to the other, could have been made by an inventive hobbyist. “Sharadiant” (2000) might be the work of an eccentric housewife. It’s made of 19 primary colored broom and mop handles radiating from the center, where they are joined by a short length of rope.

While Mr. Feher’s art may suggest an untrained, vernacular activity, it’s also animated by a mandarin sophistication. The readymades of Duchamp naturally come to mind — his “Bottle Rack,” for example. But unlike Duchamp, who claimed to be indifferent to the aesthetics of the things he chose to present as art, Mr. Feher is obviously acutely attuned to the aesthetic qualities of his materials. Much of the excitement is in discovering otherwise unperceived possibilities in ordinary things, as in “Untitled (Ruby Begonia)” (2000), in which nearly 30 iridescent purple marbles are scattered over a circular field made of hundreds of pennies, nickels and dimes. In this and many other works, Mr. Feher seems as much a painter as a sculptor in his attunement to color and texture.

His work is comical if not laugh-out-loud funny, though it’s hard to say exactly why a pyramid made of green, plastic, quart-size fruit containers called “Mountain Home” (2004) is humorous. Maybe it’s because it reverses expectations, turning something usually considered ugly and worthless into something lovely and amazing. Many of his works gently upend the pretensions of more serious art. In putting bottle caps in geometric formations on the floor and stacking various boxes or blue foam bricks, he teasingly alludes to adamantly nonfunny Minimalist works by Carl Andre and Donald Judd.

“Four Drawn Conclusions” (2004), a quartet of different kinds of strapping used for industrial bundling hanging from nails on the wall, evokes early works by Richard Serra that involve much heavier lengths of metal and rubber. “Federal Suite” (2001), a set of six small cardboard boxes unfolded, flattened and spray-painted solid colors, refers to the august tradition of monochrome painting. Two wall-hung irregular grids made from colored plastic straws invoke the grid of Mondrian and countless other Modernists; their pointed titles, “Honcho Grid 1” and “Honcho Grid 2” (both from 1999), satirize a tendency in modern art history to associate artistic achievement with macho authority, as if identification with feminine sensitivity were a threat to art’s prestige.

But deflating the overblown is not Mr. Feher’s only mission. He’s a mischievous subverter of the dictatorship of all categories, a wily poet of the everyday.

“Tony Feher” continues through Feb. 16 at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, at 165th Street, Morrisania; (718)681-6000, bronxmuseum.org.