

Master class: Joseph Havel's blue period

By Molly Glentzer | December 21, 2012 | Updated: December 22, 2012 3:11pm

Joseph Havel: 'Hope and Desire'

When: 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays through Jan. 26



- "It's a very crowded show," Joseph Havel said, deadpan, as we walked into his "Hope and Desire" exhibit at Hiram Butler Gallery.

The gallery's large room holds just two pieces. Occupying the west wall is the installation "Hope and Desire," a grid of 10 large sculptural "paintings" made with about 350,000 custom-made shirt labels packed into Plexiglas frames. A cast-resin sculpture, "Architecture," glows like a miniature skyscraper near the window.

Two smaller cast-resin works are relegated to a back room, and a clay piece sits on a pedestal outside the building. They're related but they dilute the dialogue between the two main works, Havel explained. So they're presented only as "periphery information."

"A show is like publishing a book or recording a piece of music: You might have another great song or poem, but if it doesn't have the same implication, it muddies the water," he said.

Clearly, Havel excels at the art of the edit.

No visual nuance escapes him. The woven labels used to create "Hope and Desire" are a soft color called French Blue, which matches the irises of Havel's eyes. On this day, he magnified the

reference "Architecture" by wearing a sweater of the same hue.

"Hope and Desire," similarly, is both a whisper and a shout.

Half of the frames contain labels with the word "HOPE" in capital letters. The other half are sewn with the word "desire" in lowercase. The labels are packed in sideways, about 35,000 to a frame, so the blue and white threads create stripes when viewed from the front. Havel allows the patterns to be imperfect, humanizing the minimalism and enabling viewers to read the words.

Havel has created two sets of five striped patterns - vertical, horizontal or diagonal - and repeated them with each label so they "speak" to each other on the wall.

This is his 14th label piece, but Havel sculpts with a variety of materials, including bronze. (He has works on permanent display at the entrance to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Beck Building as well as its sculpture garden.)

Havel came to Houston in 1991 to direct the Glassell School of Art's Core Residency Program, on leave from a job teaching art at Austin College near Dallas.

"In a weird way, I'm the longest-running visiting artist at Glassell," he said.

He's directed the entire school since 1996 and built the Core program into one of the world's most prestigious artist residencies, with help from a great staff, including critic and art historian Mary LeClere.

"I am first, every day, when I wake up, a human being; then an artist; then I run the school," he said. "Even when I'm looking at the business of it, I'm operating from this position of being an artist."

Trim and boyish at 58, Havel rises early most days - often at 4:30 a.m. - and spends time in a studio about five minutes from his Heights home before he goes to Glassell. He returns on his way home or spends time in his garage, where he's set up a second studio dedicated to drawing.

He's loosened up a little bit, but when he was younger, he was so intent on building that practice he didn't even break for Christmas and New Year's.

He invokes short-story writer Flannery O'Connor, who referred to the habit of writing as the habit of being. "You have to find a way to have a practice that is a habit," he said.

Early influence

Havel has thought about what it means to be an artist for a long time - at least since he was 18, when he discovered a book that would find its way into much of his art: John Berryman's 1965 Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry collection, "The Dream Songs."

"I had a first-edition copy. It was one of the first books that, to me, exemplified being an artist," he said. He also appreciated that Berryman, who committed suicide in 1972, was working in his hometown of Minneapolis.

Havel read "The Dream Songs" so many times over the years, it became a link to all the memories associated with what was happening each time he returned to it.

When he made his first label piece in 1996 for a group show at New York's Deitch Projects called "Shopping," he cut the word "present" out of the book, photocopied it and had it sewn by a Dallas manufacturer that serves the fashion industry. Exhibit participants could take the labels to a tailor to have them sewn into their own shirts.

Havel smiles, remembering how the label maker, not aware he was an artist, recommended ramping up the pale green color and enlarging the text so it would be more label-like, more commercial.

"I had to call them and say, 'No no, I really want it that quiet.' I wanted the word to have multiple meanings. I liked that it was unstable."

A lot of Havel's work explores the idea that things are never really "fixed" in life. "You change, even if you think something's fixed. The way you remember something changes your next experience of it... slowly, you move away from the actual thing into an internal process," he explained.

He saw the cut-out text as a one-word poem imbued with his own memories.

Although he completely cut up the book a few years ago for an installation at the Art League Houston when he was named Texas Artist of the Year, he has a file of 35 or 40 words culled from it that could be used someday.

When they're put into service, each word gets assigned "the absolute perfect color" whose implications can echo or play against the text. "Desire" does the latter against the cool blue.

Havel first made the "desire" label for a show at Paris' Palais de Tokyo museum in 2005. (He orders the labels in quantities of 10,000, keeping extras in case a piece ever needs repair.) He had it woven in a slightly different pattern than the current version but settled on the French Blue color because the name seemed appropriate for the location. He also thought it would mimic the light through a nearby skylight and looked fashionable.

"It was right when the Palais de Tokyo opened, and it was a very fashionable place," he said. It wouldn't have had any irony if it had been, say, hot pink.

Havel never knows if he's done his last label piece. But about a year and a half ago, inspiration struck when he looked at the extracted word "HOPE," which was in all caps because it was clipped from a poem's title.

Considering how to marry it with the related term "desire," he had them woven in exactly the same way and the same color. "The only thing that would make them different is to read them," he said. "Whereas before the color might have decorated the word, now it puts the weight on the color. It carries content in a different way. For me that's important."

He packed the labels into patterns reminiscent of Sol LeWitt's minimalist work, allowing them to be imperfect. The minimalists were all about eliminating narrative, Havel said; and he aimed to "leak" narrative back in with both the text and the evidence of human hands at work. "It makes all that clean, transcendent art messy again," he said.

His studio doesn't have a wall as large as the one at Hiram Butler Gallery, so he didn't see the completed 10-piece grid until it was hung for the exhibit. He's pleased with the result.

"Each one maintains its independence but bleeds nicely into the others, so they can be perceived individually or all together," he said. "I want to create a poignant, moving or specific circumstance in which I've given you lots of information that's been very considered; then I want you to have to weigh in and think about it."

And you might see it differently from one day to the next, depending on the light, your mood and whatever aspect of the work you happen to focus on.

"I would like it if all I've done is provided enough specific poetry that it creates this moment of wonder that you can fill in," he said.

It's all about context

Havel often aims for a little irony and humor in his art. "My practice does not lead to cynical work," he said, "but it has to be self-reflective in some way."

Labels interest him because they carry a lot of information, but they're an offshoot of earlier work.

Havel's father, who was a "corporate America guy," expected him to follow suit; and Havel was more than a little conflicted when he agreed to lead the Glassell.

"I recognized that I had my first white-shirt job," he said. He also saw the shirt as an image of modernity - "white walls as a convention rose as part of Le Corbusier with modernism," he added. "What does whiteness mean? I'm a white person, wearing a white collar, showing things in a white gallery in a world that assumes white is a noncolor or simply 'is.' So I thought, let's take it and personalize it in some way. ... I wanted to use my identity as a way to talk about larger identity issues."

He cut the collar and the label from one of his shirts and hung them in an exhibit at the same height they'd be if he was wearing them, also affixing the buttons into the wall. "It was to recognize that the room was white, and the artist was there and that nothing was there without context," he said.

His "presence" in this way became almost a signature - so the choice of the word "present" for the first label wasn't random.

He may never use some of the words he's filed, he said.

The same goes for other projects around his studio. An important part of building a "habit" of art-making is accepting that some ideas will pan out and others won't - and some simply need time to gel. "That's how I sustain it," Havel said.

He thinks his focus on practice also explains how he's been able to build the Core program into something important. He doesn't need to teach Core fellows how to make art.

"The remarkable people we get keep me intellectually current. They're among the smartest people of a new generation of artists every year," he said. "Hundreds of people apply for those positions, and I have to walk into their studios and go, 'What do I think?' ... It's not useful to say, 'You should do what I do.'"

But he can mentor them in how to keep making art when life and jobs intervene.

"I went to schools that, at that time, had very accomplished people, and I don't know anyone of them who still makes work. Because what happens is, it breaks you down if you don't find a habit. It's hard!," he said.

He recommends thinking of art-making as gardening: You take care of the soil and fundamentals and understand that not everything blooms at once.

"The hardest thing about being an artist is that you have to be a hyper self-critical egomaniac," he said. "You have to not take yourself super-seriously and take yourself super-seriously at the same time."

This begins to explain why he's put "Architecture" - which is cast from "The Collected Writings of Sigmund Freud" and stands at 5 feet 7 3/4 inches tall (Freud's height) - in the room with "Hope and Desire."

"There has to be this moment of clarity where it all pulls together; things form and the narrative and crafting and everything has an implication. It's a little like the lens on a camera: You know when it's in focus," he said.