



WEBEXCLUSIVE

TONY FEHER

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In Tony Feher's work a windblown shopping bag caught in a tree's branches becomes a ripe, exotic, synthetic arboreal fruit. Empty plastic bottles sweating inside with condensation are valorized as bodies, as organs and vessels—ritual items that eulogize a sick society. Feher alchemically reformulates discarded scraps from the dumpster or street corner into sad, beautiful totems to 21st century life.

Feher is a mid-career, Texas-raised, New York artist. He makes compelling neo-Minimalist sculptures using the detritus of urban living. Scavenging the sidewalk for bits and bobs, lost pennies, shreds of broken colored glass and polystyrene packaging, Feher assembles these worthless gems into strange edifices that are throwaway, poetic monuments to the contemporary landscape.

The Bronx Museum of the Arts is hosting the New York leg of Feher's first American museum retrospective. This touring survey exhibition, organized by Claudia Schmuckli of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum, features 60 pieces of Feher's work drawn from the last 25 years.

The survey of work spans every era of his constantly evolving practice. His sculptural strategies roughly gravitate towards three or four formal presentation modes. These strategies include works on the floor, works using a table, works on the wall, and works suspended in mid-air.

Over the last quarter century Feher's work has developed an evocative language that diaristically documents his personal medical struggles, while offering a meditation on mortality and the lack of permanence in all life. These reliquaries to marginalized, medicalized existence are balanced by the artist's hardline aesthetic toughness. Nothing extraneous is included in these sparse, bleak sculptures. Feher continually pares down his palette, his materials, his system of choice-making to find new metaphors, working between the particular parameters of his quixotic, zero-budget art strategy.

His earliest work in the show, "Untitled," from 1987, is a glass honey jar filled with red marbles. Presented in a museum vitrine, the jar becomes a thrift-store reflection about the shamanic power of medieval reliquaries.

In a notable series begun in 1992, Feher uses colored fluids and bottles in a number of gorgeous low-budget mobiles that precariously hover above and beside the viewer like disembodied hospital drip bags. It is with this body of work that Feher first hits his métier—the funereal beauty of the deserted prosthetic. During the 90s, Feher developed as the master of an aesthetic that twins the horror of the blood-filled hospital tube with the lonely beauty of Minimalist solitude. These pieces speak of the fragility of human existence, living

beyond chart-figures, where hope is gone but a ragged entity remains, stranded, fragile, and desperate to keep going. In hanging pieces such as “It Seemed a Beautiful Day” (2002), and “Pinks” (2007), the abstracted sculptural figure splutters with life like a rickety car empty of gas—alive but only just.

Beyond this body-related genre, Feher moves on to further strategies that gently evince a delicate line between fine art aesthetics and a hobo’s chaotic quasi-religious, anti-logical shrine.

He produced a number of tables stacked with the junk of a life that seems deserted but not unresolved. For example, in “Take It Up With Tut” (2008), recyclables, beads, empty coffee cups, and bottles filled with colored water are propped, stacked, and totemized in a wayward elegiac rhythm atop a rectangular white-painted plywood tabletop. The colors in the bottles range from candy-pink to red to mid-greens to silver.

Feher hijacks Modernism’s canonical tropes, its blocks of primary color and its arch gestures. He riffs on Arte Povera’s macho, brutalist “cheap material” credo. But he upends and repurposes these formal conceits in a gentle balancing act, producing junkyard Bochners and hand-me-down De Marias. He interrogates the monumentalist materiality of First-Wave Conceptualism. Feher’s Neo-Conceptualism is fey and witty. For example, “Honcho Grid I” and “Honcho Grid II” from 1999 are both two by two foot wall grids that reference Sol LeWitt’s work, but Feher cheekily renders his homage out of red plastic cocktail straws.

Feher knowingly winks at these icons, but he moves beyond and around slavish art historical quotation. His work alludes to the precarity of human living, to the visual absurdities of marginal figures on the perimeter of the city, the rough-and-ready street poetry of a vagrant’s assemblage left on a deserted city block. His best works tread a thin line between visual logic and illogic. Is this the work of a prankster or the epitaph of a drifter, the artifacts of fragile life lived on the edge?

Playfulness and pathos are key to Feher’s work. At its finest, it leaves its viewer enraptured in its precarious poetry.