



Art review: Tony Feher turns random found objects into artworks

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Tony Feher, Blossom, 2008, extruded polystyrene, Each: 48 x 96 x 24 inches (121.9 x 243.8 x 61 cm); overall dimensions variable. (Jason Mandella)

Don't recycle that plastic water bottle, and hold on to those little berry baskets you bring home from the supermarket.

Do like Tony Feher does and turn them into art.

Through Aug. 17 the Akron Art Museum will be stacked high with Feher's transformations of everyday objects and materials, even ones we think of as disposable.

Even painter's tape. In case you haven't noticed, if you put blue painter's tape on a window, the light shines right through it, and it's really pretty.

By now you may have seen or read about Feher's outside installation, *Buoy* — the three red marine buoys that hang from the museum's cantilevered "Cloud" roof over the parking lot, East Market and South High Streets.

But you may not have seen the transformed glass wall in a first floor back corridor, just south of the public bathrooms. It's another manifestation of Feher's sensibility, in his refined and poetic realization that blue painter's tape could be used to make something akin to a medieval stained-glass window.

This piece, named for Akron native Judith Resnik who perished in the 1986 Challenger disaster along with six other NASA crew members, is beautifully effective, evoking not only a stunning blue sky, but stars and constellations (as well as a nod to *The Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh).

Turning a roll of the tape round and round in his hand as he worked on the piece last week, Feher noted, "The floor goes blue and the walls go blue when you come around the corner. It almost feels like vapor in the air.

"I've had some of these in place for five to six years now in some venues; in others, three to nine months ... some with direct sunlight pouring through them in the afternoon."

He then went on to analyze the work in progress: "It's the process of how I work — what can I do, how can I exploit this item? It's a tension between the straight line of the tape and the way you place the pieces; when you have the overlap there's two colors."

Jan Dreisbach, the museum's chief curator, picked up the narrative: "Tony has used blue painter's tape all over the world — from the Hagia Sophia Museum in Istanbul, Turkey, to the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas."

The museum commissioned both *Buoy* and *Judith Resnik* to complement its presentation of the artist's 25-year survey exhibition, organized by Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston.

The exhibit remains in Akron through Aug. 17 and features more than 50 of the artist's works from 1987 to the present. It reveals the richness, complexity and wide-ranging influence of his aesthetic as well as a gift for seeing objects for what they are.

Focusing on Feher's process and sensibility, the works feature the range of materials that he uses, from bottles filled with colored liquids to marbles, pennies and mylar blankets — most of which he has lived with for quite some time before fully defining their properties and forming strategies to use them.

Installed in the museum's Karl and Bertl Arnstein Galleries, and extending into its grand lobby as well as downtown Akron, Feher's compact and complex works cause visitors to look at their world anew.

His materials are objects picked from the back alleys and byways of New York City, which Feher lovingly describes as a "material treasure trove."

His treasures? Caps, wing nuts, washers and glass fragments, mop and broom handles, soft drink crates and insulation panels, as well as the aforementioned disposable baskets and bottles. The work is a tribute to the power of the creative impulse, our need to wrench order out of chaos, beauty from ugliness and noise into poetic solace.

Born in 1958 in Albuquerque, N.M., and raised in Corpus Christi, Texas, Feher studied architectural history at the University of Texas and briefly worked for architects and a studio potter before moving to New York City to begin painting, supplementing his income working for an art gallery.

Feher explained his transformation from painter to assemblage and installation artist. "In the late 1980s and early 1990s, after the work we see here began to emerge out of a perfectly passable, if mediocre painter, I noticed the condensation on the inside of a partially consumed bottle of water in my apartment.

“I wondered how those droplets got there — of course it was the same hydrologic cycle that creates rain in our atmosphere — and I found that to be profound and also ridiculous: profound could be realizing this could happen in a plastic water bottle, but why is that? Because the cap was created to make a seal; then you realize there’s a whole industry of product design, and these companies invest a lot of money to create a design to keep their product in.

“Then I realized I could draw with this and could rely on that seal to keep my colors in. The bottle could be a metaphor for the body throughout history or for vessels that contain anything from oil to wine or fish sauce, and could refer to ancient amphora being lifted from the Mediterranean Sea floor to the plastic crates I lifted from New York City alleys.

“Then I realized that instead of trying to create something different, I could utilize already produced packaging.”

Programs for Feher’s exhibit include:

- Art on the Rocks: Bloody Marys with Tony Feher, 11:30 a.m. today. Chat with the artist about how he looks for artistic possibilities in random objects, and learn to create an excellent Bloody Mary. Bring random objects to work with and to share. \$25 members, \$30 nonmembers. Register at <https://akronartmuseum.org/eventregistration/486>.
- Book Club: But Is it Art? by Cynthia Freeland, 6 p.m. May 22. A survey of everything from aesthetic theory to digital imaging, and of everyone from Goya to Damien Hirst, is packed into seven chapters. Discussion includes a guided tour of the Feher exhibition led by Director of Education Alison Caplan.

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