

Tony Feher/MATRIX 201a “I’m Tired of Toast”

“There was a woman at the Hammer Museum,” Tony Feher told me when I visited his New York studio in May. “She walked up to one of my sculptures—it was one of the bottles, suspended from the ceiling with string. She looked at the bottle, saw the way the condensation inside caught the light, and her face just registered pure joy: ‘How beautiful!’” He paused, clearly relishing her reaction. “Then, it was like watching the stages of Mary’s reaction in Medieval depictions of the Annunciation. Her face fell in confusion as she realized it was just a bottle. A bottle tied with a piece of string. A split second later, she had progressed to disgust: A bottle. And a piece of string. In an art museum! Were her membership dues (or worse, her tax dollars) paying for this? I watched her try to move on, but something kept drawing her to the bottle. After another second or two, you could see she had reached a resolution—whether or not she understood why this bottle was hanging there, it was beautiful. And that was enough.”

Feher’s sculptures are often imbued with a startling beauty—startling, perhaps, because we are ill accustomed to giving most of the materials he employs a second glance, let alone perceiving their subtle poetry. His raw materials are the residue of our commodity culture: bottles, jars, crates, Styrofoam, caps, and coins. Feher’s interventions into these objects are spare; he eschews craft, favoring instead an art of arrangement.

He might, for example, corral loose change into a tight circle on the floor, as he did in *D.C. Five and Dime*, 1999, filling the gaps between the coins with marbles. For an installation in Paula Cooper Gallery’s chamber at the 1994 Gramercy International Art Fair (staged entirely in hotel rooms at New York’s Gramercy Park Hotel), Feher weighted liter soda bottles with pennies so that their carnival-colored plastic bottoms waggled saucily above the bathtub’s waterline. The installation to which Feher refers in the anecdote above was reconfigured for UCLA’s Hammer Museum following its run at Bard College’s Center for Curatorial Studies Museum in upstate New York last year. It represents both a distillation of Feher’s signature style and its most perfect expression to date—a series of plastic bottles, partly filled with clear or colored liquid and suspended in level, rhythmic lines from the galleries’ track lighting grids. Bottles are utterly disposable, designed to deliver their contents to the consumer without distracting from the product within (designed, in other words, for both literal and figurative transparency). Stripped of their logos and placed in an empty white gallery, however, these vessels can transcend their intended purpose and dissolve into sheer movement and light.

Above all, Feher’s is an art of attention. He asks us to really look at our surroundings, and to seek beauty where we may formerly have seen only detritus or industry. Upon visiting the Berkeley Art Museum recently for the first time in a decade, Feher was immediately attracted to the massive black columns that were added to the building in last summer’s seismic retrofit. Should a major earthquake hit, these columns are meant to support the museum’s cantilevers. The columns are utterly utilitarian items, painted black in an effort at neutrality. The hope of those who bemoan the retrofit’s intrusion into the clean geometry of the BAM/PFA building is that this neutrality might encourage us to effectively see through the columns—that they will somehow dematerialize, leaving only the cool concrete lines of the original building beyond.

Feher, on the other hand, wants to celebrate the columns themselves. He is seduced by their rigid, industrial forms, charmed by their ingenuous lack of style, enamored with their frank functionality. For his miniMATRIX installation, Feher has draped roughly six hundred feet of polypropylene rope between the columns, inserting it into a space packed with potential energy: the point where pylon meets cantilever. The rope is the same style that was used to keep visitors off the growing grass in the aftermath of the retrofit. More often than not, this ubiquitous yellow construction site indicator scarcely registers in the eyes of passersby—it is significant only for what it protects or prohibits. But by removing it from its ordinary context and treating it instead as a mock ceremonial bunting, Feher has transformed it into an abstract gesture, a line drawn in space. Every sway now takes on special significance, bathing the columns in a quiet splendor. An unconventional swipe at beauty, to be sure. But it is enough.

Designed to highlight the prevalence of contemporary artists who are fascinated with the ephemeral, the transitory, and the temporary, miniMATRIX is a series of exhibitions comprising a single work of art, mounted not in the MATRIX Gallery but in atypical viewing spaces.

Tony Feher was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1956. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Texas, Austin in 1978. Feher lives and works in New York.

Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions

2002

"Maybe/Enjoy," Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA
Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston, TX

2001

"Maybe," D'Amelio Terras, New York, NY
"Red Room and More," Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY and UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA

2000

Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA
ACME, Los Angeles, CA
"ASISWAS," Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York, NY

1999

Mercer Union, Toronto, Canada
"Probably best seen in a dark room with the T.V. on," Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA
Numark Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Selected Recent Group Exhibitions

2002

"Theory of Leisure," Colección Jumex, Mexico City, Mexico

2001

"Highlights from the Permanent Collection: Pollock to today," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

2000

"Balls," James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY
"Summer Group Exhibition," Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, NY
"Vanitas in Contemporary Art: Meditation on Life and Death," Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
"Déjà vu," Art Miami 2000, Miami, FL

1999

"1999 Drawings" Alexander and Bonin, New York, NY
"Works on Paper," D'Amelio Terras, New York, NY
"Neither / Nor," Grand Arts, Kansas City, MO

Selected Recent Bibliography

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Work in MATRIX

"I'm Tired of Toast," 2002
Polypropylene rope
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist, Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, and D'Amelio Terras, New York

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Berkeley Art Museum**

MATRIX