

## Review: Tony Feher, at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum - Theater & art

By Sebastian Smee | Globe Staff May 25, 2013



Suzanne Kreiter/Globe Staff

Sculptures by Tony Feher in an installation at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum.

LINCOLN — Slight yet bewitching, Tony Feher’s artworks — they barely support the word “sculptures” — made from jars, colored liquids, coat hangers, and sundry sweet nothings, seduce you with a kind of overweening modesty. Their aesthetic is flamboyantly offhand, fastidiously “whatever.”

Feher was born in New Mexico in 1956, and raised in Texas. He lives and works in New York, where he came to prominence as an artist in the 1990s. Spiritually speaking, his retrospective, organized by the Blaffer Museum of Art in Houston, and displayed indoors at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, is a show for our times: It harmonizes secondhandedness (our fate) with humility (our aspiration) and effulgent beauty (our heart’s requirement).

It harmonizes, too, with spring, when the world is freshly tinted, and kitchen cupboards are cleaned out, prompting ineluctable questions like, why did we keep all those empty jam jars? And, moreover, where did their lids go?

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Feher has answers. Dozens of his works here make use of old glass jars, both large and small. Some are filled with colored liquids (he uses standard food dyes, liquid soaps, opaque watercolors, and Windex). Others, hanging from wires and clustered against walls, carry single marbles, all the same color. Others still, imperiously alone, are empty, their former contents (coins; a miscellany of parti-colored knickknacks) arranged in obedient rows beside them.

There is even a constellation of those missing lids, turned upside down and arrayed on the floor.

All these works delight because they evoke child's play: the urge to collect, construct, or arrange in daydreamy permutations that impose arbitrary order or simply please the eye.

An early work, "High Low," lets multicolored marbles congregate in the meandering crevasses of a grayish carpet. Effortlessly, it evokes a child's idle hours on the living room floor. But with a flip of the imagination, it can also suggest an aerial view of distant terrain. Similarly, Feher's structures of stacked crates, blue chunks of extruded polystyrene, or green plastic containers can, in a thrice, evoke medieval towers or ancient ziggurats.

Feher's work grows out of a fertile but heavily ploughed post-minimalist aesthetic, one that values modest gestures, everyday materials, and relaxed, unstrenuous forms. Its prevailing outward mood is a poker-faced neutrality. Inwardly, it throbs with humanist impulses, hot romance, and glimmers of sociable wit.

Aficionados of this aesthetic may enjoy watching Feher try to jimmy open a berth for himself in the crowded safe harbor of post-minimalism. You can feel him steering his proudly makeshift raft, with a nod and grin, between the gleaming signature styles and sleek maneuvers of artists like Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Gabriel Orozco, David Hammons, and Tara Donovan, even as he offers more formal salutes to an older generation of minimalists, among them Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Ellsworth Kelly.

But of course, one inference to be drawn from Feher's shrewdly nonchalant aesthetic is that originality, as an artistic value, is trading artificially high.

It is. And yet, for what it's worth, Feher does have his originality, and it derives, almost exclusively, from his unusual emphasis on color. Color not as an arbitrary accessory or a slur on minimalist sobriety, but as an essential ingredient with properties every bit as compelling as the work's materials and form.

A handful of the show's 60 works are white, gray, or transparent. But the rest hum with pure color. Ambling through the deCordova's galleries is at times like being immersed in a tank of tropical fish, arrested at every turn by bursts of local color. All are sourced from everyday life: green radiator coolant. Yellow trimmer line. Red plastic strapping. Green plastic lattice fruit containers. Blue plastic bags. Dark green glass bottles. Red marbles.

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A Tony Feher sculpture of glass bottles and jars with lids, wooden table, and mixed media.

Aside from all the properties we usually ascribe to color, Feher somehow convinces us that they also have different speeds. Blue, by and large, is slower, and if Feher favors it above all others, it may be because his work is always involved in an effort to slow us down.

When he succeeds, as he so often does, there is an accompanying perceptual rush, triggering brief domino runs of poetic, psychological, and philosophical insight.



These feel, for the most part, external to the work itself, which is so flimsy that its relation to deeper meanings is like a sieve's to running water. And yet Feher deserves credit for creating an atmosphere of intelligent, joyous contemplation.

At the deCordova, this atmosphere snaps into being almost as soon as you enter. Lining the glass wall dividing the main staircase from the park outside are several rows of glass jars filled with different colored fluids. Conceived especially for the deCordova, the effect of the work, which extends to smaller windows on adjacent sides of the building, is lovely, and changes with the outside light.

Suzanne Kreiter/Globe staff

Part of the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum exhibition's of Feher's work.

More than most of the works in this traveling retrospective, this one points to what Feher has always done best. More freelance designer than tortured artist, he responds to given spaces with interventions of delicate beauty and unerring simplicity.

Another work, on a wall that faces one of the color-adorned windows, is called "Swimming With Galileo." It's an installation of hanging concentric loops of yellow nylon twine which, again, react to the exterior light. Unless viewed from the side, and thereby concentrating the effect of yellow, the lines almost dissolve into the surrounding air.



Feher's most modest works are usually the best: the flattened cardboard packaging painted a single color and stuck to the wall like miniature Ellsworth Kellys; the stacked boxes, each one painted a different color inside, the smallest and uppermost threatening to topple; the vertical tower of blue crates casting shadows like Islamic "jaali," or latticed screens.

Full of perceptual flexes and yet in other ways seductively slothful, this is a show that brings out the best in the deCordova, an institution which, at this time of year, is already pretty enticing.

*Sebastian Smee can be reached at [ssmee@globe.com](mailto:ssmee@globe.com).*