

Why Aren't You Famous Yet?

By Renny Pritikin

Tony May was born in 1942 in Mineral Point, Wisconsin and was known as Anthony by friends and family. He lived with his parents—both from Catholic families originating in Luxembourg—and adopted sister Mary on a beef cattle farm located in the southwestern part of the state. Mineral Point had been, as the name suggests, a nineteenth-century mining area, with zinc and lead in the ground and refineries nearby though largely played out by the time of May's childhood. The Mays grew their own animal feed—corn, oats and alfalfa. Like any farm child, he was expected to, and dutifully performed, the daily tasks required to keep the operation going, but admits he never much cared for it, nor was his heart in it. He was relegated to being in charge of the chickens and slopping the hogs. A dreamy kid, he spent a lot of time alone—despite a network of close cousins, the nearest to May's farm was a quarter mile away. Years later, Raymond, the family hired hand, admitted to May that as a kid, "you were kind of strange."



The May's family farm, Mineral Point, Wisconsin, 1950

How does it happen that a person becomes an artist, especially when there is no precedent among family members, or in the way one is raised? May recalls at a very early age watching his grandmother draw simple images for him. It was not that she was talented—he recalls they weren't much more than stick figures—but the mere act of creation "was the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen, and it made me want to draw." Years later, revisiting the farm after it had changed hands a couple of times, he was shown drawings he had made on the siding of the house that had been discovered during remodeling.

Other possible clues emerge—his mother, Dorothy, was a skilled seamstress, and an avid reader, largely of Reader's Digest book-of-the-month-club books; one of the constants in May's sculpture has always been the use of books as objects. Perhaps more important was the role model provided by May's dad, Ernest. Ernest May was one of three sons who acquired adjacent land from their father, Tony's grandfather, a successful farmer and businessman. Ernest was a highly skilled craftsman, who could not only make anything out of wood, and had his own sawmill, but was a blacksmith and metalworker too, with his own forge on the property. As a child, Tony "greatly admired his [father's] skills." Ernest held a patent, with his brother, on a beautifully designed barn door latch. His son was soon making his own little objects, scavenging the farm's dump for odds and ends to fashion into "my projects that I'd always want to show people." Sitting in his exquisite hand-made backyard *T. House* sixty years later, May recalls, "I've just always loved building things."

May attended a seminary boarding high school outside Madison run by very strict German priests. It was so regimented that talking was controlled, even in one's room. For the young farm boy, whose cousin preceded him to Queen of Apostles, it was seen as an escape from the predictability and drudgery of life on the farm more than a calling to the priesthood. The sights of Madison, to which he occasionally was permitted to walk on weekends, soon attracted him. Upon graduation, he chose to attend the University of Wisconsin, Madison, rather than go on to two more years of religious study. Miraculously, this quiet and shy farm boy from the seminary would, within three years, be sharing a house with Bruce Nauman.

In the early 1960s May was an art student, working primarily in ceramics and painting. He studied with Don Reitz, Warrington Colecott (brother of the more renowned Robert), and Steve French. A young Italo Scanga was teaching sculpture there, and it was he, years later after he and May had moved to California, who asked May the fateful question, "Why aren't you famous yet?" The implication was that all the rest of them were already renowned; what was up with May, whom they all considered a talented comer?

May had stayed on and done his graduate work at Madison, unlike Nauman who left to attend UC Davis. By the time he graduated with his MFA, May was married to Therese, also an artist, and had the first of his two children. He got a job teaching at the University of Wisconsin, Sheboygan, for a year, before a connection through Steve French got May a tenure-track teaching job at San Jose State where he taught from 1967 until his retirement in 2005.



Home Improvements (tree root repair), 1980, Acrylic on masonite, 11 x 13 inches, Courtesy of the Artist



Home Improvements (central heat), 1981, Acrylic on plywood, 11 x 13 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

Part II

"...is Time in itself beautiful, or is its quality merely decorable or decorous? Somehow, he gives an equation in which attention equals Life, or is its only evidence, and this in turn gives each essay, whatever the occasional nature of its subject, a larger applicability we seldom find...."

—Frank O'Hara on dance critic Edwin Denby

In poetry, the term "occasional" applies to works that are written to mark social events such as deaths or weddings. It's often considered *déclassé* because of its frequent tendency to lurch toward sentimentality. If that trap can be successfully negotiated, however, occasional work can stand out, finding new language for deep experience. Tony May makes deceptively modest paintings that are about the beauty of time frozen and given severe attention. This body of May's work, which he calls *Documentary Paintings*, is like occasional poetry: it marks a human moment that would otherwise pass unacknowledged because of its sheer quotidian nature. The events May frequently memorializes are his clever and improvised home repairs, a subset of the *Documentary Paintings*, which he calls *Home Improvements*. These paintings (they are usually 11"x 13" or smaller, acrylic on boards) are all captioned by neatly painted white phrases on black backgrounds that describe the depicted action. The language used suggests a hybrid of instructional manuals, tourist brochures and photo captions: neutral, helpful, deadpan, dumb. In the knowing hands of May, the paintings have a light irony whose subtext is: *I hope you know that I know that these are silly, but at the same time do you know that I know how endearing they are, how they epitomize how a life is lived? That is, how we fill our lives with*

projects into which we invest meaning and give it everything we have, our experience and skill, to make something functional, witty, and lovely? The documentary paintings are built around earth tones, especially brown, in a flat, brushstroke-free style. Like the captions, the coloration and organization of the images do not show off—they could be the product of paint-by-numbers kits made for maestros.

Hyper-realistic painting based on photography has become commonplace, and May does not abjure the practice. His small paintings resonate with human history the way that Robert Bechtle's photorealist works do, with the photograph as mediator. Bechtle's cars are monuments to specific eras, like On Kawara's dates; May's paintings sidestep chronological specificity; they're domestic comedies mocking time rather than tragedies mourning time.

Some artists are idea machines and never look back. Others, like Tony May, have a handful of career-long interests that they work and rework, and that can resurface after decades of hibernation. For example, there's May's *Variable Constructions*, which come in two forms: suitcase-based works and installations whose morphology changes based on manipulation of cords (which I think of as non-figurative marionettes). The suitcase-based works date from 1965, yet, like recurring dreams, they suddenly reappear in 2006 and 2007, after a mere four decades out of sight.

The late performance artist Stuart Sherman ironically called his modest works spectacles; they were contained in suitcases from which little props would emerge that he manipulated on TV tray-like stands. Of course, there is a long tradition of artists working with suitcases, tracing back at least to Duchamp's pre-WWII miniature reiteration of his greatest hits in a small suitcase titled *Box in a Valise*. May's suitcases take this tradition into spatial terrain: think of a convertible roof disappearing into the trunk of a big American car, or the way certain beetles' wings miraculously unpack from their bodies. May's *First Collapsible* (1965) is a formal investigation whose black box becomes an A-frame style base with two canvas wings emerging from it, circular holes in the wings connected by a plastic bag tube; it's straight out of a NASA moon landing animation, but it was made four years before the first moon landing. There are one or two other variations on this style by May in the 60s—notably *Sheboygan Variable Construction* that folds out into a parody of a Carl Andre floor piece. However, the next iteration doesn't appear until 2006 with *Small Case (Authorized Replica)*, a recreation of a lost 1965 piece and 2007's apotheosis, *Thai-Inspired Portable Art Display Unit*. The former is a wooden box that, when opened, holds a canvas attached and stretched taut bottom and top; the latter is an elaborate red and black gabled tent house that emerges, gigantically, from its suitcase to form an overwrought frame for four of May's small paintings. It was in fact made for, hand carried to, and exhibited in Bangkok.

The *Variable Constructions* are close to the crux of May's art. One of his most important shows was a 1971 exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now MOMA) titled *Four Sculptors* (along with Robert Kinmont, Jim Melchert and John C. Fernie). May's contribution—*Variable Construction Altered By the Chance Re-arrangement of my Living Room Furniture*—was a side-by-side double installation, neither side of which could be seen from the other. On one side was a reproduction of his living room, with all the furniture moved into the gallery. On the other side was a three-sided black room with a black tarp suspended from a dozen vertical white ropes. Each of the ropes was tied to a piece of furniture through ceiling-mounted pulleys, so that moving the furniture raised, lowered or torqued the corresponding part of the black canvas hanging in space. The work highlighted many of the interests that May has investigated over the ensuing forty years: architectural improvisation; mutable sculptural form and interaction; explorations of personal history and abstraction; play in both its meanings as fun and as theater; and modesty of materials.

First Hanging Variable Construction (1967) is a ceiling-mounted grid of wooden strips, from which hang four ropes suspending a canvas that floats, tablecloth-like, over a non-existent table. If the cords' length is altered, the raw canvas (with its square line drawings) crumples—May's parody of a minimalist painting run through the blender of process and conceptualism. Also that year, May built *Third Variable Construction*, a looser version with many more stringed possibilities, looking like the offspring of a parachute mated with a jellyfish. This direction reached its crescendo with *San Jose City College* (1968), a yet larger, room-sized variation. In 1970 May developed the idea of shape-shifting sculpture as drawing, in canvas and rope, with *Drawing (Fireplace)* and *Drawing Drawing Machine*. Two major pieces culminate this direction: *Red Branch Retrofit* (1980) commissioned by 80 Langton Street Gallery (while this writer was director) and *Bookmobile* (1991) commissioned by the San Jose Museum of Art for the lobby of their new building.

Variable Book Construction with Implied Solar Function—Red Branch Retrofit was made for the exterior of an old social hall in San Francisco's South of Market district. It was fitted into the existing large windows, and was made of books painted silver and black and mounted on wood, their covers connected vertically. The silver suggested solar panels, while the whole seemed to be an elaborate set of shutters. Pulling on the rope gizmo opened or closed the books, column by column. *Variable Book Construction*

(*Bookmobile*) (1991), culminates this line of research in a huge mobile of books on string, which recognizes the history of the original museum's home as the city library in its triple pun. In fact, books are one of May's ongoing obsessions, having made many variations of lamps from books, and other book-derived sculpture. His 1976 piece *Reader's Digest Book Floor installation*, was a tour-de-force of wit and skill shown at the San Francisco Art Institute, using variegated hardcover book jackets as flooring material, side by side with a rowboat skinned in the entire text of *Robinson Crusoe*.

David Ireland, the seminal San Francisco artist, died in 2009, leaving behind his greatest life's work, his home at 500 Capp Street. Ireland bought this workingman's cottage in the Mission District and in remodeling it for his own use, invented his signature art making style: the removal of everything unnecessary in order to reveal the history hidden beneath. Ireland's house, with its stripped and varnished walls, and display of dozens of objects found in the building, is the Rosetta Stone for understanding his gallery and installation work elsewhere. Visiting Tony May's home gives a parallel, if opposite suspicion: one cannot know May's artwork without knowing his overstuffed house. May's dwelling is densely packed with his and his friends' and student's art, but that is true of many artists. The compelling and distinctive experience is that, like with Ireland's, the visitor feels that the entire house itself is an opus, an ongoing concatenation of May's creative output, art and everyday life seamlessly meshed in a maze of memorabilia, sketches, collections, esoterica and nonsense. Then a visitor steps into the backyard, full of sculpture and dominated by the *T. House*, perhaps May's masterpiece.

Like Ireland, like the late Jim Pomero, and the young Jock Reynolds (he is no longer practicing), May is a Bay Area builder, a maker of architecturally derived aesthetic objects. As a resident at Capp Street Project—housed, coincidentally, in a building designed by Ireland—in San Francisco in 1985, May collaborated with artist Bob Jones on a major work titled *Functional House* that examined how site-specific art could transform architectural space. Essentially using only a complex network of mirrors mounted inside and outside, forming periscopes, kaleidoscopes and related optical devices, the artists pierced, opened up, and complicated the building in a manner worthy of Gordon Matta-Clark.



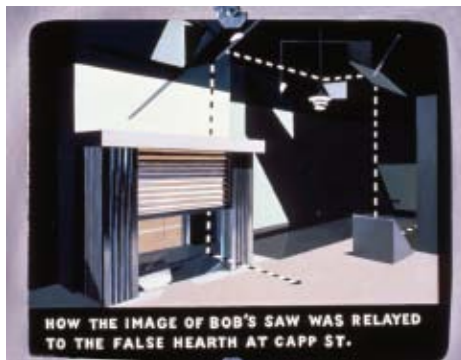
First Collapsible Construction, 1965, Suitcase, wood, cloth and plastic, 30 x 16 x 6 inches, Courtesy of the Artist



Large Variable Construction, 1968, (Installation at San Jose City College), Cotton fabric, wood frame and string, Courtesy of the Artist; Photo Credit: Mary Auvil



Work Lost in France (bookshelf), 2000-2001, Acrylic on masonite, Courtesy of the Artist



Capp Street Project (functional House), 1984, Acrylic on masonite, 11 X 13 inches, Courtesy of the Artist

May's architectural approach was displayed as well in his 1998 public art piece in downtown San Jose titled *Remembering Agriculture*. Originally proposed in 1994 as a series of whimsical windmills, the final product that emerged was quite different, as is the tendency in public art projects. The space given for the project was wedged into a thin slice of land cut off by a freeway; May used the limitation as a way to make concrete the "slicing up" of local farms by developers; he made a black and white line along the perimeter by the highway. The piece as it exists now is a series of large-scale objects that suggest an overgrown trellis-like farmhouse, barn and windmill. It is not stretching a point to suggest that not only does this piece pay homage to San Jose's agricultural history, but also brings the artist's practice full circle, to his Wisconsin farm roots.

The *T. House* in Tony May's backyard should be considered along with David Ireland's house as a major Bay Area art icon of the past 25 years. It is an amalgam of many things: a work shed, a studio, a gigantic lantern, a greenhouse, a Japanese teahouse, and a backyard garage. A two-story glass and wood edifice, the hanging out/talking/drinking tea or otherwise area is on the second floor. Downstairs are the rougher working and storage spaces. *T. House* is on the surface a merger of Asian and Western building styles, but perhaps it is better understood as a conversation between Midwestern American



My SCU Ivory (Soap) Carving Demo with Chinese Wooden Model, 2007, Soap, wood and mixed media, 7 x 9 x 6 inches, Collection of Ray Ashley

love of plain functionality and West Coast attitudes about improvisation and beauty. May continues to work in dynamic new ways. His 2004 installation, *This Area Closed for Installation of Monumental Sculpture*, is a lyrical extension of Balinese shadow-casting puppetry into contemporary art, with Tom Marioni's suite of homages to world cities and peoples from the 80s as a background context. May's 2007 sculpture, *My SCU Ivory (Soap) Carving Demo with Chinese Wooden Model* depicts two rabbits in an exquisite glass case, one a found Chinese wooden piece, and one roughly identical, carved from Ivory soap at about 120% the size of the original. It's funny and gorgeous, and brings a new kind of sexiness into May's work.

Why isn't Tony May famous yet? A hard-nosed question for an easy-going artist, a question that epitomizes a brutal world of business and promotion never much to May's taste. Was it a failed strategy of expecting his due to come to him as it did for his housemate Nauman? Perhaps, but then again Lee Bontecou and Bridget Riley weren't rediscovered until relatively later in life. May says that he's gotten just about the right amount of fame he ever would have cared to achieve. We who've enjoyed his work for decades, however, still hope that Tony May's remarkable diligence and talent will ultimately reach the wider audience it deserves.

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