

NEWS

The Exhibitionist: Tony May

By Maureen Davidson • November 24, 2010

SHARE

They're social events, art openings, occasioned by the showing of a body of work by one or more artists. Amid a crowd and the buzz of conversation, it's rarely possible to really see the artwork, except to decide whether or not to return. The opening reception was, however, the very best time to see the 40-year retrospective of a loved artist and teacher, Tony May, whose "Tony May: Old Technology™" exhibition at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art opened Nov. 12.

The larger of ICA's galleries looks like a Copernican museum within which elegant objects of strange utility line the walls and a construction of curious functionality occupies the airspace. This network of copper pipes whose relationships can be changed by pulleys suspends at each junction sturdy green-bound books, each fluffed open to a peak-roofed shape. This *Book Mobile* changed form throughout the night, operated by artist and friends from their positions in the deck of the construction, dubbed the T. Tree House. "The *Book Mobile* was in the lobby of the San Jose Museum of Art for years," volunteered a man watching from the side. "It was the greatest use of that lobby." An artist from the coast looked with fondness at the evocative *Miracle of the Fishes* public art proposal and told tales of May as a teacher, full of intensity and humor.

A farm boy from Wisconsin and thus a lifelong tinkerer, a seminarian scholar, art school star and 40-year art professor at San Jose State, May enjoys with droll and kindly attention those small increments of daily life that hold within them all that is good. In the other ICA gallery, the viewer is led through a narrow maze of clever rod and cloth walls to view dozens of small paintings hanging at perfect eye-level, vividly lit within

the dark encompassing space. It's the right level of intimacy with which to appreciate these paintings—mostly acrylics on masonite, so flawless of surface they appear to be enameled—deploying restrained palette and impeccable design with text occupying the bottom of each. Haikus. Much in little: *The aftermath of a rare summer storm caught the structure roofless*, or *Nocturnal view of the excavation*. On the walls, *A framed aperture allows access to the gate hook* is the apotheosis of “old world craftsmanship” and cosmic humorous perspective. May's “Old Technology” is an inspiring career view of an artist-teacher whose tinkering makes things work right, including people.

Read more of The Exhibitionist at kusp.org.