

TONY MAY: THE MEAGER RETROSPECTIVE
(WORK FROM THE BASEMENT ARCHIVES)

Retrospective:

“directed to the past”
“contemplative by or given to retrospection”

Retrospection:

“act, power, or mode of recollecting the past; also a review or contemplation of past events”

(from the 1946 edition of Webster’s Collegiate dictionary)

Although the Artist Tony May claims to possess the single largest collection of his own work, we know for a fact that this is a ruse. With the exception of certain paintings and functional objects that were produced within the traditional context of the creation of permanent objects of art, and the large public sculptures which were intended to be permanent and were actually constructed, the majority of the physical objects relating to this Artist’s lifetime of work that can actually be “owned” are objects such as the remnants and artifacts installed in an exhibit such as this one in the Meagher Gallery. Many people, for example, came into possession of a single fish from the site specific public space installation “Milagro de los Pescados” at the end of that temporary, site specific installation.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to impart to the viewer of this Retrospective, through this collection of icons and artifacts, the true scope and effectiveness of this Artist’s work over his lifetime. Because May often deliberately chose to create transitory, temporary, conceptual art, it is not possible for anyone to possess a collection of his work. However, through this Retrospective, we can experience memories of his installations, in public and in private gallery and museum spaces, and we can come to at least a partial understanding of the artist’s intentions by viewing these relics, photographs, paintings, sculptures and pieces of sculptural works in this current Retrospective installation.

For those of us who are familiar with May’s work, this installation evokes memories and re-creates experiences through the viewing of these artifacts and objects. For those who are not familiar with May’s work, it is important to note that many works represented in this exhibit are part of a larger context of site specific installations and sculptural works, and that, as conceptual pieces, they were often site-interactive, sometimes humorous, and were often mysterious commentary on a particular art-related issue of the time.

So this Retrospective may be seen to be in large part a collection of *relics* of works – records of happenings, pieces of installations, reminders, and models. Some are present only by reference, through referential secondary objects which, although of beauty, craftsmanship, and interest, are actually not the works that occurred in time and space. Others are presented as beautifully crafted sculptural or painterly objects. Some are

photos of installations; some models of things that could have been built, were partly realized, or never were created in real space and time. Many are truly icons.

For example, the “T.Tree House Maquette: a replica” was created for a gallery installation, inspired by the idea of building a tree house for a child. The actual work is now in pieces, some stored in Lonny Tomono’s studio in Hawaii, much like the odds and ends, bits and pieces from May’s former installations (referred to in this exhibit as “The Basement Archives.”) The treehouse was never built in a tree, despite the original intention to create a treehouse for a child. Now, here, in this Gallery, the “idea” for the house – the model itself – conjures up a different reality than the exhibit of the work in Hawaii, and Tony refers to it as a “lamp.” The model refers to time itself, childhood and perfection combined; a perfect peaceful place with almost spiritual context (a place to be spiritual, or a place that would be the cause, as well as the effect, of a spiritual orientation towards reality); a work made in collaboration with an artist (Tomono) who spent years as an apprentice to a temple restoration team in Japan. The question arises whether there is a work of art to be owned, other than the maquette which symbolizes the idea of the gallery exhibit in Hawaii, especially where the final treehouse never materialized as imagined and conceptualized by the artists in collaboration? Yet in theory, this piece is available for purchase (since part of it has been constructed and waits in storage).

Tony was influenced by artists such as Bruce Nauman and the West Coast conceptual artists who looked to the use of humor rather than heavy handed emotional or socio-political commentary. In an unusual contradiction, Tony’s devotion to craftsmanship adds another dimension; he fuses the willingness to be a true craftsman with the ephemera of conceptual art, creating an inherent absurdity, even without the final stroke, his relentless use of the pun.

If the art movement that was termed “conceptual art” deliberately set out to create temporary, idea-oriented art that defeated by definition the realm of the commercial high art industry and to dismay even the most affectionate connoisseurs of modern and post modern art, then the “Retrospective” of a conceptual artist such as Tony May is not a Retrospective in the traditional sense. This Retrospective of this conceptual artist can only be described as *a new installation with the intention of creating the act or state of mind of “Retrospection.”* In other words, here, in this room, we are given enough information and artifacts to be able to contemplate past events drawn from the career of this remarkable artist.

We are presented with the following contradictions inherent in the works:

- a single enigmatic object beautifully crafted, dedicated to a “slim” idea, a pun, or a joke;
- documentation of communally created installations, with cultural and psychological resonance;
- a series of crafted objects with a personal narrative underlying the seeming meaninglessness of the content;

- beautiful, non-trivial paintings: the content dedicated to memorializing relatively insignificant home repair projects actually finished by the artists (paintings the content of which are home repairs as sculptural installations in the artist's home);
- "big sculpture" that was installed and then uninstalled and never seen again;
- public sculpture transformed by time
- beautiful models of things that didn't happen
- memorials to works that had a life of their own, going off, so to speak, of their own accord
- site specific sculptures missing critical components and existing as signs instead of experiences
- The theme of functionality/non-functionality: idea/function fusion to produce a completely dysfunctional or quasi-functional "functional object" consisting of an irrelevance, beautifully handmade, with enigmatic, disturbing, or ridiculous content
- the theme of the artist/sculptor as conceptual "interior decorator" ---here is the relic of the original chimney shown at the Hansen Fuller Gallery, but without the "draft" --- the air drawn up the chimney --- to which the pun refers. Above, an accordion moves along a string upon which it is "drawn."

This artist never calculated in advance as to how he could profit financially when his temporary works were dismantled, stolen, vandalized, destroyed by authorities, or "lost in France."

Why?

Perhaps, if we take a stab at introspection along with Retrospection, it is because part of May's artistic identity is influenced by his metaphysics. One theory could be that May shrinks from defining life, or art, in terms of the accumulation of material objects. It is not that he doesn't want to be successful. It is the definition of success that has to be conceptually analyzed. Success to this artist, I believe – and I am being presumptive – has to be so uniquely personal in his experience and memory that *only he knows when it has occurred*. I can guess that this perfect moment occurs for May when the blend of idea, pun, humor, accomplished craftsmanship, and quasi-metaphysical influence on the thoughts of others, and its magical transference to us, and our laugh or smile – happens all together and he sees it. Only May knows when this happens. It is hardly dependent upon, or tied to the event of a sale of any material object.

It may be that what matters to May in his occasionally self-deprecating approach to getting our attention is that his work is a gesture, with humorous overtones, to challenge us. It allows us to perceive another secretive and personal look out into the increasingly depersonalized world of mass culture to see if anyone can get past the pomp and circumstance of Art to genuinely and spontaneously respond to ideas. Thus May shores up his belief in the importance of a concept of truth while giving quite effective lip service to the gods of deconstruction.

After all this, as McLuhan says, "we return to the inclusive form of the icon."

Postscript

In 1973 Gregory Battcock stated in his introduction to the collection of essays published under the title Idea Art:

“The changes resulting from Conceptualist proclamations and provocations are being felt more slowly by the art magazines, the art schools, and particularly the university art departments. The last appear to be the slowest to catch on. It cannot be stressed too heavily how important the college art departments have become in distributing art ideas and providing energy to art making in general... Yet if the real benefits of the Conceptualists’ aesthetic provocations are to be exploited, then the very focus and goal of formal art training need serious realignment.”

From 1967 to 2005, Tony May seduced and coerced confused, mystified, and inspired enthusiastic students at San Jose State to create group conceptual works, some of which existed for only hours after weeks of studied labors by all. While most conceptual artists either lacked the social skills, teaching aptitude, or inner ability to transcend their own horror of academia to persevere as a subversive force within the college art department environment during the transformative 1970’s through the socially dehumanizing and terrifying 1990’s to offer the alternative of an exploration of conceptual art to students, Tony worked within that system, promoting a viewpoint much like the insightful child in “The Emperor’s New Clothes.”

The student project consisting of dozens of blue foam rubber miniature Fletcher Benton “copies” surrounding the large scale real steel Fletcher Benton sculpture appeared spontaneously overnight along San Jose State pathways, as if produced from alien invader pod-plants. This conceptual piece was the result of student/teacher collaboration in a Tony May class and was, if I interpret it correctly, the students’ light hearted critique of those artists who, by force of personality and one or two original ideas get the green light to make ever more expensive and elaborate versions of their previously original ideas in order to “cash in” by selling to that segment of society that uses art to establish status. We may all be quite jealous of the financial success of such artists, but students unconsciously may feel let down by the emphasis on such artists in the academic environment. Inspired by conceptual art, students went on the attack: nothing destructive, just ego puncturing humor: hundreds of little soft copies -- what revenge!

Some of these temporary artworks produced collectively by students (and other collaborators) were this Artist’s best legacy of all. IF conceptual art exists as an idea the manifestation of which may be more or less crafted, more or less permanent, more or less serious, these ideas exist as permanent works in the minds of everyone who was there at the time, in whatever capacity. In many ways, that is another important Retrospective.

–Valerie Patten