

Art Review

Tony May Turns Old Technology Into New Art

By [Ben Marks](#) | Dec 11, 2010

"Collapsible Construction (small case) 'Authorized Replica'," 2006.

Tony May: Old Technology, which runs through February 26, 2011, at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, is easily one of the best art exhibitions I've seen in years. This handsome, elegant and witty retrospective makes those of us who have not paid enough attention to May's work for the past 30 or 40 years feel like fools. For the record, I fall squarely into that camp. To paraphrase the title of the fine catalog essay by Renny Pritikin, who borrowed the line from artist Italo Scanga, why isn't this guy more famous?

The answer may have something to do with the modesty, nonchalance and economy that pervades May's work. This is art that lives within its means. His paintings, though sumptuous, are routinely less than a foot square while his sculptures are recycled from found objects such as ironing boards, a piece of peeled paint that resembles a lunar landscape when lit from the side, used books and rusty hand tools -- no multi-million-dollar stainless-steel balloon animals for this guy. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine May resorting to out-sourced special effects to move his audience; he builds his magic by hand, one brush stroke, one chisel chop, one small observation at a time.

"Refurbished Antique Folding Device," 2009.

The result is a pervasive from-the-heart spirit of reuse and remedy. May is also blessed with a wonderfully dry sense of humor. On countless occasions, I found myself laughing in surprise and delight as I strolled through the SJICA's compact galleries from piece to piece. Here's a tiny Ikebana sculpture formed out of found cat whiskers; there's a photo-realist

painting of a new furnace in his basement. Obviously there's nothing inherently funny about a small painting of a furnace, but May has an uncanny ability to elevate the ordinary, to give everyday objects their due, to find wonder and poetry in the most prosaic things.

"Home Improvements (central heat)," 1981.

While I loved the paintings (the ones in the "Home Improvements" series are marvelous, and **Gratia's Decoy**, 2010, is a micro masterpiece), I was equally captivated by what May has done with books. In **RC Boat**, 1975, he uses the pages of **Robinson Crusoe** to paper the inside and exterior of a rowboat, as if the words could carry the vessel's sailor to untold adventures. Many other books have been transformed into lamps -- book lights, if you will -- and one of May's paintings even suggests that he has repurposed books to create a bookshelf.

"Gratia's Decoy," 2010.

In one piece, **Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet**, 1977, a pair of used Grove Press books of the same title as May's sculpture have been sandwiched between two panes of clear glass, framed so their repetitious spines are in plain, confusing view. Are we now looking at four novels by Robbe-Grillet, or is the correct answer still "two" since the books within May's piece are the same? It's not an especially important puzzle May has put before us, and I'm sure he wouldn't mind a bit if we shrugged and moved on to the collage of old tools nearby that form a literal and symbolic hammer and sickle. Still, I'm grateful he took the time to play with the ocular and literary dissonance.

Much of the exhibition is devoted to May's T. House, a two-story structure in the artist's backyard. Its construction, including the errors and resulting solutions ("An early miscalculation of post height was remedied by chamfering the finish flooring") are documented in many of the small paintings, while the building itself is represented, if not replicated, by a structure that visitors can climb into.

Here as in his other sculptures, May's woodworking and craftsmanship is

neat and clean, though never fussier or fancier than it needs to be. I'm tempted to say it's perfect, but that wouldn't be true either. Besides, at this point in his career, I wouldn't want a bit of indiscreet praise to go to his head. Almost-famous appears to have worked for him just fine.

Tony May: Old Technology runs through February 26, 2011 at San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art. For [information](#), visit sjica.org.