



Welcome to the Junkyard

By **STEPHEN MAINE**, Special to the Sun | July 19, 2007

AN EXHIBITION IS AN ARGUMENT. IT MAY BE ANOTHER THING AS well — showcase, demolition derby, tribal gathering — but it always has an agenda. "Salvaged," a deceptively spare group show at PaceWildenstein's 22nd Street space, argues that the sculptor Tony Feher has reached a point in his artistic achievement where his work warrants consideration in the company of three giants of postwar New York School sculpture: Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Nevelson, and John Chamberlain. Mr. Feher is a terrific artist, and this show is a hero's welcome, but the effort seems premature.

The show marshals sculpture that builds on and refines the "junk" aesthetic pioneered in the 1950s and '60s by Richard Stankiewicz and David Smith. The works reuse cast-off materials with minimal interference beyond attaching them together, and maybe slapping on a little paint. The Chamberlain piece really shines, providing comic relief in this oddly dour grouping. Eighteen feet long, "Gondola Henry Miller" (1985) is a green, twisted metal beam sprouting a couple of snarls of mangled auto body parts.

It echoes the smashed aluminum chair in Mr. Rauschenberg's "Nile Throne Glut" (1992), which manages to be simultaneously stately and scrappy. Too stately and insufficiently scrappy for this show are the Nevelsons, particularly "Night Tree" (1971), a burnished, 13-foot-high beauty in glowering Cor-Ten steel. An untitled, black-painted work (1976–78) in wood is more convincing, and in keeping with the show's spirit of assemblage. This wall work even sports a throne of its own, a busted-up chair protruding at about belly height.

Among these good but not great works by canonical figures appear two pieces by Mr. Feher, continuing a transparent tradition by which a gallery presents its artists as heir to an artistic movement or moment, reviving or extending it. In the early 1980s, the dealer Mary Boone did so with great success in mounting an exhibition of paintings by the symbolist/surrealist Francis Picabia to bolster the reputation of the contemporary painter David Salle, whose work of the time showed striking similarities. Mr. Salle soon became a luminary of Ms. Boone's roster.

But it's an iffy proposition. Three summers ago, Robert Miller Gallery presented "Ground—Field—Surface," a wonderful exhibition of all-over paintings by such celebrated practitioners of the idiom as Al Held, Milton Resnick, and Christopher Wool. It was meant to provide context for an ancillary show of finicky

field-oriented canvases by gallery artist Robert Greene, whose work did not meet the challenge.

"Salvaged" is noteworthy, also, for heralding what some call a "new model" for gallery cooperation in promoting an artist. As the New York Times reported a few weeks ago, Pace Wildenstein will co-represent Mr. Feher with D'Amelio Terras, the artist's longtime dealer. The co-owner of D'Amelio Terras, Christopher D'Amelio, tells me that his gallery approached Pace Wildenstein with the idea, as a way to provide Mr. Feher with opportunities, including physical exhibition space, which his gallery could not. The two galleries share all the inventory of the artist's work, so when something is sold, "both galleries benefit." In light of recent controversies surrounding the high-profile change in gallery affiliation of fashionable artists like John Currin and Tom Friedman, it seems like a civilized and intelligent way to proceed.

There are problems, however. Mr. Feher's work is funny, intimate, and unpretentious, and all these qualities are lost in this sanctimonious space. In "The Big Red Wedge" (2005), two walls built of a few hundred beat-up plastic cola cases are set at a right angle. Their gentle downward taper ends in a 30-foot span, alluding to both Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and Sam Fuller's 1980 World War II movie, "The Big Red One." But the context emphasizes its resemblance to bloodless conceptual works by Sol LeWitt. A big hank of green and black carton strapping, redolent of Alan Saret's amorphous bundles and hanging from a beam by a loop of twine fastened to the wall by a screw, would be more effective in an intimate venue. Instead, it is stuck in a corner like a dunce.

In the admixture of Mr. Feher's campy abjectness, there is the seed of a darkly giddy museum show here. A Jack Pierson found-lettering piece would blow things wide open, likewise a sculpture by Willie Cole made of second hand high-heeled shoes. No matter. "Salvaged" is a shaky start to Mr. Feher's tenure on PaceWildenstein's roster, but it signals that the gallery is willing to take risks. That is always more interesting than betting on a sure thing.

Until July 27 (545 W. 22nd St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-989-4258).