FINE ART

Artist Tony Feher finds beauty in everyday items

By Steve Bennett

Like many artists, Tony Feher began what has become a very successful career struggling to make “bad paintings.”

“I still can’t draw a cat that looks like a cat,” says the 55-year-old New York artist, who was born in New Mexico and raised in Corpus Christi.

About 20 years ago, a couple of things happened that made a profound impact on Feher and sent him in completely unforeseen directions. One involved walking down a New York City street and being stopped in his tracks by a fishbowl of marbles in the window of a toy store. Feher, who at this time had a special place in his heart for the “kindergarten color wheel,” was mesmerized by the variety of hues — not to mention the composition.

“My work has pretty much been informed by everything I learned in first grade,” he says. “It just took me 45 years to realize it.”

The other mental flash was, to him, a storm in a bottle. Drinking from a clear plastic water container, Feher became fascinated by the condensation clinging to the sides.

“It was a cloud, like a cloud in our atmosphere, and I thought it was so extraordinary to have that microcosm inside something as mundane as a plastic bottle,” Feher recalled recently.

He thought to himself, “Does Feher continues on D5

Found-object art offers freedom to be creative

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the world really need more bad paintings? This is my art,”

It led to what Feher calls his “signature work,” clusters of bottles filled to various levels with primary-color liquid, often suspended from the ceiling.

Feher, whose résumé includes exhibitions from Marfa to Los Angeles to Istanbul, has included a hanging-bottle piece in Thomas Hoving's, his installation on view in Artspace’s Hudson Showroom through April 29.

“It reminds me where I’m coming from,” he says. Over the past couple of decades, Feher has built a career on stuff most of us throw away without a thought, from twist-off lids to old carpet squares, suspending everyday objects with string or stacking them on the floor in columns and pyramids.

It’s an approach to found-object art that offers the artist a lot of freedom, Feher says. Often, he wings it, which was the case at Artspace.

“I’ve developed a way of working where I let a site determine aspects of what I do,” he says.

At Artspace, he allowed architectural elements of the upstairs gallery — an industrial space in the old Hudson car dealership with concrete floors and exposed beams and pipes — to dictate much of what became the installation.

“I like the idea of controlling how you see and making you see something different,” he says.

Initially inspired by a wall of gridlocked windows, Feher made what he calls a "large abstract painting" by covering the clear ones in simple designs of hundreds of small strips of blue painter’s tape and leaving the frosted windows as they were. It’s a striking, soothing work, that constantly changes with the interplay of shadow and sunlight.

Utilizing long lengths of fluorescent nylon construction twine, Feher draped the hot-pink, chartreuse and glowing orange strands from pipes in the ceiling. He has twisted the concentric loops into a complex composition that becomes a three-dimensional “drawing” that one can walk around and under.

“I’m fascinated by fluorescent colors,” Feher says, “colors that don’t exist in nature. They really respond to the light in the air.”

Feher also used the ceiling (as well as his first-grade art sensibility) to create what amounts to several large beaded necklaces of inch-long strips of colorful orange (and red and blue) construction tubing strung on long, looped lengths of cord.

It would be easy to extrapolate an ecological message — man’s impact on the environment — from Feher’s use of construction materials and, well, trash, in his work. That would be overthinking, says the artist. In a word, Feher’s work is about beauty.

“I know it’s not the ‘correct’ response for an artist to make,” he says, “but what’s wrong with adding some beauty to the world?”

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Artist Tony Feher’s “signature” works feature plastic bottles filled with colorful liquid.

Strips of blue painter’s tape turn windows at Artspace into works of art.