Tony Feher
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Artist Tony Feher is the subject of a twenty-five-year retrospective that originated at the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston and is on view at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, until September 15. Feher, known for redeeming everyday objects and consumer goods through careful juxtaposition and placement, speaks about the new works he made for the deCordova and about surveying his art career.

AS SOON AS I DROVE into the parking lot at the deCordova, I knew I wanted to create a work for the building’s grand staircase. The building is nestled into a hill, and you enter at the bottom. A window wall goes up the side of the staircase, at its base, the windows are probably forty feet tall. Horizontal Mullions define the panes of glass, and they seem to want to accept, very readily, two-liter bottles filled with dyed water—a mechanism I have used a lot. In total, nearly three hundred bottles filled with water tinted by McCormick food dye—red, yellow, blue, green—make a linear progression across the diagonal staircase. The light pouring through those spots of color looks like medieval stained glass from France. They’re just glowing.

I made two other pieces for the deCordova. One is at the end of a twenty- or thirty-foot-long hall, on a glass pane that’s approximately eight feet square. I1stolted out the view onto the park completely with bits of blue painter’s tape. From a distance, it’s an ethereal, sapphire pattern lit from behind. It keeps you inside the space of the exhibition. If you look outside other windows you see a forty-foot-tall fluorescent magenta pole I specified. At all times of day, it glows. It looks like it has been plugged in. Now everything is as green as possible. But in the fall, when the leaves go orange and red, it will play off those colors. In the depths of winter, with skeletal tree limbs, the contrast will be quite dramatic. The deCordova has decided to leave it on view for two years.

The survey has helped me to realize how fortunate I am in terms of my health—that I’m still alive, still fat and sassy. A lot of the work of my coming-of-age period, in the late 1980 and early ’90s, was made in the social climate of HIV/AIDS. So many people were confronting their mortality thirty or forty years sooner than you normally do. The intimacy, the fragility—the almost pathetic quality—of some of my early work has given way, over the years that I’ve survived, to works with more substantial qualities. That might have something to do with the fact that I no longer feel like I might die tomorrow. In 1989, when I found out I was positive, I said to myself, “Well, you’re gonna be dead in ten years, so you better get busy.” This is not a time to mope around and feel sorry for yourself. Now I’m lucky to be in a situation where sometimes I can even forget about it. I take my medication and everything’s good. This show reminded me of what was going on at the time, and how far I’ve come—and we’ve come. I thought it would be easy to look back over my shoulder, but all it has done is remind me that the future is tomorrow, and there’s much more work to be done.

— As told to Brian Sholis