

ARTnews

ARTTALK

Feher Play

Although sculptor **Tony Feher** was always creative, tinkering with objects in his bedroom as a kid and contriving zany flower arrangements under his mother's curious watch, his junior-high and high-school art classes didn't go very well. "I can guarantee that those two instructors did not see any hope in me whatsoever," he says. "One of them came up behind me one day, said 'Feher, your drawing is just wrong,' and walked away."

It wasn't the most auspicious of beginnings, but the sunny-natured Texan found his way soon enough. Now, his last 25 years of production have been organized by the University of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum into a touring mid-career survey and a book. The exhibition comes to the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, on May 26, before its final stop at the Bronx Museum in October.

Featuring some 60 objects and installations, the checklist has been adapted to suit the nature of each venue. "The deCordova is not a traditional white-cube gallery space," says curator **Lexi Lee Sullivan**, who is overseeing the show there. "So Tony will take over all four stories. And he's thinking about some site-specific interventions—including one involving this three-story window that really is the face of the museum, which would transform the whole building into a Tony Feher sculpture."

Feher's distinct visual aesthetic combines quotidian materials—from glass jars, plastic bottles, pennies, and string, to soda crates, PVC piping, and tires—into whimsical arrangements that often convey an unexpected human pathos. "When you strip things bare, you allow them to take on the possibility for broader meaning than if you explained them," he says. "Reduction opens the work up."

As he describes it, his current practice resulted from a



Tony Feher, Long Term Pillow, 1997,
plastic flowers and sand mix.

series of "watershed" moments that occurred after a long period of "flopping around"—wandering through a liberal-arts education, working odd jobs for architects in Corpus Christi, Texas, and studying at what he calls the "university of the streets." The first turning

point came in the '80s, when, walking by an East Village toy store, he glimpsed a bowl of red marbles sparkling in the light. "Something about them intrigued me," he recalls. "So I bought a handful, went home, and layered them into a bunch of honey jars so they created these different-hued red tones. I suddenly thought, 'I get it now. I'm an artist, and this is sculpture. This is mine.'"

And then there was the bottle incident. Sitting at home one day, Feher noticed beads of condensation inside a Poland Spring bottle, and he realized that he was witnessing the hydrologic cycle—the weather system that creates rain—on a microcosmic scale. "I saw the whole planet's water system in there, plus the idea of the vessel as a metaphor for the human body," he says. "And I suddenly understood that one stupid plastic bottle could take on so many identities and possibilities. It was a very Zen moment, and everything just clicked."

—Emily Nathan



Blossom, 2008, extruded polystyrene.

