Art: Interview

Tony Feher
by Saul Ostrow

I remember seeing Tony Feher’s first show and not being impressed by it. The work seemed to be about arranging stuff; some of it was detritus, the rest the type of things one would find at a garage sale—jelly jars and goldfish bowls. Though carefully composed—that is, ordered by size or color or shape—the work appeared to have no purposeful end. It all was too effortless and too slacker—Feher made making art look too easy.

Though you might think the above to be damning, you may suspect that I was wrong in terms of what I wanted from his work. I was expecting something didactic, some message. Instead, there was sensibility. In hindsight, I had missed the simple poetry in Feher’s type of kitchen-table minimalism.

By his second show I had begun to get it. The work is not about anything; it is just what it is, in the same way that an early Robert Rauschenberg Combine or a Donald Judd box is what it is. Ironically, once I accepted this, the work opened to interpretation and association. Plastic bottles partially filled with water hung from the ceiling, individually or in multiples, suggesting people who had been lynched or, less macabre, an elementary school science project concerned with demonstrating the principles of plumb and level. The work takes on an emotional aura that is at once vulnerable and full of pathos, while remaining somewhat ordinary.

Over the years, subtle changes of attitude and approach have taken place within Feher’s work. While the syntax has remained that of minimalism, there has been a shift in strategy—the work has grown increasingly diverse in both composition and materials, though no less matter of fact. His materials have changed; they appear to be more pristine and new, and, when site permits, Feher works on a larger scale. In fact, recently he has begun to engage in making public and site-specific works. After 20 years of making his somewhat eccentric brand of work, Feher is the subject of a traveling survey show and a coffee-table book. I determined that there was no better time to discuss his views and gain some further insight into his process. We met in his Bronx studio this fall and the interview started almost midsentence, for while his work is modest and sublimated, Feher is a talkative fellow who has much to say about what he does and who he is as an artist.

**Saul Ostrow** So where is your next exhibit and what are you doing for it?

**Tony Feher** In San Francisco with Anthony Meier. It’s a beautiful townhouse
exhibition space. It feels a bit like walking into a wall of north-facing windows with lots of reflective light. It’s great for painters—you come in, turn, and then you have this wonderful light. But you put a sculpture there and it’s always in shadow. So I wanted to do something that would take advantage of the glare and also defeat the issue of UV fading. The plastic bottles with water that I use are great as long as you keep them out of the sunlight.

But people tend to ignore my warnings and instructions. So I stumbled upon Depression glass, which has these funky shapes and crazy colors. I started buying quantities of it to work with; it’s pretty affordable stuff. I noticed that the center of gravity is very curious with these pieces. They are top heavy—if you wrap a wire in the middle of a stemmed compote, it hangs upside down. And a vase is going to hang with its mouth up and open; plates and flat things are going to hang on their sides. There is a kind of self-abstracting suggestion of motion—some down, some up, some sideways as if they are tumbling. The pieces look like they’re spinning in space, up and down and around. A compote or bowl loses its function and becomes the thing that I want it to be, which is shape and color. The glass pieces are spaced vertically along a chain and from side to side in front of the window. Because of the irregularity of the sizes and shapes, the spacing is uneven and there is a sense of motion. Each of them can rotate on a central axis but they don’t seem to swing side to side, at least not too much.

SO I had never been aware of how site-specific your work has become. It seems a lot less portable now.
TF I take advantage of situations that come along. Robert Irwin made the distinction between site-specific and site-determined works, the latter of which sounds more precise to me. Usually the site-determined ones come in the form of museum installations or larger architectural opportunities, like at Berkeley where there is that big spiraling, cantilevered concrete museum building. They offered me a slot in their mini-matrix program where you do art in odd locations in the museum. They said, “Well, what about here?” and I said “No, it’s the hallway to the bathroom.” Instead I focused on the circumstance of the seismic retrofit, these huge pylons that were embedded in the ground and rise 30 feet up to the underside of the cantilevers, with a one-inch gap in the flange between the pylon and the building—if there were an earthquake, the movement would be no more than an inch.

That little one-inch gap fascinated me because that’s where the action is. So, I took a common three-quarter-inch-diameter yellow polypropylene rope you can get at any hardware store and looped it over the pylon into that little one-inch space. As in Cinderella when the birds are flying in, throwing gold brocade on her dress, with this simple gesture I cast a golden thread upon the architecture and engineering and completely deflated it. The building became a support mechanism for my artwork. My gesture negated the architecture and the engineering, and the art assumed primacy.

SO Did that transition to greater scale happen with the opportunity to address institutional spaces?

TF In the early ’90s, Bob Gober called my work “tenement art.” It fit in my East Village apartment and was primarily composed of materials that were readily available in the area. In 2001, with my exhibition at the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, I felt for the first time successful at incorporating architecture into my art. You were not simply standing in a room looking at an artwork; you were standing within the artwork itself.

I had been given the opportunity to show my sculpture in the Bard space, but as the time approached, I thought, Anybody could drag in their 15 works and install them generously, one piece in one big room, or two or three pieces scattered around. It seemed to me that there was a bigger opportunity—to conceptually tap into the energy of the architecture.

SO This was the show with Sarah Sze?
TF Yes. She didn’t want to do anything inside; instead, she wanted to dig holes outside and go into the earth. I told Amada Cruz I wanted the entire interior space. Part of being a good curator is knowing how to work with an artist to help them achieve their greatest potential. It wasn’t just an automatic, “Yeah, you get the whole building.” She needed to know that I could handle it, because it would’ve been the largest exhibition I’d ever had. I wanted the whole space because it was an opportunity to play off of several different areas of interest. I have a long interest in architecture: I studied architectural history at the University of Texas, and I worked for two architects, Richard Colley and then Joe Williams, in Corpus Christi when I first got out of school. At Bard I could take advantage of all the nuances that the architecture offered, and I could fold them all together to make a single experience as a work of art.
SO Looking at the Marfa pieces from 2005, I see a huge shift in the way you address the viewer. You went from making stuff that was hand sized to the arrangement of stuff that literally addresses the body. I’m thinking of the red crate pieces—

TF The overall size of each of the four red crate pieces was determined by the width of my reach, my standing height, and my hand raised in the air. How tall could I make the column without needing assistance from anybody to get it stacked up? If you take those red crates and you say that the high corner is going to be X, equal to my overhead reach, which is about seven feet, it means the two legs are 23 feet long. And it requires a 34-square-foot room to fit, as a minimum. When Rob Weiner from the Chinati Foundation asked me, “Why haven’t you ever shown this piece?” I told him that I’ve never been involved with a gallery that had a room that big. That’s when he said, “Boy, have I got a space for you.” And we took the work down to Texas and installed it in the Ice Plant, which is an enormous, beautiful barnlike structure.

There was enough distance to get away from it, to get behind it, and have a nice scale shift. You could squint and wonder, Well, how big is that thing? or, How far away am I? It’s like the pyramids, you see them from Cairo on the horizon and they’re these perfect shapes a couple of miles away—and huge! Get up close and they’re so big you can’t tell how big they are.

SO But that’s what I see as an aesthetic shift—all of a sudden the body plays a role in the work, as you just pointed out, the body literally establishes scale, it’s measured to the body. So the reception of that work is relative to the viewer’s body, right? Or was it just contingent based on the fact that all of a sudden you could do something 32 feet long?

TF Everything is relative to the body, big or small. I’m often perplexed as to why a curator asks me to engage a specific space. Dan Cameron has given me several amazing opportunities. He curated a show at the Serralves Foundation in Porto, Portugal: Thresholds, Ten American Sculptors. He asked the various artists to select spaces they were interested in. I said, “I’d like that room.” “Oh no, I need video in there,” he responded. So I said, “Well, what about over here?” And he goes, “Oh no, that’s for somebody else. This is for you.” “You mean the most difficult space in the entire facility?” “Yeah, that’s right. That’s for you.” His point was that I had the potential to make it
work; the other artists are not thinking that way, that’s not what they do.

On another occasion, in 2003, for Dan’s Poetic Justice Istanbul Biennial, I pleaded with him to let me have a site within Hagia Sophia. Because of my background in architecture, I knew the building and its significance. But again, he gave me the most problematic space available. After weeks of on site study and observation, I literally saw a line of windows from a distance where I knew my potential lay. And because it was about light, it allowed me to engage the entire building. Instead of only reading the piece from a few feet away, you could also read it from across the entire width, 300 and something feet across. And it held up in scale throughout, no matter from what angle you looked from. It created a false horizon line within the space. It was a beautiful experience and a privilege to touch those walls, literally affecting the perception of the architecture.

Installation view of The Whale Died (detail), Hagia Sophia, 8th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey, 2003, blue painter’s tape on glass windows.

SO Where did the idea of using the blue tape pieces come from?

TF It probably came from actually painting a window, you know masking it off, and noticing that when two pieces of the tape overlap, you get a color change. I also like the contrast between the machined edge of the tape and the hand-torn end. I love stained glass, the way it blocks your view outside, by taking advantage of the light that’s coming in. Like babies and pets, a window with a view will always win; the art simply can’t compete. At the Art Institute of Chicago, in the new wing, there’s a window on the second floor looking out across Millennium Park to a line of skyscrapers and that is the
most remarkable experience in the entire building.

SO So again, how much do the materials dictate what you do? I’m thinking of the story of your epiphany.

TF Well, there’s the epiphany of the marble, and then there’s the condensation-in-a-bottle epiphany.

SO I’m talking about the marble epiphany.

TF Well, one day I happened to notice some marbles in the window of Dinosaur Hill, this little store in the East Village. Somehow the light was reflecting, refracting off of them in just the right way and I realized they were the embodiment of what I was looking for. I knew there was something there; color, form, light, shiny, glossy. So I bought a bunch of marbles and took them home. I had some jars hanging around—I don’t throw stuff out, I’m a bit of a bum—and I started to layer these marbles in the jars, and as soon as I screwed the lid on I knew that this was sculpture that was my art. I realized that “three dimensions” was where I existed more comfortably—as opposed to the paintings I had been struggling with. That’s the moment when I understood that I have to make art to please myself. After a few transitional moments like that, I let everything else go; I stopped trying to make art and just did what pleased me, what excited me, what took me to some place of consideration where I hadn’t been before.

SO A lot of your early work has to do with control and imposing order on random situations.

TF If stacking or lining things up is control, I think it’s a human trait that crosses all boundaries. We line things up, we stack things up, we inherently try to make sense out of a world.

SO And that’s the aspiration for the work?

TF For me that’s the aspiration for being alive. It’s about truth and honesty. There’s no fuss, there’s no muss in what I’m doing. For instance, there are chips of glass that have been run over by a car. I see them on the street and I respond to their color, to how light interacts with them, and to the sense of scale—I think about how, for instance, one grain of sand can define an entire beach. So these little shattered chips of glass are to me like small mountain tops. It’s like the top of Mount Everest or a Rocky Mountain peak. That shattering force is exactly the same as what happens on top of the mountain.
It’s just a shift in scale from six miles to six inches.

SO It’s the difference between the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. The symbolic is when we start trying to explain things, give them meaning; the imagined is when we use a composite of things that we have experienced to create something that we haven’t experienced; and the real just happens. The reason I brought this up was because it sounds to me that you want your work to be real. Forget about meaning, forget about that notion of interpretation.

TF The work can be interpreted once it’s done. I’m not trying to make things to illustrate a point or to create a specific metaphor, but if you’re successful in stripping away the identity of all these objects that you’re using, then you have the possibility of a new interpretation. There’s no need to justify the work. Its very existence is its own justification, and then you interpret it or define it from there.


SO I think I told you, it took me a while to come to your work. It wasn’t until the second show that I could actually make sense of it. The first time I saw it, I wanted it to do something, and the second time I realized it was doing something.

TF It does what it does, and you will be disappointed if you ask it to do more than that. But if you understand, or find what it is that it’s doing, it’s doing a
SO Tell me about your training.

TF One art class in junior high, one art class in high school, and an adult education course in watercolor after college. When I was a kid, I always made things in my room that were somewhere between science and art. My mother encouraged my creativity, but nobody looked at any of this stuff and said, “Oh, he’s talented,” or, “There’s art here,” or anything, it was just odd. In fact the teachers all said I had no talent whatsoever. To the point that Mrs. Beams in high school leaned over my shoulder and said, “Mr. Feher, your drawing is wrong,” and walked away. Ah! My drawings are still wrong, you know, but they’re in private collections and museums, whatever. When I was about 22, I said to myself, You’re an artist, that’s what you are. You’re not going to pursue architecture professionally, and you’re certainly not going to work in a bank or in an insurance agency. I might be a bad artist, but an artist nonetheless.

SO Where did the image of the artist come from for you? Here you are at 22, on the Gulf, right?

TF South Texas. Gulf coast, Corpus Christi. I didn’t grow up in a vacuum, though. My father was in the navy, we moved around, up and down the East Coast. So, I experienced New York City; Philadelphia; Washington, DC; and my mother always took me to museums and historical sites. When I was nine, my family went to Europe, meeting my father on the aircraft carrier at various Mediterranean ports of call. First we went to Paris. I’d never seen anything like it. I remember going to a cathedral with all these statues and paintings of saints with hatchets in their brains, holding their heads in their hands, and one of a woman holding a plate with her breasts on it. Those visual experiences just seared into my brain! In the long run I might’ve been lucky to have been spared the indoctrination that art schools give you.
SO The decisions about living your life are comparable to the decisions you make in making your art—it’s all contingencies. I like the story you once told me about being tested.

TF That was the ’70s and psychological testing was very popular. I was studying psychology at the University of Texas, so it sort of made sense. But apparently I’m tone deaf; my color sense is not that great; uh, I have no creativity, no spontaneity. They told me I was no good for anything. They said I should sell shoes, and I might not even be very successful at that.

SO Yeah, so you might as well go to New York. (laughter) I’d like to talk about
the courthouse piece. When you told me that you were doing public sculpture, my first thought was that you were the most unlikely person in the world to do public projects.

TF I did too! This was in 2003 when the letter arrived: Would I be interested in considering a $250,000 commission for a soon-to-be-built federal courthouse in Rockford, Illinois? I thought, What have they been smoking and will you send me some! It just seemed ridiculous. How many coke bottles do you think I’m going to propose to hang from the ceiling of this building? I was intrigued so I said yes. They sent along plans, measurements, elevations, renderings, and locations that were suggested for my use. I thought, I don’t know that my work is appropriate for this space, but more importantly, really, I don’t know that this space is appropriate for my work. I’m not sure this is the environment where I want to install a gentle, gestural piece because that’s not what people are looking for here. They’re being sued in court! You either put a 30-foot-tall glow-in-the-dark pink resin statue of George Washington in the middle of the thing, or I’m not interested. Well, that wasn’t going to happen.

I had noticed a vast unused expanse of grassy lawn, and I thought of my love of flowering trees. I thought of DC and the cherry blossoms, and the garden in Kyoto with, what, 10,000 cherry trees? And three million people come to see it every year. I wanted to do something magnificent like that. I proposed it to the committee, and, goddamn it, they called back a few weeks later and said, “We would like you to pursue it,” which set in motion a nine-year process. Eventually we planted five varieties of crab apple trees, which are each unique in form and color—color of blossom, color of flower, and color of persistent fruit that hangs on through the winter. And the shape of the trees—there’s a weeping form, a columnar form, two that look like lollipops on a stick, and a spreading multistem form. They’re semidwarf varieties, spaced such that they will never grow into each other. Over time they just get to be gnarly, twisty, and funky, and each has its own personality. Down the road they will be maintained as individual sculptures.

I described it as Martha Graham meets Kabuki on the front lawn, to which one person commented that it sounded a little light in the loafers. Ten years down the road it will become a go-to destination. People will say, “Oh did you see the trees at the courthouse this year,” or somebody will start a crab apple festival. I truly believe it will enter the consciousness of the community. No other work I could’ve done would be paid attention to in that way. I would be very interested in finding another opportunity, in a different location, to devise
a scheme appropriate for that region.


**SO** Has time been a consideration in that sense before?

**TF** *Disintegrating Sculpture* was a piece with different-colored foam sponges inset into a cardboard box that had been painted and made to receive them. But the box lives inside a black plastic bag, which keeps it from light. You can open it and take it out. But if exposed to air and light it will simply crumble over time to dust. But those are sideline considerations.

The *Untitled* plywood paintings with brown oil stain will, over time, do what wood does when it ages. I’m looking forward to 500 years from now when they have become shriveled, bent, and warped. Like me.

**SO** Not if the conservationists get their hands on them.

**TF** Well, hopefully they’ll just keep them all from splitting. If you have a 300-year-old piece of furniture, you don’t want to put anything on it. You just let it do its thing. I want my work to change in the same way.

**SO** What was it like when you walked into your survey show at the Des Moines Art Center for the first time?

**TF** Shock and awe. When you collect that much work over a period of time you do see a shift of scale. You go from a tiny little room to a little-bit-bigger room to a bigger room—your level of ambition might change according to the
availability of space. Still there’s a consistency in sensibility from the very first pieces to the newest works. There’s a thread that ties them all together.

SO Which is?

TF I’m not sure I know what it is . . .

SO But you don’t stand there and go, “Oh my gosh”? (laughter)

TF I stand there and go, “Oh my gosh it looks awesome! It’s beautiful to see this early piece hanging in a space once again.” The Des Moines Art Center’s temporary-exhibition galleries are not all that big, and we had more work than was going to fit. They were very generous in letting us move into two of the permanent-collection galleries with works by Donald Judd, Louise Bourgeois, Ellsworth Kelly, and Robert Smithson, among others. I felt right at home with these pieces, to be perfectly honest. One work ended up in front of a massive Anselm Kiefer, the dialogue between the works in that gallery was very dynamic and exciting. My work held up its end of the conversation.

SO The emotional tenor of your work has significantly changed, at least for me. The early work has a certain pathos. The more recent works have a different type of emotional sensitivity.

TF I’m HIV positive, and I’m very fortunate that the pharmaceuticals that do keep you alive came online right when I needed them. A good friend of mine missed that window; he would be alive today had those drugs arrived only a few months earlier. That’s the climate that we were all living in during the late ’80s early ’90s. That was on my mind—people dying all around, and then getting my own diagnosis and thinking, Shit, I’m gonna be dead in ten years. That certainly has a profound effect on how you think and how you look at the world. I told myself, This is no time to sit around and mope, you better get busy if you are an artist. It’s been about recommitting. I got distracted in the early years—by a boyfriend, or a job, whatever. No matter how bleak things became, I always found my way back to art, never really having left.
SO When you look at your own work, do you see that narrative inscribed, that reaffirmation? I assume this is the first time we’ve actually gotten to see, and you’ve gotten to see yourself, the big picture in terms of your trajectory. You made those decisions, you pushed ahead, and you succeeded in convincing a lot of people that jars of marbles are worth looking at. That string is worth looking at, that plastic bottles half-filled with water are worth looking at. This is 25 years—people like me will write about the show and say what 25 years of Tony Feher looks like to them. I was wondering what 25 years of Tony Feher looks like to you. Other than amazing! (laughter)

TF It looks like me, because if you saw how I live, I live in it. There’s no
separation. A painter in a painting studio might go and paint for ten hours and then leave. I’ve created a world that I never leave. It’s an all-consuming experience. My apartment looks like a landfill.

SO Then what’s the inverse of it, when parts of it leave you?

TF Sometimes it’s really difficult. I’m so invested in the works that when they go out the door it’s like a kid going off to college or something. I mean, I feel that close to the work. I’m thrilled that they’re going out the door after so many years. Scott Burton, bless his heart, said one time, “You know that you’ve made it when somebody else pays to store your work.” (laughter)

In the ’80s, he came to my apartment—I didn’t have an outside studio, and he said, “Is that a piece?” I said “Yes.” “Is this a piece?” I said “I’m not sure.” He turned to me and said, “I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing, just keep doing it. Don’t listen to anybody who says they don’t like your work, and more importantly, don’t listen to anybody who says they do like your work.”

SO So the first time somebody came in and said, “I want to show this,” what was your reception?

TF “Finally!” I had gotten to know a young collector named Andrew Ong. He
came over, we looked, we talked, and a week later he called me and said, “You know, there’s a piece that I just have not been able to stop thinking about.” And ultimately, he acquired it. At that very time he was designing Andrea Rosen’s first gallery, in the Prince Street building. So she came over and a few weeks later called and invited me to be in a ten-person group show. And she actually sold two or three of these little pieces, which led to another group show—Paula Hayes, Curtis Mitchell, and me. And that was a real breakthrough experience for me. But it was Andy that got things rolling.

SO But in those days you never would’ve imagined having a catalogue like the one that they have published in conjunction with your survey show.

TF Never! It’s a real damn book! You can hit somebody in the head with it. But honestly, it goes back to 1980 in Corpus Christi when I said to myself, You’re an artist. At that moment, if you don’t believe, it’s never gonna happen. Somewhere inside me I knew it would work. Something just kept me going forward. I knew in the back of my mind that I was right, even when I was wrong. And I didn’t give up because I didn’t know what else to do. If there’s ever an occasion to exhibit my sketches and notes I think the title of the show will be: Mr. Feher, Your Drawing Is Wrong.