A Memorial Exhibition for Tony Feher, Who Found Art in the Unexpected

Five artist friends have curated a memorial exhibition of works by Tony Feher, who died in June at age 60, highlighting two unfinished bodies of work he was developing at the time of his death.

Tony Feher, “It didn’t turn out the way I expected (Brilliant Yellow Green)” (2010–16), acrylic and mussel shells on plywood, 20 x 22.5 x 1 in (© Estate of Tony Feher, courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; photo by Jason Wyche)
In June of this year, Tony Feher died from cancer-related causes. He was 60 years old. Young though he was, in some ways it was remarkable that he lived that long. Feher was diagnosed as HIV-positive in the 1980s, and through the AIDS crisis and onward, watched friends and other artists succumb to the disease. Not coincidentally, his work often explored the ephemerality of the everyday through the objects that fill up the world around us, yet leave little to no lasting effect on our memory: broomsticks, blue painter’s tape, pennies, and his signature plastic bottles. Whereas many make art out of quotidian objects, Feher found the art in those objects, and largely allowed them to speak for themselves.

Feher’s memorial show at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., *It Didn’t Turn Out the Way I Expected*, brings together the artist’s last two bodies of work, still in process when he passed, and a collection of drawings, notes, and other miscellanea he wrote down throughout the last 28 years of his life. The eponymous first section of works is a series of monochromatic paintings. Each painting features clam, cockle, and mussel shells on plywood or canvas, all painted vibrant colors. Feher was always a great lover of color, and the shell works in this show reaffirm this. So, too, do their titles: “Brilliant Yellow Green,” “Radiant Yellow,” “Neon Pink Fluorescent.” He was interested in fluorescence because such a color does not naturally occur in the world; fluorescent hues are merely a product of humans looking for more of color — a sentiment Feher himself likely identified with.
The *It didn’t turn out the way I expected* paintings are no doubt embedded with art-historical-references, but where the lines of those references are drawn is unclear. They’re part Pop art, part Rauschenberg-esque assemblage, and part color field. With the mussel shells in particular, it’s hard not to think of Marcel Broodthaers, and it seems likely Feher’s paintings are a direct nod to such works by the Belgian artist as “Cercle de moules” (“Circle of mussels”) from 1966 and “Panneau de Moules” (“Panel of Mussels”) from 1968, both of which, like Feher’s paintings, are mounted on wood.
Broodthaers might not be the first artist to come to mind as a touchstone for Feher, but it’s not a stretch either: both have a jocular sensibility, a playful take on the readymade, and a fraught relationship to semantics. However, while Broodthaers’s compositions are dark and cloistered, Feher’s works are bright and full of life. Standing in contrast to the shell paintings is the second section of works, a series of plaintive pieces of plywood, all untitled. Unadorned with anything but a light finish, Feher allows the subtleties of the stain and grain to shine.

Tony Feher, “Untitled” (2010–16), stained plywood, 16.25 x 24.875 x 0.625 in (© Estate of Tony Feher, courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; photo by Jason Wyche)
The real highlight of the show is its third section, which brings together over 700 of the artist’s handwritten notes, collectively titled “Sketches, for 1985–2013.” Housed in plastic sleeves and pinned to the wall, the sketches are written on everything from used napkins and graph paper to recycled envelopes. They provide further proof that, for Feher, everything had a potential creative energy waiting to be unlocked. They range from sad to silly, pithy to poetic, and everywhere in between. On the wings of an unfolded restaurant napkin, “Why Me?” over and over again. A piece of notebook paper laments: “Too Loud, Too Often, Too Late.” A series of scrap notes blare: “ART DOESN’T MEAN ANYTHING. ART IS MEANING”; “WITHOUT MEANING ART BECOMES EVERYTHING AND ANYTHING”; and, finally, “MY NEXT PROJECT IS ABOUT PULLING MT HEAD OUT OF MY VERY OWN ASS.” A small cocktail napkin reads: “Women decide about sex. Women say when.”

Arranged in gridded sections, the notes, most of which are inscrutable, look like musical notation or Feher’s distinct brand of abstraction. Rather than over-dramatizing the fact that more “work” will never come from the artist, and that all we have left are his sketches for what could have been, the notes simply give the viewer a sense of the man, thoughtfully organized.
The curators of the show, friends and fellow artists Andrea Blum, Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, Zoe Leonard, and Carrie Yamaoka, resist sentimentalizing the material, a tempting trap into which memorial exhibitions often fall. In fact, were it not for the text, the show would not feel like a memorial at all. It does not feel like a somber look back at life cut short, but instead a look into one man’s creative process. Even the title of the exhibition, while imbued with a certain amount of pathos, ultimately feels like a joke: Feher’s art never really looked like art, at least not in the traditional sense.
Altogether, *It Didn’t Turn Out the Way I Expected* feels incomplete, though this is neither as obvious as it sounds, nor is it intended to be denigrating. In some ways it seems the perfect compliment for Feher — his work always had an unfinished quality to it, not because it was never complete, but because it so welcomed the possibilities of change. He was never an artist looking to recreate the world around him; he was just trying to understand it, and find some beauty in the process. As another napkin hanging in a plastic sleeve reads: “I’ve been to the moon and back. There is no better place than here.”

Installation view of *Tony Feher: It Didn’t Turn Out the Way I Expected* at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, 2016 (artworks © Estate of Tony Feher, courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; photo by Jason Wyche)

*Tony Feher: It Didn’t Turn Out the Way I Expected* continues at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. (530 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) continues through December 23.