

Projects 50 : Tom Friedman : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 28-May 6, 1995

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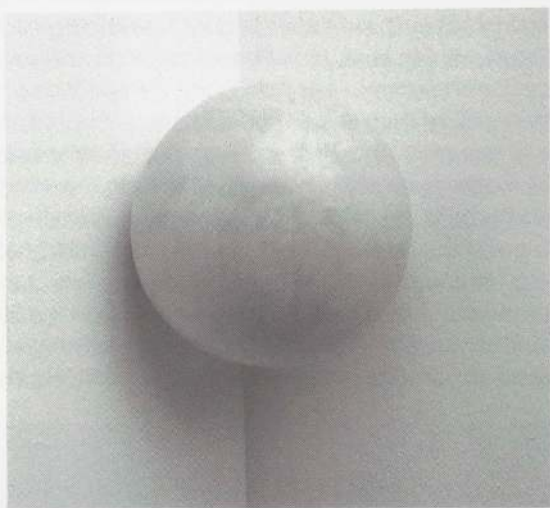
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50

tom friedman

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

March 28 – May 16, 1995

It is no secret that the avant-garde ideas of the 1960s and after are ripe for reexamination. Thirty years separate us from the initially radical aesthetic departures of early minimal, conceptual, and process work. In the current life of art, that is generations. Moreover, we are already a decade away from the ferment—and some say decadence—that brought on the eighties, the last major upheaval on the contemporary scene. Looking over their shoulders as they try at the same to time to see ahead, young artists and their critical cohort regard the legendary innovations of the past, recent and remote, with an understandable skepticism.

Indeed, by the early 1990s, an anti-heroic stance seemed to many the most promising, if not the only, path out of the wreckage of modernist and postmodernist high style and pretension. In 1990 Ralph Rugoff coined the term "Pathetic Art" to champion the work of those who, for a host of different reasons, had opted for minor modes and purposefully faulty facture. It was the right moniker for the right moment. In retrospect, however, the tag accurately described just a fraction of the work to which it was casually applied. Furthermore, social issues and gender politics set the terms for other tendencies equally engaged in demystifying and thereby returning to use the formal inventions of minimalism, conceptualism, and their offshoots. For example, the exhibition *Sense and Sensibility*, seen at the Museum in the summer of 1994, sampled work by women who, in diverse ways, recast minimalist seriality and austerity in the light of feminist criticism of the authority of the original; again, the spring 1992 exhibition *Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres* consisted of photomurals, presented on billboards around New York City, which raised corollary questions concerning sexual orientation and the relation of public and private space and, deftly eschewing political rhetoric of any kind, literally took them to the streets.

The work of Tom Friedman is located in the aesthetic field occupied by artists representing these tendencies, but it stands apart from them all. Hailing from Chicago, and fusing that city's two longest-standing aesthetic traditions—the clean-lined "truth-to-materials" of the New Bauhaus and the gleeful down-scale taste of Imagism and Midwestern Funk—Friedman is closest in spirit, perhaps, to the disabused whimsicality typical of those on Rugoff's roster. Nevertheless, his sensibility is

otherwise less anarchic or rebellious than theirs, while his procedures are more rigorously empirical.

In fact, Friedman's preference for mundane materials—soap, tape, dust, spaghetti, bubble gum—stems not so much from a critique of studio art techniques and the rarefied products fashioned with them as from a clear-eyed curiosity about what the ordinary alternatives might be. Supplanting the refinement of conventional art supplies is the extravagant craft Friedman invests in the manipulation of his ordinary, chosen means. Workmanlike to an extreme, and though the reasons he gives may at first seem too obvious to merit the effort, Friedman invests large amounts of artistic energy in strange and generally small packages by concentrating his mind and the viewer's upon the special qualities of the least of things.

The discipline he has set himself inevitably recalls that of his task-oriented predecessors. In the interview which follows, Friedman's description of his barren first studio and the projects he assigned himself in it closely parallels Bruce Nauman's recollection of his very similar decision, early in his career, to clear away the sculptor's accoutrements and get down to basics. Meanwhile, Friedman's topsy-turvy untitled 1994 photograph of a man lying on the ceiling plays off Nauman's 1973 video *Tony Sinking into the Floor, Face Up and Face Down* (currently on view in the third floor Garden Hall Gallery as a part of the Nauman retrospective.)

Absent from Friedman's work, though, is Nauman's always pronounced anguish. In its place, and marking not only the difference between two individuals but also, perhaps, the distance of generations, is a tense but cool-headed delectation of anomalous occurrences and effects. Whereas Nauman's prostrate man nearly dissolves into the floor, Friedman's man simultaneously defies gravity and bumps up against hard reality in a mock Ascension that invokes the classical motif with deadpan surrealism. Friedman's eye-straining self-portrait carved from an aspirin tablet, conflating the head with a cure for its stress-induced pain, displays a comparably witty knack for visual economy and logical sleight of hand.

Putting a Paul Klee-like delicacy and consistency of execution at the service of Man Ray-like enjoyment of perceptual disparity, Tom Friedman carries forward the contemporary project of parsing the language of 1960s and 1970s vanguard art with an ever greater and more eccentric subtlety. Shunning the grand gestures of the previous ten years, while obliquely inquiring into the "big ideas" of the two decades before, Friedman confines the excesses of his work to the time and attention required to make it. One may, as a result of his exemplary dedication, look briskly at the results, but like all fine-tuned forms, his have an essential, palpable seriousness and a funny way of calling one back to wonder how they got there and why.

Robert Storr
Curator

Department of Painting and Sculpture



Untitled. 1993–95. Aspirin, $\frac{1}{8} \times \frac{1}{8} \times \frac{1}{8}$ " Courtesy the artist and Feature, New York.

Robert Storr: *Let's begin at the beginning: what set you on the track of making the diverse range of objects you make?*

Tom Friedman: I started out in graduate school at the University of Illinois being frustrated by the gap between how I dealt with my work personally and how it was read by others. That opened up something that I think I had always been interested in but was never really aware of. So I set out to find out what I really knew and to look into the basic exchange between the viewer and the object. First I turned my studio into this void. It was just this completely white space with diffuse fluorescent lights on the ceiling. Then every day I would sit in the space and think about it. It wasn't so much a means of creating a piece, because there was nothing around. It was more like an exercise to make me really examine how I looked at things and what my experience of them was. Gradually I could begin to see the significance of my activity. For instance, I spent some time making a puzzle. That is to say, I bought a jigsaw puzzle and separated the pieces, which obscured the image so that people had to look at it a different way to figure out what it was.

RS: *You mean you purposefully reversed the logic of puzzle-making, by scattering the pieces so that they couldn't go together in the conventional way?*

TF: Right, but it was still a part of the logic of the puzzle, which is something you put together and then take apart. It was not as if I had poured gasoline onto it.

RS: *What other tasks did you set for yourself?*

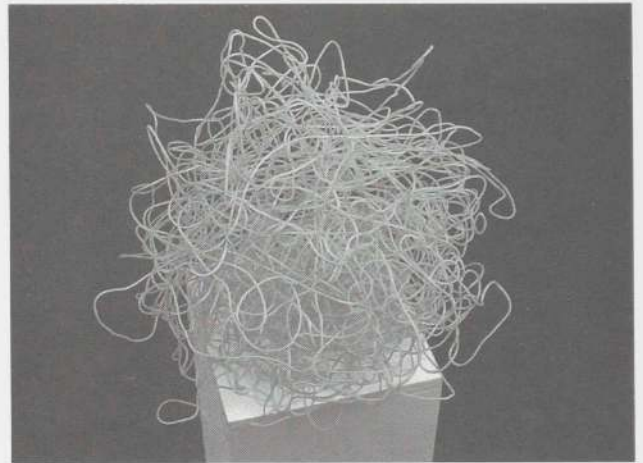
TF: I was also working on a piece with eraser shavings, where I spent hundreds of hours collecting eraser shavings that were specifically meant to be put in this empty studio space. That process was about concealing the identity of something and having to investigate it to get what it was originally, but it also led me to the problem of ritual and ritual's relationship to mundane habits. And it raised the question of the connection between small, ordinary things and big natural forces. So I did a piece where I created this device for laying laundry detergent on the floor in a spiral, which connected two very different things in one image, an ordinary spin cycle and the idea of a galaxy.

RS: *That relation of microcosm to macrocosm in your work is particularly evident in the way the generally small pieces you make draw one's attention in the large empty studio or gallery space in which one finds them. They almost seem to exert a kind of gravitational pull on the scanning eye.*

TF: A lot of my work is very focused and very centered. It defines some sort of vicinity. Like the spaghetti piece, which is a continuous loop that moves around and establishes an area.

RS: *Is the same thing true of the construction paper piece? How did that come into existence?*

TF: It started with a single pyramid. Then another pyramid was placed on that, and another, and another. So it grew



Loop. 1993–95. Spaghetti, 12" dia. Courtesy the artist and Feature, New York.

from a central point. The piece is about that outrageous growth.

RS: *Am I incorrect in supposing, then, that the piece is internally articulated according to a consistent, almost crystalline logic? It's not solid, but it is built up throughout by the same basic unit.*

TF: Exactly. It's not a facade; its structure is determined by its principle of growth.

RS: *When you set out to make such a thing, is there any rule that decides when you stop the process, or that sets an outer limit to a given object's size?*

TF: Usually the process or the material dictates a very clear limit. For example, the spaghetti piece was made out of a standard one pound box of spaghetti, and the dictionary piece used every word in the dictionary. So there were predetermined limits. As far as the construction paper piece goes, I think the dimensions had to do with the relationship I felt between me and it, and from there I calculated the size of the uniform elements that composed it. In its final state I wanted the surface to be as confused as possible, with all sorts of protrusions coming off of it.

RS: *Do you mean that you wanted it to be defined not by its shape, which is impossible to hold in the mind, but by its principle of construction, which is easy to grasp?*

TF: Right. It's not a form that can be remembered, except in a generalized way. It's not like a cube or something of that kind. So it's really a question of looking at a specific material and finding a logic that informs it, and how it's altered, and how, finally, it is presented.

RS: *The first things of yours I saw—for example, the identical twin pieces of crumpled paper or the bar of soap with a hair spiral—were simple in appearance compared to some of the more recent works that are in this show. Is there a conscious shift taking place in your approach that explains that impression, or am I mistaken?*

TF: I've been thinking a lot about complexity lately. I know that it is something that has been thought about before, but what interests me is the fact of my inability to process everything that I'm confronted with and the idea of the parts of something being very separate from the idea of the whole. That explains how I got involved in dealing with the dictionary; how individual words fit in and the sheer quantity of them. What unifies what I do is the phenomenon of taking something that is crystal-clear to me, something I seem to know, and finding that the closer I get and the more carefully I inspect it, the less clear it becomes.

RS: *Take the ruler piece, for instance. What could be more straightforward than that—if, that is, one can trust one's eyes?*

TF: I've dealt with standards before, because they ground us or orient us and make it possible to connect with things in a certain way. The ruler piece is called *My Foot*. I was thinking about how close I could actually get to remembering how big a foot really is. So I envisioned it and put my hand out toward a piece of paper and marked it and started from there to construct the ruler. It turned out to be ten and one-quarter inches long. So I called it *My Foot* because it was *my* idea of a foot, and because that's what people say when they think you're not telling them the truth: "My foot!" And after all, there was something not true about it.

RS: *The map piece also makes one question one's bearings.*

TF: I have been working on the map piece for quite a while. I was thinking about how I would orient myself if I were hovering over the earth but facing it in such a way that the South Pole was up and the North Pole was down.

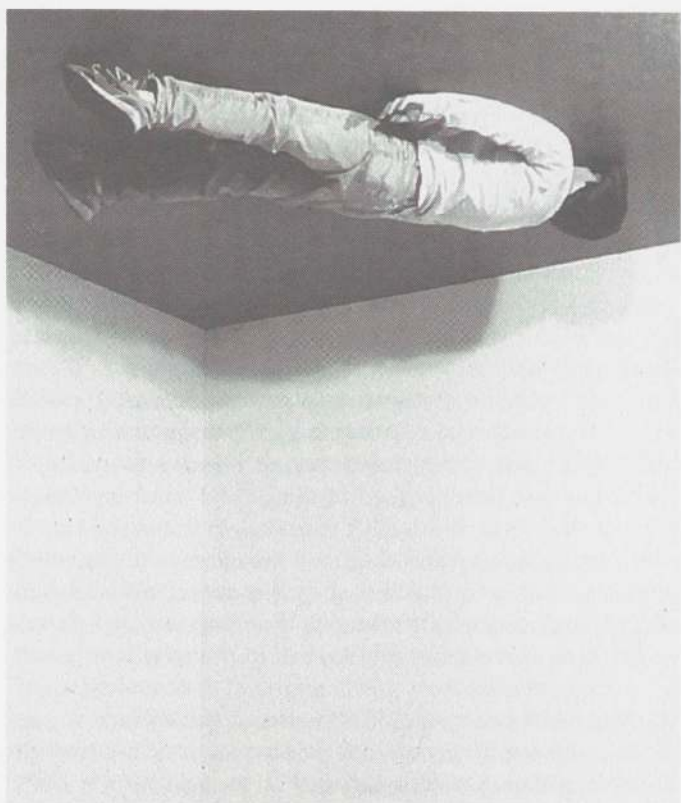
RS: *The dust piece in this show also has the look of a planet viewed from a great distance, though actually it is very down-to-earth in every respect.*

TF: Well, that came about because I'm developing allergies, and in order to alleviate them, I've had to do a lot of vacuuming. So the material was just around.

RS: *I was once told that something like seventy percent of household dust is flaked human skin.*

TF: Yes, something that interested me in pursuing the piece was the idea that much of us is falling apart and we are tending toward this different sort of unity.

RS: *Though you've shied away from the kind of direct figurative representation that one encounters in the work of Kiki Smith, Robert Gober, and others, the dust piece, like the spiralling hair on the soap bar and the rolled speck of feces on a pedestal, all refer to corporeal shapes, substances, and functions.*



Untitled. 1994. Black and white photograph (edition of seven), 35 x 25" framed. Courtesy the artist and Feature, New York.

TF: The obvious associations are in terms of the body, and of cleansing, sanitation, and things involving materials associated with personal hygiene. But as I began transforming these materials, they always evolved into something geometrical or structural. That geometry got me to thinking about minimalist aesthetics, ideas of immediacy and purity of form.

RS: *So, as with the tension between microcosm and macrocosm, the work also points simultaneously in two aesthetic directions: toward the mundane, like an assisted readymade, and toward the ideal.*

TF: Yes, that is part of it, that relationship between those base materials and what is thought of as an art object.

RS: *Are you teasing the viewer or the art system, or is there another motive involved?*

TF: Well, if you approach things from the perspective of serious art dialogue, then I guess it can be seen as a tease. But if it is approached in terms of how somebody can take something base and make it into an object that can carry significance, then it is not so negative.

RS: *Do you think about your work primarily as a set of discrete objects or are they always considered as parts of a larger ensemble or constellation of ideas and forms? Or, put another way, does the work's installation affect its meaning?*

TF: If I'm presented with an image, let's say a cityscape, and

while I'm looking at it someone says to me, "blue sky," I'll automatically look at the blue sky. And if they said, "street corner," I'd look at that. I think that's how the pieces function off of each other. The experience of one defines how you approach the next.

RS: *But in the end, isn't it the confrontation with the individual form or image that counts most?*

TF: But for me it's not just a formal game. Or if it is, it's not dealing so specifically with the physical elements, but instead with the ideas. So I think about the objects and the way they have evolved in terms of how they reveal themselves to the viewer. My interest is in how things categorize information, and how one deciphers an object. It revolves around the questions that you ask, and how you process all that information and come to some kind of conclusion. The way that I began thinking about the work, then, was as a direct line of questioning that you go through when you are presented with something unfamiliar and think, "Well, what is it? How is it made? Why is it like this?" What's most specific to me is that process of discovery.

biography

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, 1965.

Lives and works in Middletown, Connecticut.

education

- 1988 Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri;
B.F.A, Graphic Illustration
1990 University of Illinois, Chicago; M.F.A., Sculpture

selected one-person exhibitions

- 1991 Feature, New York
1993 Feature, New York

selected bibliography

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Cover: Untitled. 1990. Bubble-gum. 5" dia. Collection Clyde and Karen Beswick.

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