



Tony May: Old Technology

TONY MAY

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SAN JOSE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

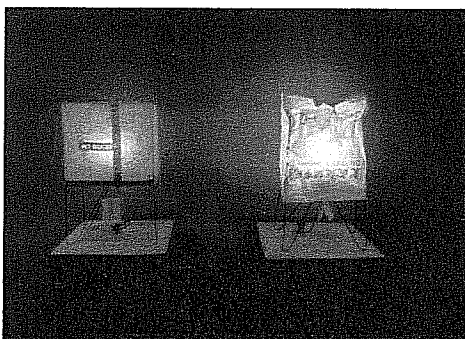
by Laura Cassidy Rogers

Tony May's forty-year retrospective at the San Jose Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) showcases his resourceful ingenuity. His quintessentially American art emerges in this exhibition under the guise of "old technology," though it is refreshing in this slumping recession where limiting circumstances prompt us to find new value in ordinary things.

In the most literal sense of utilitarian value, May transforms books and tin cans into personalized light fixtures that accent his already astute painting compositions. He even manages to harvest art materials from his own cat, Tabusana: its whiskers become a miniature Ikebana arrangement in *A Collection of Cat Whiskers* (2005–ongoing), whereas its claws are refigured to spell the homophone "claus," a simple yet witty remark celebrated against a bright red backdrop of Christmas-colored fabric in *Santa* (2001). May reassuringly states at the bottom of the frame that "No animals were tortured or in any way injured in the production of this work." That May consistently communicates with his audience in a series of textual explanations and interactive gestures is endearing; in this manner, he reveals the underlying philosophical value of his meandering materials.

The ICA galleries are filled with cerebral gems. Each work on display deserves close inspection and admiration. The scale varies from miniature paintings, sculptures, and maquettes to fully immersive installations. Whether small or large, the works are ripe with May's signature craftsmanship. Viewers are prompted to move forward and then backward to discover the intimate details of each piece, as well as their intermingling relationships.

May collaborated closely with the ICA to design the layout of his retrospective, and the results are impressive. Together, they meticulously and artfully mapped the floor plan with discrete, compartmentalized viewing spaces tailored to groups of distinctive work. Nearly half of the exhibition space is dedicated to May's acrylic on Masonite photorealist paintings. Four of these paintings are designed to be perpetually portable in May's *Thai Inspired Portable Art Display Unit* (2007). They efficiently travel and display together inside a suitcase, which expands into an architectural structure modeled after a traditional Thai house. The paintings themselves are also efficient and succinct arrangements of form, color, light, and shadow: exterior light floods the face of *Sue's Attic Buddah* (2003); the cool blue bathroom in *Compact Hotel Room in Kowloon* (2007) is balanced by a bright white mirror reflection and nearby bed; and the metal faucet that gave life to the soapy *Apparition in a Dish Pan* (2007) is reverently illuminated like the *Thai Steamer Handle* (2003) that has been refurbished



Moon Light, 1968; mixed media, 12 x 8 x 5 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Paul and Margie Pratchenko. Photo: Kathryn Hetzner.



Installation view of *Variable Book Construction (Bookmobile)*, 1991; books, rope, copper pipe and boat hardware, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the Artist and the San Jose Museum of Art. Photo: Kathryn Hetzner.

with bamboo.

Several other paintings present different perspectives, or angles of acuity, in May's engineered artistic process, and each is accompanied by a stylized caption. Unlike the animal rights disclaimer accompanying *Santa*, these captions read like narrative haikus and bear distant relation to the classic journalism aesthetic of *Reader's Digest* and *Life* magazine.

A darkened room at the back of the gallery houses a series of lanterns, or illuminated sculptures, constructed from a variety of materials. *Moon Light* (1968) appears almost Duchampian—a found plastic bag from San Jose's Dai Thanh Supermarket is suspended over a simple wire frame and lit from within. Others are complex in their construction, like *Great Lampkin* (2004), a large woven ceiling lantern that casts zigzag shadows across the ceiling. The long rectangular area adjacent to this dark room is mostly devoted to an archive of May's public art projects. The space is interesting, though it functions more like a hallway interlude leading either to or from the main sculpture gallery.

The main gallery contains original sculptural works that May has coined "variable constructions," though they clearly pay homage to John Cage. These works are divided into two different types: individual objects that expand and collapse along more or less linear axes, like *Thai Inspired Portable Display Unit*, and groups of objects more loosely positioned in space to be rearranged by adjustable ropes. The largest of these roped compositions is the *Variable Book Construction (Bookmobile)* (1991), commissioned by the San Jose Museum of Art. This web-like structure floats in the upper canopy of the gallery, seemingly stationary, though it is flexibly rigged to the frame of the nearby *T. Tree House* (1999). A flock of teal green books with lacquered candy-like covers are suspended from translucent green beads at the vertices of linear copper pipes. A video demonstrates how May tugs at the ropes to manipulate the mobile: swooping up and down; the perfectly bound books lie horizontally flat, and their pages fan open toward the floor.

Installed on the front of the ICA for the duration of the exhibition is a giant *T* marker entitled *ICA Periscope/Lantern /Marquee* (2010). Though the *T* is only a modest branding, fabricated with bamboo, recycled orange plastic netting, mirrors, and lighting that merges rather than contrasts with the brick facade. This work exemplifies the nature of the show—modest and magical. Considering that May is a long-time faculty member at San Jose State University, it is fitting that his retrospective be mounted at the ICA.¹ However, to echo Renny Pritikin's essay in the exhibition catalogue, it is also clear that May deserves acknowledgment beyond the Bay Area arts community. These artworks have aged beautifully, and his reputation still may grow to more sizeable proportions.

TONY MAY: OLD TECHNOLOGY IS ON VIEW AT THE SAN JOSE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART THROUGH FEBRUARY 26, 2011.

¹ Professor May actively taught at San Jose State University from 1967 until 2005 and is now Emeritus Professor of Art.