



# May's Machines

**STRUCTURALISM** Tony May surveys his constructions at SJICA.

*Longtime SJSU art teacher  
**Tony May** pulls the strings on  
 his old-tech installations at  
 S.J. Institute of Contemporary Art*

By **GARY SINGH**

**A**FTER GRADUATION from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1966, Tony May began teaching at San Jose State College, as it was then called. He learned of a faculty position from one of his committee members, so he decided to “go West” and apply for the job.

Forty years later, he finally retired, but he still lives in the same downtown San Jose house he bought for peanuts in the early '70s. Now a professor

emeritus at SJSU, May continues to hang out in the gallery scene, both on campus and out in the city.

Almost anyone else who has infiltrated the San Jose arts community during those last four decades knows Tony May—he’s been around longer than almost anyone. Reflecting on his career over tea in his kitchen, he spilled a portion of his life story. Back in the postwar generation, it was simply much easier to go to art school.

“Those were the boom years for teaching,” he said, “because there were so many art departments all over the country, brand-new and expanding. Universities starting thinking, ‘Well, maybe we can have an art program,’ because it wasn’t traditionally part of the university curriculum. So they

were all suddenly adding art programs. When I graduated, everyone of my classmates got a job teaching.”

In 1977, WORKS/San Jose, an alternative art and performance space, first opened up at Vine and Auzerais, in an old meat-market building. May was not one of the official founders, but he was there. He was one of a clique of folks inspired by places like 80 Langton St. in San Francisco, venues that perpetrated the visual art/performance crossover scene that was beginning to emerge. May and others thought San Jose would be “less embarrassing” if it actually had an art gallery.

“We were looking for something that was in touch with some kind of art that wasn’t being seen around here,” May recalled. “It wasn’t easy to define. There was a pretty big, growing movement of performance art and all that stuff, happening in cities throughout the country. San Jose had nothing like that. San Jose didn’t even really have much of a museum yet. The museum didn’t have much backing and they didn’t have very much sophistication either, as far as what they showed.”