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[Tony May @ SJICA](#)

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Far left: "First Collapsible Construction ",1965, suitcase, wood, cloth and plastic 30 x 16 x 6 inches; far right: Tony May and Lonny Tomono, "T. Tree House", 1999-2009 wood, nylon screen and metal hardware, 6 x 9 x 9 feet

In the late 19th century, when Impressionism first rocked Europe, it did so, in part by inaugurating the widespread use of vernacular subject matter. It gave artists permission to paint common people, as opposed to royalty or religious subjects. Pop, which emerged almost a century later, extended the practice by permitting the depiction of banality in the form of consumer goods and comics. More recently, with banal images of every sort permeating theory-driven conceptual art, a realm where ideas routinely trump material invention, one can't help but wonder: can visual art survive on a starvation diet, of theory alone? More to the point: should it?

Over the past few years, Cathy Kimball, director and chief curator of the [San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art](#), has mounted a series of contrarian exhibitions that would appear to answer both questions with a resounding no. The ICA has presented one show after another of conceptualists who *also* happen to be master craftsman: that is, artists who are as adept at generating provocative ideas as they are at building objects that embody them. Chief among these practitioners is Tony May, whose highly anticipated 45-year retrospective, *Tony May: Old Technology*, runs through February 26. If you haven't heard of Tony May, there's a reason. From 1969 to 2005 he taught at [San Jose State](#), and his career as an instructor largely overshadowed his prolific and variegated output as a painter, sculptor and maker of suitcase-based contraptions and room-sized architectural fantasies.



"Home Improvement" series.

Born in 1942 on a Wisconsin farm, May represents a certain quintessential Midwestern type: the backyard tinkerer. But instead of applying those skills to the family business, he went to art school. There, he appears to have fallen under the influence of [Duchamp](#), the [Dadists](#), Warhol, and [Bruce Nauman](#), a classmate with whom he shared a house in Madison.

May's art echoes those influences, but his unique, sublime-absurd sensibility sets him apart from his predecessors and his contemporaries. It shines through strongest in the acrylic-oil-on-panel mockumentary paintings he calls *Home Improvements*. These small-scale autobiographical works – about 50 in all, mostly from the early 1980s into the 1990s – meticulously replicate the illustrational style of '50s-era instruction manuals, right down to flattened perspectives and the sickly color of poorly reproduced Kodachrome photos. May paints deadpan captions on to each picture that simultaneously acknowledge the banality of his domestic chores and the deep significance they hold for him. Whether the activity pictured involves plugging a leak, cleaning a kitchen or clearing backyard rubble – each painting seems to argue for the “examined life”.

At one level, the pictures declare such activities unworthy of artistic attention, yet they also assert, without irony, the value of such seemingly mundane pursuits. It's a Warholian conundrum. The difference, of course, is that where Warhol attempted to elevate industrially produced consumer goods to icon status, May's paintings valorize his own estimable handiwork. In addition to being clever and functional, the home repairs depicted in these paintings are also very hip-looking thanks to his carpentry and design skills. Combined, they hit something of an apotheosis in *T. House*, 1999-2009, a room-sized, two-story structure whose joinery and finish rival in quality and attention to detail anything you're likely to see from *any*



"Drawing Drawing Machine", 1970, wood, steel, lead, glass, cotton cord, copper and salt, 54 x 44 x 44 inches

(1970), May's rope-and-pulley operated re-make of the [Etch A Sketch](#) toy, allows visitors to move a lead weight across a shallow salt-filled platform to make line drawings. An inveterate scavenger, May seems able to create art from almost any object that falls into his grip. In his restoration of a sailboat, *Robinson Crusoe* 1975, May pasted the entire text of [Daniel Defoe](#)'s novel to the interior and exterior of the craft with layers of resin; it hangs upside down from the ceiling, suspended by ropes a few feet above the floor, a monument to perseverance.

Antique Tool Rack (2010), a framed hammer and sickle, appears, at first, to be a paean to Communism, but is really about the disappearance of trustworthy hand tools and, by extension, a way of life: the artist's.

May's low-tech, DIY ethos isn't so much a protest as it is a plea for reverence — for things that are either extinct or are well on their way to becoming so. Books, for example, May hollows out and repurposes as lamps to illuminate several paintings, bringing to mind words a schoolmarm might have used to chastise a dimwitted student: "Turn on the lights!" *My Darned Sweater*, a garment preserved under glass (and redolent of mothballs), carries a note stating that its previous owners – the artist's mother and grandmother – "would have continued to repair it indefinitely

source, save perhaps David Ireland's pioneering (and as yet unrivaled) installation, [Mission District home at 500 Capp St.](#)

In 2007 May was invited to exhibit in Bangkok. After learning that shipping would be too costly, he devised a fiendishly elegant solution: a collapsible sculpture that sprung from a suitcase. The result, *Thai-Inspired Portable Art Display Unit*, 2007, which he lugged to the show, enables a three-foot-tall tent house to unfold from a frame that carries, on its canvas walls, four of his small paintings. Each contains captions that show May laughing at his self-made predicament. In this Duchampian ([Box-in-a-Valise](#)) mode, the artist, in the mid-1960s, built a number of similar structures. The cleverest among those on view are "*Collapsible Construction (small case)*" (1965), which opens to reveal a swatch of blank canvas – an obvious jibe at minimalist painting; and *First Collapsible Construction* (1965) which looks like a folk artist's rendition of an alien spacecraft. Remarkably, despite the passage of decades, these works feel fresh.

Other examples: *Drawing, Drawing Machine*



"Robinson Crusoe", 1975, wood and mixed media, 8 x 3.5 x 4 feet

had their deaths not prevented it.” It’s an heirloom repackaged as inherited wisdom. Taking this home-spun, waste-not, want-not, philosophy further, May recycles his cat’s whiskers, fashioning them into an Ikebana-style “floral” arrangement, which he places in a mirrored plexiglass box, a nod to [Sol Lewitt](#), [Lucas Samaras](#) and [Joseph Cornell](#). To Duchamp, May offers up a readymade of his own, a vintage ironing board, *Refurbished Antique Foldable Device (Reversing Duchamp)*, 2009. And in homage to his former roommate, Nauman, who in the 1960s, built legendary text sculptures out of neon lighting (e.g. [The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths](#), 1967), May delivers a characteristic low-voltage riposte: a length of rope attached to the base of a window blind that spells out the last three words of the work’s title, *Drawing to a Close* (1967). Pun or apocalyptic prediction? It could be either or both.



“Miracle of the Fishes (remnants)”, 1978, ceramic, wood and glass, dimensions variable

Nostalgia and fantasy figure in, too. May’s model for the public art piece, *Remembering Agriculture*, 1994, which occupies a median strip in downtown San Jose, points both to his Wisconsin roots and to a time when orchards, not concrete-tilt-ups, lined Hwy 101. The most humorous piece in the show, *Miracle of the Fishes*, is a maquette for a public art project that was shown briefly in 1978. It depicts the audience of fish summoned by St. Anthony to convert heretics. Operating at a similarly fantastic level is *Two Unretouched Photos, c. 1860 & 1987*, 1987. One is a portrait of Central Park architect Frederick Law Olmstead taken in 1860. The other is of May in 1987. The men look like identical twins, separated by a century.

Whether May and others of his ilk who’ve been featured at recent shows at ICA constitute an actual “antiquarian avant garde” remains to be seen. But in light of the materially impoverished state of much conceptual art these days, the prospect of such a movement — where craft counts and where meaning is embedded, not obscured by arcane jargon — is a tantalizing prospect.

—DAVID M. ROTH

Tony May: Old Technology, through Feb. 26, 2011 @ [San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art](#). Note: portions of this show close Feb. 12.

Watch a video of [Tony May](#).

Photos: David Pace