

The Pickup Artist

By Glenn Dixon

"Tony Feher"

At Numark Gallery to July 3

Nearly 90 years after Marcel Duchamp upended a bicycle wheel into a stool, you wouldn't think there would be any lines left to cross concerning an artist's use of "nonart" materials. But Tony Feher has found one. By accumulating the most lowly castoffs of our throwaway economy—finding some, buying others—arranging them with an eye to their inherent poetics, and then getting out of their way, Feher has, over the past decade or so, created a body of work that inverts the diminishing returns of a contemporary sculptural practice that has grown bloated on costly fabrication.

The idea can take a little getting used to. Hang around a while at Numark Gallery, where five Feher's (six, if you count the one in the office, and you should) are installed, and check out the timid procession of gallerygoers shuffling past the entrance. A few of the braver souls step tentatively inside, but most people refuse, even though they've committed themselves to making the rounds at 406 7th St. NW and climbed to the third floor—and despite the fact that every other show in the building is worth at most a passing glance.

What's turning them away is the linchpin of Feher's second Numark solo outing, *In Necessity of Hanging* (2002), 13 unopened plastic bottles of flavored, carbonated, clear spring water, all delabeled and dangling from varying lengths of slipknotted cotton twine tied to a spindly pergola roughly 8 feet cubed.

The structure is painted white, thinly enough that the wood shows through. Shaky before it was weighted with—let's see: "Pint's a pound, the world around," plus you have to throw in the bottles and string—15 to 20 pounds of sculptural heft, the construction now lists toward the wall, its legs warping in shallow curves. The piece retains a homemade casualness, but nothing about it has been left to chance. Everything is culled, chosen, arranged, questioned, and confirmed.

And yet nothing is set according to a foreordained program. Although Feher's forebears are minimalists and conceptualists, and he thrives on materiality and repetition, his pieces never result from establishing a set of rules and following them through to their con-

clusion. Feher is a specificist, someone who thinks in things. It's never a bottle, always *this* bottle; never *some* bags, but rather *these* bags.

At Numark, eight sacks of the logo-free plastic shopping variety, all empty and threaded together by their handles, hang between the office's twin skylights in an untitled cascade. The nylon twine tied to the topmost handle runs up through a screw eye, then angles down to a Phillips-head screw embedded in the wall; from there, it trickles over the baseboard and onto the floor. The screw eye is far too large for the task, and the twine, thin as it is, is far stronger than is required to support the weightless,

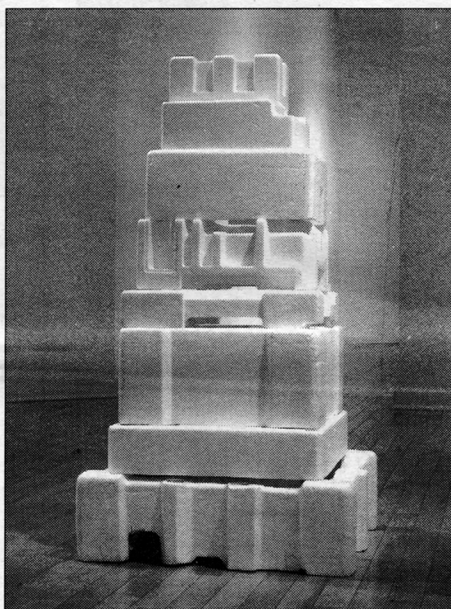
differently shaped, labelless plastic bottles with colored caps, each partially filled with a different color of dyed, soapy water. Shake one and the top of the bottle fills with bubbles that first quickly and then very gradually go back into solution, changing the shapes of those that remain. They eventually become rounded and truncated geometric solids that distort what would otherwise be the free surface of the liquid, a facet of the work best seen from underneath.

There's an initial tendency, even if you've been looking at contemporary art for some time, to feel as though Feher is trying to put one over on his audience. But when you consider the great line of avant-gardists who flirted with *ch ar l a t a n r y*—Duchamp, Warhol, Klein, Beuys—Feher doesn't fit. He's not interested in tricks, traces, transcendence, or totems. And he couldn't care less about fostering a cult of personality: When Numark couldn't find a place on the wall to stencil his name that wouldn't intrude upon the sculpture, Feher simply chose to forgo the ID.

Numark is a lab for Feher, a place where he can test new ideas. The pressure's on in New York, where he solos at D'Amelio Terras; in D.C., where viewers haven't yet learned to care about him, he can be a bit less guarded. Having earned a reputation for being exceptionally

sensitive to the spaces in which he shows—particularly in installations at the Center for Curatorial Studies Museum at Bard College last summer and at the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University in 1997—he chose, for *In Necessity of Hanging*, to reduce the importance of the gallery space. The pergola is essentially a portable room, without walls so it may be viewed from the outside, the bottles and strings having taken possession of the inside.

An untitled work from this year finds Feher turning a corner. He poured a cementlike casting mix into a cardboard box, the fluid weight bulging the sides of the container until the long ones creased, forming an irregular but roughly symmetrical hexagon. He then filled two cheap glass hip flasks with clear marbles and isopropyl alcohol, screwed the caps back on, and sank them upside down in the mixture, their concave sides facing each other a tight fist's width apart, their convex sides facing the short sides of



Eight White Elements, expanded polystyrene, 2001

multicolored flowering that drifts in mid-air. The piece is a sly, understated comment about lightness, strength, and durability, literal and metaphorical qualities Feher plays with incessantly.

Eight White Elements (2001) is a tower of polystyrene packing inserts plucked from the curb, one still bearing a faint brown stain and several scratches of ballpoint ink. Smaller is piled onto larger into a model temple made from the most eternal trash. Although Feher denies that he has made a ziggurat, claiming only to have followed the fundamental human impulse to stack like items, a building is clearly evoked. It comes as little surprise that Feher worked for two architectural firms in Corpus Christi, Texas, before moving to New York in the early '80s. The form is windowless and hollow, with gaps where each layer imperfectly meets its neighbors; defects and mold marks echo the brutalist preference for raw concrete.

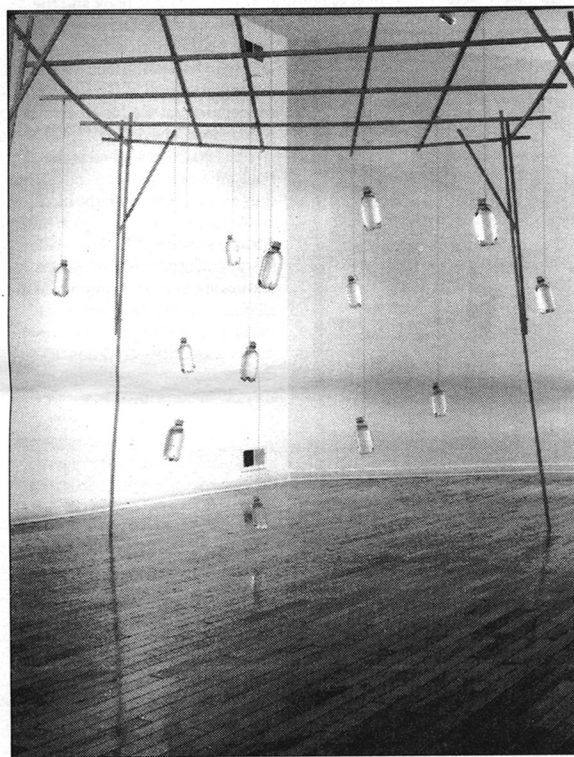
Similarly toylike in its simplicity is *Bird* (2000), which comprises three

the box. It's tempting to read the arrangement as a kind of head whose features are rendered as a mathematical sign, shifting from equality to nullity. But, then again, the thing is just what it is.

Many observers, including Feher himself, have noted the similarity between his angled, dangling bottles and lynched bodies, but such political content, as well as the environmental and economic critique suggested by his materials—or even any architectural metaphor—is less obtrusive in material form than it is once uttered. If Feher's work could be translated into a faithful audio mix, such concerns would be pushed to the periphery of the soundstage, still present but softened, far from any threat of blatancy.

Untitled (Sugar and Spice Over the Counter Device) (2000–2002), for example, consists of an arrangement on the floor of 59 rectangular-boxed items, such as you might find at the drugstore. Their identities are obliterated by methodical but not fastidious wrappings of aluminum-foil tape, whose crisscrossing layers glimmer in the light. The effect is of a mini-Brasilia—its units unified by surface treatment, varying in form, and disposed in orderly array.

The piece has accumulated additions as it has moved among different venues. Several more silvered boxes are currently stacked amid what only gross understatement would term the clutter of Feher's Manhattan apartment, which he



In Necessity of Hanging, mixed media, 2002

The artist's refusal to bully his materials or get cute with them makes for work striking in its humility, poise, and subtlety. Your perception of a Feher piece is constantly in flux, expanding into the haphazard world of ordinary things and then shrinking back into the confines of its own precise configuration.

It would be easy for the unconvinced to pigeonhole Feher as the rag-and-bone man of Chelsea—bottles and cans and just clap your hands—but to do so would be to ignore much of what he has done. I haven't mentioned the pieces made from plastic straws or bricks of insulation or small unfolded boxes or power strips with blinking green bulbs or flattened bags and low-tack painter's tape, both transparent blue. Such works are linked not by habit or intention but by a talent for considering the untapped implications of materials.

believably says he hasn't straightened up in 15 years. It's a remarkable place, an engulfing cloud of stuff that feeds a reductive aesthetic with a superabundance of choice. It's impossible to know what will eventually end up in the garbage and what will appear in Feher's next show. Just to walk inside is to risk treading on divine clay.

What may at first look like a heavily blinkered foray into niche production in fact displays the tremendously broad reach of someone who has every little thing at his disposal. As much as an awareness of Feher's work opens the viewer up to a range of visual phenomena shut down by previously undetected prejudices of everyday connoisseurship, there will always be some things that only he can show us. It's beguiling to consider what must remain under our noses, visible yet unseen, until he returns. CP

NUMARK GALLERY

625-27 E Street NW Washington DC 20004
T. 202.628.3810 F. 202.628.1925
numarkgall@aol.com www.numarkgallery.com