

Practical tasks shape Tony May's 'Old Technology'

ART

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"Tony May: Old Technology" includes (from left) "Drawing to a Close" (1967), "Variable Construction (Small Awning)" (1965) and "Variable Construction (Large Awning)" (1966). Credit: Photos by David Pace / San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art

Even within Bay Area art circles, Tony May, who turns 69 on Friday, still does not figure as a household name.

"Tony May: Old Technology," the survey show at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, offers the broadest view of his work available anywhere for many years.

"I value my privacy," May told me, "but at the same time I crave approval, so this show has been wonderful because of the response it's gotten - it's almost unnerving how much response."

Like David Ireland (1930-2009), May has centered much of his artwork on - or extracted it from - his house. But no one would mistake one man's work for the other's.

Where Ireland celebrates the redemption of time's ruin through ostensibly meaningless labor, much of May's art grows out of practical tasks and enhancements of his property.

A series of meticulous paintings, begun in the late 1970s, titled "Home Improvements" literally does describe projects and makeshifts by which May bettered his living and work spaces. The paintings, displayed against swaths of black fabric, and each lighted by a custom-made "can lamp," form a wonderfully contemplative passage in "Old Technology."

Each painting comes captioned with a gnomic descriptive phrase such as "like a rebus, Gratia's decoy" - a duck - "warns visitors of the low branch" and "the fireplace flue stopper has been thought to resemble an early Nauman."

By chance, May and Bruce Nauman shared a house during their brief time as students together at the University of Wisconsin.

"A lot of the work relies on happy accidents," May said, "something that strikes me as odd or curious, yet viable ... A lot of earlier ones were much more consciously striving to be 'art,' but I think I almost abandoned making art in a sense. Before I did the 'Home Improvements' paintings, I really was just doing home improvements."

Like Ireland's work, May's also refers frequently to the examples of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and John Cage (1912-1992). Only after making quite a few of the "Home Improvements" paintings did May realize how much their format and spirit resemble the "assisted readymade" - an altered Sapolin enamel advertisement - that Duchamp converted to "Apolinère Enameled" (1916-17), in memory of his writer friend Guillaume Apollinaire.

Several of the earliest pieces on view, including "First Collapsible Construction" (1965) and "Variable Construction (Small Awning)" (1965) consciously recall Duchamp's "Box in a Valise" (1938), a briefcase to contain a miniature anthology of his work.

Another piece at SJICA, "Making John Cage Smile" (2002), allows the viewer to rock gently a copy of David Revill's biography so that a smile appears and disappears from the jacket portrait photo of the composer.

The fastidiousness of May's art made me wonder whether he sometimes overworks things.

"Oh, yeah, frequently," May said. "When I had about finished the 'Home Improvements' paintings, I decided I should make a crate for them, so they could be shipped anywhere for exhibition. But I worked on it too long. It finally became such a showpiece in itself that if I were going to ship it somewhere I'd have had to make a crate for *it*."

Though humor and ideas ricochet through May's retrospective, he does not consider himself a conceptual artist "because I enjoy making things too much," he said. "I used to describe myself as a conceptual craftsman. I spent a lot of time in college on ceramics and painting, and grew up on a Wisconsin farm where my dad and other relatives made pretty much everything they needed. I find great pleasure and solace ... and even feel somewhat self-indulgent when I lose myself in what I'm making. Because I also had this Catholic upbringing that makes me feel I really shouldn't be doing this, but something more socially useful."

May contrived the intense, intimate lighting of the "Home Improvement" paintings to offset their small size, on the order of a foot square. "In school, we were encouraged to make paintings on a scale no less than 4 by 5 feet," he said. Later "I realized that if you put a lot of focus on a small work, it takes on more importance. I found that I had boxes of these can lamps that I'd made, though it was kind of a pain in the neck for the installation crew. They said that even though it's a low-tech show, it involved more wiring than almost anything else they'd done."

Tony May: Old Technology: Sculpture, paintings, models and installations. Through Feb. 26. San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, 560 S. First St. (410) 283-8155. www.sjica.org.