The Exhibitionist: Tony May

By Maureen Davidson Wed, Nov 24, 2010

They're social events, art openings, occasioned by the
showing of a body of work by one or more artists. Amid
a crowd and the buzz of conversation, it's rarely
possible to really see the artwork, except to decide
whether or not to return. The opening reception was,
however, the very best time to see the 40-year
retrospective of a loved artist and teacher, Tony May,
whose "Tony May: Old Technology™" exhibition at the
San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art opened Nov.
12.

The larger of ICA's galleries looks like a Copernican
museum within which elegant objects of strange utility
line the walls and a construction of curious functionality
occupies the airspace. This network of copper pipes
whose relationships can be changed by pulleys
suspends at each junction sturdy green-bound books,
each fluffed open to a peak-roofed shape. This Book Mobile changed form throughout the night, operated by
artist and friends from their positions in the deck of the construction, dubbed the T. Tree House. "The Book
Mobile was in the lobby of the San Jose Museum of Art for years," volunteered a man watching from the
side. "It was the greatest use of that lobby." An artist from the coast looked with fondness at the evocative
Miracle of the Fishes public art proposal and told tales of May as a teacher, full of intensity and humor.

A farm boy from Wisconsin and thus a lifelong tinkerer, a seminarian scholar, art school star and 40-year art
professor at San Jose State, May enjoys with droll and kindly attention those small increments of daily life
that hold within them all that is good. In the other ICA gallery, the viewer is led through a narrow maze of
clever rod and cloth walls to view dozens of small paintings hanging at perfect eye-level, vividly lit within the
dark encompassing space. It's the right level of intimacy with which to appreciate these paintings—mostly
acrylics on masonite, so flawless of surface they appear to be enameled—deploying restrained palette and
impeccable design with text occupying the bottom of each. Haiku! Much in little: The aftermath of a rare
summer storm caught the structure roofless, or Nocturnal view of the excavation. On the walls, A framed
aperture allows access to the pala hook is the apotheosis of "old world craftsmanship" and cosmic humorous
perspective. May's "Old Technology" is an inspiring career view of an artist-teacher whose tinkering makes
things work right, including people.

Read more of The Exhibitionist at kusp.org.

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