

Tom Friedman

Parkett 64 – 2002

SERIOUS PLAYBOYS

TOM FRIEDMAN IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN WATERS

John Waters: A friend who doesn't follow the art world saw your book and said, "You have to have a real faith in contemporary art to look at Tom Friedman's work." Do you agree?

Tom Friedman: It seems like people can enter my work on different levels. People who don't know a lot about contemporary art seem to enter it because of the type of things I do with materials...

JW: Oh I agree! It is good that you have to have faith in the art world to look at someone's work. Then at least you're going to really look at it. Your work is self-assured in a humble but strong way, but in some of the pieces you demand faith. When you say, for example, that you stared at a piece of paper for a thousand hours, you are demanding faith from the viewer, don't you think?

TF: Yeah, I guess faith in my credibility.

JW: What is so amazing about your work is that even the most unsophisticated art person is not pissed off because before they can say "Oh, my kid can do that," the words get stuck in their throat because their kids most definitely could not do that.

TF: Because I seem to put myself through a sort of torture, people feel that if I'm going to put myself through that, they might as well give a little of themselves.

JW: But is it torture or magic? I mean you were a magician as a kid—I'm sure critics make too much of that—but were you for real?

TF: My brother and I used to put on shows for kids. We were called Ali & Oop. I was Oop.

JOHN WATERS is working on his new screenplay, *A Dirty Shame*.

JW: I was a puppeteer, so we were on the same circuit; kids birthday parties.

TF: (laughter)

JW: All art shows are magic in a way, aren't they?

TF: Yeah.

JW: And I wonder if talking about it gives away the trick in a way, even what we're doing now. Real magicians will never tell you how they do the trick.

TF: I try to be incredibly obvious and straightforward, but this sort of conceals itself again. I'm trying to reveal the secret. It's like a secret that everyone knows.

JW: When you were young did art ever surprise or shock you?

TF: Not really. I didn't look at art that much. I got started making things as a way of trying to understand the world around me, and it still is that way for me. It becomes a vehicle for my understanding, so each piece represents some kind of discovery that I make about the world.

JW: But you can see how some of your most obsessional pieces are sometimes shocking to others.

TF: I can see that.

JW: Is patience to you a virtue or a compulsion?

TF: I guess both.

JW: In your work certainly, patience has to be one of your tools, as much as the material, isn't it?

TF: I think my patience comes from faith and also a need to pursue an idea. I have to see it through and make it physical to complete my understanding of it.

JW: I don't think your work is funny but I think that it's incredibly witty. Is humor important in your work to you?

TF: I don't think about humor when I do it; it's a by-product.

JW: When I told some art-world people that I was interviewing you they said, “Oh, you know he’s very, very serious.” And I said, “Well I think that his work is very serious but he seems like a man with a very good sense of humor.” But have you ever laughed at your own ideas before you started a piece? Internally?

TF: Not really.

JW: Laughed with, not at. A chuckle is more what I think of: something that you’re going to do for a particular piece that is obsessive in a great, great way—that never gives you a chuckle?

TF: I think there’s an impression that the ideas in my work happen instantaneously. I wish they did. By the time I’ve gotten to the heart of the idea I’m exhausted. I don’t get to have the same enjoyment that the viewer does. For me the object is just something that goes out there and it’s sort of a documentation of all the stuff that I’ve gone through. It can go away and I don’t really care.

JW: I understand that. It’s like making a movie. When it’s over I don’t need to see it again for a long time. You’ve made what they call “fugitive material” almost a signature. Was that something in the beginning that was always part of your work?

TF: Yeah.

JW: That seems to be one of the most radical things about your work. Conservators in museums must tremble at your influence. They must hate it!

TF: Especially when a bunch of different departments all have to be involved in one piece. It causes a bureaucratic nightmare.

JW: Well maybe you’ll start a new department that will deal with Styrofoam. Do collectors ever worry?

TF: I don’t think so. I haven’t heard of any concerns. I think my New York art dealer, Hudson, is very good with all of that.

JW: He’s great, he maybe invented that term “fugitive material.” Do you know who owns the piece of feces now (UNTITLED, 1992, feces on pedestal)?

TF: I think Saatchi owns it, but he may have sold it to someone else.

JW: All right, if his dog ate it, would you supply another?

TF: I supply quite a few extras. It for some reason keeps vanishing when it’s on display.

JW: But it’s not a multiple. It would certainly be called unique. It seems like from your pubic hair on the soap (UNTITLED, 1990) and with a lot of your earliest work you

had success pretty much right from the beginning, didn’t you? I mean the art world’s interest. I see these early beautiful installation shots of these insanely detailed works. What did the critics call you in the beginning? Did they have a hard time labeling you?

TF: One label I heard that I liked was “infinitesimal minimalist.”

JW: I saw one of your first shows in New York and it was an instant success. And I mean that in the best sense. I’m not saying anything is the matter with that. It stood out from all the other shows I remembered. Tony Tasset, one of my favorite artists, is your teacher; Hudson is your gallerist. With those two great people, right at the beginning it seemed your career started in a good way. Did your parents understand your work?

TF: I don’t know. I think they were more interested in whether I could make a living doing this stuff. From the beginning my work started to be written about in the art magazines, but that wasn’t part of their world. But once there was a tiny blurb in *The New Yorker*, in the “Goings on about Town.” My dad took it to his office and enlarged it like 500 percent. That was their world. So I think when that happened they realized that things were going pretty well.

JW: Now, your all white windowless studio has almost become legend, is it still exactly like that?

TF: No, that was something I needed in the beginning, but I don’t need it anymore.

JW: So the pictures that I see in the books are of your old one, and you have a new studio now?

TF: Yeah.

JW: Do you have windows?

TF: Yes, unfortunately.

JW: But was that a conscious thing that you felt more confident in your vision that you could look out your window and not be influenced?

TF: Well that white studio space went from being outside of me, to being in my head. I don’t really need it anymore. I can look at things and isolate them in a way that the white room did.

JW: It was always amazing to me that in the pictures the studio was so neat. I pictured this pristine white studio and the rest of your house crammed with stuff. Is that true? Is there rubbish everywhere else in your house?

TF: It was true. Not anymore, I’ve disciplined myself.

JW: I’m always curious about inspiration. Which comes first, the piece or what it’s made out of? Like the space sta-

tion made of objects from around the house, did you think of the space station and then look for the objects or did you see the objects and then make a space station?

TF: Sometimes it's the idea, sometimes it's the materials, it varies with each piece. I would say that most everything arises more out of the idea, and then when I see a material, the material attaches itself to this idea and then they sort of grow together into the piece.

JW: Do you feel fulfilled when you're obsessed? Is obsessive a good word to use about your work?

TF: I don't know. I wouldn't characterize it as obsessive just because it's not about having to do it for the sake of doing the act. I do it because it is necessary to fulfill my understanding. If my ideas required less mindlessly repetitive activity I would happily welcome that.

JW: But it doesn't seem insulting to call your materials or even your most heroic works pitiful. Do you agree that you sometimes purposely choose pitiful materials?

TF: Oh yeah, definitely. That's part of trying to lower itself so that it becomes less intimidating and more inviting. I want people to be sensitive to it, and develop a mutual relationship to it. One thing I've become more aware of is just how intimidating contemporary art is to the lay art person. There was recently a piece done about my work on CNN. They talked about things in a format like: "Look at this crazy artist and what he does!" It sort of mocks me.

JW: That's what always happens to good artists the further you get from art magazines and the closer you get to *People*-type magazines. You won't be in those mass-circulation magazines unless they can do that to you.

TF: I guess I understood that they have to do that so people can feel less intimidated.

JW: But talking about intimidation, your work is so ironically fragile and I don't think you really use irony in your work except for the materials. Even in your last show at Feature people had to wait in line to see it, like at Tiffany's, only six at a time could come in the gallery. And I thought that was so great because of the fragility of a piece of duct tape rather than a billion-dollar gem. People waited in line with this great, great respect. Has any of your work ever been fucked up by crowds in a show?

TF: Oh yeah. That doesn't bother me. There has even been intentional vandalism.

JW: Really? Like in what way? Stomping on it or something?

TF: There's a piece that I did with a plastic cup and plastic straws that cycle through it creating this sort of loop (UN-

TITLED, 1997). That was in a show and someone grabbed one of the ribs of straws and yanked.

JW: Do you get people that say: "You should try this" or "You should try that" or "When I was a kid I would do this"?

TF: Oh yeah, people send me things and say. "You can use this as an idea."

JW: Which I'm sure you never have! Do you feel that you're imitated? I see it in contemporary art galleries today. Not that they're so successful at it; I don't think that another can imitate you because you've kind of thought up a whole look yourself. But do you feel that sometimes?

TF: I see it when I go to graduate schools.

JW: Me too, when I'm doing studio visits. Now, can you give me a little blooper reel, two projects that you tried and didn't work?

TF: Oh, there are probably hundreds.

JW: Just one that you started and abandoned half way through. I'm just curious what the reason would be.

TF: If something doesn't work out it goes on the shelf and either it eventually goes into the trashcan or it gets recycled into something else.

JW: But when it doesn't work in your mind, it's because it doesn't become art, not because you lose patience, right?

TF: Usually it's because it's not doing what I had thought it would do, or it's not exciting me anymore.

JW: Can I ask you some details about a few of my favorite pieces? Maybe you're not supposed to talk about the craft, because no one ever seems to ask you how you did some of these things. Is that off limits?

TF: Not, at all.

JW: My all-time favorite piece of yours is still 1000 HOURS OF STARING (1992-97), the piece of paper that you stared at for a thousand hours. Did you really do that?

TF: Uh, yeah.

JW: That's faith, right? I mean did you hallucinate? Did you eventually start to see brown spots or anything?

TF: I was meditating anyway, so I figured I might as well put it to some sort of use. But maybe 750 hours into this piece, one day I came to my studio to stare at the paper and I noticed a moth on the paper. I removed it but it left a poop spot. So maybe five minutes was not actually staring but removing the moth's poop.

JW: Did you keep regular hours? Did you punch the time clock?

TF: Kind of. I jotted down the time on a piece of paper.

JW: I was always wondering if you said to me, "I didn't re-

ally do that," if maybe it would be better! But I knew that you really did do it. You talk about meditation a lot. I know with the eraser shavings (UNTITLED, 1990)—it's very playful and very clever—you always get compared to the Wolfgang Laib pile of pollen. But he seems almost too serious, I start imagining people having asthma attacks at his show, but with your work I can't imagine a parody. Is it bad to have fun at art shows? Is it artistically incorrect to be fun?

TF: I think that there's this misconception that playful thinking is not serious and it's not important. My four-year-old son wakes up in the morning and plays, which is some serious work. He's making some serious connections in his brain and learning so much through this play. I think people forget about that sort of play.

JW: The one where you signed your name on a wall until the pen ran out, that's so great. It's the opposite of the usual megalomania of most artists: They would never admit that the ink ran out. But did you do that all at once or over time?

TF: I think it took several days.

JW: Now the rubber balls that you stole (HOT BALLS, 1992)—I used to be a shoplifter so I need to talk technique with you here—did you steal all of those balls from the same place?

TF: No, no, different places.

JW: I was gonna say, because they would have started noticing. You weren't a dumb shoplifter either; you were an artistic one.

TOM FRIEDMAN, UNTITLED, 1992, feces on pedestal, feces: 1/8" diameter; pedestal: 20 x 20 x 20" / OHNE TITEL, Kot auf Sockel, Kot: 0,5 mm Durchmesser; Sockel: 51 x 51 x 51 cm.



TF: A couple of balls here, a couple there. It was in Chicago.

JW: And if you had gotten caught would you have used the Winona Ryder excuse, you know when she just got caught shoplifting?

TF: No, I don't know, what happened?

JW: She got caught shoplifting and said that she was doing research for her next film. Would you have dared to say, "It's for art"?

TF: I don't know what I would have done. I was thinking that if I got caught that process would become a part of the piece.

JW: Did anybody ever steal one of the balls from your artwork?

TF: I actually think someone did. I stole this ball that was a Jeff Koons reference; a dog toy of a basketball, and it was in the original photograph, but it's not in the piece anymore. I have no idea where it is.

JW: The spiders and the flies on the wall are these incredibly beautiful things that are not at all like practical jokes, they're like elegantly detailed empty spaces to me. But do you see it that way?

TF: Yes. I also think about the bugs as like a bug in a computer program, something that sort of screws up the logic. My bugs keep mutating and evolving. They started out with the fly, then mutated into the dragonfly and then the spider. Each bug sort of represents where my thinking is at that particular time. Right now it's a tarantula.

JW: For the one you call EVERYTHING (1992–95), where you put all the words in the English language on a sheet of paper, did you look for a short dictionary at least?

TF: No, it was a pretty large dictionary.

JW: How did you keep from getting bored doing that? Did you listen to music? Do you go into a Friedmanesque trance?

TF: Who says I didn't get bored?

JW: But is that part of the work? I mean did you think about each word when you were writing it down?

TF: I started to, I thought it could be a good way of improving my vocabulary, but after a while it slowed me down too much so I had to forget about that.

JW: Another favorite is the 2 x 4 painted to look exactly like it was (2 x 4, 1990). It seems like a recurring theme: the Play-Doh pills, the pencil made of paper. I love the work that you do like that, but it doesn't look exactly the same, you'll agree, right?

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TF: Yeah.

JW: You can tell, right? I mean on the piece of wood it was only on one side, right?

TF: Right, right. But actually when I started painting the 2 x 4 it looked too real to me. I wanted there to be more indication that it was faux.

JW: Now with SECRETS (1997), you wrote down all of your secrets on a piece of paper so small that you couldn't read it, correct?

TF: Yes.

JW: Beautiful visual poetry. Will you tell me just one secret that was on there?

TF: I can't reveal any secrets.

JW: Damn! I was trying to be an investigative journalist. Now the titles of your pieces are part of them sometimes, correct?

TF: Titles are pretty much like clues. For example, "Hot Balls" gives sort of a clue that they're stolen.

JW: On the erased *Playboy* centerfold, how could you erase a color photo?

TF: Oh, you can do that. You should try it. I used to erase out the eyes in models when I was young; I'd go through the magazines and make them look possessed.

JW: Without ripping the paper?

TF: Yeah, you can do it with just a normal eraser.

JW: Do you remember who she was, Miss Whoever that you erased?

TF: Miss December.

JW: Well that's good. Do you think in a way that that's a sexual fantasy? Because then you can put anything in that centerfold that you think of if you can imagine it, right?

TF: Right. Well, it was kind of about masturbation, the whole process of erasing it. The title of that is 11 x 22 x .005 (1992, erased *Playboy* centerfold) which are the dimensions of the piece of paper.

JW: That's sort of like MY FOOT (1991). I also really love that one: you made a ruler from memory. But you're so modest; it was only ten inches. Is that some comment on masculine artists' sexual bravado?

TF: I don't know, that's just what happened. It could have been 14 inches long.

JW: But I wouldn't assume that you would have been that much of a braggart. I could name a few artists who in their minds would have made it 14 to 16 inches. Now the cursed air, UNTITLED (A CURSE), (1992, cursed spherical space). I think Hudson told me that when you ship it, you have to leave a space for the air, is that true?

TF: Yeah.

JW: I love that. Was it a good witch or a bad witch?



*TOM FRIEDMAN, UNTITLED, 1997, clay, hair, fishline, paint,
5 x 4 x 3/4"; a handmade spider rests on the wall / OHNE
TITEL, Ton, Haar, Angelschnur, Farbe, 12,7 x 10,2 x 1,9 cm;
ein handgefertigter Weberknecht verharrt an der Wand.*

TF: I found her through an occult bookstore, which was a very bizarre experience. One person that I called to ask to do this said, "If you affect, you will burn your little fingers." I said, "What?" and she said, "If you affect, you will burn your little fingers."

JW: What does that mean?

TF: I don't know. I asked her what that meant and she said it again. So I figured I better hang up the phone.

JW: Let's talk about the new work that I have seen in the pictures that you sent me. If you're talking about since September 11th, this work looks so incredibly joyous to me.

TF: Yeah, it's very odd. After September 11th, it was very difficult for me to think about art and to make art, but then maybe a month or two later, something happened. It was interesting because I think September 11th took me to a place of seeing things in black and white, and it was not a place where I think that art exists. I came out realizing that what art does is to fight that black and white place of security.

JW: That's great there's no neurotic dwelling going on. It's rare that an artist continues and does well, but doesn't feel guilty about it.

TF: I'm still thinking about that, because there is that moment when someone feels very insecure and they look for things that they know and that give them security. That's not what art is about.

JW: Some of the new work is very Pop-y. Certainly the first one with boxes and magazine cutouts is more Pop-y than usual. And this cardboard box covered with Styrofoam is incredibly beautiful; it looks like the most elegant jewelry box.

TF: It'll be this piece that sort of introduces the show.

JW: Oh, it's perfect. The Styrofoam cups and paint: What is that one? I can't quite tell from the pictures. What do you mean a n d p a i n t? They're just painted?

TF: The bottom one is the actual cup, unpainted and then each consecutive one is painted slightly darker until the very top one is black.

JW: And this one, metal, glue, and paint suspended from the ceiling. It's so incredible, it looks like the last microsecond of a firework before the next one starts. It just looks amazing in this picture. And the tarantula, whose hair is it? It's not yours, is it?

TF: It's my hair.

JW: It is! Better be careful, Satanists could steal it and use it against you. I try to picture the entire Tate Modern empty with just two bugs in it. That's my idea of your curated show. Can you explain a little bit about that one that just

says "paper" (THERE, 2001)? It's a pedestal and underneath the pedestal are cutout papers in different colors?

TF: The cube is made out of paper and so is the paper cut underneath it. It's kind of my Minimalist piece. I think of the cube coming down like a gavel.

JW: Oh, I think you have another one that's even more Minimalist: the gravel made out of clay, which is so great. The gravel one to me is so un-Barry LeVa, so un-Carl Andre, but in a way it's like a weird scatter piece. Have you ever done site-specific work? I'd love for you to do my driveway!

TF: I love gravel. My son and I would go out during the summer and collect gravel.

JW: The boxes that you make out of other boxes, is it similar to the dollar bill as far as how it's made?

TF: The Lucky Charms box and the Total box?

JW: Yeah.

TF: But this is the reverse: I took one Lucky Charms box and I made four smaller boxes out of it.

JW: They're so trippy looking. It's very LSD.

TF: It's very bizarre how removing that information makes that leprechaun look a little strange.

JW: The all-white paper sculpture looks like shredded Kleenex, it's beautiful.

TF: I was trying to make it into a horrific facemask. I like the contrast between that and it just being this piece of paper.

JW: It seems to me that a simple piece of paper always gets you going.

TF: Yeah, a single piece of paper, I just love it. It's very inspirational.

JW: This hand-made bee in flight over a bunch of seemingly hand-made stuff, it seems like it's almost an installation here, is it?

TF: It's actually all glued together.

JW: It's one piece?

TF: You can just pick it up. Except for the bee, the bee is suspended.

JW: That's even better. It looks like a movie set. I try to think, "What would a Tom Friedman movie be?" You'd have to make the film. Well, you have that great projector (UNTITLED, 1999, paper) you made that you could use!

TF: (laughter) I have some ideas. It will happen, I just don't know when.

JW: OK, we're going to end with that promise, all right?

TF: All right.



TOM FRIEDMAN, UNTITLED, 1999, paper (film projector); UNTITLED, 2000, construction paper (a paper representation of the artist violently torn apart); UNTITLED, 1999, 36 one-dollar bills combined to make one large dollar; and (hanging from the ceiling) UNTITLED, 1999, paper construction. Installation view, Feature Inc. Gallery, New York, March/April 2000 / OHNE TITEL, 1999, Papier (Filmprojektor); OHNE TITEL, 2000, Modellbaupapier (gewaltsam zerrissenes Abbild des Künstlers); OHNE TITEL, 1999, 36 1-Dollar-Noten zusammengesetzt zu einem grossen Dollar; und (von der Decke hängend) OHNE TITEL 1999, schwarzes Papiergebilde. (PHOTO: OREN SLOR)