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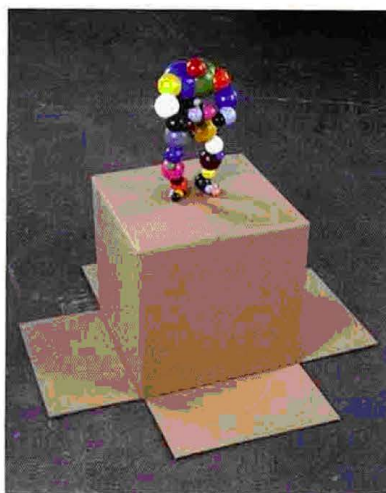
REVIEWS

NEW YORK

Tom Friedman

FEATURE INC.

Though no doubt initially conceived primarily as a practical measure, the decision to make Tom Friedman's recent exhibition accessible "by appointment only" also had a certain conceptual logic. The extreme fragility of Friedman's work clearly demands some form of crowd control.



Tom Friedman,
Untitled, 2005,
Styrofoam, cardboard,
acrylic paint, 35 x
38 1/2 x 38 1/2".

The scrupulous agglomerations of paper, cardboard, Styrofoam, string, wire, and other assorted craft materials that made up this new suite of works operate, as usual, at the very limits of technical feasibility, seeming always just one inadvertently swung backpack away from annihilation. At its most successful, Friedman's work has an intellectual subtlety that is nicely in line with its structural delicacy, encouraging a solitary and focused mode of interaction, so the payoff for the minor inconvenience of having to call the gallery for permission to visit was an unusually contemplative environment.

Friedman has developed a reputation for being able to coax extraordinary things from mundane materials, and his unequalled talent for improbable feats of small-scale engineering was again on display here. From a lacy knee-high cone of punched paper (all works are from 2005 and, as is the artist's habit, are mostly untitled save for brief explanatory descriptions), to a clump of white polyester thread hung from the ceiling so that its nearly twelve-foot long tendrils arranged themselves into a tiny silken comet, to a bizarre little constellation of pencils, wire, pillow stuffing, and Styrofoam pellets that squatted in the corner of the south gallery like some localized atmospheric disturbance from a parallel universe, the show was vintage Friedman. Quirky and industrious, it was suffused with all the "howjadothat?" charm that has characterized the artist's output over the past decade and a half.

But for all Friedman's celebrated prestidigitations, there has always been another, rather cartoonish aspect to his practice. And in fact it was this mode of address—unapologetically broad, with a taste for slapstick as much as for the wry conceptual bon mot—that dominated the show. The entrance to the gallery proper was guarded by a sky blue Styrofoam bumblebee hovering over a matching cube, an animation-style recapitulation of his creepily lifelike model insects from the 1990s. The sense that Friedman may have conceived the show at least partly as an opportunity to perform tongue-in-cheek revisitations of earlier gestures was confirmed elsewhere. In the center of the room, a little muscleman made of painted Styrofoam spheres and standing on a cardboard box evoked both the long list of self-portraits produced by the artist over the years (in materials as various as sugar cubes, drinking straws, and aspirin) and the array of shoplifted balls in his hilariously subversive *Hot Balls*, 1992. Nearby, *10,000 Thoughts*, a large piece of strategically crumpled paper on which the artist had printed the individual letters of the word "thoughts" 9,999 times, suggested his *Everything*, 1992–95, in which he inscribed a similarly sized sheet of paper with, he claimed, every word in the English language. And the pair of painted Styrofoam "leaping legs" that hung in the middle of the main room were a sort of deadpan version of the artist's many

fantastical, often spectacularly dismembered life-size figures. Here the kineticism of the artificial body (probably, like its predecessors, a self-portrait) was more joyful than macabre, an appropriate metaphor for a show that generally depicted the lighter side of Friedmaniana—emphasizing the artist's sense of humor without diminishing his bravura technical facility.

—Jeffrey Kastner