

OLD TECHNOLOGY: THE WORLD OF TONY MAY

San Jose ICA Retrospective Reveals an Intimate Relation of Life to Art

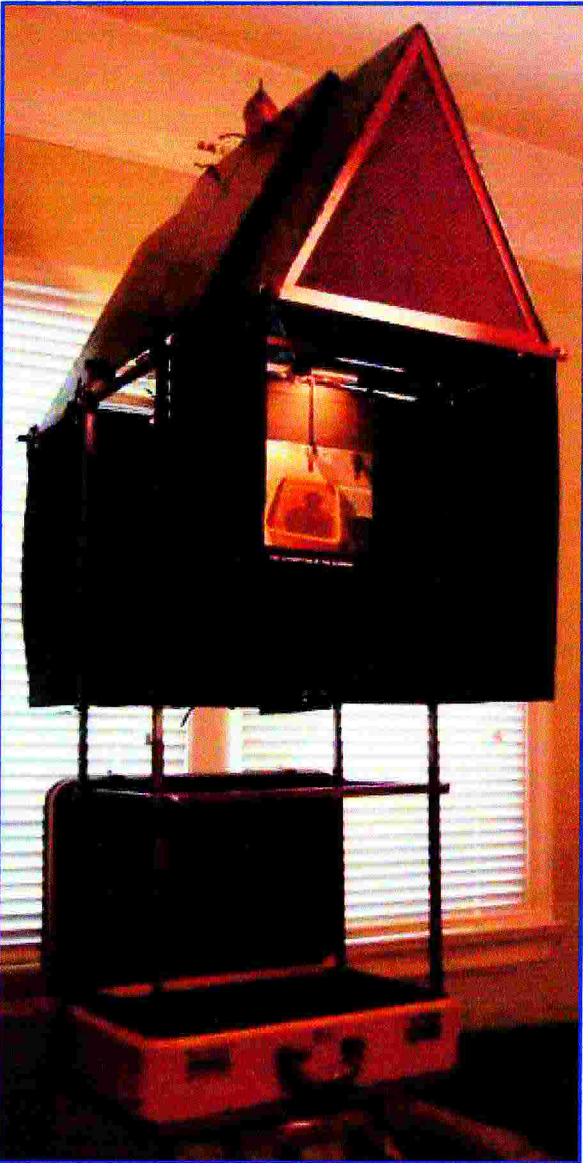
By Erin Goodwin-Guerrero



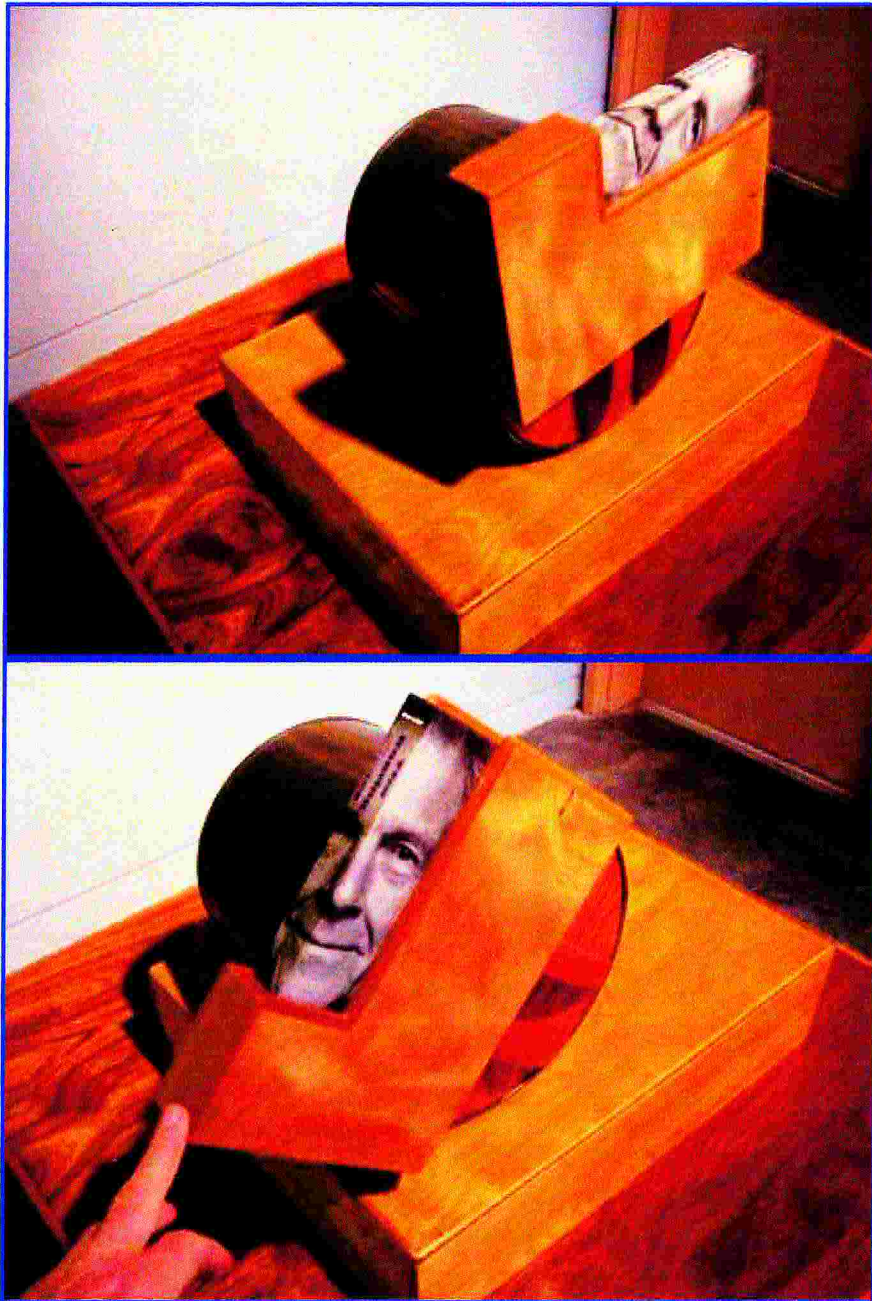
Installation view of *Old Technology*, including a structure evoking Tony May's well known *T. House* and the *Variable Construction Bookmobile* on loan from the San Jose Museum of Art. *Old Technology*, the extensive exhibition of painting, sculpture and installations from forty years of Tony May's work, including many new pieces, opened on November 13, 2010 at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art. Indeed, Tony May is a world-class artist who imprints an indelible stamp on the Silicon Valley art scene with public art, his unmistakable and charming art, life and persona, these frequently folding almost seamlessly together. Insightful writers that spin words more deftly than myself have written a good deal about the Tony May 40 Year Retrospective. I refer the reader to an informative and entertaining catalogue essay that includes wonderful biographical details, by Renny Pritikin, currently Director of the Nelson Gallery at UC Davis, and reviews by Ben Marks for KQED Arts, and Laura Cassidy Rogers for Art Practical. From the moment the show opened it has generated a buzz, with those who attended on opening night jamming the ICA galleries to the point that few really saw the show. Many who have seen it once come back twice or more. Folks immediately bombarded me with email asking if I had seen it, declaring it the best "museum" show in decades, and extolling the artist as a rare local hero.

So yes, it is an important show by an important artist who offers us an example of the irrepressible drive that animates an artist whether or not his work becomes heralded on the world stage. (At the risk of belaboring an issue of minor importance, I am nevertheless quite taken with the question posed by Italo Scanga, and explored further in Renny Pritikin's article, "*Why Aren't You Famous, Yet?*"). This is not to say that Tony May's reputation, as an artist, does not reach beyond Northern California, because it does and he has shown some of his best and signature works in venues abroad. May's *Thai Inspired Portable Display Unit*, which emerges from a small suitcase that carried the entire installation to an exhibition at Silpakorn University in Bangkok, is a perfect example. The display unit is an amalgam of previous displays featuring May's diminutive realist paintings that typically document the artist's notable inventions, repairs or discoveries in a quotidian environment, and the recurring art-in-a-suitcase theme. This work took the exterior form of a building with steeply pitched roof, like a Thai house, and also bore

features that evoked Thai temples and other traditional Asian constructions. From the roof, panels of black canvas are suspended symmetrically to create four viewing stations, one on each side. The painting featured in each niche then reveals some connection to the Buddha found in his travels in China or around May's home in San Jose, as in the vision of a Buddha in soapsuds in a washpan in his kitchen sink. The entire *Thai Inspired Portable Display Unit* is presented as rising from its open suitcase/carrying case.



Tony May's *Thai Inspired Portable Display Unit*



Making Cage Smile

May attributes his love of canvas as a sculptural material to his undergraduate experience in painting. He found the unstretched canvas every bit as intriguing for its potential in three dimensions as it was as a substrate for a picture. Canvas, in his *Variable Constructions*, plays many roles. His fondness for the spontaneous, the absurd, and the irrational element of chance is very *Dada*. As evidenced by the small sculpture *Making Cage Smile*, May clearly admires the approach of John Cage and the unpredictable forms assumed by many of his variable constructions are a response to that attitude. And yet, with his repeated work with suitcases, May demurs on the Duchampian comparisons — they are simply, a convenient, visually apt and easy way to enclose and carry a work of art. Opening and closing them often affords a way to show how canvas moves and folds.

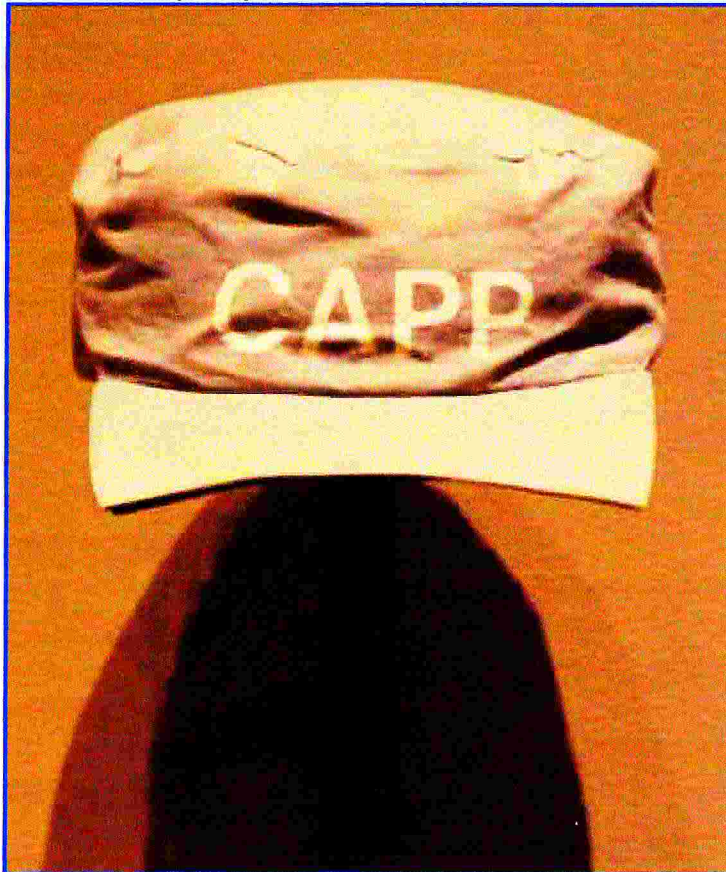


Antique Toolrack created from recycled tools in May's workshop

The flavor of Tony May is simplicity, modesty, a wry humor and refusal to admit any inflated meanings to an art that, on the surface, seems to be just the way May presents it — as a straightforward appreciation of the small everyday experiences and revelations we have at home, in the workshop or basement, at a garage sale. Found objects, constructions, repairs and inventions around the home are isolated, perhaps seasoned a bit with Tony May condiments and showcased with pokerfaced aplomb. May likes recycling. One example of Tony May style recycling is the aforementioned series of small acrylic paintings that document his home repairs, each one bearing a deadpan hand lettered narrative in the third person below the image. “*A PROJECTING BAY IN THE ALLEY FENCE ACCOMMODATES THE EUCALYPTUS*”. More recycling: May collects and uses old tools for use in his workshop which, in turn, frequently yields an object that stands on its own, such as the *Antique Toolrack*, composed of a hammer and sickle in a shallow wooden box. He mirthfully recalls, “Every time the hammer and sickle got together, they started talking to each other.” *Refurbished Antique Folding Device* is an old wooden ironing board that May declared “underbuilt and too rickety to use,” and was refurbished to give it more strength. In the process, May recalled “a Duchampian directive to destroy old icons”, and took the notion to stamp “REMBRANDT” into the wood, thinking it would be suitably iconoclastic to iron on top of a Rembrandt.



Tony May's Two Unretouched Photos



The Capp Street Cap

Tony May also plays with his always-understated wardrobe. *Two Unretouched Photos* is a curious print, and one of several pieces using the cap as part of the unforgettable visage of Tony May. A photo of the artist with a mustache, and wearing a workman's cap is seen below a photo of an historic figure also with mustache, at the same angle and wearing nearly the same cap. He says, "The two images are of Frederic Law Olmstead (the landscape designer who laid out NY central Park etc.), and me. The Olmstead photo was taken c. 1860. I discovered it in a book at the library about 1987 and thought it bore an uncanny resemblance to me. I had my friend Dale Leslie photograph me in as close to the same position and attitude as we could manage. The two combined photos were used as the cover image for a magazine called MUMBO JUMBO being put together by Lanning Stern's graphic design class which was published in 1987." There is more: In the show, a gray workman's cap that reads Capp Street above the visor, and then, for an auction a couple of years later, the latest and most quintessentially Tony May skull cap, again a gray fabric but without the visor. A sweater, worn first by Therese May and later, Tony, mended to the point that it is barely recognizable, is neatly folded and presented under plexiglass. Finally — not really typical Tony attire — there is *Two Tea Jugs*, a very sassy Pop tee shirt made for a Works Gallery auction, with two teapots painted on the chest: a double or maybe triple duty T!



May's *Two Tea Jugs*: acrylic paint on tee shirt

Now, to Tony May's chagrin, I return to that confounding question of why the artist is not yet *famous*? I ask Tony to bear with me, and my own obsession to understand why wonderful art and artists cannot launch a big apple profile from San Jose, California. I pose such obvious answers as the lack of commercial galleries, the lack of traditions in art collecting, Wild-West suspicions that the artist is a fraud and second cousin to the welfare cheat. Tony's response: "San Jose is not un-nurturing, it's a myth! Galleries open and fail everywhere, constantly. I hear things are not going so well in the San Francisco gallery scene right now. But, those galleries don't open as a public service. Actually, artists disappear in New York, probably in greater proportion than here. The Triton Museum does a good job for local artists. That Italo Scanga quote was meant to be a comparison of my career to Bruce Nauman's. Artists of a certain generation were *driven* to go where they could find success. It was often at the expense of a social life and other important things. San Jose is about average, about right."