

Tom Friedman

Fondazione Prada

Milan

24 October - 15 December 2002

On Thursday 24 October, the Fondazione Prada will inaugurate at Via Fogazzaro 36 an exhibition devoted to Tom Friedman (St. Louis, Missouri, 1965), the largest and most complete retrospective of the artist's work to be staged in Italy.

The exhibition, conceived by Friedman and curated by Germano Celant, constitutes a wide-ranging survey of the artist's activity up to the present day, since it comprises both his earlier works and those executed specifically for Milan. The decision to use the whole of the Fondazione Prada's space has created an interesting dialogue between the monumental nature of the venue and Friedman's works, often characterized by a disconcerting reduction in size. "There will be about forty works in the exhibition", explains the artist. "About twenty of these will be new pieces; the rest are borrowed from museums and collectors. The exhibition space is enormous (1400 square meters) and it will be left completely open, so there will be a lot of space around each piece." Friedman has conceived the exhibition as a whole in which each element is linked to the other and takes on another meaning because it forms part of a unifying context: "I make work for specific exhibitions. I conceive of the whole body of work, then begin working on each piece. I move from piece to piece, working on each a little at a time. My ideas develop through this process. As my ideas evolve so does my conception of the whole body of work. I know I am finished when each piece achieves a sense of conceptual clarity and when the relationships between the works keep building upon each other."

Tom Friedman belongs to the generation of artists that, at the beginning of the 1990s, started once again to focus their attention on the world of objects, reacting against the elimination of the physical element and tactile values by Pop art in favor of the image. He took a renewed interest in the fragile and ephemeral universe of everyday objects, making them part of their artistic language, but depriving them of the hyperbole and self-exaltation typical of the 1960s. Through a subtle process of mental and physical manipulation, in Friedman's work spaghetti, hair, chewing-gum, pieces of paper, detergent, dust, toilet paper, bars of soap, and colored construction paper are transformed into new objects characterized by an anti-heroic attitude and, at the same time, by astonishing formal perfection. Through small actions of elementary formalization, the artist raises questions regarding the theme of the complexity and heterogeneity of objects, seeking unknown, secret parallels between them. "Having trained in the 1980s, in a period in which the macroscopic scale of art - from Minimal to Land art - and the monumentality of painting were the methods of relating visually with reality, Friedman has adopted a diversified, if not contrary, perspective: that of the minute and microscopic, in which his investigation focuses on the smallness of things. Thus his vision is oriented towards the particles forming the realm of the objects...Flowers, masks and household objects, clothes and furniture, pieces of paper and fragments of pencils - ready-made products, just by being placed next to each

other, become part of a new order arising from their different ways of existing and revealing themselves.”*

The exhibition includes some of the works executed by the artist at the beginning of the 1990's, such as *Untitled* (1989), an oblique rectangular surface on the wall made with toothpaste, and *Untitled* (1990), formed by two bunches of pick-up sticks, one scattered, the other carefully arranged to duplicate the disposition of the first pile. Also exhibited are: a version of *Untitled* (1990), consisting of eraser shavings sprinkled on the floor to form a circular area, *Untitled* (1991), a collection of paper wads of different sizes arranged on the floor in descending order, as well as *Untitled* (1993), a continuous ring of plastic cups inserted in each other.

Whether Friedman composes or decomposes the object on a microscopic or a macroscopic level, his work focuses on the comprehension of the fundamental mechanisms of the visual and plastic metabolism, and of its cellular division. This is an exploration of the limits of the visible, an attempt to question something that has hitherto been regarded as certain, and to reflect on an object or a simple, mundane element. What at first sight seems uninteresting becomes an object of investigation – for instance, Play-Doh pills (*Untitled*, 1997), Styrofoam pellets (*Untitled*, 1999), a sheet of paper (*A Piece of Paper*, 1992), packing peanuts (*Untitled*, 2002), or underwear (*Untitled*, 2002). Small bees on a wall (*Untitled*, 2001), a tarantula (*Untitled*, 2001), and two flies (*Untitled*, 2001) are all works made by the artist with a wide variety of materials (construction paper, beeswax, clay, wire, fuzz, and hair). In *Untitled* (1999) and *Untitled* (2002) Friedman has assembled small squares of cardboard cut out of Total cereal boxes: in the first case, nine boxes have been cut up into squares and one large box made with these; in the second, a box of Lucky Charms has been cut into small squares that have been used to make four smaller boxes.

Among the recurring themes in Friedman's work there is that of the self-portrait; in 1994 he carved his own face from a tiny aspirin, while in 1996, 1998, and 1999 he represented himself in a series of portraits made of Styrofoam, small blocks of wood, and sugar cubes. *Yawn* (1994) and *Nobody* (2002) are also linked to this theme. The former consists of a black and white photograph portraying the artist while he is yawning; the other is a clone of himself made with colored construction paper: “This is the final example of reality reconstructed according to a complex formulation that is, nonetheless, both physical and ethereal. Through it, Friedman allows life to flow forth and he regenerates himself.”*

Two books have been published on the occasion of the exhibition: one is an artist's book conceived by Tom Friedman, containing drawings, photographs, and sketches; the other is a catalogue in which, through essays by Germano Celant and Mario Perniola, the whole of the artist's output is described and analyzed. In the latter book the works are accompanied by short but enlightening explanations written by the artist himself, and these are an integral part of his creative endeavor.

* Germano Celant, “The Anatomy of Things,” in *Tom Friedman*, exhibition catalogue, Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2002.

exhibition information

Title: Tom Friedman
Dates: 24 October - 15 December 2002
Venue: Fondazione Prada
Address: Via Fogazzaro 36, Milan
Opening hours: Tuesday-Sunday, 10 am-7 pm; Thursday until 10 pm
Monday closed
Admission: free
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