

Look!

Over the past two years, I have worked closely with the conceptual artist Tom Friedman in order to curate a series of drawings and notes detailing his progression as an artist from his years as a graduate student to the present day. Through this process, I have developed a further understanding of the caliber of Tom's work, as well as brief insights into the process in which he creates, views, and conceptualizes both his pieces and the world around him. While Tom is in the truest sense an artist, I believe the significance of his work cannot be appreciated without understanding that the motivating force behind him is a necessity to create and interpret. Though I initially hoped to use his unreleased works as a tool to inspire and educate others, I found that the process was one of confusion and unlearning, mimicking his arc as an artist.

I first met Tom through his son, Marc. While in school, Marc and I bonded over a shared love for music and eventually grew close. This led to my working with Tom as an assistant, despite my inexperience. I had not been able to afford art school and had barely set foot in the collegiate world. At this point in time art seemed very foreign and inaccessible to me. I resented being labeled an outsider, and the exclusivity of the establishment completely turned me away from my own art all together. I found myself disheartened by the manner in which absolute truths were presented. Ironically, I only truly started to learn when I fully gave up trying to understand. Much to my surprise, Tom seemed happy that I didn't know much about what I was doing and encouraged me to not accept anything as truth.

While working in Tom's studio I discovered his collection of old notebooks. After spending several months going through them, I began to encourage Tom to publish a small collection. Though Tom was initially against the idea, I began to work on compiling a collection during my spare time with the help of his wife, Mary. After working in the studio during the day, I would return home and spend hours studying the intricate details of each page. I found his notebooks contained a chaotic blend of information, presented in a turbulent series of ideas and images that were impossible to contextualize.

Initially, the books appeared to have a clear chronology. His drawings carefully shed definition over time, revealing his skill with space and tendency to compose counterintuitive scenes. The written works during his time spent with Hudson at Feature Inc. showed Tom's versatility and confidence with elements as well as

his unorthodox relationship and trust in the object. In contrast, at Gagosian, the notes emphasized broad thematic strokes and visual tactility. The large volume produced at this time showed his skill tight-roping between aesthetic and conceptual complexity, effortlessly growing into the role of a mature artist.

The notes continued to reflect his evolving ideas in his current years with Stephen Friedman Gallery and Luhring Augustine. Though there were far fewer notes to work with, the methodology of his thought seemed to be significantly more organic to him. Within short spans of time, Tom would comfortably navigate between vastly contrasting bodies of work – challenging himself and demonstrating a willingness to push materials to the extreme and redefine his comfort zone. Each and every piece continued to compel the viewer, maintaining a freshness and curiosity that are relentlessly 'Tom Friedman'.

All of this was clear. His development was concise, but the books offered little to explain what sparked these drastic shifts in thinking or work. Much like his work, the notes were deceptively simple. As the years went by, the line drawings were replaced by smudges and the pages of writing became strings of words awkwardly crowded together. It presented that what made Tom's work so compelling was the same undoing found in the notebooks. Beauty gave way to chaos, and the absurd ruled. Those hoping to understand the intricacies of his art would believe that the disorder of the works was what made them provoking. It appeared the absurdity was its strong suit. While I continued to develop a closer personal relationship to Tom, I started to see that my ideas were falling just short. Watching him work and being adjacent to pieces from the initial seed to the finished work was a humbling experience, truly exposing my naivety. Being a naturally curious person, I was eager to see how the concepts within Tom's notes came together to form pieces. As I began to take a more active assistant role, I found myself leaving the process entirely confused. While in the notes the reductionist mentality felt so intuitive, it was in Tom's careful gatekeeping of his own ideas that deconstruction seemed to unravel.

When viewing his work, Tom would assume an uncharacteristically uncertain posture. While in his work he was efficient and calculated. He viewed what he created in a very inquisitive way, giving the floor to the piece. During these meditations, he seemed to be drawn to the pieces least like the philosophies spelt out in the books. The work that championed these ideas would leave

Tom dissatisfied, and he would comfortably discard hours-worth of what appeared to be compelling work. The pieces he seemed drawn to and the manner in which he viewed were puzzling.

As I would view his work I would search for meaning and feel stinging failure in not understanding. In an exhausting attempt to distort the work to find meaning, I was left with a silence of thought which deafened me. Although it had all seemed so self-explanatory within the notebooks, it became clear that what was in front of me was actively and intentionally deceiving.

Nevertheless, I persisted. It became an obsession of mine to truly understand what I was seeing. During all of this, Tom began to compile the pieces for Ghosts and UFOs: Projections for Well- Lit Spaces. I began to attempt naively to pick apart his brain. As I would question what I was looking at or what meaning he was attempting to convey, it became quickly evident that the answers to these questions were inherently non-existent. In looking to understand what Tom was creating, I was already lost. As the viewer, I was dismantling the independence of each thought the pieces presented, giving into the patterns of thought encouraged by my own human nature. Looking to understand what I was seeing became a loaded expedition in which my own understanding of life and the world molded the works to affirm my ideas.

Gradually, the process of unlearning began. As creators and viewers, we are encouraged to create meaning, or to interpret what we see in a meaningful way. Our tendency is to dissect 'truth' from the creative and natural world – resulting in a cocooned form of thinking. All stimulus and thought begins and ends in the safety of our own understanding. This is the inclination of us all. As the pendulum of existence swings, we seek to grow in a complicated mix of personal enlightenment and a detrimental cocktail of self-affirmation. Within here lies the grey area, our better angels combine with our need for understanding to rest in a murky puddle. My desire to understand what Tom put in front of me could lead me solely to answers I already held. To learn, I had to fully remove myself from the thought patterns I had spent my whole life developing and my compass of the self. They needed to be stripped away to be fully at the beginning.

Slowly a deceptive continuity begins to emerge in Tom's artistic life. The slow disintegration of the lines in his early work so clearly led to his all white studio and 1,000 Hours of Staring. The patient

struggle of Ream and the curated wonder of Looking Up, began to feel more like monastic challenges than pieces of art. Beyond deconstruction, Tom seemed to be challenging himself to reach the very same understanding the viewer sought in his work. He, it appeared, was constantly working to escape the natural pendulum. The only answer his work was offering was complete autonomy. In a world of understanding it seemed as if his work was screaming, "Look!"

Tom, through the years, has simply been trying to reach the clean slate. Rather than injecting meaning, Tom was offering an escape from the preconceived. Confronting our tendencies to control and understand is not the means to an end, but rather a step towards developing the self.

The motifs of childlike wonder and household materials are a consequence of his search and manifestation of himself. While he creates with great aesthetic care, he is packaging his curiosity and pursuit of self for others. We as the viewer are seeing a showcase of his practice – and if there is a story being told, it is of the Object and Image. If there is a way he wants you to feel, it's confused. Tom's art is a byproduct of his need to create intersected with his own personal and never ending unlearning. His language is creation, and he speaks entirely in the hypothetical, ranging from absurd to playful.

Much like the notebooks, what we are viewing does not have continuity. The process of learning from something that seeks to confuse you is never ending, only tethered by the theme of discovery. In order to capture this, Tom and I chose not to include the drawings chronologically. Instead the drawings are organized in an aesthetic that denies a beginning or an end. It is both our hopes that those who look at the images leave each sitting with a question, idea, or thought to meditate on. The book is the experience of investigating, much like Tom's process and the work he creates.

As the drawings and notes have been picked from Tom's personal notebooks, minimal gatekeeping has been done. While at points the images are immediate and unresolved, the freedom from contextualization allows you to build on their residue.

We hope you enjoy the book and we encourage you to pick it up and put it down. And we request that you allow yourself not to find any meaning.