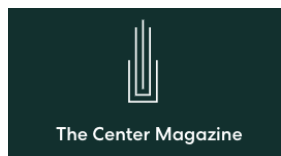


# Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Center Magazine  
The Story Behind Tom Friedman's Silver Figure  
Julie Smith Schneider  
17 February 2021



## The Story Behind Tom Friedman's Silver Figure

On Fifth Avenue, a lone figure stands frozen in apparent wonder, with body curved back, head tilted to the side, and eyes cast upwards. But it's not alone for long. Passersby feel compelled to pause and join in for a spell, matching this being's stance with their own bodies and following its magnetic gaze to a peak in the cityscape: the tip-top of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, and the sky beyond. On one frigid afternoon in late January, a couple wearing matching red jackets bring their scooters to a halt on the sidewalk and lean in for a closer look.



The sun reflects off of the figure's silvery, larger-than-life body, which stretches about 10 feet tall—the height of a regulation basketball hoop—and glints off the crumpled terrain of its surface. Closer examination reveals that it is imprinted with the textures and forms of aluminum roasting pans, pie plates, and assorted baking tins. This is "Looking Up," a public sculpture by conceptual artist Tom Friedman that's on display at the entrance to the Channel Gardens (on Fifth Avenue between 49th and 50th

Streets) through March 19.

Friedman's professional art career spans three decades, marked by an ever-expanding constellation of ideas and visual feats that play with the boundaries of logic and perception. Rather than a stylistic throughline, it's Friedman's distinctive way of turning ideas into tangible, physical forms, often laced with deadpan humor and painstaking attention to detail, that underpins his work. "I don't like being pigeonholed into doing one particular thing, which makes it fun for me," Friedman says. "Maybe [that] makes it difficult for people to see the thread through my work, but I like that. It challenges people to see a continuity. The continuity is the lack of continuity." Born in 1965, Friedman grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, and now lives and works in Massachusetts. Ever since his parents put a crayon in his hand, he says, he hasn't stopped making art. After studying graphic illustration at Washington University in St. Louis, he earned a Master of Fine Arts in sculpture from the University of Illinois at Chicago. There, in his second year of grad school, he unlocked his particular "point of departure" as an artist and started making the pieces—rooted in meditative ritual, intensive labor, circular logic, and irreverent materials—that would launch the early part of his career: A bar of soap inlaid with an immaculate thin, spiraling black line made from the artist's own pubic hair. A tangled maze-like mass made from a box of cooked and dried spaghetti noodles connected end-to-end to form a single continuous loop. An explosive starburst sculpture made from 30,000 toothpicks.



An arrow-straight timeline isn't important for understanding Friedman's body of work. "It's almost like molecules," Friedman said in a 2018 video. Conceptually and in gallery settings, his artwork "can be put together in many different ways. The chronology isn't so important." It's more like an interconnected web. A particular material, say a pencil or aluminum foil, that was the basis of one sculpture might reappear years later with a totally different reinterpretation.

"I tend to do one thing and then look to the opposite," Friedman noted in one video about the making of Rockefeller Center's "Looking Up." True-to-form, Friedman had made a sculpture called "Looking Down," featuring a standing, slouched figure doing just that while peeing. Swinging his creative pendulum in the opposite direction, Friedman decided to make a sculpture of a figure gazing upwards. Versions now exist in varying scales

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and postures, installed in a few locations—all titled “Looking Up” to reference the literal stance of the figure, as well as the other meaning of the idiom: a sense of optimism and positive change.



With each “Looking Up” installation, the figure takes on new associations as the setting changes. Its current home on the Rockefeller Center campus lends the grandeur and history of the surrounding architecture. Mere steps from the bustling sidewalk of Fifth Avenue, buzzing with city life, the figure pauses in a place where locals and tourists mingle. “It’s a temporary sculpture; I feel like it’s a tourist,” Friedman adds. “In a way, it’s mimicking what a tourist would do: looking around—especially in that iconic

location with the [30 Rockefeller Plaza] building, jutting up into the heavens.”

“Looking Up” was unveiled in Rockefeller Center’s Channel Gardens on January 20, which was also Inauguration Day. “There was something significant about the time that it was installed and the positive references to it, at least for me, of looking up and what that represents: maybe a new beginning, hopefully,” Friedman says. The familiar, everyday materials most prominent in the making of the sculpture—lightweight aluminum pans—also may add to the sense of lightness of being, though the sculpture, in reality, weighs 700 pounds.

To create this piece, Friedman made the rounds at grocery stores, collecting aluminum pans with an assortment of ornamentation. In his studio, he created an armature and bulked it up with chunks of styrofoam and spray insulation, moving it around until the posture of the figure felt right. Hot-glue gun in hand, Friedman covered the foam body with a metal “skin,” using a mishmash of entire aluminum pans that added a bulbous surface quality and cut-up pieces, keeping the imprinted words and textures. (On the left foot, you can spot in backwards type, like a secret missive, these words: “Never lift by sides only. Always support the bottom.”) Once the silvery skin was in place, he covered gaps with aluminum tape and adjusted the figure’s stance again, since it shifted in the process. Then, a fabricator cast the whole thing in stainless steel, using a lost-wax casting process, and polished it to a satisfying gleam. As substantial as the finished sculpture looks, its walls are only ¼-inch thick.

When it comes to dreams for what viewers will take away from their encounters with “Looking Up,” Friedman has soaring aspirations. “I hope that they look into the sky and have an epiphany. I want it to change their lives



forever and make them into a better person, and then they’re going to go out and do good things and spread the goodness around,” Friedman says, laughing and striking an exaggerated, starry-eyed tone. But he’s not just joking around. “It’s absurd, but I mean, isn’t that what artists want?”

Image: Julie Smith Schneider