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40 Years of Making Much Out of Little

Michael Kimmelman | November 11, 2005



Installation view of *The Art of Richard Tuttle* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, November 10, 2005-February 5, 2006). Photograph by Sheldon C. Collins, courtesy the Whitney.

HERE are a few things you might not notice in Richard Tuttle's sublime retrospective at the Whitney Museum. Blue gels tint the wall at the entrance that has his early tin "Letters" on it. The lights cast in slight shadow the shallow letters, which are a little like metal versions of toddlers' toys in cryptic alphabet shapes. "Replace the Abstract Picture Plane" -- a grid of painted plywood panels, jaunty and framed in white -- is off to the right. It looks as if it stands out from the wall. That's because it does, barely: the panels extend beyond their frames by the width of the plywood (or twice that width where the plywood sheets are doubled), while the backs of the picture frames aren't quite flush with the wall. They hang a quarter of an inch away.

Such whispering details, of which there are an endless number here, are at the heart of Mr. Tuttle's rapturous brand of intimism. For 40 years he has murmured the ecstasies of paying close attention to

the world's infinitude of tender incidents, making oddball assemblages of prosaic ephemera, which, at first glance, belie their intense deliberation and rather monumental ambition. Never mind the humdrum materials and small scale. In the ambition department, Mr. Tuttle yields no ground to the Richard Serras of this world.

He has dreamed up his work out of such ostensible nothings as a three-inch segment of plain white clothesline nailed at the middle and on both ends to an otherwise empty white wall. Notice the cord's frayed edges; where the center nail interrupts the plaits; how, because it is so vanishingly small, the cord commands a psychic space in direct disproportion to its size. Pushing the buttons of skeptics for whom such stuff doesn't even qualify as art in the first place, the work addresses anyone with open eyes and an open mind about the basic ingredients of art-making, not to mention a little sense of humor.

Since the 1960's, and out of not just cord but also Styrofoam and florist wire and bubble wrap and twigs, Mr. Tuttle, now 64, has devised objects whose status is not quite sculpture or drawing or painting but some combination of the three, and whose exquisiteness is akin to jewelry. His show is a cross between a kindergarten playroom and a medieval treasury.

It arrives as a second act, 30 years after his last retrospective at the Whitney traumatized the New York art world. Back then, conservatives naturally heaped scorn on Mr. Tuttle's inventions, which, as the critic Thomas Hess then responded in *ArtNews*, only attested to the work's deceptive radicalism. "When you read such words as 'remorselessly and irredeemably egregiously pathetic a bore and a waste arid debacle farce' from a critic who once called Jackson Pollock 'second rate' and Willem de Kooning a 'pompier,'" Hess wrote after Hilton Kramer's review in *The New York Times*, "then it's probable that something importantly different has come to notice."

It had. But it was hard for many people to see. Mr. Tuttle started out making small paper cubes with geometric cutouts. Ostensible riffs on Donald Judd's heavy metal boxes, they substituted handmade delicacy and lightness for industrial weight, coyly suggesting a kind of innocence while extrapolating on art's fundamental role as language.

"Letters" followed, along with "Constructed Paintings": canvases also shaped like nonsense signs, painted in catchy, offbeat colors, the shapes not sharp-edged but quavery, after faint pencil drawings. Mr. Tuttle, in nudging Minimalism toward personal touch and private speech, was here abetted by the somewhat paradoxical examples of Agnes Martin and Barnett Newman. Poetic discretion slyly combined with grandiose aspirations.

The Whitney retrospective opens with his succeeding "Cloth Pieces," of the mid-60's, dancing across a far wall and spilling onto the floor. Exploring a no-man's land between painting and sculpture, they pick up on the same eccentric shapes as the letters. Lightly tinted, crumpled pieces of heavy fabric, hand cut and roughly hemmed, with no front or back, no up or down, made to hang on the wall or not, they also look

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best together rather than one at a time. Mr. Tuttle's early efforts occasionally favored metaphysics over sheer visual loveliness, although the early drawings, on which many works are based, place delicate marks just so on otherwise blank sheets of paper. They are like heavenly doodles, as ethereal as angels' breath.

Organized by Madeleine Grynstejn for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where its presentation was bigger and more strictly chronological, the exhibition occupies the Whitney's third floor, which is ordinarily not a congenial space but now has been given an almost domestic feel. Works are hung close together, with aptly unconventional irregularity. (Many of them will rotate in and out during the run of the show, as works did 30 years ago.) The Whitney curator is David Kiehl, who, in clear psychic sync with Mr. Tuttle, has made the exhibition into something

of a homecoming -- the installation affectionately recalling aspects of the 1975 show while casting more recent work in newly designed galleries that serve Mr. Tuttle's high-minded, obsessive-compulsive predilections.

Perhaps partly in reaction to the reaction against that first retrospective and in general keeping with the art world's turn from his own postminimal austerity toward 1980's extravagance, Mr. Tuttle allowed himself an increasing opulence in the late 70's. The evolution unfolds in rooms toward the back of the show. The first has Mr. Tuttle's utterly fine wire pieces from the early 70's: almost invisible pencil lines drawn on the wall; thin wires tracing the contours of the lines and springing from the walls, casting shadows that make yet more lines.

Wall assemblages from the early 80's, in an adjacent room, which seems like a world away, look baroque by comparison: twigs, blocks, thicker wire and corrugated cardboard are joined into Rube Goldbergian confections, brightly painted, divinely balanced. To these Tinkertoy devices, Mr. Tuttle added light bulbs during the late 80's. Their shimmery effect, collected in the last of the back galleries, is reminiscent of a sacristy.

How you approach such art is up to you. Purely abstract, made up of endless parts, joints and painterly marks that affect happenstance, they have no central focus, no beginning, no end, but sometimes a narrative peg. A group of palm-size drawings in faux-ornate yellow cardboard frames hang across a gallery corner (the corner and frames make a triangle), bearing gently colored marks and symbols inspired by Egypt. Watercolors, loosely brushed in frames shaped like railroad tracks, suggest Chinese paintings. Floor sculptures that resemble teepees summon up the Southwest, while those early wire pieces, making shapes from simple to ornate, are explicitly meant to allude to Archaic and Rococo art.

But the beauty of Mr. Tuttle's art is ultimately in its concentration on materials for their own sake, and the space they occupy. He regards these the way we hope to be regarded -- individually, patiently. If what results is sometimes a trifle, so is life sometimes. There is nothing more difficult in art than to make work that looks easy. A shaman with waferboard and colored tissue paper, Mr. Tuttle operates far above the run of ready-made conceptualists with their throwaway aesthetics, because of the urgency and occasional melancholy he brings to even the simplest things.

It happens that the tranquil 19th-century American Luminist painter John Frederick Kensett is one of his ancestors. With Kensett, Mr. Tuttle shares a refined respect for plain material facts and a fascination with immaterial ones like light, which verges on the spiritual. A work like "20 Pearls (12)," painted on cheap pressed wood scraps cut into florid shapes, is a mélange of nature and culture, shot through with flowery pink, its central motifs thin washes of orange-gold paint that delicately shift in changing light.

Standing near "20 Pearls (12)," looking across the next two galleries in the show, you may notice how the edge of a work called "New Mexico, New York No. 14" in the far room lines up with the edge of the wall in the nearer room on which is hanging "Sand Tree 2."

"New Mexico, New York No. 14" is shaped like a droopy red envelope with a needle's eye looping across its middle. "Sand Tree 2" deploys a large, irregular green ovoid with a clutter of small wood crosses, from which issue forth broken Styrofoam chunks embedded with curling strips of red paper. The chunks skip up to the end of the wall.

So from the doorway they can meet up in your line of sight with "New Mexico, New York No. 14" -- the wood crosses of one bookending the needle's eye of the other, making a fresh, third work.

It is not a coincidence. Nothing ever is in Mr. Tuttle's perfect world.