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### The Man of Small Things

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In 1975, when he was 34 years old and had been showing in galleries for about a decade, Richard Tuttle had a major exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. A big show at a New York City museum can be career making. Or it can play out the way his did. Tuttle was working with the humble materials he favors to this day – wire, string, bits of Styrofoam, matches, scraps of plywood and cardboard – which he lightly assembled into strange little delicacies. Some of the works in that show, like his “rope pieces” – three-inch lengths of clothesline, fluffed a bit at the edges and attached to the wall with three nails – seemed less like works than offhand gestures, the merest residues of an intuition. Years later, Tuttle described another of them as “some paint on the end of the coffee stirrer, placed on a 40-foot wall.”

To anyone holding to more strenuous notions of art, whatnots like that seemed too flimsy for words. Actually, the reviewers had words, plenty of them, including “pathetic” “precious” and “farce.” Though he had notable defenders, the bad press was such that the show’s curator, Marcia Tucker, eventually lost her job. Hilton Kramer, who was then the unappeasable critic of the “New York Times,” dismissed Tuttle with a few lines that followed the artist around for years. Playing off Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s famous directive that less is more, Kramer announced that “in Mr. Tuttle’s work, less is unmistakably less... One is tempted to say that, so far as art is concerned, less has never been as less as this.”

That should have been enough to consign Tuttle to the scrap heap of history, though you suspect that even there he would have had fun with the scraps. But this fragile art, with its flickering pulse, has turned out to be durable. Three decades later, he’s the subject of “The Art of Richard Tuttle,” a retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) that sends you home with your senses briskly reconditioned. After it closes in San Francisco on Oct. 16, the exhibition goes on the road for two years; heading first to the Whitney – talk about “I shall return!” – then to Des Moines, Iowa; Dallas; Chicago; and Los Angeles.

Madeleine Grynsztejn, the SFMoMA curator who organized the show, calls that tour “a victory lap,” and she’s right. Over the past decade, Tuttle has been increasingly recognized as a genuine, if highly idiosyncratic, American master. In the 1980s, when so much art was big and declamatory, it was always a relief to come across one of Tuttle’s meticulous drawings or his gentle constructions, making their case that the smallest gesture could carry weight. When the noise of that decade died down, the low-intensity virtues of his work became more obvious, even to the market. Three years ago, one of his early works, “Letters (The Twenty-Six Series),” sold at auction for \$1 million.

Everything Tuttle does seems to be asking the same question: What's the smallest things you can do in a picture or with an object and still lift it out of the realm of the ordinary? What's the smallest conceptual pressure that can be brought to bear on something and still have it qualify as art? Questions like those, and the humble, perishable works they can lead to, are enough to send some people running for the exits. And it's true that if all art were like Tuttle's, the art world would be a place too delectable to bear. But at his almost immaterial end of the creative spectrum, Tuttle operates in delightful ways. A picture like "20 Pearls (12)," from 2003, with its lozenges of black and its mustard-and-gray smear at the center, reduces painting to a few simple forms and gestures, attaches no compensating theory and still holds the eye with its ramshackle decorative charm.

When Tuttle first began showing in the mid-1960s, he was usually understood as a minimalist. He made shaped wall reliefs and floor pieces, typically painted in a single color, or two or three adjoining forms, each a different color. They obeyed the minimalist law that art should be a thing that can be apprehended all at once, with no painterly composition and a minimum of visual intricacies. But resolute minimalists like Donald Judd and Robert Morris were also busy expelling from art anything that resembled meaning, any reference to biological form or emotional states outside the work. From the start Tuttle was different. He wanted people to associate things he made with things they knew. He gave his works yielding names that invited the mind to attach larger meanings to even the simplest of signs, such as "Storm" for a dark blue panel that sits atop a white one of the same size, like a stormy sky on a flat horizon.

That kind of work gave Tuttle the insight crucial to his later career: that meaning could be achieved with the bare minimum of means. It paved the way for later pieces like "New Mexico, New York #14," in which a looping form is superimposed on an irregular rectangle with a flap that resembles an envelope. In a sense, it is an envelope – what looks at first like a minimalist abstraction is also a yearning road picture, a conflation of the circuit Tuttle travels between his homes in New York and New Mexico and the letters he writes to keep in touch with his friends in both places.

Tuttle's small-scale aesthetics doesn't always translate well into larger formats. In a not-quite-sculptural work like "Six" – a palisade of sticks, some of them shrouded in cloth hoods – the scrimshaw intricacy of his little wall pieces is lost, and not much comes forward to compensate. As metaphor, the piece is illegible, and as an assemblage of materials, it's not much. But so much else of what he does is choice. If this is "less," let's have more.

- Richard Lacayo

257 Bowery, New York, NY 10002  
T +1 212 999 7337 F +1 212 999 7338

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