

## Strobe Gallery Artist Profile:

# Terri Friedman

BY ROBIN EMERSON

A mess of colored tubing lay on the floor, called "Co-mingling Without Ever Exchanging." I raised an eyebrow, steeling myself for the next slide, prepared to hate it. Not only was some pretentious gallery person telling me how "they" (in New York and Europe) loved the artist, but I have an aversion to plastic and glitter and weird conceptual art pieces. Somehow bad mixed media is offensive to me in a way that, say, a bad painting is not. And I regard mixed media with far more suspicion as result.

But the next slide was a mandala of yellow lights. I was told that the lights spun around. Ooh, I thought, I like mandalas... It was called "Sunny Sideways With Oxygen," and it had a liveliness, a sense of humor, and energy. There was a weird chandelier with glasses of colored resin on top... Dazzle me with colors. Then there were these shoes, funny whimsical shoes, ornately decorated with an Indo-Asian flavor, and filled with living plants—"The Clarendon Court Model for Perfect Gardening."

Sparkling lights, bright colors, glitter, tassels. Okay, Terri Friedman, it is. I realized, as I was driving away from the gallery, the name sounded familiar. When I called Friedman up to arrange an interview, we remembered our first meeting four years earlier at her studio open-house. I knew she had since gone to grad school, and her new work was radically different from the paintings I had seen before.

The slides were from Friedman's recent show, "Sunny von Bulow is Still Alive!" at the now-defunct Sue Spaid Fine Art gallery. Sunny, subject of the film *Reversal of Fortune*, is the tremendously wealthy woman who has been comatose for fourteen years. In the show's artist statement, Friedman tells us that Sunny is dressed daily by a full-time staff, she is made-up, fresh flowers are delivered to her room and music is played for her. More intriguing is that, "once in while, when her two children from her first marriage enter the room, she has been known to curl her lips up in an almost-smile or even produce a tear or two."



An *L.A. Times* review of Friedman's bizarrely-themed show characterized the artist as "at once von Bulow's champion and a dazzlingly creative parasite, sucking what life remains out of this fourteen-year-old coma victim..."

**Even though the review was actually good, what did you think about being called a parasite?**

You could take it two ways. She might have really been putting me down, but I don't think so. I think she was just playing with the whole flavor of the show. She really got it, in a way. [The review] was her own outlook, her own bent. And she wrote something a little less shallow than the usual [review].

**What's so fascinating about Sunny Von Bulow?**

The whole von Bulow thing was happening in Rhode Island when I was going to Brown. Her son was also there. The movie and the Dershowitz book came out after that... It was just something I followed. I happened to see "Hard Copy" a year ago about Sunny being still alive. I thought it was so weird, so sad and so... what I don't like about our culture.

I did more research, and found out that she still breathes on her own. And what actually captured my attention... *she was dressed and decorated daily*. The idea of a breath that's dressed... it could be a metaphor for art that inspires you. I realized I was going into museums and galleries, and it felt so dead and so stale. In the work I found

inspiring, it was very clear that it had a life force in it. That it had breath.

**What do you think it means that she's still breathing? Do you think her spirit is still there?**

Who knows? That's the mystery. Has her spirit left her body and it's just running?

**Or does she just check in every once in awhile when her kids are there?**

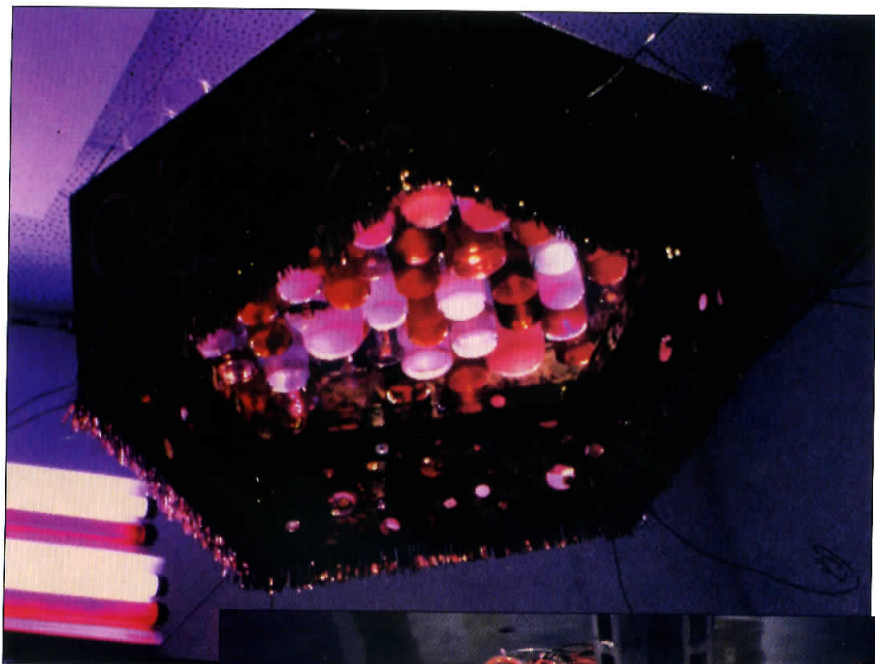
Exactly. It's such an amazing question. As I was getting ready for the show, I felt a deep compassion for Sunny and her family. I was concerned the show was going to look cynical, like it was making fun of her. It wasn't at all. The show was funny and ironic, but I didn't want it to be cynical.

The other thing that inspired me in that show was my trip to Indonesia last year. My grandma had died just before I went, and I was thinking a lot about death. I went to a lot of lavish burial ceremonies while I was there. Huge figures of bulls are made out of wood structures and paper maché—really elaborate art pieces—which they put the body inside. Then they burn it. Most of them don't have much money, and they may have to bury the body first, then dig it up several months or years later when they finally have money enough for a ceremony. What they are doing is honoring the person and honoring life.

**One of the things someone said about you at the gallery [where she'll be part of an upcoming group show called "Felicity"] was that your work is more risk-taking because it doesn't have any of the traditional quotes around it saying "ART." Were you scared when you stepped away from painting to start working on these new pieces?**

I love that [description]. Yeah, I was very scared. I felt like I gave up a lot. I was selling paintings in a gallery in Denver, and I knew I'd give up that stability of income.

When I was in grad school, I spoke with a visiting artist from New York, Heidi Saschnacht, about that. I told her, "You know, Heidi, I feel like I should be painting because it's familiar to me. But I keep secretly doing these little mixed media pieces on the side. I feel like I'm



by my trip to India. Everything there is decorated, using both junky and precious materials. People would have plastic things hanging in their rickshaws along with beautiful stones, gems, incense and tassels. It was about life and decorating life and making it more pleasant. This raw human need to decorate... Color, humor and decoration are all transformational tools. They uplift people.

That's actually what the "Felicity" show is all about. The piece I'm making for it is called "Good Morning America." It's curated by [local artist] Phyllis Green, and I think the theme relates to art that has color and exuberance, and is generous. ■

To contact Terri Friedman, call (310) 314-9872.

Some of Terri Friedman's work can be seen as part of a group show called "Felicity," March 31—May 5, 1995 at the Jan Baum Gallery, 170 South La Brea Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90036. Tel: (213) 932-0170.

stealing time from my painting to make those." I was really confused about which I should work on. She said, "Whatever is bringing you back in your studio to make more of is what you need to be doing. If you're being drawn to do mixed media pieces, that's what you have to be doing. Don't even question it. Trust your own process."

Another influential comment came from a different artist who said, "As artists we tend to make only things we're interested in. That rules out 95% of the world. If we are truly artists, we're going to make things about experiences, whether we're interested in them or not. We're going to use observation. And we're going to use materials that we're not necessarily attracted to."

That comment struck a chord with me in relation to the Buddhist concept of aversions, which I was very much into at that time. I had gone to France to do a three-week retreat with Thick Nhat Hanh, who's a Vietnamese zen master. I came back with the concept that your aversions can run your life. When you have aversions such as "I hate Reagan or I hate Bush," it gives those people more power.

I was always using the colors I liked, the things I liked. There were materials that I couldn't stand, like



plastic. My mother was a designer, and the things she put in peoples' houses were glass, crystal, nubby wools—beautiful things. Not necessarily that I grew up with everything like that, but I had this aesthetic. I thought: there are beautiful things and there are ugly things. I decided to make art using my aversions. I started working with plastic, imitation woodgrains, foam, pom poms. The idea was to use expendable, junk store-type stuff and make pretty, elegant things out of them.

Your aversions can become poetic and beautiful.

This is actually one of the most important things about my work—the Buddhist idea that the ordinary is shown in the ordinary; everyday materials become extraordinary.

When my new work was coming together, I also realized it was inspired

To submit your art for consideration, send prints or slides and any other information about yourself, along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope, to:

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