

# Interview with Artist Tom Friedman

An exciting exhibition opens this month [February 2016] at the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, for which artist Tom Friedman has created eight works based on significant parts of the museum's permanent collection. Known for his unique approach to materials and everyday objects, the artist uses, in this case, glitter, glue, Styrofoam, and acrylic in translating classics such as Monet's *Morning on the Seine, Giverny* (1897) for contemporary viewers.

An artist whose work has been shown all over the world, Friedman lives nearby and teaches in the art department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He talked recently with the show's organizer, Vanja Malloy, curator of American art at the Mead, about everything from his work process to the philosophy he lives by.

**Vanja Malloy:** Your forthcoming exhibition at the Mead, *Tom Friedman: Untitled (Foundation)*, features eight new artworks inspired by works in the Mead's permanent collection. What motivated you to look at the museum's collection?

**Tom Friedman:** First of all, I love old art. It has more of a mystery to me than contemporary work. So the thought of being able to work with the Mead's collection was really interesting.

**VM:** For this new body of work, how important was it for you to know the history of the artwork you were responding to?

**TF:** I really wanted to respond to the image and the information that was there empirically and visually, make decisions, and then once I reached a certain point, I would read a little more about the work. I think that when I'm done, I'll probably have read a bit about each piece, but in the beginning, I really like the idea of not knowing. Interesting things come out that I didn't realize, like with [Dorothea Lange's] photograph *Migrant Pea Pickers*. Even though it's really about this line of immigrants, I noticed the subtext about the mother and son.



Dorothea Lange (American, 1895-1965). *Migrant Pea Pickers*, 1938. Vintage FSA silver print. Museum Purchase with Wise Fund for the Fine Arts, 2000.321



Tom Friedman (American, b. 1965). *Mother and Child*, 2016. Ink-jet print. Copyright Tom Friedman. Image courtesy of Tom Friedman Studio

**VM:** What's your working process? Is it different every time or is there a way you usually go about things?

**TF:** It's usually a process of me leading the artwork, and then the artwork leading me. But for this exhibition, I found the original works sort of beginning the process of leading me. I made a selection of works that I thought would be interesting, and then just tapped into my visual vocabulary, my history of works.

I found it similar to how I used to work, where I would respond to a familiar object and there was a really clear objective. And then as I transformed it, it would sort of turn back to the memory of what that original everyday object was. In this case, I feel that the work functions as the everyday object, and I'm responding to it, and it goes back and forth, creating this dialogue between the original piece and what it's becoming, what my piece is.

**VM:** You use everyday materials in your art — such as Styrofoam, aluminum, pencils, and plastic cups. Why is that?

**TF:** Well, in the beginning it was sort of, Okay, here's a pencil. What can I do to the pencil to transform it so that it's a transformed pencil but still relates back to the pencil? And every so often I come back to that.

I think the last piece I did, at UMass University Museum of Contemporary Art, was a paper plate. What can I do to this paper plate? So I cut it in a certain way and then flipped it inside out. So it's an inside-out paper plate. The final piece and image — knowing that it was a paper plate really was important to it.

I also have an interest in Zen Buddhism, which is all about the everyday, and the magnificent in the ordinary. It doesn't matter what you're looking at. The profundity of seeing an opera and shopping at the grocery store can be equal in a way. That's a very Buddhist idea.

But right now, it tends to be more I use what is the most reasonable and efficient. I also have to think about archival issues to a certain degree.



Left: Tom Friedman (American, b. 1965), *Untitled (Flute Player)*, 2016. Styrofoam, paint, cotton shirt, socks, flip-flops, 66 x 25 x 49 in. Copyright Tom Friedman. Image courtesy Tom Friedman Studio. Right: Greek, Flying flute player, Myrina type, 2nd century BCE (late). Terra-cotta, 13 5/8 x 5 3/8 x 8 5/8 in. Bequest of the William R. Mead (Class of 1867) Estate, M.1936.3

**VM:** What role does the audience have in your process? Do you think about how a viewer will respond to the work?

**TF:** It's a part of my thought process. Early on I was always interested in sort of phenomenology, the phenomenon of the experience, and in fact my early work really tried to dissect that. Thinking about the viewer — specifically, I think about the general tone that the museum, the institution, the gallery space, the viewing space — somehow creates channels.

Although it's not going to be the same experience for everyone, I think of it like — and I've made this analogy before—like making art is like making medicine. Medicine has this psychological function and it has a tendency toward a certain thing, like relieving a headache or aches and pains, but it responds to everyone in a slightly different way.

**VM:** What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

**TF:** My studio assistants. Do they count as an item? They've been with me for many years. And they've gotten to the point where they kind of can read my mind.

**VM:** Do you have a philosophy by which you work and/or live by?

**TF:** I believe in goodness. I think that if goodness is what you're thinking about and it's behind the scenes in a way, then everything you do comes from that. It's kind of hard to define what that is but that's what I think about.

**VM:** You teach at UMass and take on a mentor role for your students. What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

**TF:** Once you put your ego aside, that's when you'll really start learning. Because when I was an undergrad I thought I knew everything and no one else knew anything. Once I was able to put my ego aside and really listen to people, that's when I started learning.