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Review Howard Fried's set of imperatives play out unexpectedly

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Howard Fried, "Sociopath," 1983. (Fredrik Nilsen / The Box)

Howard Fried wants to tell you what to do. The 68-year-old Bay Area artist is fascinated by systems and rules and following them to their logical conclusions.

Underlying this fascination is a distinct interest in power and its limits: the extent to which any given activity falls within or escapes one's control.

In much the same way of his peers in the conceptual art movement of the 1960s and '70s, Fried's work is often governed by a complex set of instructions. One such set directs the installation of "Sociopath," a 1983 sculpture reprised in the main gallery at the Box.

Like a perverted fountain, the piece consists of a sink perched atop a tilted wooden platform; it's attached to the building's plumbing system.



Water flows to the faucet through a network of exposed copper pipes, fills the basin just enough to drip through the drain onto the platform and into an incised trough that runs across it.

From there the water is collected in a series of PVC pipes that snakes around the gallery and through an exterior wall onto the street.

The contraption is overly complicated, like a Rube Goldberg design: the pipes are laid inefficiently according to directions written in 1989. The piece is about excess — of water, particularly egregious in this time of drought — but also of containment.

Through a ridiculous balancing act, Fried draws our attention to the control of water, that most mutable and unruly of substances. Perhaps it is the titular “sociopath” that knows and respects no rules.

The exhibition also includes a smattering of works on paper, including the strangely absorbing, experimental writing “Cheshire Cat IV” from 1971.

It’s a permutation, three generations removed from an original autobiographical piece, manipulated through some incomprehensible (at least to me) numerical procedure. It reads like a list, but is full of poetic phrases such as “I am my father,” “I am pinned down like an insect” and “I go down to blood.”

Still, the most affecting piece is one that hasn’t happened yet. “The Decomposition of My Mother’s Wardrobe” is a collaborative work involving up to 260 individuals — one for each piece of clothing — who will volunteer to accept one item owned by Fried’s mother. (She passed away in 2002.)

The wardrobe is on view through a window in a closed room: Fried’s mother evidently preferred light colors, large prints, and elastic waists.

Visitors may sign up on a list to participate in a future survey that will then be manipulated via an algorithm to determine which piece of clothing each one receives. The only stipulations are that the recipients must wear their piece to a gathering of all the participants, and that they must, when requested by Fried, send him photographs. Not photographs of themselves or the garment, mind you, but photographs taken according to Fried’s precise directions, of course. He’ll then use these images to make another work.

The project might feel like just another dispassionate machine for making art: another labyrinthine, arbitrary set of rules by which creative decisions might feel less arbitrary. It might even seem a bit disrespectful, symbolically dismembering one’s mother through the dispersal of her most intimate possessions.

But it is also a rather beautiful gesture, wherein the artifacts of a life, of a body, take on a new meaning — not just for the participants who will wear them, but for the artist within whose practice they will be thoroughly embedded.

The Box, 805 Traction Ave., (213) 625-1747, through Jan. 10. Closed Sunday through Tuesday. www.theboxla.com

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