

## HYPERALLERGIC

### What This Artist Needs to Make Work During a Pandemic

*Tony Tasset's use of inexpensive graph paper suggests that drawing is a way to remain open to ideas, whims, passing thoughts, even dreams.*

John Yau | May 2, 2020



Tony Tasset, "Untitled" (image courtesy the artist)

During the past few weeks, when Tony Tasset and I first began exchanging emails — often two or three over the course of a day — Svetlana Alpers sent me an email about the importance of “making versus reception.” Alpers’s distinction struck a chord, as I have been thinking about what has been praised and featured in the art world since the early 1980s.

Alpers’s emphasis on making, as opposed to reception, got at the heart of an issue I have been contemplating ever since Governor Cuomo ordered a mandatory shutdown of all non-essential businesses in the state of New York on March 20, 2020, and we began to practice social distancing and self-isolation: What does an artist need to make work?

In the tug of war between making and reception, the latter seems to have gotten the upper hand. There was a time in the 1980s when all “important” artists had to have shows in three galleries simultaneously, if only to prove their importance. The goal was to overwhelm the viewer with a prodigious amount of work that was, to cite one critic’s phrase, “beyond criticism.” We were supposed to be enthralled by these displays of the artist’s genius.

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Tony Tasset, "Untitled" (image courtesy the artist)

In the 1990s, at least one artist attempted to transform the spectacle aesthetic of '80s galleries into something even more spectacular. I am thinking of Jeff Koons's exhibition *Made in Heaven* at Sonnabend Gallery (November 23–December 21, 1991). While that exhibition was considered a failure both critically and financially, I see it as a bridge between the excessive '80s and the extravagant oughts.

According to Jerry Saltz (New York Magazine, December 6, 2009), after Koons's 1991 debacle:

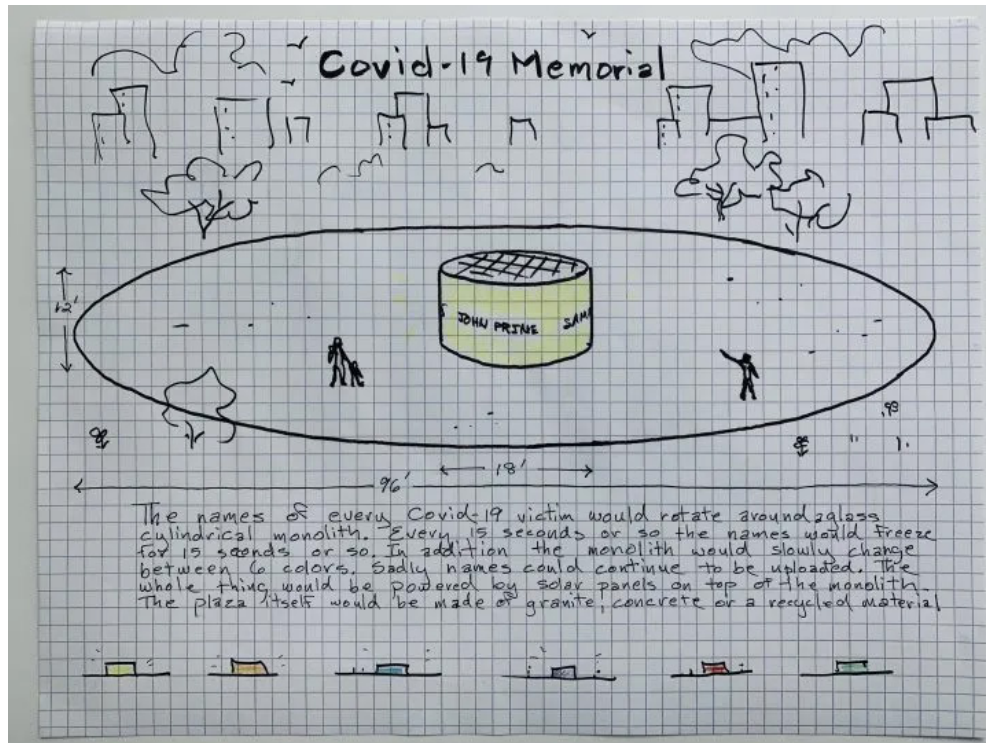
*Koons was shunned within the art world. He wasn't invited to biennials; he had only one more New York solo gallery show in the '90s. To get a sense of how that felt to Koons, consider that he once mused about being "burned at the stake."*

What does it mean to consider yourself the equivalent of Joan of Arc because you weren't invited to be in the Whitney Biennial? To what cause did Koons believe he was a martyr?

As I see it, Koons is driven by reception rather than by making, no matter how much he has emphasized perfection. What matters most of all are his ratings; he needs to be the center of the right kind of attention.

After his 1991 fiasco, Koons was compelled to reinvent himself so that he and his work would be better received. He went from presenting himself as a virile guy having vanilla sex with his porn star wife to a family man who works out at a gym. He had himself photographed in a middlebrow magazine holding up one of his children, like a trophy of suburban heterosexual normalcy. And he began producing shiny, oversized works based on seemingly inoffensive distractions for children. As it had always been, the key

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Tony Tasset, "Untitled" (image courtesy of the artist)

was resemblance; it had to look like the thing it was derived from, but be much, much bigger. Essentially, Koons came up with a better signature product, and his sexually explicit work of the late '80s and early '90s was conveniently forgotten.

Koons had attained a worthy goal in art: a flexible formula for producing artworks over a long period of time. Having a signature product is central to one's reception. You need to be dependable, even if you change your work every few years, to suggest that you are "evolving." In the catalogue accompanying Richard Prince: Spiritual America at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (September 28, 2007–January 9, 2008), Nancy Spector wrote:

*The irony, of course, is that Prince's antimasterpieces have all sold, and, in recent years, sold well.*

Spector was reminding collectors not to miss the boat, since everything that Prince made and would make was destined to become a signature work. As Spector not so subtly suggests, obtaining a significant work by Prince was like buying stock in a market that never goes down, at least in your own lifetime.

As I first suggested a few weeks ago, drawing, essentially making marks on a piece of paper, is hardly valued by the art world. And yet, doesn't drawing emphasize making and thinking over reception?

The first question I asked Tony Tasset after looking at images of the five sculptures in his exhibition *The*

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*Weight* at Kavi Gupta in Chicago was: Do you draw? I was particularly interested in what precipitated the sculptures, which are completely dissimilar from each other in every way.

I was struck that Tasset seemed to have no formula; he was not making something based on an already existing commercial product, and he used different materials and processes for each piece in the show: “Eagle Head” (2020) is made of cast concrete; “Angry Sun” (2018, edition of three) of fiberglass, paint, and faux gold leaf; “Snakes (A monument to the eternal battle between truth and fiction)” (2020) of both plush and rubber toy snakes, taxidermied snakes, and aluminum wire; “Crow” (2020) of stained baltic birchwood and painted steel; and “Ghosts” (2020) is made of two-way glass, mirrored glass, LED lights, bisque ware, and 22-karat gold glaze.

Tasset told me about his exhibition of drawings, TONY TASSET: TENSE PRESENT: Fifty Years of Master Drawings, at Lawrence & Clark (March-April, 2016). The gallery website states:

*Lawrence & Clark is a collection based gallery of contemporary art organized by Jason Pickleman that, on occasion, sells work.*

When I ask Pickleman to describe what he does at the gallery, he replied by email (April 19, 2020):

*I am “the artist that runs the gallery.” I am also, “the curator,” “the proprietor,” and “the benefactor” as well. I guess, I am also “the shopkeeper” of Lawrence & Clark.*

According to Pickleman (in an email on April 15), the inspiration for Tasset’s show was:

*a fancy postcard from the Richard Gray Gallery announcing an Alex Katz show entitled Sixty Years of Master Drawings. In talking about the upcoming Gray Gallery show, Tony told me he “easily had 50 years of drawings.” I believe at the time he was 56, meaning his earliest “Master Drawing” was completed at age 6.*

They even “flipped the Katz title from PRESENT TENSE to TENSE PRESENT.”

It was clear from Tasset’s drawing exhibition that he has different styles of mark-making at his disposal, ranging from fulsome and cartoony to dry and geometric. Several drawings also showed his familiarity with the Art Institute of Chicago’s Surrealism collection.

Tasset’s use of inexpensive graph paper suggests that drawing is a way to remain open to ideas, whims, passing thoughts, even dreams — and that he is not thinking about how they will be received. Isn’t this way of working what used to be called “experimental,” without a set outcome in mind? Going by the date of the drawing exhibition, Tasset’s drawing for “Angry Sun” preceded the sculpture by at least two years.

What is compelling about Tasset’s work is its absence of didacticism. I think “Eagle Head” evokes a fallen empire. Yet it does not pull viewers into a familiar, post-apocalyptic narrative so much as invite them to construct a story and test its probity. It invites viewers to question where the cast concrete head, now lying on the ground, was before.



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At whom or what is Tasset's sun angry? Do we read the sculpture within a narrative associated with climate change? In what public space would it belong? Especially since Tasset counteracts the rage with a cartoonish face.

Not all of Tasset's sculptures contain a current of humor. In a recent email, he sent me his drawing for a COVID-19 memorial. After describing the drawing (a glass cylinder on a circular plaza) he ended with: "this is another fantasy but it came to me and I had to draw it." The sculpture would rotate and change color, and names of casualties would be added continually to the list.

Tasset's sculptures do not simply occupy space; they also open up to new spaces. They convey a turbulent world of incipient danger, as opposed to most sculpture, which posits a stable ground, where it will sit contentedly forever. His work seems more in touch with Percy Shelley's sonnet "Ozymandias" and the unavoidable effects of time than with the ideal of forever and notions of timelessness we associate with Michelangelo's "David." Forever is a long time, and Tasset knows it is an illusion.

Tony Tasset: The Weight continues at Kavi Gupta (219 N. Elizabeth St., Chicago, Illinois) through May 31.