



## Print Article



Tom Friedman at the opening of "Aluminum Foil," June 1, 2007



Detail of Tom Friedman's *Aluminum Foil Thing* (2007) at the Lever House Lobby Gallery



**Tom Friedman**  
*Aluminum Foil Thing*  
2007  
Lever House Art Collection

## POWER PLAY

### by Ben Davis

Tom Friedman, "Aluminum Foil," June 1-Sept. 16, 2007, at the Lever House Lobby Gallery, 390 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022

What does it mean that a sculptor like Tom Friedman, who already goofed his way into the stable of supergallerist Larry Gagosian, is now serving as court jester for real-estate-mogul-cum-supercollector Aby Rosen? Known for works that combine unconventional, often worthless materials -- pencil shavings, Hefty bags, toothpicks -- with faux-obsessive craft and a generous dash of good humor, Friedman is a contemporary artist you can imagine having a drink with.

That's just what Rosen did on Friday, June 1, 2007, with a gala opening for the newly commissioned suite of works by Friedman at the Lever House, the Gordon Bunshaft-designed landmark located within spitting distance of the Museum of Modern Art. RFR Holdings, the property development firm Rosen helms, took charge of the House in 1998. Since then, it has become a symbol of Rosen's status as classy New York art world kingpin. In recent years he has commissioned new works from the likes of Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons for the ground-floor space, conjuring a marquis Lever House Art Collection from whole cloth.

For his own Lever House show, titled "Aluminum Foil," Friedman has produced a scattered installation of sculptures, all crafted primarily of the titular substance. The centerpiece is *Aluminum Foil Thing*, a vortex of hundreds of foil objects suspended together. Here, one finds everything from a silver aluminum pie and tiny silver animals to giant silver letters and numbers, giant silver nuts and bolts, and silver spirals and tetrahedrons. At the ceiling, a pair of booted foil legs protrudes, as if a figure were being sucked upwards through it. The only splashes of color are two little cars on a silver racetrack at the base -- they're cut from Reynolds Wrap boxes.

*Thing* is the most impressive work on view, but there is also an *Aluminum Foil King* who resembles one of the aliens from *The Simpsons* -- an armless slug-man with a huge, grinning, fanged maw, aluminum foil drool flowing down his front, giant googly eyes and dreadlocks made from cardboard tubes. In one corner, there's an *Aluminum Foil Birth* -- a woman giving birth to a big foil ball -- and in vitrines sprinkled throughout the space, there is an *Aluminum Foil Alien Autopsy*, an *Aluminum Foil Circle* (a tiny group of figures with hands linked in celebration) and an *Aluminum Foil Buddha*. A floating structure of cubes is made from more of the used boxes. A small cardboard tower set out on a coffee table is made of one of the same boxes, stripped of its coating, surrounded by a smattering of shavings. There's also the odd pillar or curtain made from shreds of the material, rounding out the display.

So, what is the function of all this fun with foil? True, there is some kind of nebulous Idea being mined about otherworldly or ecstatic experiences, rendered earthly by the common material. But the vocation of this art lies elsewhere, and it's a very old one: the homage to a patron. Since we are dealing with Tom Friedman, it's a



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A guest contemplates *Aluminum Foil King* (2007)



**Tom Friedman**  
*Aluminum Foil King* (detail)  
2007  
Lever House Art Collection



**Tom Friedman**  
*Aluminum Foil Alien Autopsy* (detail)  
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**Tom Friedman**  
*Aluminum Foil Circle*  
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playful, post-conceptual homage rather than a sober, representational one -- but no less than with a painter hired by a Renaissance prince, this show is a portrait of power.

On one level, this is no surprise. As a commissioned work, the installation is bound to reflect a certain set of values that Rosen wants to present the world. The interesting thing is that more and more, Puckish anti-artists have the values that today's commercial barons want to associate themselves with. A representational portrait projects its subject's mastery as a settled fact, monument-like, historical; today's anti-art-for-hire instead projects innovation, edginess, and weds carnival-like populism with the connotation of luxury goods -- better suited to the modern capitalist. In the case of Friedman, his wit also deftly conveys a sense of hip eccentricity -- a sought-after quality in multi-millionaires.

Friedman selected his material here -- aluminum foil -- to play off of the steel-and-glass elegance of Bunshaft's Lever House. But the Lever House is not just any old site to get specific on; it is the gleaming symbolic nexus that brings together Rosen's interest in using his wealth to acquire artsy trophies with the actual source of this wealth -- property development.

One doesn't have to agree with the blustery anti-modernism of Tom Wolfe's November 2006, 3,500-word denunciation of Rosen in the *New York Times* -- motivated by loathing of the homogenizing effect of his company's ubiquitous glass-box condos -- to agree that the man is Big Real Estate incarnate. In a city where there is an affordable housing crisis, his maniacal commitment to luxury development has helped transform Manhattan into a theme park that is uninhabitable for anyone not associated with the financial services (including artists, at least artists who aren't already millionaires).

Few figures are more popularly hated in New York's cosmology than the landlord -- yet when one thinks of Aby Rosen, this is mysteriously not the first impression that leaps to mind. The associations that do appear come straight from his celebrated art collection. At the Lever House, high up in the cloud of *Aluminum Foil Thing*, suspended between a life-sized aluminum eagle and an aluminum asteroid, the word "FUN" dangles in silver letters. The message couldn't be clearer.

There is something about Friedman's practice itself that serves nicely to stand for a plucky entrepreneurial spirit -- the spinning of gold out of nothings. But contradictorily, the whole endeavor also embodies decadence: Viewing "Aluminum Foil," what one is impressed by is the vast amount of time that has gone into making all this stuff -- not necessarily the specific value or meaning of any of the individual pieces, just that it all seems very intricate.

In fact, on the whole, the sculptures are allegories of frivolity, of surplus wealth. In this sense, for all its goofball oddity, this work is really quite dedicated to power, obsequious even -- Friedman's grinning alien *King* is as loving a portrait of Aby Rosen as one could hope for.

**BEN DAVIS** is associate editor for *Artnet Magazine*.



**Tom Friedman**  
*Aluminum Foil Buddha*  
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**Tom Friedman**  
*Aluminum Foil Backdrop*  
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