



LEVER HOUSE

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

Lever House Lobby Gallery, New York
December 7, 2001 - February 15, 2002

The body of work that Felix Gonzalez-Torres created is one of the most innovative and profound in contemporary art. He made artworks which simultaneously contained personal, political, and aesthetic attributes, and were often executed in ordinary, but surprising, materials, such as stacks of many sheets of paper, piles of colorfully wrapped candies, and strings of lightbulbs.

Gonzalez-Torres uses these objects to express his own very personal emotions, and at the same time he invites the public to participate in the realization of the final work of art. The pieces of paper and candy do not achieve their full significance until the audience takes the papers from the stacks or eats the candy. And the lightbulbs await the contemplation of the viewer in order to achieve their finished state.

As the artist stated: "I need the viewer, I need the public interaction. Without a public these works are nothing, nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in." The light string pieces reveal no human touch, no color, and no permanence. Their significance is open-ended, and are meant for the public audience--workers, commuters, pedestrians, taxi drivers, shoppers--to infuse their own meaning into the object.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres' works frequently serve as a metaphor for human relationships and interaction, and are often composed of two elements. One piece is referred to as "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers), and consists of a pair of identical commercial clocks that are hung side by side on the wall, and each clock is telling the exact same time. For the artist, the clocks represented he and his male lover, and allude to an ideal and perfect romance with both partners in perfect synchronization. However, it is unlikely that the two clocks (lovers) will remain in synch, because each has a different mechanism, and each has a battery with differing life spans. Unfortunately, Gonzalez-Torres' lover did have a shorter life span, and died too soon--just as Felix Gonzalez-Torres would.

In a similar manner, the strings of lightbulbs in "Untitled" (Leaves of Grass) and "Untitled" (Summer) can each represent a person, or a group of persons, that hang together, radiating light, warmth, love. In addition, each strand hangs individually but become tangled and intertwined with the other when reaching the floor. But it can not be predicted when one bulb will fade or burn out and die. From another viewpoint, the two light strings can refer to two chains of thoughts or memories--memories which come and go, are off or on, are bright or dull, are clear or confused.

The artist explained that: "The work is untitled because 'meaning' is always shifting in time and place." The artist, however, would include a parenthetical word or phrase that held personal meaning to him, such as his admiration for the literary work of Walt Whitman (thoughts and memories) or his love of the summertime (light and warmth). But those referents are not essential for other viewers to attach their own meaning to the piece and experience their own interpretation of the art.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born in Guaimaro, Cuba, in 1957, and grew up there and in Puerto Rico where he attended the University of Puerto Rico in San Juan. He moved to New York City in 1979, and graduated from Pratt Institute with a degree in photography in 1983. He died in Miami in 1996 of complications from AIDS. His work has been exhibited extensively in museums and galleries in the United States and Europe. A major retrospective of his art was held at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1995. The Estate of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is represented by Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

Richard D. Marshall
Curator, Lever House Art Program

Works in the Exhibition

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

"UNTITLED" (LEAVES OF GRASS), 1993
Fifteen-watt lightbulbs, porcelain light sockets,
and extension cord; dimensions variable
Courtesy Private Collection, New York

"UNTITLED" (SUMMER), 1993
Fifteen-watt lightbulbs, porcelain light sockets,
and extension cord; dimensions variable
Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York,
and the Estate of Felix Gonzalez-Torres