

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Vincent Fecteau

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Interview

IN SITU

For the Sculptor Vincent Fecteau, the Obsession Never Stops

By [Michael Martin](#)

Photographed by [Kristen Wrzesniewski](#)

December 9, 2020



“If I have to spend a day doing emails, I’m miserable,” says Vincent Fecteau, the 51-year-old artist who works out of his home studio in San Francisco’s Mission Terrace neighborhood. There he creates abstract, polymorphous objects—composed of papier mâché, acrylic paint, wood, epoxy clay, and the occasional found object—that summon the shape of deconstructed boxes, malleable collisions of industrial

Martin, Michael. “For the Sculptor Vincent Fecteau, the Obsession Never Stops.” *Interview*, December 9, 2020.

forms, or alien creatures. Fecteau's work either sits on gallery pedestals or hangs on walls, and a second, separate practice sees him creating wall collages out of magazine and catalog clippings. (One notable collage was made up entirely of wide-eyed cats.) Fecteau grew up on Long Island and went to a high school with no art program; at Wesleyan University, he considered studying architecture but preferred working with his hands to poring over books. He spent a summer after college in New York City, but, repelled by the crowds and weather, decamped to San Francisco in 1990. Away from the relentless art-world money market, he fell in with a group of queer artists such as Nayland Blake and Richard Hawkins, and soon started experimenting with designs that would lead to his own breakthrough as an artist. "When I first moved to San Francisco, it was like the end of the world— it was kind of like a place where people went to disappear, and that was appealing to me," he says. "It's not that way so much anymore." At his first show in 1994—at a tiny gallery named Kiki-Fecteau found an enthusiastic audience for his rigorous complex orchestrations. Nevertheless, he has remained as a somewhat off-the-radar visionary over the years, so much so that in 2019, on the occasion of his first local show in 17 years, *The San Francisco Chronicle* asked, "Why isn't he famous in his hometown?"



Martin, Michael. "For the Sculptor Vincent Fecteau, the Obsession Never Stops." *Interview*, December 9, 2020.



It's a question that doesn't interest Fecteau, who counts among his biggest artistic inspirations the writer Dennis Cooper ("He is someone who truly embraces how art is about following something very deep within yourself ") and, surprisingly, online fashion shows. "I'm not a fashionable person whatsoever," he says. "It's about the materials, colors, textures, and form, and the way forms move." Having just wrapped up a fall show in Berlin at Galerie Buchholz, where he mounted a series of wall hangings, Fecteau is now gearing up for a career survey in Kassel at the Fridericianum museum this spring. In the meantime, the temperamentally reserved artist is back in his studio working on... "stuff," as he calls it. "I don't even think of it as art. A thought comes to me, and I follow it. It leads to something else, which leads to something else, and I keep on going until the obsession stops."

Photography Assistant: Joshua Lacunha

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Frieze

Reviews /

Sculptor Vincent Fecteau's Melancholy Toys

BY ROBERT GLÜCK
04 OCT 2019

His 'brutalist dollhouses' invite viewers into the void 'in the friendliest manner'



Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2019, papier-mâché, resin clay, acrylic and cardboard, 55 x 64 x 58 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York, greengrassi, London, and Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles; photograph: Nicholas Lea Bruno/CCA Wattis Institute

Vincent Fecteau lives in San Francisco, and this eponymous show – his first here in over 15 years – is something of a homecoming. Fecteau typically works in small series, and on the smaller side; none of these seven works – all untitled and from 2019 – are over 90 cm. For each, he made models in resin clay by hand, which were then scanned and enlarged into high-density foam armatures, which he covered and shaped with papier-mâché. They are accompanied by a suite of large-format photographs by the artist's friend, Lutz Bacher, who died this past May. Over the years, Fecteau would send Bacher pictures of objects or situations that were 'so Lutz', some of which the artist converted into works herself. (The two friends planned to include these pieces

Glück, Robert. "Sculptor Vincent Fecteau's Melancholy Toys." *Frieze*, October 4, 2019.

in the show before Bacher passed.) Like Fecteau, Bacher was a shy, illusive artist. The images depict a little girl in a blue dress. First, I respond automatically, a little annoyed by the generic emptiness of family snapshots of an adorable child. Next the rug is pulled out from under me as I feel their illegibility and the loss of context. Is she falling or jumping? Are they tears or laughter? Finally, I see that she wears an expression of surprisingly comprehending dejection. Who would photograph a child on the verge of tears? – a question which only makes her sadness and isolation more real.

Fecteau's seven sculptures invite thoughts of habitation. To the fantasy of which one I would like to own, I add which one would I like to inhabit. That is, in choosing what I like about them, I choose where I want to live. With the notion of habitation, the question of scale enters, a question amplified by the anonymity of the materials. These objects, like architecture maquettes, could scale as small as a shoebox or large as the 326-metre-high Salesforce Tower – San Francisco's tallest building. Blocky rectangles support biomorphic forms, draped and bulging. Are they mock-ups for Middle Earth lodges? Some look like they have been turned inside out, jumbles of pipes and tubes on the exterior for example, stairs climbing down a sloping roof, interior levels visible through portals and rifts. They are stolid and fragile. Cubist jumbles? More like brutalist doll houses.

These untitled works are painted ambiguous colors: scraped and sanded blues, grays and tertiary violets, but a forlorn yellow holds the room together. It looks like Aztec Sand or some other bleak stucco pigment faded by the sun. Scraps are attached or



Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2019, papier-mâché, resin clay, acrylic, metal and raffia, 67 × 78 × 43 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York, greengrassi, London, and Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles; photograph: Nicholas Lea Bruno/CCA Wattis Institute



Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2019, papier-mâché, resin clay, acrylic, burlap and raffia, 52 x 69 x 86 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York, greengrassi, London, and Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles; photograph: Nicholas Lea Bruno/CCA Wattis Institute

screwed in, eye-bolts from the hardware store, wood scraps, bits of raffia and burlap. Fecteau tucked a bow of black burlap ribbon under a ledge, and he sometimes leaves the paper of the papier-mâché unpainted in nooks and crannies. I found myself arguing against the little twigs and fluff that seem to have blown haphazardly onto the stolid shapes, but then realized I was looking at an awkward perfection, a conversation between heaviness and weightlessness. I am reminded of the artist Jess's description of his own work: 'Contradictory perspectives.'

At any rate, Fecteau's work often resists description and describing the interaction of volumes may be beside the point. Critics have long excused the difficulty of writing about these works by comparing him to everyone under the sun, even Vija Celmins, but he and Celmins describe their art-making in surprisingly similar ways. Fecteau might have said, but Celmins did say (in *Surface*, a 2018 video on the SFMOMA site), 'Sometimes I think the only part that is of any value is the making itself ... you're making something that is basically unsayable.' Two other artists who make sense to me are also makers of small sculptures, Ron Nagle and Kenneth Price: Nagle for his dreamy intimate matte and glossy composite sculptures, Price for his small monumentality and his invitation to consider the inner and outer spaces of sculpture.

Discussions about Fecteau's work – the catalog for this exhibition, for example – often focus on the fact that they are abstract, and there is a certain anxiety about the nature of their abstraction. Jess called the abstract work of his time 'Romantic landscapes', and I think that makes sense for Fecteau, if you change landscape to environment.

Jess assigns to abstraction the emotions one might feel entering a sublime landscape, minus the plot line. By Romantic, I think he means the irrational tradition in art – magic, intuition, obsession, feelings of awe and terror. Fecteau invites me into the void, in the friendliest manner. But these sculptures don't seem to be explorations of materiality – any more than a dollhouse is. I entertain the idea that Fecteau's sculptures are the melancholy toys of the child in Bacher's photographs. The washed-out blue of her dress seems to relate outward. Are they the homes for her sadness, or perhaps of her ghosts?

It seems to me that it's difficult to describe – or justify – one's enthusiasm for Fecteau's art, because it falls into a special category of obsession. Instead of developing narratives and critical frames, it returns the viewer to questions of faith, like Josephine's existential songs from Kafka's 1924 short story, 'Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk'. Why make this mark, why organize the world into a series of impinging geometric and organic shapes? These sculptures are not exactly building a narrative, but they continually make the first decision; that is, the decision to exist at all.

Fecteau was the studio assistant of Nayland Blake in the early '90s, when Blake lived in San Francisco. Blake exerted a profound influence on this city. Many of his works are environments constructed of found, glaringly purchased and humble materials. Fecteau's art happens to be calmer, but the two artists share a sensibility – I would call it a feeling of vertigo before the act of creation, a feeling that substitutes for a kind of faith. Fecteau expresses this in his attitude and in the contradictory perspectives of his work.



Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2019, papier-mâché, resin clay, acrylic and wood, 57 × 67 × 70 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York, greengrassi, London, and Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles; photograph: Nicholas Lea Bruno/CCA Wattis Institute

Glück, Robert. "Sculptor Vincent Fecteau's Melancholy Toys." *Frieze*, October 4, 2019.



Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2019, papier-mâché, resin clay, acrylic and wood, 44 x 67 x 65 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York, greengrassi, London, and Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles; photograph: Nicholas Lea Bruno/CCA Wattis Institute

What is this question of faith? Belief exists, but it is belief without a subject. One might be tempted to say faith in art or truth, but I am not sure. More like the hard-won yet tentative belief that the sun will rise tomorrow. After all, if you make an environment, you believe that someone will inhabit it, even if that someone is a ghost. I am reminded of a Dylan Thomas passage from many years ago: 'I read somewhere of a shepherd who, when asked why he made, from within fairy rings, ritual observances to the moon to protect his flocks, replied: "I'd be a damn' fool if I didn't!"'

'Vincent Fecteau' continues at CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, USA, through 9 November 2019.

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ArtReview

Interview

Vincent Fecteau

“I like the idea of the grand gesture
that’s made with the humblest stuff”

by Ross Simonini



In the summer I visited Vincent Fecteau at his home in San Francisco, the city in which he's spent his entire career as an artist. His walls feature works by B. Wurtz and Peter Saul, as well as an ecstatic finger-painting by a little-known local named Tomiko Ishiwatari. Fecteau serves as a volunteer art teacher at a long-term care facility and Ishiwatari had been one of his most enthusiastic students.

Fecteau takes pleasure in resisting the conventions of the professional art life – where he lives, what he looks at, how he thinks and when he works. Born in 1969 in the town of Islip on Long Island, New York, he majored in painting at Wesleyan University, in Connecticut, and then quickly walked away from two-dimensional media. Even now he doesn't draw, not even as preparatory work. He says he prefers the tactility of sculpture and the slippery nature of the 360-degree object, which can't fully be perceived from any single perspective. Fittingly, he spent several years working as a florist.

In the mid-1990s, when he began exhibiting, his work was primarily rooted in collage: small dioramas of haunted domestic interiors. Soon after, he developed his characteristic sculptures. These compact, evocative forms are built up slowly, in layers of papier-mâché, and painted in rich, matt colours. While his objects are relatively uniform in size and material, they can look alternately dense and fluid, architectural and corporeal.

In all his work, Fecteau embraces the impermanence of ordinary stuff and has maintained a remarkable consistency throughout his career. With humble materials – shoeboxes, found photos, wicker baskets – he makes the kind of bold, modernist gestures that are usually cast in heavy metals. While the work can appear austere, Fecteau's process is torturous and emotionally draining. To maintain his sanity, he likes to keep his production level low: usually no more than eight works every 18 months.

Fecteau and I spoke in his studio, a bedroom-size space in the basement of his home. When I arrived, the room was tidy and bare, with two large worktables and little else. He had recently sent his newest body of work (dark, monochromatic, almost gothic sculptures) for a show at Greengrassi in London; but other than some drippings on the floor, there was no sign of art. This seemed to please him. "An empty studio", he told me, "is the best time in the studio."

ROSS SIMONINI Living in San Francisco, you're separated from the mainstream art-world. Was that a choice?

VINCENT FECTEAU It wasn't initially, but I don't think I could live in New York now. Growing up on Long Island I always assumed

I'd eventually live in Manhattan, but when I moved there for a summer, to intern for Hannah Wilke, I couldn't handle it... It was just too much for me. Sometimes I even think this city is too much.

RS You came straight here from Wesleyan.

VF Yeah. I've lived here since 1991.

RS Do you have an art community here?

VF I do. There are a lot of great artists here.

RS It's significant that you stayed in the Bay Area. Most artists can't maintain a career here. They leave.

VF I was able to do it because I got early support from people outside of the Bay Area: Hudson [the founder of Feature Inc.] in New York and Cornelia Grassi in London. I have plenty of friends who have left, because it can be difficult to show outside of San Francisco if you live here. And it's very difficult to have a sustaining 'career' if you don't show outside of San Francisco.

"I experience the process as flailing, searching blindly in the dark, hoping that something starts to make sense. When it does, it usually comes as a surprise, like it didn't come from me... and then I know it's finished"

RS The Bay Area creates singular artists – Bruce Conner, David Ireland, Lutz Bacher...

VF When I first moved here, I came to do AIDS activism with ACT UP. And then I realised why San Francisco was so appealing: it was a bit off the radar, which interested me, it was close to amazing natural beauty and it had a high tolerance for freaks and difference of all kinds. I worked for Nayland Blake for a while, but I wasn't even sure I wanted to be an artist. Honestly, I'm still always looking for the thing that will be more suitable for me than being an artist.

RS Has anything come close?

VF For several years I've been volunteering with an art programme at a local hospital and rehabilitation centre in San Francisco, which I find very rewarding.

RS What would that job be?

VF I don't know... psychiatric nurse? Or something like that. I had no idea I was interested in that kind of work until I started spending time at the centre. The art programme I work with is more about facilitating the making of work than teaching it. I'm really interested in art that needs to be made and the artists that, despite sometimes sizeable obstacles, make it. For some of these artists, there's no bigger goal than creating. They may not care about the finished product or even think of these objects as art, but they are completely and totally engaged. I think for some people with compromised communication abilities it becomes their primary way of expressing their internal experience and engaging with the world around them. It's inspiring.

RS Do you feel that way, making art?

VF Sometimes I do. But there's so much outside noise that can get in the way when artmaking starts looking more like a career. I actually think the job of the artist is to try to protect the real or true creative act from all the other stuff.

RS: What's the real part?

VF [long pause] I don't know.

RS The thing you can't talk about.

VF Yes. Maybe. I find it almost impossible to articulate. If I understood why, maybe I wouldn't have to make anything. Sometimes I find it helpful to think of the work as simply evidence of an intention, or a desire, or an impulse. The end result is not that important. Maybe it's that impulse that is the real or true part.

RS Does your process start with a feeling, or –

VF Always a feeling. I'm completely interested in one's intuition and the unconscious. My experience of my mind is that it's an incredibly chaotic place. Although the end result, the sculpture, is finite and very specific, that's not my experience of the making of it. Which might be why I don't really have strong attachments for pieces after they are finished. I don't necessarily recognise them. That said, they must somehow always feel 'true' in the end. I've thrown away stuff even after working on it for months because it starts to feel false.

RS Do you throw away finished work?

VF No. If I show something, it is finished, and I accept it for what it is. It would feel dishonest to deny this thing that I once felt to be true. As embarrassing as it may be, it's still true. Things don't always turn out 'great', but that's kind of irrelevant.

facing page Vincent Fecteau



RS Greatness is a small sliver of the human experience. It would be a shame if that's all art could depict.

VF I recently went to Amsterdam and saw the Van Gogh Museum for the first time. I was so inspired to see all the missteps and experiments, the complexity of this relatively short artistic life. Of course there are those amazing moments but also many things that were full of difficulty and struggle and even failure.

RS Have you ever shown work you thought was a failure at the time?

VF No. Not at the time. In hindsight, of course... but I'm way too self-conscious to do that. I know they're not all perfect, but I believe they are good enough so as not to completely humiliate me.

RS Do you feel humiliated when you show?

VF Always.

RS Every show?

VF Yes.

RS Me too. I hoped it would go away.

VF I think it gets worse. For me, the desire to be recognised, to be seen, is inherently embarrassing. This last show was very painful. The work in the studio happens over a long period of time in almost complete privacy,

and then all of a sudden it's on public view. And I'm on public view! It's shocking.

RS But it has to be done.

VF I fantasise about having a regular job, where I don't have to obsess about what I do when I come home. It's much less about 'talent' than having a drive or obsessiveness that won't let up. It takes a real intensity. Every artist I know is intense.

RS And all this psychological noise is impossible for a nonartist to understand, probably.

VF There's that scene in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* when Richard Dreyfuss sculpts Devils Tower out of the mashed potatoes, and the wife and kids are looking at him, freaked out and crying. And he says something like, "I know Daddy's been acting strange recently... I'm sorry... I can't help it... It's really important." That scene really resonated with me. It's the best description of being an artist that I've ever seen in a film. And that's what it's like: you're doing a ridiculous thing, you don't know why, but you have to.

RS Is your work dealing directly with that conflict?

above *Untitled*, 1998, foamcore, collage, ink, 10 × 24 × 10 cm. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York & Los Angeles

VF Yes, I never really feel like I have a handle on the situation. I experience the process as flailing, searching blindly in the dark, hoping that something starts to make sense. When it does, it usually comes as a surprise, like it didn't come from me... and then I know it's finished.

RS It's a funny idea, that an artwork has to feel alien to you. It has to be not you. You'd think artists would feel that the object should be a pure expression of their self, but it's the opposite. It's about erasing yourself.

VF In a way, but of course it's still really you. You can run but you can't hide.

RS You're working with vast, abstract ideas, and yet the materials you use are so modest.

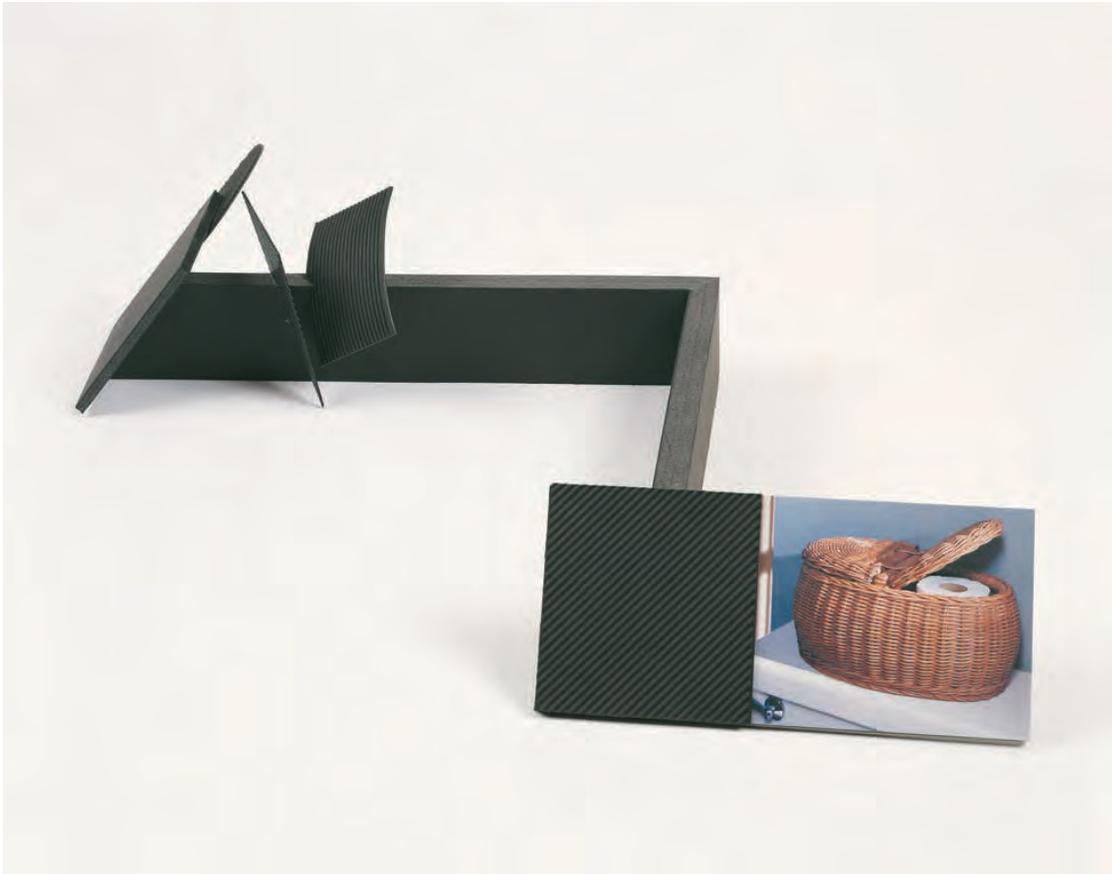
VF Well, on the one hand, it's just the mashed potatoes. You use what's in front of you. And I like that these little things already exist in the world. I like the idea of the grand gesture that's made with the humblest stuff.

RS It's easy.

VF And it's—relatively—easy. I'm not interested in fighting a medium. Some artists find meaning in the technical process. I don't. It's hard enough. I'm interested in why something is made more than how. The sculptures change constantly, sometimes almost violently, so I'm not really thinking about engineering or construction.



above Untitled, 2015,
mixed-media collage, 32 × 24 × 12 cm.
Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York & Los Angeles



above *Untitled*, 1999, foamcore, collage, plastic,
10 × 43 × 38 cm. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery,
New York & Los Angeles



above *Untitled*, 2000, papier-mâché, burlap,
acrylic, pushpin, toilet paper roll, 32 × 65 × 41 cm.
Courtesy Greengrassi, London

RS Has your work ever fallen apart after an exhibition?

VF No. I mean, the collage works are made with magazine pages, so those are light-sensitive, but the papier-mâché seems pretty stable.

RS Was collage your first work?

VF Yes. I was interested in all the references already packed into an art-directed image, and as a material it was readily available. But I think spatially, so although I started with collages, I was soon arranging them in space. I used foamcore because it was easy and cheap, and then when I wanted to make the forms larger and more complex I started using papier-mâché.

RS From the outside, there seems to be such a consistent development in your work through the years.

VF I don't think about 'development'. I don't believe in the linearity of that kind of thinking. The thing I was looking for 25 years ago is the same thing I'm looking for now. In the end, I think we are relatively simple beings.

RS Do you think in terms of improvement?

VF I've tried to stop thinking in terms of good and bad when working. I'm convinced that the only relevant judgement to make is whether or not it's true. I'm never going to get beyond my brain or my abilities. My job is to embrace that fact and dive in.

RS Are you the same person you've always been?

VF I think my essential self is the same. One can change, of course, but I think what is at one's core is consistent. A truth? A spirit, maybe?

RS Do you see older artists coming to a greater understanding of themselves in their work?

VF I'm not sure it's an understanding as much as acceptance and maybe celebration. There's a lot we can do with what we have. It's a beautiful thing to embrace and celebrate one's limitations.

RS Do you tend to like artists if you enjoy their work?

VF Not necessarily. There are definitely people whose work I liked but have been disappointed when I actually met them.

RS Does that seem like a contradiction, if the work is an expression of their interior?

VF Not really. There's another step involved, which is that of the viewer. For the viewer, it's all about them. What I respond to in a work might not have anything to do with what the artist thought they were doing. I think who the artist is becomes irrelevant at a certain point.

RS You mentioned the word 'spirit'. Is art sacred to you?

VF I think about art and religion a lot. I think they are very similar. I'm very interested in what it means to have faith. I grew up Catholic, although I don't consider myself religious in any typical sense. I think the problems with religion, like art, come from the institutions that are created around them. These institutions were established with the intent of protecting, but eventually end up compromising that very thing they were trying to protect. I think both faith and art are simultaneously, maybe paradoxically, incredibly fragile and resilient. And, ultimately, indestructible.

An exhibition of work by Vincent Fecteau is on view at Matthew Marks North Orange Grove, Los Angeles, through 29 September

Ross Simonini is an artist and writer living in New York and California



*above Vincent Fecteau, 2018
(installation view at Greengrassi, London).
Courtesy the artist and Greengrassi, London*



above *Untitled*, 2010,
papier-mâché, acrylic paint, 76 × 71 × 43 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Greengrassi, London

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BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ARTSEEN

SEPTEMBER 4TH, 2018

Vincent Fecteau

by Alex Jen

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

JULY 14 – SEPTEMBER 29, 2018

Vincent Fecteau's sculptures feel intimate but conflicted. Elegant in form but grimy in finish, his painted papier-mâché sculptures and photographic collage creations are painstakingly handmade—obvious in their materiality yet cagey in their references. Fecteau works by slow, attentive exploration, and his untitled papier-mâché and collage series (from 2016 and 2014, respectively) at Matthew Marks Gallery in Los Angeles recall car parts, animal carcasses, or grade-school dioramas gone wrong—as if Fecteau found the pieces in fragments on the side of the road baking in the sun, and tried to fix them as best he could. The results are arrestingly but uneasily alluring; the sculptures' abstract, irregular bends and hidden crevices seem like comfortable places to hide, until they abruptly give way to hard drops and open expanses as viewers circle them.



Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2014. © Vincent Fecteau, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

Ultimately, Fecteau's sculptures are charming in their illogic—there's a breathy fragility to their heavy but hollow forms, vaguely scaled to the body—and are relatable for anyone who's ever lost a spark, or had intense feelings suddenly dissolve into confusing apathy. His work is affecting in its restraint: Fecteau doesn't give you everything at once, whether by hiding certain textures

Jen, Alex. "Vincent Fecteau." *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 4, 2018.



Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2016. © Vincent Fecteau, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

on the side or back of a sculpture, or choosing found and taken photographs for a collage that depict something familiar but still unrecognizable. The sparse, thoughtful installation also adds an air of uncanny mystery. Each papier-mâché sculpture is positioned on a simple pedestal, paired with a tiny wall collage nearby—the space around the works, coupled with the bright, curious details in each piece, pulls you in close to appreciate their careful craft.

Untitled (2014) layers photographs of what seem like building ruins, an ad for sleeping bags, and a picture frame with its picture cut out; this last image tilts out diagonally, and a thin piece of cardboard wraps around and holds the collage together like a skin. A popsicle stick extends erect from behind the cut-out frame, pushing out over the cardboard, so formally in-your-face it feels cheeky and suggestive. The red, bulbous material in the background image of building ruins could equally be spray foam insulation or the roof of some stranger's mouth, and this uncertainty makes the work all the more risky and exciting.

Fecteau often uses photographs of lonely rooms with overdone decor throughout his collages, creating spaces that feign hominess but are really just cold and artificial. Every detail in Fecteau's collages is so considered and nimbly assembled—in a different untitled work from 2014, a dark photograph of a waiting room or airport boarding gate is doubled and seamlessly joined, the silver armrests of each chair glinting deep into the dark. The picture is cut off at the top by a flat metal bar with nylon pulled through it and tucked neatly behind the collage; it looks safe and preventative, but maybe is just repressive.

While Fecteau's collages depict empty spaces and only suggest what once happened in them, his papier-mâché sculptures give material form to activities' traces—they are shadows made to stay longer. A bodily association permeates the sculptures, and I think of how the work was made: Goopy strips first laid over each other, then left to harden and slathered with paint. Trembling ridges are traced by frayed rope, sometimes so covered in papier-mâché and paint they lose their definition—appearing like the outlines of someone's collarbone, pressing up out of a gently pulsing sculpture. Other times, a scumble of pink or blue paint, or a dirty black stain seems to hide beneath or cling to the surface, making the forms feel more natural and honest. *Untitled* (2016) perches like a vulture. It is painted solid black, with certain edges poking out sharply while other curves shy away into pockets that recall the folds and ridges of your ear. On the opposite side, two pieces of cardboard, lightly sprayed with yellow paint, jut out like tensed shoulder blades. A piece of rope dangles down the center of the sculpture but just rests languidly, glued in place—never to swing or twist or bind again.

Papier-mâché—the act of using glue, something usually intermediary, ancillary, and rarely seen—to create sculptures with such real presence is reaffirming. Fecteau's sculptures are like stand-ins for bodies and identities in limbo—giving the insecure and immaterial something to hold onto. Another sculpture, *Untitled* (2016), is painted an even tan, until it is suddenly interrupted by a messy dash of midnight blue that threatens to spread. But this work has a more literal element than the others: adhered to a little slope of the sculpture is a toilet paper roll, smooshed and kinked in two different directions. It's a piece of trash, no different from Fecteau's other found materials; but here, he's made no attempt to camouflage or shape the roll into another form—it's just glued on brashly, almost as an afterthought. A phantom limb, an abject remnant full of pain and joy—similar to a proud, gaping hole left from being punched in the teeth—added on just so you remember how plain and real the sculpture really is.

All of Fecteau's sculpture is characterized by this in-between feeling; something tender but cautious, nervous but sure. The works engage viewers in a back and forth, making them wait—they offer coy suggestions of their meanings while simultaneously shrouding them. They are playing a game similar to the one we undertake when we meet someone for the first time, and withholding some information, don't reveal everything—particularly the intense parts—about ourselves yet.

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Vincent Fecteau at Matthew Marks

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp likes the soft power of the Bay Area artist.

FROM THIS EPISODE

Vincent Fecteau is a master of disguise. His sculptures, about the size of a carry-on suitcase, are poised on clean white pedestals in the perfectly proportioned Matthew Marks Gallery in Hollywood. At first glance, or worse, in a jpeg online, they appear to be cast of some sort of dulled metal. That is Fecteau's slight of hand.



Vincent Fecteau. Untitled. 2016. Papier-mâché, acrylic paint, cardboard tube. 22 1/4 x 50 1/4 x 19 inches. 57 x 128 x 48 cm. ©Vincent Fecteau, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Drohojowska-Philp, Hunter. "Vincent Fecteau at Matthew Marks." *KCRW – NPR*, August 23, 2018.

Each is actually made of papier maché, the stuff of elementary school craft projects. Their apparent weight is an illusion but the artist embeds an occasional clue. A sculpture from 2016 is a deep earthy taupe cut with chasms of negative space. Yet, on one end, as if to belie its modernist heft, the artist affixed two thin strips of tartan ribbon. As with any magic act, the effect is both startling and wonderful.



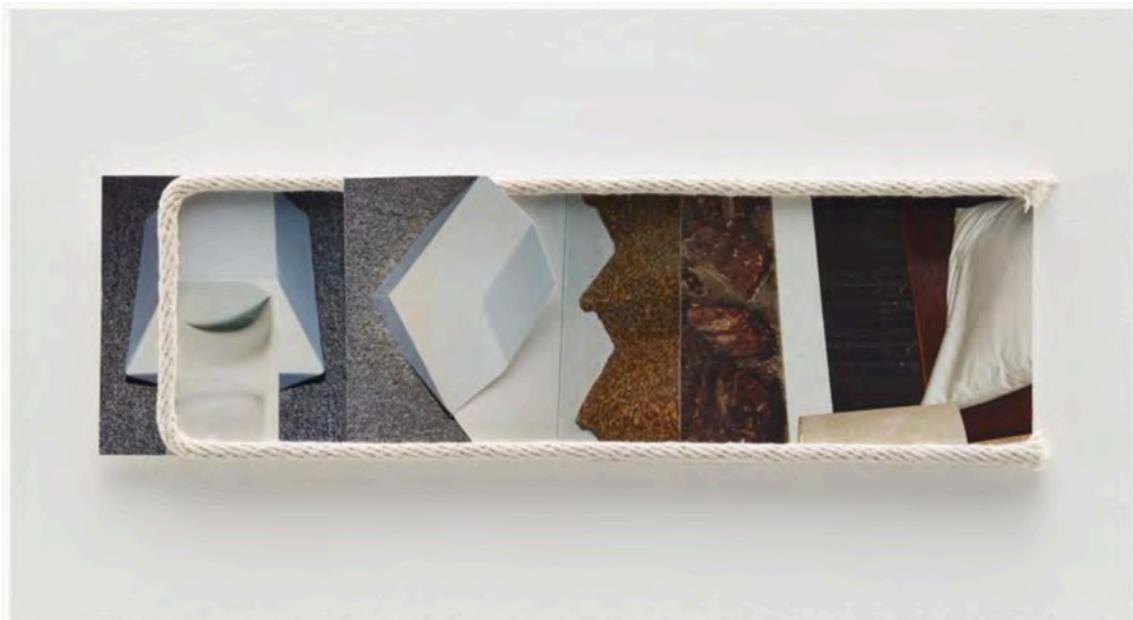
Fecteau's sculptures are both rectilinear and not. As David Pagel observed in the L.A. Times, they refer to the severe boxes made by Donald Judd and the generous curvature of Henry Moore depending upon where you might be standing to look at them. Carefully placed to relate to one another, each sculpture also connects to a small collage relief on the wall.

These, too, are rather odd, combining photographs of architecture or decorative arts details with three-dimensional materials like a piece of ribbon or white cord or scrap of wood. (In fact, I was initially intrigued by the fact that the announcement of his show arrived as folded book of postcards, in itself something that hasn't arrived in the mailbox in a decade or so.)



Detail of Vincent Fecteau. Untitled. 2016. Papier-mâché, acrylic paint, ribbon, cardboard. 20 x 45 1/2 x 21 inches. 51 x 116 x 53 cm. Photo by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp.

Fecteau, born in 1969 in Islip, N.Y., has a B.A. from Wesleyan University but now lives and works in San Francisco. Though he hasn't shown in this country for four years and not in L.A. for fifteen, he has had a number of impressive museum shows and was a winner of the 2016 MacArthur award, known as the "genius grant." Yet, an essential humility seems to reside within his sculptures, a quality of great appeal in our era of excess.



Vincent Fecteau. Untitled. 2014. Mixed media collage. 4 1/4 x 14 1/4 x 1/2 inches. 11 x 36 x 1 cm. ©Vincent Fecteau, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

In an *Ocula* online interview, he makes what is today such a rare declaration that I quote it in its entirety: “I would like to encourage people to just look and trust their intuition. People are much more visually astute than they often give themselves credit for. It’s a failure of our art institutions that people don’t feel like that have some inherent ability to appreciate art.”

That shouldn’t be the case for anyone viewing this very special exhibition. The show continues through Sept. 29.



Vincent Fecteau. Untitled. 2014. Mixed media collage. 7 1/2 x 5 1/4 x 1/2 inches. 19 x 13 x 1 cm. ©Vincent Fecteau, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

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Los Angeles Times

REVIEW ARTS & CULTURE ENTERTAINMENT

The sculptural riddles of Vincent Fecteau: What, exactly, do you see?



By DAVID PAGEL AUG 11, 2018 | 6:00 AM



Untitled work by Vincent Fecteau, 2016. Papier-mâché, acrylic paint, rope and cardboard, 22.25 inches by 47.5 inches by 21 inches. (Vincent Fecteau and Matthew Marks Gallery)

At a time when we streamline and oversimplify messages into tweets, it's exhilarating to come across the five untitled sculptures and five untitled collages in Vincent Fecteau's untitled exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery. Each of the San Francisco-based artist's works is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

Fecteau's nearly monochromatic sculptures look like the offspring of works by Henry Moore and Donald Judd. The curves and crannies of the former combine with the angular austerity of the latter in ways that make no sense logically but work visually — often beautifully.

Pagel, David. "The Sculptural Riddles of Vincent Fecteau: What, exactly, do you see?" *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 2018.



Untitled work by Vincent Fecteau, 2016. Papier-mâché and acrylic paint, 24-5/8 inches by 57-1/2 inches by 16 inches. (Vincent Fecteau and Matthew Marks Gallery)

Size matters, but not in ways you'd expect. Resting horizontally on individual pedestals, Fecteau's 3-D abstractions are pint-sized versions of typical works by Moore and Judd. The diminutive renditions are too small to go toe-to-toe with their forebears yet too big to be models or maquettes.

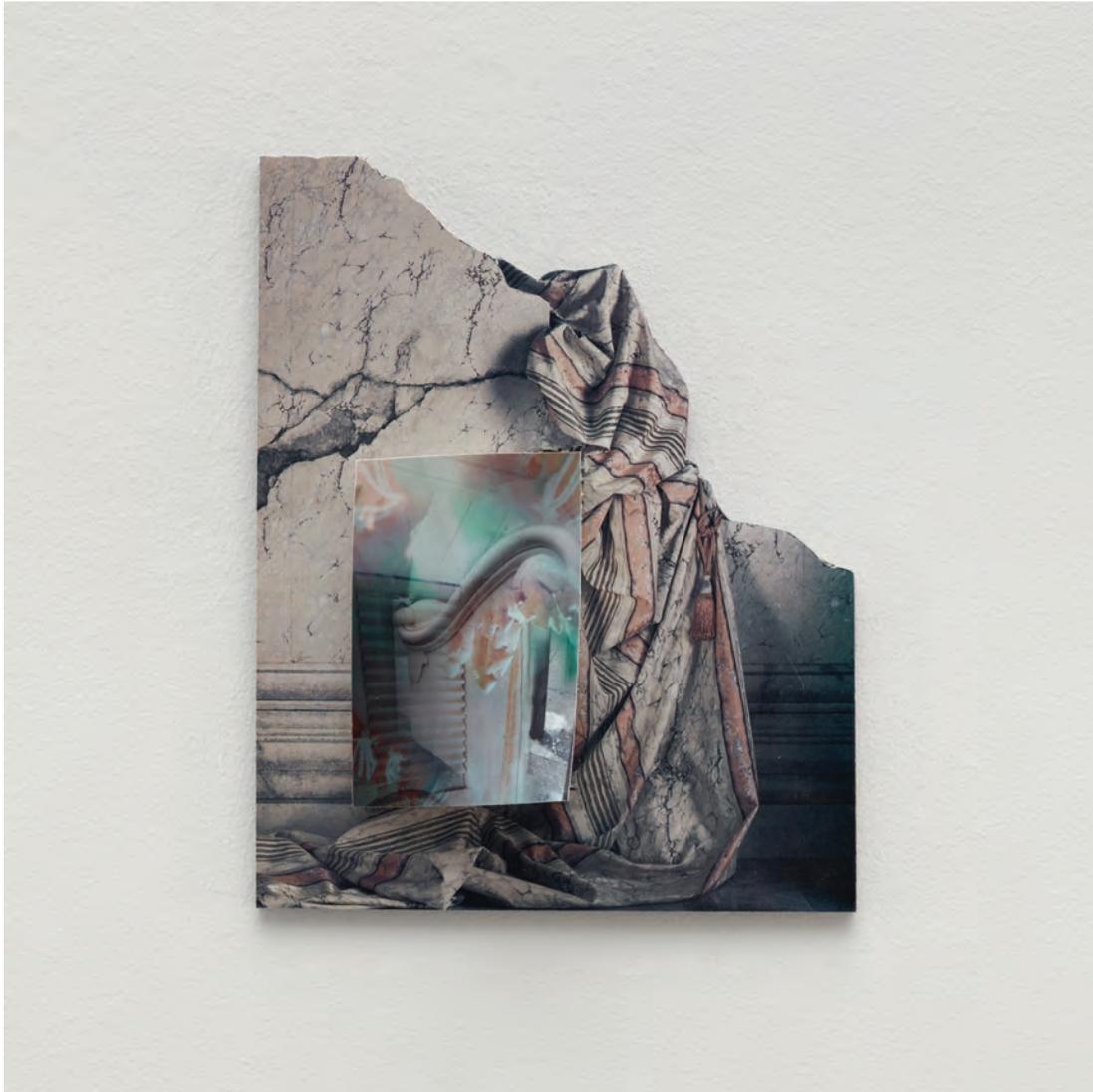
From a distance, each appears to be made of bronze or steel. From up close, you see that Fecteau has used papier-mâché, cardboard, rope, ribbon and acrylic paint. More common to grade-school arts and crafts projects than to modern industrial production — and 20th century sculpture — his materials make his art more accessible, even user-friendly.

His collages, no bigger than a phone or tablet, bring images into the mix. But his cut-and-paste depictions of various household items provide few clues as to what his works might mean. Instead, they intensify the irresolution at the heart of his art, whose taut compositions amplify their indecipherability.



Untitled work by Vincent Fecteau, 2014. Mixed-media collage, 4.25 inches by 14.25 inches by half an inch. (Vincent Fecteau and Matthew Marks Gallery)

Pagel, David. "The Sculptural Riddles of Vincent Fecteau: What, exactly, do you see?" *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 2018.



Untitled work by Vincent Fecteau, 2014. Mixed-media collage, 10 inches by 8 inches by 1.5 inches. (Vincent Fecteau and Matthew Marks Gallery)

To circumnavigate one brown sculpture is to feel as if you are looking at a farming tool, a Picasso portrait, the stage set for an avant-garde play and, finally, a cartoon character. To walk around a black sculpture with soft yellow highlights is to see the facade of a house, a ship's anchor, the silhouette of the screaming figure in Munch's famous painting and a Lynn Chadwick sculpture.

A coherent story line is nowhere to be found. Connecting the dots is pointless. Certainty falls by the wayside. Knowledge is not all it's cracked up to be.

In the core of your being, Fecteau fuels the conflict between wanting to know something and knowing that there is nothing to know.

That may be maddening. But it's also profoundly satisfying — and, more often than not, true.

Matthew Marks Gallery, 1062 N. Orange Grove, L.A. Through Sept. 29; closed Sundays and Mondays. (323) 654-1830, www.matthewmarks.com

Pagel, David. "The Sculptural Riddles of Vincent Fecteau: What, exactly, do you see?" *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 2018.

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sculpture
A Publication of the
International Sculpture Center



Whitney, Kay. "Submerged Forces: Vincent Fecteau." *Sculpture Magazine*, March 2018, pp. 26–31.



Vincent Fecteau

Untitled (2 views), 2010. Papier-mâché and acrylic, 81 x 69 x 46 cm.

© VINCENT FECTEAU, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY



Untitled (2 views), 2011. Gypsum cement, resin clay, and acrylic, 41 x 61 x 60 cm.

BY KAY WHITNEY

In *The Shape of Time*, anthropologist George Kubler organizes a history of objects and ideas from the perspective of innovation, replication, and mutation from an original, a “prime object.” Such prime objects can’t be reduced to something else; they arise from deep needs, not fashion, and they are fundamental to their specific function. This notion of prime objects, as applied to the work of particular sculptors, describes objects with affinities but no resemblances; such objects are *sui generis*—entirely new and different things. Such work, accomplished without fixed approaches or settled, repetitive solutions to the same problem, is not directly involved with art history, the academies, stylistic trends, or market popularity.

Vincent Fecteau, a 2016 MacArthur Fellow, has been creating a body of work bearing all the hallmarks of these orphans and “primes.” He’s said that he has “often fantasized about making a form that would be so incomprehensible that it couldn’t actually be seen.” His work is concurrently simple and complex, naive and sophisticated, clumsy yet affecting. His quasi-assemblages are collections of concavities and convexities, intricately curled and twisted forms that merge the geometric with the biomorphic, the alien with the familiar. Their painted surfaces often have the texture and sensual appeal of coarse sandpaper. The work evokes nests, caves, and rooms, as well as various kinds of furnishings and aspects of anatomy. Much of Fecteau’s sculpture is omni-directional, spurning notions of front, side, back, top, or bottom. Most notably, his work is con-

cerned with how sculpture occupies architectural space and the physical circuit the viewer must follow within that space to see the full object.

Architectural historian Kenneth Frampton coined the term “the poetics of construction” to describe the continuity of form, fabrication, and invention. Fecteau’s work is as much about structure and construction as it is about space and abstraction. It’s intensely architectural—not only in terms of its physical nature, its expression of weight and compression, but also in terms of its topography, its sense of relationship to the body and the space surrounding it. As Fecteau says, “I’m interested in the literal, material object, and the way that it breaks down and complicates one’s understanding of space.” It’s possible to perceive his work as a series of polarities: calm versus agitated, smooth versus convoluted, exposed versus hidden,

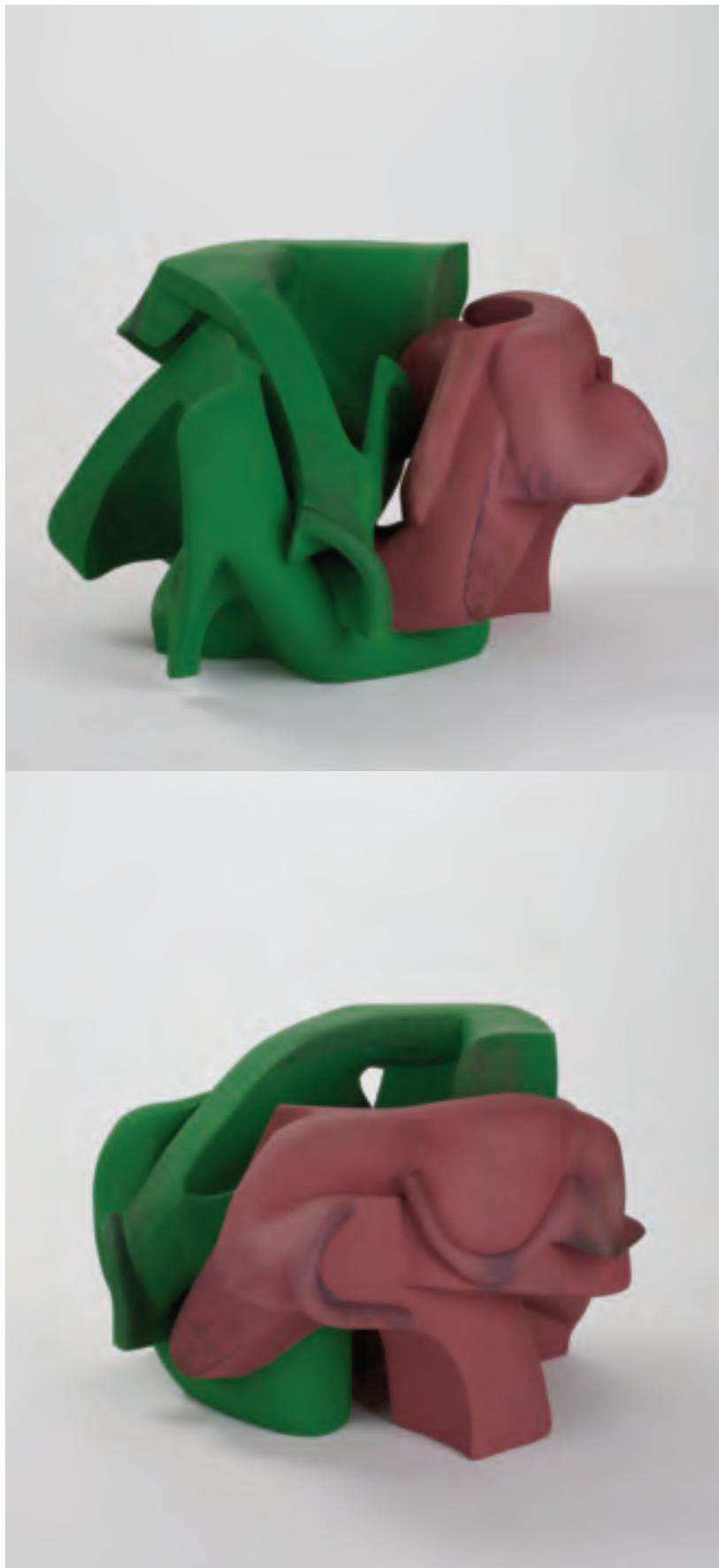
© VINCENT FECTEAU, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

formed versus formless. Though it is difficult to maintain such tricky oppositions, the power of Fecteau's work lies in these polarized elements and properties or, at least, in a combination of dissimilar ones. His aesthetic demands a delicate balance between structure and the perception of space.

Although Fecteau's work is spontaneous and intuitive (to a certain extent), he does not fumble his way into it. He takes a considered approach to inherently formless materials like cement, clay, and papier-mâché. He buttresses the sticky muck of papier-mâché over carefully selected objects and florists' paraphernalia. After laying down numerous layers of papier-mâché, he allows it to harden, then cuts it up, reassembles it, and eventually paints it. His fabrication process is low-tech, hands-on, and intimate, resembling an outré version of model-making. The results are both organic and architectural. All of Fecteau's works retain hints of the supports used in their construction: cardboard florist's boxes, foam, cardboard tubes, and bowls. One group of sculptures is constructed over beach balls. After removal, the thick, curved skin of papier-mâché was sliced and reconfigured as Fecteau continued to add, subtract, and glue sections together with more layers of papier-mâché. The echoes of his supports sometimes remain visible, and sometimes they are so transformed that they can no longer be identified. As he says, "The material I work with needs to offer a kind of resistance, and the final piece has to be worked on directly by me." The care with which he plans the initial forms, including materials, is more structural than "arty"; his process is about cutting apart, reconfiguring, and gluing repeatedly. He claims not to know how to weld, cast, carve stone, or work with wood, choosing instead to work with the cheapest materials he can find to make large, paintable forms. While the process is laborious, it results in forms only permitted by a malleable material.

Fecteau's use of color further complicates his objects. His colors do nothing to inform or clarify; instead, they compromise and confuse the identity of the shapes, seemingly of the material rather than a layer on

Untitled (2 views), 2011. Gypsum cement, resin clay, and acrylic, 37 x 61 x 55 cm.





Above: *Untitled*, 2016. Papier-mâché and acrylic, 64 x 130 x 37 cm. Below: *Untitled*, 2016. Papier-mâché and acrylic, 63 x 146 x 41 cm.

top of it. Areas that may be convex or concave, curved or hollow, are emphasized or underplayed depending on how the color modifies the space. The always matte finish may be monochrome or speckled and mot-

tled. Fecteau also plays with faux finishes that suggest dirt, shadows, or aging. Small blips and bumps that remain from the process—drips, flecks, chips of papier-mâché—are often retained and emphasized by the color choices. He says, “I use color to accentuate or



© VINCENT FECTEAU, COURTESY MATTHEW MARK'S GALLERY

disrupt forms and suggest or frustrate references. I'm interested in the way it can either sit on the surface as decoration or actually seem to generate form." The colors themselves come from whatever he sees in his surrounding environment.

These works have a life that's made visible on their surfaces—marks, dents, and faded, uneven colorations that adorn or, conversely, blemish their surfaces. The inflected skins emphasize the transitional nature of the work. In fact, the very notion of "completion" is fluid—every object may be subject to another round of tampering or tweaking. All of these aspects precede the imagery, giving it an out-of-sync elegance and human quality inextricably linked to extreme abstraction. Fecteau's sustained engagement with his materials means that his work depicts its own transformation. The three most important aspects of the work—its scale, structure, and image—are definite, direct, and powerful. Even the physically absent components thoroughly occupy space; cavities, cutouts, and deep enfoldings become centralized in a way that cements

peripheral parts into a single body. A hole or large cutout might be off-center or at an angle to the plane of the piece, there may be edges or terraces around a single hole, or the holes might be contradictory or in conflict. The position and number of holes, as well as their inward paths, create a primary, determining structure.

Fecteau presents his work in a way that mirrors his method of fabrication—constructed additively from all sides—and he employs three methods of display. There are freestanding objects exhibited on pedestals at or below eye level, wall-mounted bas-reliefs, and constructions that can be hung on the wall in various ways (flipped from "back" to "front" or rotated 180 degrees). These "reversible" pieces are made without a designated orientation, although one side is always against the wall. Because the holes and open spaces in what Fecteau calls "360-degree pieces" allow you to peer through them, these works have no materially defined borders—the room they're in, other pieces in the room, and other viewers become part of the experience.

Fecteau has written about his desire to create a "form that exists free of so-called understanding and that operates in a purely abstract maybe unconscious way." His work is, in fact, abstract to an extraordinary degree—particularly when viewed within the context of the past decade's insistence on topicality. It "definitely references other art and periods, not to mention non-art objects or forms that already exist in the world. I don't cultivate this aspect of the work, but it's inevitable, and this irritates me at times." Despite the seriousness of his intentions and the formal beauty of the work, there's a loony, humorous, almost cartoonish aspect to it. This is partially a result of his use of color and the humbleness of his materials, but is also due to a fundamentally forthright crudeness combined with craftsmanship. Ultimately, his interest lies not so much in surface qualities but in the expression of submerged forces—energy, intention, the release of some truth that's only accessible through art-making.

Kay Whitney is a writer based in Los Angeles.

Untitled, 2016. Papier-mâché and acrylic, 55 x 125 x 55 cm.



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SFGATE

4 Bay Area residents among MacArthur 'genius award' winners

By **Nanette Asimov** Updated 9:56 am, Thursday, September 22, 2016



SF sculptor Vincent Fecteau has won a 2016 MacArthur "Genius" award

Photo: John D. And Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

A Stanford University biologist creates a computer out of water droplets. A financial expert in San Francisco helps poor people create a credit history. Three dimensions emerge from two in the hands of a San Francisco sculptor. And the world's complexities grow clear on the comic pages penned by a graphic novelist in San Jose.

These seeming magicians from across the Bay Area are among 23 winners of the MacArthur "genius awards" for 2016, announced late Wednesday by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Chosen through a secret nominating process, the honorees hail from seven states, mainly California and New York, and one lives in India. All are considered creative enough to merit a gift of \$625,000 each over five years to do with as they please.

Vincent Fecteau of San Francisco is a sculptor whose creations of papier-mache and cardboard are described by the MacArthur Foundation as "deceptively intricate, abstract pieces (that) provoke thoughtful reflection."

Compared with the other "geniuses," he joked, "I'm sitting here with little pieces of paper and a glue gun."

Yet Fecteau, 47, uses those tools to create something from nothing, "an ability that's necessary for most problem-solving," said Cecilia Conrad, managing director of the **MacArthur Fellowships program**, as the "genius awards" are formally known. "It's essential to the human condition."

Asimov, Nanette. "4 Bay Area Residents Among MacArthur 'Genius Award' Winners." *SF Gate*, September 22, 2016.

The foundation says Fecteau's sculptures "twist and swerve." They "move between elegance and ungainliness" and they "convey a subtle visual humor." As he works, Fecteau cannot predict where his hands and mind will take the sculpture, he told *The Chronicle*.

"I feel more and more committed to the idea of the intuitive process," he said. "In the end, that's all I have to offer. I think my job is to try to get as close to that as possible."

Stunned that he won, Fecteau called it an incredible gift to be able to work "without worrying about bills for the next five years."

The other MacArthur Fellows include four scientists, three nonfiction writers, two computer experts, a playwright, a poet, an art historian, a theater artist, a composer, a video artist, a jewelry maker, a linguist, a cultural historian and a human rights lawyer.

In all, 12 women and 11 men won this year's awards.

ART PAPERS



Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2016 [photo: Hannes Böck; courtesy of artist and Vienna Secession, Association of Visual Artists, Vienna]

Vincent Fecteau

Vienna Secession, Vienna

The “-ism” has long been declared unfit for describing trends in contemporary art—but of course, to declare something dead is to beg young artists to purpose it anew. Curated by Annette Südbeck, Vincent Fecteau’s recent solo show at Vienna Secession [July 1–August 28, 2016] refreshes two such “-isms” from previous centuries: existentialism and formalism. Never extinct, existential angst lurks in the background of many a critical mind in the same way that formal concerns inevitably arise in the artistic one—even if they are rejected.

Fecteau once told an interviewer for *Art in America* that he was probably attracted to bas-relief because he doesn’t understand it. I am probably attracted to Fecteau’s work because I don’t understand it. His papier-mâché sculptures—rectangular forms built from

florist boxes—solicit flashes of profound and attractive clarity, followed by moments during which it is difficult to remember or articulate their profundity. I oscillate between infatuation and skepticism when faced with the works; it is in their conceptual unclearness that they feel “right,” it is their apparent unreasoned existence that makes them so strong. The work leaves viewers wanting more, creating space for them to complete their meaning, or to accept their meaninglessness, in an existential manner.

Existentialism is, ostensibly paradoxically, a useful framework with which to think about a meaningless and unknowable world as a space to *create*. Fecteau’s papier-mâché sculptures suggest a similarly silly profundity. His complex bas-reliefs resist being photo-

graphed. Even in their presence, the best one can do is acquire multiple partial views. Just as their forms resist an immediate and holistic view, they also slip out of any definitive understanding.

At times inevitably and at times intentionally, Fecteau's works reference a world beyond abstraction. During his public conversation with Bruce Hainley at the exhibition's opening, the artist pointed out that the color of one sculpture screams "southwest"—but that little can be made of this resemblance. The works pique an interest they can't appease, reflecting the experience of trying to make meaning in a world that lacks reasoned existence. Fecteau's viewers are invited to accept the pleasure of these resemblances without rationalizing or justifying them. Working directly with materials, without a preliminary sketch, Fecteau employs a process that is similarly grounded in "being," rather than in governing theories.

Other inevitable external references include the art historical ones. Not only is the Secession a gorgeous home for Fecteau's work, but its modernist history frames his formalist grammar. It's not as if Fecteau is directly referencing particular modernists so as to make a point, but rather that the limitless web of potential connections and formal comparisons his works evoke is ultimately empty—and in that emptiness is a sort of freedom, a proverbial "blank canvas."

Yet the apparent immodesty of Fecteau's formalist abstraction is subverted by his humble materials—balsa wood and papier-mâché are typically reserved for models. This humility is especially evident when the artist speaks about his work: he doesn't claim to know what he's getting at. He remains committed, however, to a kind of philosophical pursuit of knowledge. As Fecteau was once quoted in *BOMB* magazine, he believes "that there are some essential and probably ultimately unknowable truths to being human that can be accessed through art-making."

In the legacy of abstract expressionism, the works evoke affect and evince the artist's raw encounters with material. They evoke a sort of "mood"—and the contemplation of one's own moods, according to philosophers such as Heidegger and Sartre, reveals fundamental aspects of the self.

Accompanying the sculptures on view in Vienna is a book of collaged images that get at nothingness in a different way, reusing and dissecting representational images. Like the sculptures, they make references to the real world, combining these references in ways that feel magical and spontaneous, rather than reasoned. They are stoic, but also deeply silly—one features a male abdomen cut out from a Tommy Hilfiger advertise-

ment collaged atop what appear to be Greek ruins. The sculptures and collages speak to our present condition of image oversaturation. Fecteau views his rectangular forms as screens, in a sense. Indeed, they offer a sort of shallow depth in the way that the Internet promises limitless information—all meaningless without interpretation. In his work's nothingness lie infinite possibilities, yet in the screen's infinite possibilities lies nothingness.

The papier-mâché of which his sculptures consist is associated with crafts more than with "finished" artworks. It is also by nature endlessly additive in its process; with its imprecision, it is an inconclusive medium. For Fecteau, the works "feel" done when they no longer irritate him, when they produce a feeling of oddness and rightness at the same time. To pronounce *papier-mâché* is to flirt with the line Fecteau toes between silliness and sophistication: do you choose the proper French pronunciation and risk sounding pretentious or butchering it, or do you anglicize the word as you would in a grade school art class?

Fecteau recalls in an interview with *Art in America* that someone once told him, "You know, you're not an intellectual artist." The statement was met first with horror, which then yielded to a feeling of freedom. Fecteau clearly works from this place of liberation. Liberation and despair are, according to Nietzsche, the two possible responses to the acknowledgment that life has no intrinsic meaning. This divide explains my initial oscillation between skepticism and adoration: upon a first encounter with these works, it is difficult to define their aim. At the core of Fecteau's hollow sculptures is nothingness; around it, meaning is made.

Amid today's prolific, socially engaged art practices, it's easy and tempting to dismiss formalist work as apolitical. It prioritizes form over content while working in the legacy of modernist avant-garde visual language, which was often intended as radical and subversive yet was often received as self-referential and isolating, and which would later become a bourgeois commodity. *But nothing is apolitical.* Fecteau's works revel in open-endedness, yet that's not to say they don't make a claim—to make anything is to make a claim. Fecteau's work is radical today for insisting on art as justified in and of itself, on sculpture as sculpture. And yet, his is not a bourgeois insistence on the autonomy of art, on art as separate from the social. Rather, it's a re-emphasis on material existence in an art world that had, perhaps until recently, abandoned discussing objects for discourse itself. Fecteau's works flip the process in which ideas generate forms; instead, his forms generate ideas or moods, and revel in the freedom of purposelessness.

—Emily B. Watlington

ARTFORUM

BASEL

Vincent Fecteau

KUNSTHALLE BASEL

This exhibition, Vincent Fecteau's largest yet, featured a selection of sculptures that date back to 2000, allowing connections to be drawn between several strands of his oeuvre. The San Francisco-based artist frequently remarks that his is a slow process; he usually works on several related efforts at the same time, so that maintaining a cohesive ensemble becomes a constraint that guides his creative thinking.

As the visitor entered the nineteenth-century Kunsthalle Basel's expansive skylight hall, she encountered seven papier-mâché sculptures, produced between 2000 and 2006, that were poised on plinths arranged throughout the room. Surrounding them on the gallery walls was a new series of thirteen theatrical miniatures set in black boxes (all 2015), three-dimensional collages with which Fecteau reprised his early work in the genre. In some cases, the artist integrated images he had snipped from architecture and design magazines in the 1990s and set aside for later use. To see these photographic fragments—mostly shots of interiors intended

to recall the faux splendor of a bygone era's aristocratic residences—one had to closely approach the works. As though to probe the relationship between sculptural form and surface that is always dynamic in the medium of collage, many of the pieces feature images of pillows sheathed in iridescent fabrics, their plump softness contrasting with the boxes' hard edges. Scraps of corrugated cardboard, wickerwork, twigs, and other found objects, all coated in light-absorbing black paint, served as additional compositional elements that both abstracted and bridged the richly textured world of the photos and the matte black space of sculpture.

The wall objects shared a palette with the freestanding sculptures, which were more recognizable products of Fecteau's idiomatic attention to form: torus-knot-like serpentine volumes fractured by severe geometries. To make each of these latter works, the artist first covered foamcore with papier-mâché; he then cut up the form and rearranged the resulting pieces to produce a body riddled with holes and folded into pockets. A coat of acrylic paint, sometimes in two colors, was then applied, and finally, the piece was enhanced with various appliqué, such as balsa wood, burlap, rope, or seashells. In effect, these two final steps heighten or mitigate the strain of the tangled sculptural surfaces: Matte and glossy paint makes for pulsating contrasts, diagonal wooden slats somehow transform a flat plane into a taut membrane, and a rubber band hanging limply from a nail demonstrates that the artist sometimes prefers flaccid inertia to tension.

Occupying (indeed, consuming) the two small galleries that branch off the main space were three large sculptures—one from 2006 and two from 2012—whose intricate curves and nested spaces confound orientation in a way that recalls the unguided exploration invited by the tiny scenes in the wall-mounted collages. Unlike the collages, however, these mammoth efforts have no front side. From whichever angle one approaches them, they seem to turn away, to withdraw into themselves. In fact, many of Fecteau's efforts seem haunted by a paradoxical melancholy: Rather than condemning the artist to idleness, the sentiment is channeled into the work of his hands.

—Maja Naef

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.



Vincent Fecteau,
Untitled, 2015, acrylic
paint, dowel, paper,
8 1/4 x 14 1/8 x 5 1/8".

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MOUSSE

Vincent Fecteau “You Have Did the Right Thing When You Put That Skylight In” at Kunsthalle Basel

August 5~2015



A year and a half ago, Vincent Fecteau’s San Francisco studio flooded. Luckily his work wasn’t damaged, but he was forced to go through his old boxes, and he came across a decades-old folder of cut-out photographs of throw pillows he had taken from architecture and interior design magazines of the 1970s and 1980s. This rediscovery led to a new series of fifteen three-dimensional collages—one of his first forays into this format since the 1990s—that will be featured alongside sixteen sculptures from 2000 through the present in his solo exhibition “You Have Did the Right Thing When You Put That Skylight In,” curated by Elena Filipovic at Kunsthalle Basel. His largest exhibition to date comes on the heels of increasing exposure in the United States, with inclusion in the 2012 Whitney Biennial and the 2013 Carnegie International, along with a well-received solo exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York last year.

Fecteau normally eschews titling his work, discouraging viewers from their natural inclination to locate familiar forms in his abstract sculptures, and the curious title of his exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel cleverly avoids any distinct connection to the work on display. “You Have Did the Right Thing When You Put That Skylight In” is the name of a song by the American experimental musician Arthur Russell, a steady soundtrack in Fecteau’s studio as he worked on this new series. He had never visited Kunsthalle Basel before receiving the invitation for this exhibition, but friends remarked that it had a beautiful glass skylight, and he saw a witty link between the song title and this architectural feature.

This subtle humor—a constant yet often overlooked element in Fecteau’s elusive practice—comes to the fore in his focus on throw pillows in his newest collages. Throw pillows are perhaps the most banal and extraneous of

Garrity, Jeanne. “You Have Did the Right Thing When You Put That Skylight In.” *Mousse*, August 5, 2015.

decorative items, frequently featured in architectural shoots and staged apartments. In this series of wall-mounted three-dimensional collages, images of these mundane pillows are nestled in ordinary shoeboxes and other equally simple containers. These constructions are primarily painted matte black, creating dioramas that Joseph Cornell might have made if he had gone goth and developed an interest in interior design.

The shape of the pillows becomes the subject itself, and the contours of the collages resonate with the undulations of the sculptures nearby. Fecteau's signature papier-mâché sculptures are formal exercises in abstraction that act as investigations of space. Spanning two decades of his practice, the sculptures move from simple constructions to more baroque forms. The process of making each piece is laborious and intuitive; they push the limitations of the medium and resist a single viewpoint. Like Arthur Russell, who was known for working endlessly on compositions, Fecteau engages in a rigorous process of addition and subtraction to shape the forms. Modest in size and displayed on pedestals, the sculptures' layers rise and fall, creating pockets and creases. Some are marked by sharp angles, while rounded edges create crevasses and protrusions in others. Early work tends to stick to a muted palette, but the colors get bolder in more recent pieces.



Fecteau sees his collages as a continuation of his consideration of space, and imagines that the viewer might envision the dioramas as descriptions of details of his sculptures. Each approaches a problem from a different perspective, and together they create a whole. In comparison to his collages from the 1990s, Fecteau says, “they’re more poetic, looser... more casual, but also a little more complicated.” As his understanding of spatial relations has grown more complex, these shallow dioramas reflect an increasingly nuanced approach to angles and planes.

Fecteau's practice is reflective and even existential, in search of broader meanings. In a recent conversation with Phyllida Barlow for *BOMB* Magazine, Fecteau stated: “I believe that there are some essential and probably ultimately unknowable truths to being human that can be accessed through art-making. When I’m feeling good about things I’m working on, I see them as evidence of an attempt to locate and share this knowledge or belief.” His sculptures exist outside of trends, instead continuing a timeless inquiry into the very nature of sculpture itself and its presence in the world. With this new body of work, he appears to be moving from a refined, restrained approach to a more humorous and unsettling engagement with architectural space.

Jeanne Gerrity



Garity, Jeanne. "You Have Did the Right Thing When You Put That Skylight In." *Mousse*, August 5, 2015.



Garrity, Jeanne. "You Have Did the Right Thing When You Put That Skylight In." *Mousse*, August 5, 2015.



Garrity, Jeanne. "You Have Did the Right Thing When You Put That Skylight In." *Mousse*, August 5, 2015.



Garrity, Jeanne. "You Have Did the Right Thing When You Put That Skylight In." *Mousse*, August 5, 2015.



Vincent Fecteau "You Have Did the Right Thing When You Put That Skylight In" installation views at Kunsthalle Basel, 2015

Courtesy: Galerie Buchholz, Berlin; greengrassi, London; Matthew Marks Gallery, New York and Kunsthalle Basel. Photo: Philipp Hänger.

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ARTFORUM

Basel

Vincent Fecteau

KUNSTHALLE BASEL

Steinenberg 7

April 18–August 23

What visitor to Vincent Fecteau's exhibition in Kunsthalle Basel's skylit hall isn't already acquainted with works of modernist sculpture that are anxious to create, via abstraction and even sheer volume, relevant forms that simultaneously engage with their sites and engross their audiences? Connoisseurs of Hans Arp or Henry Moore, for instance, soon find themselves at home with Fecteau's work—and yet the artist is after something very different from what Arp or Moore pursued. To start with, his materials—hard foam, wood, papier-mâché, and acrylic—run contrary to those of his predecessors. From these he creates, for example, *Ohne Titel* (Untitled), 2012. This work, like the other sculptures in the exhibition, is presented on a pedestal, in keeping with tradition. It features a shapely, amorphous figure whose dark surfaces in contoured arcs and arches end with abrupt breaks and openings accentuated in blue. Or take another untitled work, from 2002, a ten-inch-high dome made of plaster with seashell trimming, looking as if it were an architectonic study from the hand of Rudolf Steiner.



View of "Vincent Fecteau," 2015.

Among the advantages of this equanimously beautiful exhibition is that it juxtaposes ten sculptures from the last twelve years, all presented on pedestals, with Fecteau's most recent series, all untitled pieces from this year. The fifteen works—black boxes of various shapes but approximately the same size—reveal collages within, stages on which stories are sketched through newspaper clippings that speak to Fecteau's penchant for interior spaces and architecture. Indeed, seen as architectural constructions, his modernist sculptures in the center of the Kunsthalle reclaim contemporaneity anew.

Translated from German by Diana Reese.

— Max Glauner

ARTFORUM



Vincent Fecteau,
Untitled, 2014, resin
clay, acrylic paint,
24 × 26 × 8"

Vincent Fecteau

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

“My continuing struggle is that I want to express this cheesy emotion that I know isn’t cheesy,” said Vincent Fecteau in 1995. “And I don’t know how to do it.” Such a mission is difficult, but if the solution is elusive, the struggle has been generative. Almost twenty years later, he’s still going at it. In the press release for this recent show, Fecteau states: “I feel like I’m always trying to figure out the same thing. . . . I can’t define what that *thing* is. It’s a feeling or a sound or a song. Maybe it’s a kind of mood.”

At Matthew Marks, Fecteau’s attempts to home in on the nameless emotion encompassed five sculptures and seven collages. The sculptures, roughly two feet by two feet and bulging anthropomorphically from the wall, are topologically complex, distinguished by odd contours, a dearth of right angles, and complicated pockets and folds that commingle the organic and the inorganic, the abstract and the representational, the industrial and the handmade. They induce a certain delirium, containing forms that seem calibrated to ping those deep, dark, pattern-seeking parts of the brain that say, Hey, I *know* this, but then subvert those flashes of recognition as soon as they arrive. A particular chamber could be a car’s curved cupholder or the interior of a seashell, and while the tube running diagonally across the top of one work is pretty obviously modeled after the kind of pipe used for plumbing—the tube’s scale tips us off, as do its two symmetrical curves—the rest of the sculpture has seemingly crumpled and fragmented into forms at once unlocatable and strange. In some cases, semicontained parts appear to have drifted apart, Pangaea-like, and the satisfying way in which they could fit together

broadcasts a possibility of touch you can practically feel.

All of the sculptures are made from resin clay, a hobbyist’s material Fecteau has painted a subdued range of grays, greens, light blues, and purples. In many places, he has lightly brushed the sculpture with an additional color or colors as if to highlight certain ridges and curves, this detailing giving the impression of an emanating aura or—better yet—a subcutaneous blush. Importantly, these works don’t just hang on the wall; they are set three to six inches into it, so that their pockets and folds can be deeper than they might at first appear. On my first walk through the gallery, only once did I notice a cavity that seemed impossibly deep—that *must* have extended beyond the plane of the wall—but even then I had to confirm that fact with the gallery attendant, so trippily complex was the sculpture’s shape. Elsewhere, the works were set back only a few inches, with interiors that curve inward in such a way that we are prompted to get really, really close to try to see—always unsuccessfully—just how deep the hole goes; it’s like peering into an ear. These are not the fathomless voids of, say, Lucio Fontana, but some kind of unsettlingly organic orifice.

If Fecteau’s struggle is that of expressing an intangible affect through abstraction, it is not one that is particularly new. But in contrast to the ardent heroism of classic AbEx, say, Fecteau’s formally complex work stands out for its mellow slowness. It exudes not heat and flash but a vibe of introversion and melancholy, the nostalgia-inflected tone of a weird private world reluctantly opened up.

—Lloyd Wise

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

BOMB

The captions for the works by Phyllida Barlow and Vincent Fecteau featured in the following pages might not tell you something essential about the images they describe: the views they offer can only be partial. Of course we know that about the reproduction of artworks in general. Yet when it comes to three-dimensional forms whose very essence consists of the interplay between process and materials (Barlow mentions knitting with steel), and between concave and convex surfaces—with their resulting protuberances and hollows, as in Fecteau’s faintly biomorphic shapes—even in the presence of the works themselves the best you can do is attain multiple partial views, all of them transient. Is this sculpture’s plight or sculpture’s victory over mediation? In the following email exchanges, facilitated by the 2013 Carnegie International team, the sculptors reflect on this matter, from London and San Francisco respectively, manifesting a playful, sensorial approach to their invented forms.

— MÓNICA DE LA TORRE

Phyllida Barlow and Vincent Fecteau



Vincent Fecteau, Untitled, 2008, papier-mâché, acrylic paint, 25 3/4 x 32 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches. Copyright Vincent Fecteau. Fecteau images courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery unless otherwise noted.

Phyllida Barlow, installation view of Nairy Baghramian and Phyllida Barlow, 2010, Serpentine Gallery, London. Photo by Andy Keate. Copyright Phyllida Barlow. Barlow images courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



VINCENT FECTEAU I've known of your work for several years (we were even in a show together last year: *Sculptural Acts* at Haus der Kunst in Munich) and I feel a strong sense of camaraderie with what you do, but, until now, it was only through images. I came across this quote by you in *Artforum* that I just love: "Image and the pictorial are my enemies. They are what I always want to escape, but I clearly fail to do so. Sculpture will always fail at this task." I thought we could start with that. I'm curious about why you think sculpture fails at the task of escaping the image. I've always thought that it's sculpture's triumph that an image, or even a thousand images, will never replicate the experience of a sculptural work.

PHYLLIDA BARLOW Yes, sculpture refuses to replicate itself as a single image. Sculpture's reality is its reality—being there with it and walking around it, stalking it. Every movement we make in relationship to a sculpture generates another point of view that is also another image. That's what I mean by failing to escape the image. Our physical movement in relationship to sculpture's stillness is the triumph of sculpture. Each fractional movement we make around a work generates an unending sequence of fleetingly experienced images that, as quickly as they are experienced, become forgotten. Hence, the tragic loss of that unperceivable totality, which can only be experienced by being there, in real time, in a sculpture's own reality—materially, physically, and spatially.

Of course I am speaking from my own experience. It is probably different for anyone else. But the process of forgetting the sequence of images encourages the stalking process even more—round and round we go, seeking out what? Maybe it's a quest to find an image in the sculpture, but sculpture persists in refusing to offer a single view. Unfortunately the images—the glamour shots—that adorn our catalogues, etcetera, become adopted as the work. Why is the so-called worst view of a sculpture—its most uncomfortable, fragmented, and least attractive—the worst view? Is it some dreadful convention that has been unwittingly adopted? And why don't we want that view to be shown?

Deep down, I feel that "making" does not necessarily produce sculpture. Although pictorial object-making has been critically discussed in depth (supposedly), it has had an impact on sculptural language. Sculpture as image has a great historical trajectory, and

I would include Bernini in that lineage. But sculpture as a language—sculptural language—is, for me, both ancient (as in Paleolithic) and more recent. Is Picasso's *Glass of Absinthe* a declaration of sculpture as a language, the first of its kind in the 20th century? It is always imaged as a portrait—frontal, "best" view— but, in reality, it is not only a very small object, it is also unforgiving in refusing to offer a single, optimal view. It is an invented form, and as such, it brilliantly contends with the craft of mimicry, appropriation, found objects, and readymades.

Oh God, how pedantic this all reads! But I got to where I wanted in order to discuss something about invented form—which is what's so compelling about your work—and the ultimate obstacle to both sculpture as image and how sculpture is imaged.

VF The way you pull apart the idea of sculpture from the idea of making is interesting. I wonder if the distinction could be expressed in terms of representation. So much art (abstract, representational, conceptual, etc.) simply represents something else—sometimes it's even an *idea* of art. The alternative, which may be what you are proposing, is to try and make something that *is*, that exists in the world irreducibly and uncontainably. Could this be what you mean by a sculptural language or an invented form? It seems like we dove head first into the murkiest waters! I find these things very difficult to articulate, but if there is a reason to continue to make things I suspect it can be found within these ideas somewhere.

PB Yes, I am fascinated by the ongoing evolution of art that remakes art and whose aim is to re-present a particular art movement in the context of the present. It's like remaking classic films, as if there were nothing left to say. It does indicate different attitudes toward *making*: making as demonstration and making as revealing, the latter being unhinged from *telling* but having more to do with *showing*.

Aren't actors frequently requested to show and not tell? Actors and performers use body language to reveal the content of the text. There is an understanding that the text is only one part of the narrative. The performer's bodily behavior and gestures are a non-verbal language as powerful and as subtle as the text. Can a tiny action be as loud as what is being spoken? Or vice versa—can a huge bodily gesture make its point known without the need for verbal language? Similarly, the

formal qualities of sculpture *show*: Is it horizontal, vertical, suspended, leaning, small, large, high up, low down, plinthed, loose, contained, open, hidden, outside, or inside? And what do its other attributes say? Its materials? Is it designed, studio-built, factory-built, hand-made, manufactured, figurative, appropriated, non-representational, familiar, unfamiliar, readymade, new, or old? On the other hand, *telling* is, for me, embedded in such things as the title, and relates to the necessity to explore the work through a deconstructive trail that leads to an answer. Perhaps here I am referring to works that are subject-led, whose ideologies—political, autobiographical, social commentary—tell you what they're about rather than allowing that to be discovered. Of course, both showing and telling can exist together!

Is sculpture the one visual art form that does not necessarily require sight? As such, does it have the potential to exist as its own physical thing? As you say, can it just *be*? I long for that. My contradiction is that remembering existing things is a great stimulus for me, because these things perform sculpturally. They are what they are and therefore beg the question as to why I should have to remake them—it seems a futile act. These are everyday things, banal and very visible: mountains, fallen trees, fallen buildings, fallen signs, broken chairs, broken walls, crashed cars, junk, street barriers, bollards, road works, buildings, banners, bags, bins, pins, clouds, spills, dust, heaps, mounds, rubble, rubbish, cups, containers, newspapers, hoardings, pillows, flags, fences, fields, floors. Things both natural and man-made, rural and urban, in an ambiguous state of decay or regeneration, and already sculptural. Things that are obstacles in that their behavior is incongruous or irrational. Despite their banality and familiarity, they block and interrupt how we experience our daily encounters with the world—whether within our own domestic environments, on the street, or beyond, as in nature.

I am excited by how sculpture is already in the world. I can appropriate it, but this process is flawed, because it ties the work to a source, and as such denies how *shapes* can arise from action. So I try to release the work from its origins through processes of production, although these origins usually remain there in the work as a phantom reference. I long for the shape to break free, and for a shape or form that cannot be likened to anything to emerge. Such a shape has a

freedom from being named and, as you say, just *is*. However, the dreaded simile is always lurking: an invented form is vulnerable to being likened to this or that as a means to understanding, when no understanding is required. It's irritating.

I understand sculptural language as being connected to our own physical behavior in relationship to the physicality of things that are not ourselves—be they other selves or inanimate objects. Therefore the idea of sightlessness offers direct physical awareness of what is in the world. I don't restrict my notion of sculptural language to objects. We can be alert through our senses to things where sound, smell, temperature, texture, light, dark, and so on, all have powerful interruptive properties—such that our behavior toward these things will be affected, and vice versa.

But back to invented form: maybe all forms are invented, and my differentiations, in terms of making sculpture, are spurious. Invented forms are uncategorized, and are different from appropriated things, readymades, and found objects. Yet I dislike the moral implications that arise from establishing these distinctions: that there is something worthy and authentic about a form that has no recognizable, borrowed, pastiche, or copied component within it. I am as enthralled with the past as anyone. It is a resource, especially when it comes to invented form—a lot of postwar European sculpture is hideous, ungainly, ugly; but, for me, is absolutely compelling!

As for the desire to make: it was quite an upheaval for me to come to terms with making. It happened early on, when I was 17 years old. Making proved to be unbearably difficult and arduous. Nothing ever worked. Carving: ugh. Welding: impossible. Construction: nothing stood up. Casting: things got stuck and broken. What was I attracted to? I'm still trying to find out. Making was so different from painting, other than the extraordinary surface-y qualities of clay. The contrast between the weight of a raw lump of clay compared to its surface—always overreacting to anything that touched it, sort of like paint—was a magical revelation!

VF My relationship to materials has also always been rather fraught. I never took a sculpture class. I don't know how to weld, cast, carve stone, or work with wood. I have an incredible amount of patience except when it comes to the very technical, and I've always made things. As a child it was crafty kinds of things: needlepoint, macramé (this was

the '70s!), decoupage... Then when I got to college I took some painting and drawing classes and was really interested in architecture. I thought I might try to be an architect, but in the end I didn't have that particular kind of stamina. This is why my earlier works are very much like architectural models, and most definitely why I used foam core. Papier-mâché was the lowest tech, the cheapest way I could make larger, paintable forms. You work with what you have, and that includes the history you're given. My work definitely references other art and periods, not to mention non-art objects or forms that already exist in the world. I don't cultivate this aspect of the work, but it's inevitable, and this irritates me at times. Non-objective forms in particular are a language that exists for us to use. Like you, I long for the form that exists free of so-called understanding and that operates in a purely abstract, maybe unconscious way. Yet this utopian desire hinges on an idea of abstraction that not only might be impossible, but in the end, might even be undesirable. Pushed to its logical conclusion, such form might end up like a kind of binary code stripped of any humanity. Maybe it is our humanity, in the end, that refuses the artificial distinction between abstraction and representation.

I'm curious about your ideas of sight not being a requirement for sculpture. I've often fantasized about making a form that would be so incomprehensible that it couldn't actually be seen. In the end I'm really interested in the energy or intention beneath the surface—in seeing the forms as a way of accessing something deeper and bigger—as opposed to the deconstruction or understanding of a form in art-historical or other terms. (Again, this isn't to deny that they are there!) I believe that there are some essential and probably ultimately unknowable truths to being human that can be accessed through art-making. When I'm feeling good about things I'm working on, I see them as evidence of an attempt to locate and share this knowledge or belief.

Wow, I think I'm in pretty deep, and definitely in very murky water now. I keep imagining that we're both underwater at opposite ends of a deep pond, swimming toward each other. That's kind of what we're doing, considering you're in the UK and I'm in the US! Sometimes making work feels literally like a stab in the dark, hoping something will stick. And maybe that's the blindness you're referring to? Is it paradoxically a way to see more clearly?

To move in a slightly different

direction: I'm curious about your thoughts on scale. People often ask me if I think of my pieces as maquettes for something much larger. I never do. Even my early works that clearly resemble architectural models were only so on a conceptual level. They were models of ideas or feelings. I'm interested in the literal, material object, and the way that it breaks down and complicates one's understanding of space. I guess this is more of an intellectual and psychological process than a physical one. Or maybe it is a physical one on a more intimate scale?

I wonder if although we approach scale from different directions, we might arrive at a very similar place? I'm curious about the environments within which you work and live. Do you have a large studio that allows you to try out your large pieces before you install, or is the installation improvisational? Do you live with sculptures—made by yourself or others? I have a relatively small studio and live in a very small apartment with my partner. I like having things that interest me around, but they usually take the form of small non-art items, or artworks by friends, but not really sculptures. I never live with my own pieces. I work on them for so long that by the time they are finished it feels like we've both really said all there is to say to each other and it's time for them to go.

PB No, I don't have any of my work around apart from four forgotten small, woolen, crushed-paper and cane-woven objects (handicrafts) on top of a cupboard—they've been there since 1989! I don't live with any sculpture by anyone else either, but there is a lot of art around by my husband and our children. The house and its contents are shambolic.

Your wonderful descriptions of how you make your work gives credence to the extraordinary processes of discovery brought about by realizing that making things is what one wants to do. And then figuring out the way one wants to make things can be extremely fraught, as you say. I've always felt that I have gotten it all wrong—the *it* is probably sculpture, sculpture with a formidable and overbearing capital S.

I am curious about your discoveries with making being rooted in handicrafts. The translation of handicrafts into the supposedly higher art form of sculpture is the ultimate excitement for me—it brings together intimacy and disclosure. Sculpture is unforgiving. It demands space in terms of where it can be placed and also in terms of how it delivers itself: it is performative, attention-seeking,

I've often fantasized about making a form that would be
so incomprehensible that it couldn't actually be seen.
— Vincent Fecteau



Vincent Fecteau, installation view of works in the 2013 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh, PA. Photo by Greenhouse Media. Courtesy of the artist and the Carnegie Museum of Art.





Phyllida Barlow, installation view of untitled: 11 awnings, 2013, Des Moines Arts Center, Des Moines, IA, steel armature, polyurethane board, polyurethane foam, cement, scrim, fabric, 155 x 660 x 334 inches. Copyright Phyllida Barlow. Photo by Paul Crosby.

Sculpture is unforgiving. It demands space in terms of where it can be placed and also in terms of how it delivers itself: it is performative, attention-seeking, and theatrical, even in its quieter modes.

— Phyllida Barlow



Phyllida Barlow, installation view of TIP, 2013, 2013 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh, PA, timber, steel, spray paint, paint, steel mesh, scrim, cement, fabric, varnish, 276 x 360 x 1074 inches. Copyright Phyllida Barlow. Photo by Greenhouse Media. Courtesy of the artist and the Carnegie Museum of Art.

and theatrical, even in its quieter modes. Therefore, regardless of the subject, when its materiality—for example, highly polished, shiny surfaces (say, bronze)—combines with huge monumentality, there is an authoritarian and usually very public message being delivered. However, if a sculpture's processes and materials come from somewhere more domestic, more hand-crafted, more private and undemonstrative, then there is this magical clash of identities: sculpture's inherent demonstrative characteristics are undermined by these intimate processes of production. Even the huge monumental shiny sculpture I just mentioned would become a very different and very eccentric object, if, for instance, it was hand-knitted. Yes, it would still be theatrical, spatially demanding, and very attention-seeking, but its monumentality and its authority would be subversive and contradictory. It would become anti-monumental.

There are ways of doing/making—knitting, weaving, sewing, pottery, macramé—which when manipulated can have radically atypical results. I'm thinking of knitting with steel, sewing with clay, making pottery from cement, whereby materials are pushed to the limit, and there is a loss of control.

I have never thought of your works as maquettes. I respond to their confidence as autonomous things that refuse being compared to anything else. Their size does not seem to be about scale, but is more of a fact: this is what they are, and this is how they exist. They are ruthless in their uncompromising sense of being. Once I am in their world—close-up, looking into, under, up, and through their folds and openings and gaps, at their doubling back on themselves—my curiosity is absolutely in the here and now.

At the beginning of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (I haven't seen it for years), Kyle MacLachlan comes across a severed ear lying amongst the litter of leaves. An extraordinary filmic sequence follows which caught my imagination completely: the camera peruses the ear as a sculptural phenomenon. The mixture of the dead leaves and the fleshy severed ear was so materially compelling, so sculptural. Your two wall works in the exhibition at Haus der Kunst reminded me of this. I write from memory: One of them opened itself up with hybrid curved forms arching out from the top and bottom, with gaping cavities through which a heaving interior could be seen—very bodily but also the opposite. This work was a strange yellow-brown on its outside and dark inside—a



Vincent Fecteau, Untitled, 2003, papier-mâché, acrylic paint, fabric, string, 13 1/2 x 14 x 11 1/2 inches. Copyright Vincent Fecteau.

half-remembered, redundant mechanical part, salvaged, but remaindered. The other wall work was dark in all respects. Its interior and exterior were fused as one, as if turned inside out. It was truly painful and uncomfortable, and unforgiving too. Slits and openings seemed arbitrary, as if this object were manifesting something in a state of reparation or recovery, but in the knowledge that it might not make it. An object in a state of limbo—its fragility a reminder that I was looking at myself. These amazing works exemplify my fascination for folded forms. By keeping themselves half-hidden they invite curiosity but refuse to yield up their secret interiors. They are erotic in their curling in on themselves, and innately visceral. They prompt the desire to touch and probe. But the only person who touches the sculpture is the artist—everyone else has to imagine those tactile encounters rather than fulfilling them, and this is such a vital part of the sculptural experience.

I, too, am much more interested in a psychological relationship with things than in a literal one. But my dilemma is that going there, so to speak, is getting into deep and murky water, to quote you. The way I attempt to understand what I do, and my relationship to materials, processes, and sculpture, is to recognize its subjectless identity. Its size, sometimes vast, sometimes small, is itself a kind of subject, but a physical one. As such, it is psychological; making things that reach beyond my own size excites me. I want the object to explore the space it inhabits. This action offers me, as the first viewer, ways of looking as a bodily experience. I look up, across, into, around, and become aware of the space as an integral,

and a materially vibrant part of the sculpture, not as something separate. Is the sculpture looking at me as much as I am looking at it? This refers back to blindness—how am I experiencing the sculpture, and how is the sculpture experiencing me? I don't consider my large sculptures to be big. They attempt to retain some kind of intimacy through their surface qualities and materials, which can then contradict their size and deny their monumentality. They are anti-monumental and emotionally pathetic. I relate to these large works as being without size and especially, without scale. Scale is an illusion; size is what things are.

To answer your question about improvisation: it is essential. With the large installations, the making processes require assistants. They need direction, which involves a lot of assemblage and re-making, building up and breaking down, in every sense. But I have a small studio where I live, and there I make smaller works: these involve testing out materials and concoctions of materials, and ways of fixing, and also drawing, which is a continuous activity. At the heart of all the processes is something close to chaos... a state of never quite knowing what is going to happen and how the work should and can develop. I have often referred to making as guess-work. I am always concerned that this chaos is very stressful for the assistants, and that it is difficult for them to follow my incoherent instructions. I usually demonstrate how I want something to be, and this proposes a whole other engagement with making. I have had to adopt a different approach to these works that are produced by assistants from my demonstrations and instructions. This has something to do with treating the resulting works and their components as quasi-found objects: hybrids that become resolved once the work is in its place, a gallery, museum, or location, wherever that might be. The smaller works are easy. They can wait, or they can be binned, they can be slow or quick. They have control over me and show me what to do next, even if it doesn't work out. With the larger works, I have to be in control, and I don't necessarily like that role, so it's a battlefield! Getting to a resolution is performative, and the final result, regarding whether it works or not, is always on a knife's edge.

VF I was in Pittsburgh in July to install my pieces for the Carnegie International. Unfortunately you were not there, but I had the distinct honor of watching two

of your assistants install a rather large work. I was struck by the interior of the piece, a structure that no one would normally see. It was incredibly complicated, and painted, which suggested that the piece had been through various iterations. In fact what was covered up may have at one time been uncovered. I really appreciate the way you talk about your work being in flux. It was clear to me that your process requires a lot of trial and error and endless negotiations with the limits of materials. This engagement with material and the struggle it assumes is apparent regardless of the final form. "Hard won" is something I often think about as being the ultimate compliment of a work of art. I like knowing that something was struggled over, regardless of how so-called seamless it might appear on the surface. Do you ever think of your work as finished? How do you negotiate your interest in flux and ambivalence with the rather rigid way most of the contemporary art world thinks about change of, or within, a work of art?

PB Oh God, sometimes revealing a work in its process of construction makes it acutely vulnerable, but it is wonderful that you saw it like this. *Untitled: up-turnedhouse* was initially shown in New York, where it was installed in a very ad hoc way. This process had to be radically changed when it was agreed that it would be shown in the Carnegie. All its failings exploded into reality. The challenge was to retain its haphazard character, but to construct it as a permanent object. It was as if my love of the conflicting nature of making and un-making were being meticulously scrutinized as a badly told lie—I felt like a criminal whose devious activities were on trial. It was all for good, though; I have been giving my ways of making and un-making a tougher, mental acknowledgement. My works are now being shown more than once—something I do not have much experience with, since in the past my works have been shown and then destroyed, with some materials being salvaged for future use. Making more permanent works has made me more resilient and purposeful about my

building and re-building methods. It can be grueling, and yes, the resulting works are hard won, not necessarily always in a good way. I'm still hanging onto an uneasy relationship with whether the works are ever finished or not, because it generates excitement and uncertainty. I never know if more should be added or removed. I don't doubt what I am doing, but I want the freedom to change my mind and to be able to undo today's job tomorrow, regardless of whether it turns out well or badly. I want a fluid thinking process to be realized in the material reality of the work itself, to try and narrow the gap between thought and action. Also, I look at art with recurring curiosity: How do we know when something is finished? What is the last paint stroke on a Jackson Pollock, a Matisse, Picasso, or for that matter a Velázquez or a Goya? It's all a wonderful and well-kept secret, something that could keep the art historians guessing for years to come: "The Last Mark."



*Vincent Fecteau, Untitled, 2008, papier-mâché, acrylic paint,
20 1/4 x 22 x 21 1/2 inches. Copyright Vincent Fecteau.*

Art in America

TILTING AT CHAOS

AN INTERVIEW WITH VINCENT FECTEAU
BY BRUNO FAZZOLARI

I FIRST MET VINCENT FECTEAU in the mid-'90s in the scrappy DIY art scene that orbited San Francisco's short-lived but influential Kiki gallery. It was an at once heady and hopeless time to be a young artist: the economy was in flames and the AIDS epidemic cast a grim shadow over just about everything. None of us expected ever to earn a living, and many of us didn't expect to live at all. Fecteau's personal style, combining easygoing candor with humanizing sarcasm, stood out from the harsh ironic posturing and political righteousness that seemed to be the default responses of the day. His quietly subversive taste ran to the quirky and uncomfortable, like the performances of singer Klaus Nomi and the Memphis Group designs of Ettore Sottsass. At the time, both were severely out of fashion.

Fecteau grew up on Long Island, N.Y., and settled in San Francisco after graduating from Wesleyan University in Connecticut in 1992. Since then, he has shown widely in the U.S. and Europe, with solo exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago, Matthew Marks Gallery in New York and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin. Early on, Fecteau earned critical attention for small, cerebral sculptures made of foam core and craft supplies and collaged elements from magazines. He wielded his low-rent materials with a nuanced consideration of scale, space and form. It was as though Joseph Cornell and H.C. Westermann had collaborated on disposable art objects. In 2000, Fecteau began working in papier-mâché, a material he used exclusively until his 2010 show at Greengrassi in London. More recently, he has been experimenting with cast plaster, producing works that he will premiere in fall 2012 at Buchholz.

Fecteau's studio practice is intensely deliberative, with a single work taking many months to reach completion. Averaging 10 objects every two years, he works by building up, tearing down and modifying repeatedly. His work in the Greengrassi show stemmed from an unusually long and challenging process; in the end, eight papier-mâché sculptures hung from pegs stuck in the gallery wall. They are reversible, so that either side may be displayed. As with much of Fecteau's work, complex references and formal decisions chart a wild course for the viewer. The sculptures recall masks, children's toys, toilets, industrial parts, questionable craft projects and architectural maquettes. They are both beautiful and homely.

While Fecteau has a reputation for shying away from talking about his own work, in conversation he consistently stands out as being among the most discerning artists I have met. Supple and stubborn in discussion, he is intellectually rigorous and always eager to be surprised by a fresh perspective. Over the years, we have shared many studio visits, and I often wished there were a record of the things he said. So I was delighted when he agreed to undertake this conversation, mostly about the work of other artists. The following is distilled from several hours of talk recorded on a summer's day in San Francisco's Strybing Arboretum.

BRUNO FAZZOLARI Do you think a viewer can tell the difference between the deliberate and unintentional in your work?

VINCENT FECTEAU The whole question of intentionality is so exciting. I'll see something that someone has made and think, "No! She couldn't have really meant to do that!" And then she does it again, and I think, "She knows what she's doing. It's wrong, but . . ."

FAZZOLARI Are you talking about situations where the gesture or the decision is maybe a bit appalling?

FECTEAU Yes, in some cases, although that sort of thing can become a kind of gimmick. At its best, what I'm talking about is a way for the artist to signal something very particular; it becomes a very refined type of communication. There's a difference between doing something ironically and doing something knowingly, though I find it hard to describe that distinction.

FAZZOLARI Can you give an example of the kind of work you're talking about?

FECTEAU Maureen Gallace's landscapes come to mind. On the surface, her work is so low-key, yet somehow, it winds up being very divisive—people seem to either love it or hate it.

FAZZOLARI Her painting instills an uncertainty. It's hard to tell how you're supposed to take her choices of subject and paint

Opposite top, two views of Vincent Fecteau's untitled sculpture, 2010, papier-mâché and acrylic paint, 28 by 29 by 19½ inches.

Opposite bottom, two views of another untitled work, 2010, papier-mâché and acrylic paint, 30 by 28 by 17 inches.

Photos this spread Marcus Leith, courtesy Greengrassi, London.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Works by Vincent Fecteau can be seen in the group show "Sculptural Acts," at Haus der Kunst, Munich, through Feb. 26, 2012.



Fazzolari, Bruno. "Tilting at Chaos." *Art in America*, December 2011, pp. 98–103.

handling—whether the joke is on you, or even if there's a joke at all.

FECTEAU That's when art gets really interesting. In those instances it makes me rethink everything—my whole world. Suddenly, it's not about one decision or artwork, but the possibility of questioning everything else.

FAZZOLARI I've often heard you talk about the trigger that gets the viewer to really start looking, to really begin paying attention to her own responses. Many critical approaches today maintain that a work of art is only interesting when it fulfills a conceptual directive or exemplifies a topical or theoretical issue. There is something that troubles people about art that doesn't turn out to be conceptually buttressed in some way. What happens when the viewer is left with a question about the artist's motivation that is not conveniently resolved?

FECTEAU That ambiguity is scary. If you have conceptual buttressing, as you say, then as a viewer you don't have to confront your anxiety, because you have a sort of proof or validation for the work and for your interest in it. Even if you're faced with the weirdest work of art, which seems completely wrong, it can be justified and contained within a larger system. But without that validation, then as a

viewer you really are dependent on your own mind; you have to decide for yourself, "Oh, I actually do see something there. I can't explain why I see something there, but I do."

FAZZOLARI Are you still interested in Klaus Nomi?

FECTEAU Yes. I haven't thought about him in a while, but it seems like he just keeps coming back.

FAZZOLARI That's one of those situations where you wonder: did he know how crazy he seemed?

FECTEAU I think he did.

FAZZOLARI There was a sincerity in his performance and singing, in contrast to a performer like Leigh Bowery, who was very sincere, very beautiful, but who also protected that with some aggression.

FECTEAU I think of Klaus Nomi as being more vulnerable, like a flower. You know? He could wilt in a second. And you don't know how to take that.

FAZZOLARI The actor Andy Kaufman had something similar going on. He was more volatile, but he relied on vulnerability and sincerity to blur life and art, and to elicit an uncomfortable response in the viewer.

FECTEAU My partner, Scott, and I went to this benefit for a local hospice. The social scene was kind of what you would expect, a very mixed San Francisco crowd. But then these

two guys walked in, and Scott and I both looked at each other and simultaneously said, "Siegfried and Roy." They were in full-on makeup. And not in drag makeup, not to look like women. They were in "man" makeup. I just couldn't take my eyes off them. There was something so fascinating about how they must understand themselves and how they choose to position themselves in the broader culture. It was very old-school gay. And it was such a specific look. It was great! They had the white pants, the Pucci shirt, super tan, lots of jewelry. Everything was manicured. They had dyed black hair which looked like it had just been cut that day. Everything in place, but in place in such a peculiar way. That was what made it so exciting. It was so deliberate. And I found myself thinking, "Do you know what you look like? I don't think you know how I'm looking at you . . . but on the other hand, maybe you do."

FAZZOLARI You don't see that sort of transgression so much today: not aggressive, not in-your-face, not ironic or sarcastic and yet there's something kind of wrong about it.

Maureen Gallace:
July 15th,
2011,
oil on panel,
9 by 12
inches.
Courtesy 303,
New York.



Above, Klaus Nomi performing at the nightclub Xenon, New York, ca. 1982. Photo George DuBose.

Right, Leigh Bowery performing at Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, 1988.

“THERE’S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DOING SOMETHING IRONICALLY AND DOING SOMETHING KNOWINGLY, THOUGH I FIND IT HARD TO DESCRIBE THAT DISTINCTION.”

FECTEAU Can you think of an artist who does that?

FAZZOLARI Frank Stella's constructions, which you almost never get to see these days: the really colorful relief sculptures, garish and over-the-top, with all kinds of textures. They are wonderfully maxed-out in a way which I think probably embarrasses a lot of people right now.

FECTEAU I think people cannot take it at all.

FAZZOLARI Criticism is often used as a kind of safeguard against embarrassment, to make us feel all right about spending time with those men who have walked into the room wearing makeup and too much jewelry.

FECTEAU The artist Lutz Bacher did a series of “paintings” based on camouflage. At first they seem like a departure from her media-based work with photography and video. She actually calls them “my abstract paintings.” As I understand it, she simply downloaded patterns for camouflage from a CD-ROM and printed them on canvas. And they really do look like certain kinds of abstract painting you see around today. They’re like a cross between wallpaper and abstract painting, but then when you see them up close, they’re obviously printed. It occupies the

weirdest place I’ve seen in painting recently. They could easily be either one of the best things I’ve ever seen or one of the worst things I’ve ever seen. There’s no room to reassure yourself by saying, “Well, at least she tried really hard.” There’s none of that! I admire the way that she keeps finding this really uncomfortable place where her entire project is always on the verge of collapse; it just barely holds together, but the way it holds together is often just so touching to me.

FAZZOLARI I’m suddenly reminded about a screening you described to me. The filmmaker Patric Chiha was presenting his work, and during the Q&A afterward people were asking what he meant to communicate with the film.

FECTEAU The thing is, it wasn’t an abstract or obscure film at all. It was a narrative film called *Domain*, and it unfolded in a very clear way, but there was one major question left unanswered at the end of the movie. What was incredible was that people were so uncomfortable with a single moment of ambiguity. Which is so strange, because our whole lives are ambiguous. There is so much that we

hold onto as consistent, yet if you think about your day-to-day experience, your moment-to-moment experience, it’s a bunch of pieces, vibrations, sensory input and ideas, all swirling around. For instance, right now, we see green, blue, we hear a baby crying and I’m thinking that I have to pay my rent.

FAZZOLARI Most of the time we don’t expect absolute coherence, however with art people seem to expect . . .

FECTEAU For it to confirm some sort of stability or completeness.

FAZZOLARI Or to confirm that there’s a purposeful narrative to life.

FECTEAU Or even to your day. Or even to your consciousness. There’s such a resistance to the messiness of it all. It’s so interesting when I see an artist or a work of art that opens up to that messiness and expresses it without trying to limit or contain it. Seeing that done skillfully is so rare.



Lutz Bacher:
DPM 087, 2009,
inkjet print on
canvas, 64 by 40
inches. Courtesy
Alex Zachary,
New York.



Nathaniel Dorsky: *Song and Solitude*, 2006, 16mm film, 21 minutes.



Richard Hawkins: *Closing Time 2*, 2004, oil on linen, 48 by 60 inches. Courtesy Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles.

FAZZOLARI Which artists would you say do that?

FECTEAU I think Lutz's work is completely chaotic, and in the best possible way. What's inspiring is how she navigates that chaos. You get the sense that she's in control and knows what she's doing but that simultaneously she has no idea what she's doing. There's so much to be said for getting to that place. Richard Hawkins is another one in that category. What I find interesting about Richard is that you can't quite tell what begot what. Are his paintings painted those colors because he goes to Thailand and hangs out with young guys in bars, or does he hang out with young guys in bars because those are the colors of his paintings? That's a really beautiful confusion, because it doesn't seem possible to separate those things.

FAZZOLARI It's interesting how the personality of the artist can provide a context. I mean, ultimately our lives are one continuously unfolding abstract artwork and the art grows out of that context.

FECTEAU It's all these bits and pieces floating around. Our minds are these bits and pieces floating

around. The art is somehow some way of . . . giving them form.

FAZZOLARI I remember when you said you had begun work on two-sided sculptures. You wanted them to hang from a single peg on the wall while also being completely reversible. Over time it became clear that you hadn't anticipated just how challenging it would be to make them according to your usual process; just when the piece seemed to be working out formally, you would flip it around and suddenly it was off balance and wouldn't hang from the peg any longer. I think what's really marvelous is that you allowed the sculptures to push you around even when the process became unwieldy and lingered just outside of your control.

FECTEAU I don't know . . . I'm at this point now, after having finished those, and having had to struggle so much with them, and having had a period of a lot of professional and personal change, that I find myself reevaluating how to begin a new body of work. It feels that even to conceive a point of departure for

a project seems like a problem; even the conceit of saying, "These things are going to be two-sided." It's clear that there is always a conflict between the idea and the reality, which is what makes art complicated and difficult and interesting. But somehow it seems like ideas are the problem, or are holding things back.

FAZZOLARI So you think that those sculptures are too idea-based?

FECTEAU I think they started from an idea. In the end, I don't think that they are ideas . . . but really, I don't know what the hell they are.

FAZZOLARI To me it seems that you got in over your head and you had to find a way out.

FECTEAU Yes, I think that getting lost in something is really ideal. Once you know what you're doing, forget it. That's a big danger. Because if the artist has figured it all out, then it's only a matter of time before everyone else figures it out, and then the work feels so rote. Unfortunately, you see that all the time in art.

FAZZOLARI There's this passage in Nathaniel Dorsky's book *Devotional Cinema* in which he writes, "It's the fear of direct contact with the uncon-



Two documentary photographs from Vito Acconci's 52-day performance *Proximity Piece*, 1970, at the Jewish Museum, New York. Photos Joseph Carlucci.

trollable present that motivates the flight into concept. The filmmaker seeks the safety net of an idea, or something that is already known."

FACTEAU Which is remarkable because his films embrace the chaos but also are so structured. There's an incredible stylization to his work. He actually came by the studio at one point when I was working on those sculptures. I was planning to paint them pink on one side and purple on the other, but I couldn't see it working. He said something to the effect of, "Sometimes you just have to let go of the idea." Like maybe the plan to paint them pink and purple was the problem. It was kind of shocking because my gut response was, "I'm not conceptual! You're calling me a conceptual artist? How dare you!" But then I understood: even that plan was still just an idea.

FAZZOLARI I think that "conceptual artist" is one of the saddest terms right now. It gets used so much, but the work it refers to bears so little resemblance to the original Conceptual art practices. Those were really edgy, and sometimes had no comfortable closure—no exit, and occasion-

ally no entrance. For instance, Robert Barry's "Inert Gas" series, for which he released a liter of krypton or neon into the atmosphere and documented it with an image of the place where he did so, or Vito Acconci's early performance works, like the *Proximity Piece*, where he intruded on the personal space of viewers in an exhibition. The work was truly strange.

FACTEAU And poetic.

FAZZOLARI Instead, now conceptual art means work in which the idea drives how everything is built and what it means, and how it should be received or contextualized.

FACTEAU I think some of it has to do with the nature of the contemporary art market these days and with the use of language as a tool for selling art. Conceptual art has always been tied to language, even the early stuff. And because it's so linked to language it makes it easier to talk about. And when it's easier to talk about, it's easier to market.

FAZZOLARI Even so, truly challenging conceptual art is not very marketable and remains very quirky.

FACTEAU Most of what we see today is called "conceptual art" when

it's really "academic art," because that's how people are taught to make art in the schools. Young students don't say, "I want to work like de Kooning," though they might say, "I want to work 'like' de Kooning." Everything is in scare quotes.

FAZZOLARI It all has to lend itself to explanation. It has to mean something.

FACTEAU Art is really just a way of accessing meaning. The problem with an academic approach is that it often takes meaning as the generative point of art. Like, "We start with meaning and then we make art," as opposed to using art to find meaning. It's as though meaning were a thing or a place from which art originates rather than the ongoing process that happens to art over time. ○

Vincent Fecteau will have a solo show at Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, in fall 2012.

BRUNO FAZZOLARI is a Bay Area-based artist and critic.

frieze

Back to Front

As influenced by haute couture as he is by experimental filmmakers, **Vincent Fecteau** discusses his new sculptures with *Bruce Hainley*

Two lesser-known facts about Vincent Fecteau:

1) His contribution to the first issue of *Charley* magazine was a newspaper clipping about *Jeff Smith* – the best-selling cookbook author and television personality (not to mention Methodist minister and chaplain at the University of Puget Sound) – a.k.a. *The Frugal Gourmet*. On PBS from 1983, Smith abruptly left the airwaves in 1997, having settled out of court to pay an undisclosed sum to seven male plaintiffs who accused him of, in one account, ‘variously of groping, kissing and raping them when they were teenagers.’ Apparently: ‘Smith died in his sleep in July 2004 of natural causes [...] survived by his wife Patricia, and sons Channing and Jason, as well as daughters-in-law Yuki and Lisa.’

Having long ago moved from working with foamcore to papier-mâché to make his compelling and yet recalcitrant sculptures, Fecteau has recently completed a body of brightly painted, wall-mounted papier-mâché works. Although a shift of only 90 degrees, from pedestal to wall, the consequences of the change in vantage become too difficult to explain and are made even more mind-bending because all the works can be flipped, ‘back’ for ‘front’, top to bottom. The new pieces are now at at greengrassi, London and Inverleith House, Edinburgh in May 2010.

In early 2010, Fecteau and I talked in person, via email and even via text message to produce the following conversation about some of his work’s core concerns.

BRUCE HAINLEY In the past few years, you’ve spent a lot of time looking at the videos and films of George Kuchar and Nathaniel Dorsky. The longer one considers the work of either artist, qualities such as Kuchar’s diaristic loopiness or Dorsky’s intense meditations on the play of light, occur differently but definitively, in each: Kuchar has heartbreakingly meditative intensities and Dorsky can shift, quietly, into the autobiographical, say, when the viewer’s eye is guided to dwell on the stuff in his partner’s kitchen after a dinner party. I wonder if you could say something about dailiness, intensity and abstraction, and how to broach their connectedness in your work?

VINCENT FECTEAU There are few things that have inspired me more in the last few years than the films of Kuchar and Dorsky; I actually find it humbling to think about the way their lives seem so integrated with their work. I feel like my work commandeers my life, rather than just being a natural part of it, but I’m probably romanticizing their relationship to what they do. In any case I love the way they both seem to be led by their eyes. Their work begins and ends with how they visually negotiate the world around them. Which I think is kind of rare today.



Untitled
2010
Papier-mâché and
acrylic paint
86×71×29 cm
Exhibition view

BH No small part of what is compelling about your new wall-mounted work is that it demands an 'eye lead'. The pieces would seem to have a front and back and also really do not have a definitive front or back, quietly insisting upon the difficulty of apprehending the world by sight. By this I mean they trouble quick viewing and literalize what cannot be seen, in that at least half of what potentially could be seen is unavailable in a single viewing. The works exist in some actual between state, not normatively sculpture but also in no way painting, despite being quite specifically painted and sculptural. This is not the same as your other recent *papier-mâché* sculptures, situated on pedestals: anyone could walk around them. Their bases were not meant to be accessed, even if how they were positioned was at question: for instance, some rose up from 'points', while others have rectilinear foundations. Could you say more about the challenge of 'being led by the eye' and how this relates, if it does, to Kuchar and Dorsky?

'The world around us can be experienced as a continually shifting arrangement of shapes, colours, spaces, textures.'

VF I'm not trying to be cagey, but I'm not sure what I can say about the challenge of 'being led by the eye'. I'm ill-equipped, or maybe reluctant, to try and write or talk about something that seems to be so exclusively about the visual experience. I think what makes Dorsky's films, in particular, so amazing is that they resist translation. They are irreducible. I am, however, willing to take a stab at talking about the new work. First of all, I want to correct part of your description. I would not say that 'at least half of what potentially could be seen is unavailable in a single viewing' - rather, that for most of the pieces only a small portion is unavailable at any given time. However, because they are flipped front to back and top to bottom when they are shown in the other position, there are elements that probably weren't seen due to being below or slightly out of view or look

very different due to the different orientation. That's what makes these pieces kind of irritating. Although they have what we could call an 'A' side and a 'B' side, parts of a 'B' side are seen (in a 'backwards' or 'upside down' orientation) when one is looking at the 'A' side and vice versa. This problem recently reminded me of some 'limited edition' candies I saw last year called *Junior Mints Inside Outs*. A normal *Junior Mints* candy has a white minty interior covered by a chocolate shell. *Junior Mints Inside Outs*, however, consist of a chocolate mint centre and white candy coating. So they're not really 'inside out'. This drove me crazy and I kept trying to figure out how to diagram the relationship between *Junior Mints* and *Junior Mints Inside Outs*. I'm not sure it can be done. They are not opposites of each other. After you left my studio a couple of weeks ago I thought: maybe these pieces are like *Junior Mints Inside Outs*.

BH *Junior Mints Inside Outs* got the design (not to mention the interior design) wrong. All of which makes me think of the interior designer Hasi Hester. At one point, his swatch books presented a possible colour scheme for the new works. Did any of his palettes or patterns remain?

VF Ha! I'd forgotten about Hester. The colours weren't consciously influenced but now that you mention it there are some funny overlaps. I'd love to see the work hanging on some Hasi Hester original wallpaper!

BH How does design, interior or otherwise, influence your work and/or process?

VF These days I'm more excited about watching runway videos on my computer than interior stuff.

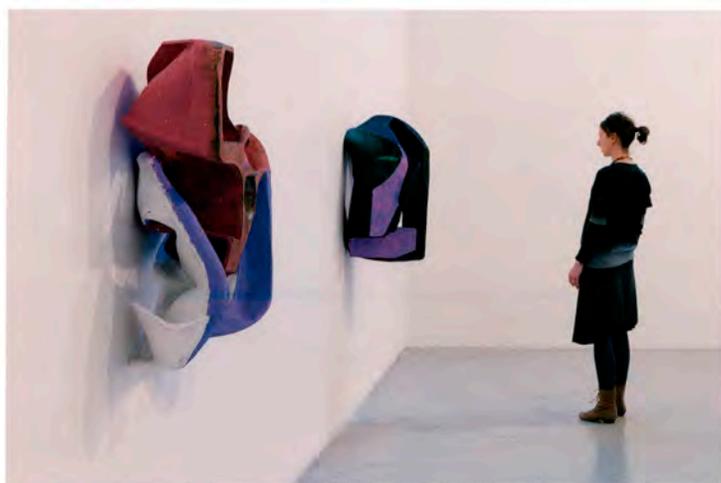
BH Oh, URL, please, of your current favourite runway vid!

VF There is something really sculpturally interesting - volumes, textures, materials, colours - about clothes in the theatrical context of the runway show. I've never been to a one, but I imagine they're distilled theatre with only the things I'm ever actually really interested in: sets, lighting, costumes, sound. I just watched a Givenchy one that I thought was quite exciting (www.tinyurl.com/y8fjflc).

BH Riccardo Tisci adores ruching and soft falling ruffles as a way to accent or conceal the body. Your last group of sculptures all started by cutting apart, working, and reworking *papier-mâché* initially shaped around a beach ball - whose ghost form, because of certain arcs, declivities or concavities, could



Untitled
1995
Collage, bottle cap
and pin
43x16 cm



'Vincent Fecteau'
2010
Installation view
greengrassi, London

still be, somehow, felt in the final pieces. The starting-point for the new works arrives via florists' flower-shipping boxes, a cardboard rectilinearity almost impossible to discern. In each piece, the *papier-mâché* curves around and carves out from cardboard tubes that not only provide structural support but also allow the works to be mounted on electrical-tape-padded nails. Could you say something about the engineering? What logistics get the pieces to balance, rather than sag, off-kilter? Does their complex engineering change or become their 'meaning'? Is it somehow akin to the 'sets, lighting, costumes, sound' that interest you?

VF These most recent pieces started with *papier-mâché* scraps from several years worth of cutting and reworking sculptures. I glued these scraps into cardboard flower boxes, cut some of the boxes in half, joining the halves back to back and started my usual process



Untitled
2010
Papier-mâché and
acrylic paint
86×71×29 cm
Rear view (not shown
during the exhibition)



Untitled
2007
20×122×5 cm
Part of a public art work commissioned for the California Institute of Quantitative Biosciences, University of California, San Francisco

‘I’ve been trying to consider what sexuality – its potential hot mess and comic bite as much as its elusive and allusive specificities – has to do with aesthetics.’

of adding and subtracting forms, shapes, with *papier-mâché*. Several years ago, I made some relief pieces for a public art project and decided to revisit the problems of wall-mounted sculpture. I thought that it might be interesting to see if it was possible to make sculptures with no front, back, top or bottom. When I decided that these pieces would be hung on the wall and be reversible, I knew that the mechanism of this movement and installation should be clear and simple: hang from one post, no extra support. The forms and the fact that they were reversible – that was complicated enough. It seemed important to me that the ‘how’ was as honest as possible. The cardboard tubes cut through the form and, I think, suggest that there is another side, another way to hang, allowing you to see the nail and the wall. As with everything I make, the engineering part was all trial and error. I figured out how to get the pieces to balance just by altering them over and over. So, yeah, the forms were definitely informed by the physical limitations of hanging on a wall and being reversible. The inside of the tubes expose the raw *papier-mâché* and the mechanism of the piece, so I guess it’s like a ‘behind-the-scenes’ view. Maybe the insides of the tubes are the pieces’ true ‘backs’ or ‘bottoms.’

BH Or oculars. When we were standing in front of the forms in an almost completed state, the two tube holes, even though they’re never situated like eye sockets, took on aspects of ‘eyes’ – like masks, while clearly not being masks at all. I’ve always found reference in your work as compelling as it is oblique: the single half of a walnut shell shifting into lone testicle; the ‘stains’ in certain works suggesting piss or cum on underwear; a pattern in relief becoming a sneaker tread and just as quickly ‘mere’ pattern. I’m fascinated by how and why something abstract takes on referential specificity and then ‘loses’ it. You have an ongoing commitment to what is often called abstraction. How do you think about abstraction and/or non-representation, given that no small part of what’s bracing about it is how it escapes or shrugs off language?

VF Language is a major part of the way we negotiate the world, but it’s not the only way we think. Shapes, colours, spaces, textures inevitably invoke specific references but the inverse is also real. The world around us, even our emotional or psychological world, can be experienced as a continually shifting arrangement of shapes, colours, spaces, textures. I like to think of this reality as some sort of messy continuum rather than an

‘either/or’ problem. It’s kind of like these new pieces with their shifting double-sidedness.

BH It reminds me of something you talked about a long time ago, the singular lighting effect of a gay bar in San Francisco, which, if looked at one way was just a vertical line of red light and another way spelled out, briefly, magically, the name of the bar, THE DETOUR. You proposed it as a diagram for the creative process, and at the time I took that to mean the lighting effect itself. Now I’d be tempted to say it was the effect, but also the context and atmosphere of where the effect took place, and maybe even the suggestiveness of detouring, that made it such a provocative diagram. Without getting all early 1990s identity politic-y, I’ve been trying to consider what sexuality, its potential hot mess and comic bite as much as its elusive and allusive specificities, has to do with aesthetics. How these matters are bound up with AIDS and its cultural ramifications complicates any thinking ... I’m starting to drift, so let me try to anchor things. You participated in a retrospective show, organized by Chris Perez at Ratio 3, for Kiki, a short-lived San Francisco gallery, founded and directed by the late Rick Jacobsen. In 1994, you had your first solo show at Kiki, ‘Ben’, named after Michael Jackson’s rat. Any thoughts?



Far left:
Untitled
2008
Papier-mâché and acrylic paint
65×83×32 cm

Left:
Untitled
2005
Papier-mâché, acrylic paint, burlap and balsa wood
29×56×46 cm

Right from top to bottom:
Junior Mints
Inside Outs

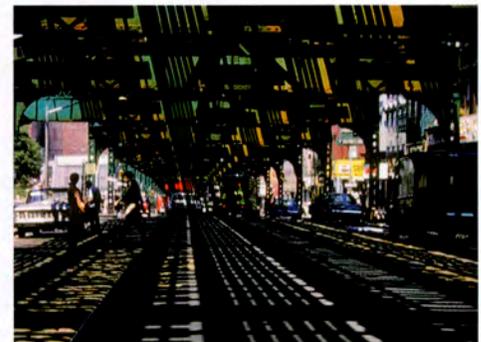
(Limited edition)
'I kept trying to figure out how to diagram the relationship between Junior Mints and Junior Mints Inside Outs. After you left my studio a couple of weeks ago I thought: maybe these pieces are like Junior Mints Inside Outs.'

George Kuchar
Burnout
2003
Video still

Nathaniel Dorsky
Hours for Jerome
1966-71
16mm film still
'There are few things that have inspired me more in the last few years than the films of Kuchar and Dorsky. I actually find it humbling to think about the way their lives seem so integrated with their work.'

A model wearing a design from the Givenchy Spring/Summer collection at Paris Fashion Week 2010
'For me there is something really sculpturally interesting - volumes, textures, materials, colours - about clothes in the theatrical context of the runway show.'

Below:
Untitled
2006
Papier-mâché
46x74x40 cm



VF I'd never really thought about the word that the sign was spelling out which seems ridiculous but is kind of typical for me. And you're probably right. I'm not sure it would have had the same impact had it not been in a very old school style gay bar (all black interior, chain link fences etc.) and had I not usually been drinking when I was thinking about it. It's funny because the space that the wall-mounted laser defined was a semicircle. Now when I think about seeing that sign and moving around the space it seems related to these most recent pieces. They're also on the wall and require a half-circle of movement if one is really to 'see' them. I think who I am, where I've been and what I've seen absolutely makes its way into the work. In fact, I think that's all there is. After the 'Ben' show, I decided not to approach content directly but to trust that it would follow me as I moved around the room.

BH Speaking of moving around the room: the Christopher Wilmarth sculpture, *New* (1968) that operated as a centre both for 'Not New Work' (the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art show you curated from their collection - a selection of 25 works which had rarely, if ever, been displayed before) and for

the set of postcards published to document it, does a lot with the half circle. Although a freestanding sculpture, *New* provides an intense consideration of two-sidedness and of the paradoxical management of magic and revealing the trick of materials (the clear glass slab supporting *New*'s wood elements appears and disappears), among other things.

VF Despite the number of images, and the fact that it's a symmetrical 'two-sided' form, the postcards fails to capture the strangeness of *New*. A 360-degree tracking shot cannot approximate the way a human body moves around an object or within a space: heads turn, backs slouch, eyes shift. It's that conflict between a desire for some kind of magic and the inevitably limiting material reality that keeps sculpture so relevant.

Bruce Hainley is a writer who lives in Los Angeles, USA. He teaches at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

Vincent Fecteau lives in San Francisco, USA. His first museum exhibition in the UK runs from 15 May - 4 July at Inverleith House, Edinburgh. It is presented in partnership with greengrassi, London.

The New York Times

Art in Review

Vincent Fecteau

Matthew Marks Gallery
523 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through Oct. 24

All art forms could be described as time based. Mediums like performance and video have duration built in. But even paintings, sculptures and other object-based arts have to persuade you to stick around.

Vincent Fecteau's new abstract tabletop sculptures, which form one of the best gallery shows in New York this fall, are plenty sticky. Airy yet hunkered down, the eight pieces here were all made in 2008 and first shown at the Art Institute of Chicago. They are Mr. Fecteau's largest — bushel-basket, rather than shoebox, size — and they bundle together painting, sculpture and architecture into unpredictable, almost performative structures.

These structures twist, turn and surprise, changing dramatically as you move around them. Each piece is an irrational aggregate of forms and openings made from papier-mâché molded over different objects and painted one color, with occasional addition of black and white. The colors — purple, turquoise, dark mustard — are as insistently idiosyncratic as the uneven surfaces, odd protrusions, hints of pasted newspaper and arcs to nowhere.

If flattened, Mr. Fecteau's sculptures might resemble paintings by Thomas Nozkowski or Raoul De Keyser. Different notions of touch are explored. Sometimes a seemingly monochromatic piece will reveal patches of black that may be solid



Two Vincent Fecteau sculptures, part of a series of eight at Matthew Marks Gallery.

or textured, or rubbed on, suggesting use and wear. White interior spaces or underbellies sometimes can seem soiled, suggesting a less deliberate, less loving kind of contact. In Mr. Fecteau's work everything invites you to look closer and to better understand the possibilities of material expression.

His pieces provide unusually detailed evidence of the way an artist's thinking is deflected imperfectly through an object. It ricochets toward your brain, which instantly starts determining whether or not you will be sticking around. **ROBERTA SMITH**

IN CONVERSATION Vincent Fecteau WITH CONSTANCE LEWALLEN

On the occasion of his new exhibit, which will be on view at Matthew Marks Gallery's 24th Street location from September 10 to October 24, 2009, Contributing Editor Constance Lewallen paid a visit to Vincent Fecteau's Inner Richmond studio to talk about his recent body of work and more.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

CONSTANCE LEWALLEN (RAIL): I wasn't aware of your earlier collages of pop imagery until I saw some at Ratio 3 [Gallery in San Francisco]. I am curious about the process that took you from collage to the highly abstract, non-referential 3D objects you make now.

VINCENT FECTEAU: Those collages were part of the first group of works I made after graduating from school. I was Nayland Blake's assistant at the time and was drawn to the way he often used narrative as a way of initiating the making of objects. At the time I was thinking a lot about the accusations of child molestation against Michael Jackson and the issue of repressed memories, and I constructed a rather convoluted "cat and mouse" narrative on which I based my first show at Kiki Gallery. I had no money, but it was January, when stores would unload their previous year calendars for almost nothing. So I bought all these cat calendars, cut out the heads, and collaged them into mound-like shapes, replacing cat eyes with human eyes, making fake tears with a hot glue gun, or covering the eyes with red sequins. I also made some simple sculptures out of shoeboxes. They were titled "The Shirley Temple Rooms" after the guest bedroom at Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch. I guess those were the first "model"-like sculptures I made. However, as soon as I had finished that show it was clear to me that I wouldn't be able to sustain that particular process. Narrative thinking just doesn't come naturally to me.

RAIL: You were thinking of becoming an architect at one time, I read.

FECTEAU: Yes, in high school I thought I would be an architect. I looked at architecture programs, and I realized I wasn't cut out for that.

RAIL: Because?

FECTEAU: They seemed kind of rigid and required a huge commitment from the very beginning. I wasn't sure what I wanted to study. I just wanted to get out of high school. I still sometimes wonder if I'm doing what I should be. It took me years after that Kiki show in 1994 to really consider myself an artist.

RAIL: When did you start making sculpture?

FECTEAU: After the Kiki show I was in a few group shows but my next solo show was at Feature when it

was on Greene Street. The show consisted of small foam core and collage works using images culled mainly from design magazines. I think I had begun to figure out something about setting up relationships that could read visually, conceptually, and formally. They were almost like diagrams or conceptual models. Eventually I began trying to stretch the logic of the relationships further and moved away from such culturally specific images. Eliminating the collage elements enabled me to change the size of the objects, but foam core was difficult to work with once it got beyond a very small size. I wanted to make things larger and incorporate color so I started covering the foam core with papier-mâché. With the foam core works and earlier collages, it was all concept—think about it, construct it. It wasn't a hands-on process. It was clear when I started with papier-mâché that I had been missing a hands-on approach. Thinking and figuring out by making. I think there is a real knowledge in one's hands.

RAIL: You mentioned that you did take an architecture class; you had some experience with model making with balsa wood, foam core, i.e., materials not often used in finished projects. That's why people have made a connection between your work and architectural modeling. You can't get away from the fact that when you look at your sculpture, there is a connection with architecture and design.

FECTEAU: Yes. Less and less I think, but for years that was definitely true. Somehow the model-like aspect of the work allowed me to think of the pieces almost as propositions for art rather than Art. It made the process a bit less intimidating.

RAIL: They are not bronze—you gave yourself an out.

FECTEAU: It might have been an out or a way in.

RAIL: Your sculptures, which sit on pedestals, still suggest that they could still be transferable to a larger size. And, they all deal with exterior versus interior. You really want to look inside them, walk around them, that's part of their appeal. You can't perceive the whole from one point of view; they insist on multiple views.

FECTEAU: I think that's one of the most compelling aspects of sculpture. It really resists the photograph, the single view. I like to think that it can never be really completely held in the mind and that makes its physical existence necessary.

RAIL: In the sculptures that preceded the current group, color wasn't as important as it has become. You used mostly neutral colors—grey, tan, white. You were concentrating more on the physical form.

FECTEAU: When I started working with papier-mâché, there were so many issues I was trying to figure out that I think color took a back seat. As I began to understand a bit about the way the forms could work I became more interested in manipulating the color. I think it's just a matter of keeping things interesting and challenging for myself. After my last show, I thought I would have to change material. Papier-mâché is so laborious, and I just felt frustrated by it. I started looking into new materials but everything was too complicated, dried too fast, or put too much distance between the object and myself. For better or for worse, I think in papier-mâché now. There are forms or curves that I can only imagine making out of papier-mâché. It's amazingly flexible and endlessly additive and reductive.

RAIL: You still sometimes collage things on the sculpture. You had a kind of romance with a half walnut, which gave the sculpture an added texture, another formal element.

FECTEAU: It also very simply created a shift in scale and grounded the piece in a particular reality.

RAIL: In your current work, you are not going to collage objects onto the sculpture?

FECTEAU: Probably not. Now I am more interested in the color and the way the colors interact or are at odds with each other. Sometimes I think my work is simply about what happens when a specific color is placed on a particular curve.

RAIL: Take me through the process. I haven't seen any drawings. You don't sketch beforehand?

FECTEAU: No. Many of these works started with a large beach ball that I covered with seven or eight layers of papier-mâché. Then I removed the ball and manipulated the shell: cutting, adding, cutting, and adding, over and

over. I reacted at each step to what was in front of me until it felt like its own thing.

RAIL: Prior to this series, did you start with an object like a beach ball?

FECTEAU: No, the earlier works started with foam core shapes, like a pyramid for example. I would papier-mâché the form, cut it, glue it back together, add more papier-mâché and repeat until it was finished. It's basically the same as my current process, just with a different starting point.

RAIL: You place the sculptures on pedestals of the same height.

FECTEAU: Yes. I think meaning resides in the pieces themselves, not necessarily in their installation. I work on a group of sculptures at the same time so they obviously have relationships and I do think about that kind of thing when I'm installing, but I'm not really interested in installation as some kind of critique. It's a question that always comes up and I always feel a bit defensive about it. Why don't people ask painters why they choose to hang their paintings on a white wall?

RAIL: How do you feel about making formal sculpture now, when the art discourse is about globalism, relational art, collaboration, gift giving? You are not dealing with those issues. Instead, you are making sculpture in the traditional sense.

FECTEAU: I feel like I may have something to add to that particular sculptural conversation. I don't think I'm going to redirect it but I hope to inject an anecdote or an awkward, off color joke. I'm not sure why that particular conversation grabbed my attention, but it has.

RAIL: There's room in the world for all kinds of art—painting, sculpture, giving food to people in galleries.

FECTEAU: Definitely. I think flexibility is the highest of virtues.

RAIL: It doesn't have to be related to what you do?

FECTEAU: No. Sometimes the things that are closest to what I do are the hardest to see. I have my prejudices but I'd like to think that sometimes I can see around them.

RAIL: There's humor, which I find in your work, too. Your objects are curious—they can't be easily described.

FECTEAU: I think that's a great compliment. I would love my pieces to seem "right" but without reason. Too often people think ideas generate the work; I think the work generates ideas.

RAIL: You don't name your pieces.

FECTEAU: I never think of titles when I'm working on the pieces so it doesn't make sense to me to add them at the end. Besides, I'd like to think that whatever my work has to offer is available to someone simply willing to look.

RAIL: We talked about your using color more prominently and even combining colors within single pieces, complicating them further, and not just solid colors but often mottled or flecked.

FECTEAU: I use color to accentuate or disrupt forms and suggest or frustrate references. I'm interested in the way it can either sit on the surface as decoration or actually seem to generate form.

RAIL: In this series, you painted the works purple, lavender, beige, and green. What suggests the color to you?

FECTEAU: The colors come from things I see around: buildings or clothing. I might have an emotional reaction or a memory triggered by a specific shade and I'll try to use that in the work. Often I will try the same color on several pieces before it seems to find the right form.

RAIL: You don't work very quickly, because your process is laborious. You seem to make a body of work every year.

FECTEAU: About eight pieces every year and a half.

RAIL: What are you working on now?

FECTEAU: Since my process is about building up and cutting apart, over and over again I have accumulated a lot of scrap pieces. There are hundreds of hours of work in these large scraps. It's horrible to throw them out. So I decided that I would start the new pieces using all these scraps. I glued the scrap pieces into cardboard flower boxes, papier-mâché the whole thing, cut it in half, glued two halves together and continued adding and removing papier-mâché. They will hang from the wall and will be reversible. They won't have a designated front or back, top or bottom. Although one side will always be against the wall, they are completely, in theory, 360-degree sculptures.



Vincent Fecteau, "Untitled" (2008). Paper-mâché and acrylic paint; 25 3/4 x 32 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches, 65 x 83 x 32 cm. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery.

RAIL: Do you use trial and error?

FECTEAU: Yes.

RAIL: I have to say that these don't look like anything I have seen before.

FECTEAU: Thanks, I'm excited about them.

RAIL: They have a lot of motion, a centrifugal feel.

FECTEAU: My instant reaction when someone says that is to figure out how to counteract it. I hate the idea of things becoming too anthropomorphic. If they have too much movement, I have to make adjustments.

RAIL: You work on several pieces at once?

FECTEAU: Yes, since papier-mâché takes time to dry, I do a layer or a couple of layers, and while they're drying, I work on another one. Also, it keeps it fresh in my head, so I am not trying too hard to push one thing through.

RAIL: You have a small studio.

FECTEAU: Yes, it's feeling smaller as the work gets a bit bigger but I've been here for over 13 years and I feel pretty comfortable in it.

FECTEAU: I have had someone help me in the beginning with the pieces that started with beach balls, adding layers of papier-mâché. It only works at the very beginning of the process. As soon as it gets beyond really basic forms there are too many decisions that need to be made and I have to make them myself.

RAIL: Do you still work at a florist shop?

FECTEAU: I arrange flowers and deliver.

RAIL: Does flower arranging come naturally to you?

FECTEAU: I don't think it did initially. At first I was just the driver. As I watched people make the arrangements I thought, "I can do that." So my boss and co-workers, some very talented people, taught me.

RAIL: It's a job that involves aesthetic decisions.

FECTEAU: Yes, it's very sculptural. It's related to my work but also very different, so I don't bring it home with me. It's a job. But I like it; it gets back to the fact that I like working with my hands. That's how I relate to the world. **BR**

ARTFORUM

CHICAGO

Vincent Fecteau

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

The viewer may find it disconcerting when Vincent Fecteau's wonderfully erudite abstract sculptures reveal themselves, on close inspection, to be made of papier-mâché. Plaster, ceramic, or cast bronze seem the obvious media in which to produce such classically formal exercises reveling in unpretentious plays of shape, volume, color, and contour. But Fecteau is not compelled by elaborate lost-wax casting techniques; instead he uses simple means, building up these recent works with paper, glue, and gesso.

Curator James Rondeau notes in the exhibition brochure that "few artists have made such deceptively modest and idiosyncratic works so assured, involuted, and transformative." Rondeau's designations are right, though one of them only partially so, for while the exhibition's eight small objects (all works *Untitled*, 2008) may be idiosyncratic in their individual forms, Fecteau's abstract practice is in fact willfully unoriginal, the artist candidly pledging art-historical allegiances. He boldly summons, for example, Constantin Brancusi and Jean Arp (whose works hold court in the Art Institute's modern collection), calling on the rudimentary formal language championed in early-twentieth-century avant-garde sculpture.

Each of Fecteau's objects began as a papier-mâché cast of a beach ball. Working on all eight pieces at the same time, he pulled, bent, crushed, and cut at the basic spherical shape, adding papier-mâché appendages here and there and creating undulating organic contours and architectural planes, deep pockets of space and shallow crevices. Each of these assembled forms was then unified with a final layer of papier-mâché and gessoed and painted. Despite their varying appearances, the works are roughly the same in size and mass, a homogeneity brought into relief by the museum's having displayed them on uniformly proportioned pedestals. Several have flat tops, which together, given the works' equivalent heights, create the illusion of an invisible horizontal plane spanning the room, parallel to the square tops of the white bases. Such consistencies establish an aesthetic equilibrium from which the formal incongruities pleasingly rise to view.

Flat hues of purple, green, orange, red, and blue; faux finishes and white underbellies; scumbled shadows and brushy surface textures all imperil the sculptures' compositional integrity. Art-historical evocations



Vincent Fecteau,
Untitled, 2008,
papier-mâché,
acrylic paint,
15 1/4 x 28 1/2 x 19".

abound. For example, the ochre and black work, with its organic contours and hard edges, might be a section cut from Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913, but it also sports a black stippled pattern evoking the dotted surface of Picasso's painted bronze *Glass of Absinthe*, 1914. The green and white sculpture is resolutely more graphic in its color combination and rectilinearity. Yet Fecteau carefully dirties its interior white planes, giving the illusion of both age and shadow.

In the exhibition brochure, Fecteau is quoted as saying, "Ideas that formed with one sculpture will often end up being used for another. Colors and textures switch and move around until they find their match. So they have an inherent relationship, kind of like siblings." Although wrought from the same material as piñatas, the eight "siblings" here share an unmistakable, modern European ancestry; their unabashed formal conceit and indebtedness to early-twentieth-century abstraction make the Art Institute an ideal venue for their debut.

—Michelle Grabner

ARTFORUM

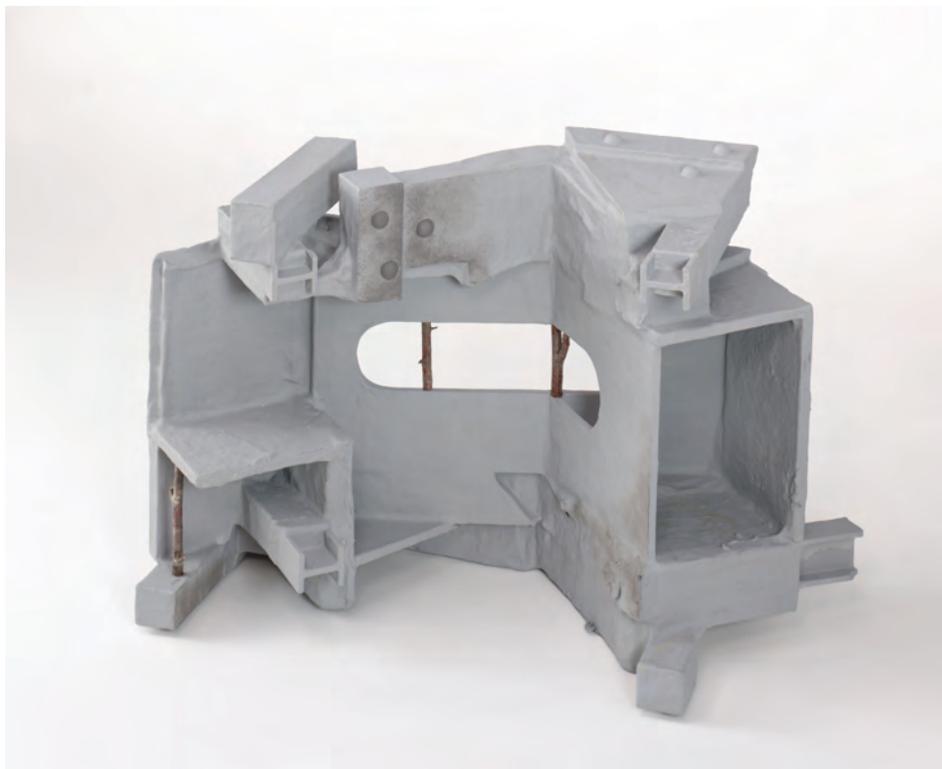
BERKELEY, CA

VINCENT FECTEAU

BERKELEY ART MUSEUM

Vincent Fecteau's modest-scale sculptures have always exuded a curiously mixed vibe: They're inviting because of their arts-and-crafts materials yet repellent because of their open, even defiant expression of creative anxiety. The artist's first solo museum exhibition, which took place as part of the Berkeley Art Museum's "Matrix" series before traveling to the Pasadena Museum of California Art, included thirteen of these untitled pieces. As the largest collection of his work assembled by an art institution to date, the show had an unexpected graciousness, but the sculptures still conjured a host of enigmatic associations, with implied narratives and formal tensions embedded in their flatly painted veneers.

Fecteau finished all the pieces in 2001 or 2002, but, as pointed out by curator Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, his creative process often spans many years preceding a work's completion. That back story informs the thorny delicacy of these sculptures, which might initially seem tossed off or unfinished amalgamations of papier-mâché, Popsicle sticks, foamcore, and the like. The color schemes are basic—gray browns, matte blacks, muted natural tones—and some are smoothly applied, while others betray painterly traces of drips and brushstrokes. But on close examination, there's a clear sense of exactitude to the artist's activities, an angst-ridden mixture of plotting, tearing down, destroying, and reworking. This discord between intention and apparent accident is no small part of the work's appeal. Fecteau purposefully deceives his audiences. His three-dimensional collages invariably suggest things they are not: What looks solid is really made of cardboard; what looks like metal is brushstrokes on newspaper; what looks useful is totally nonfunctional. Fecteau's sculptures are delicate, lovingly crafted works masquerading as clunky craft projects.



Vincent Fecteau, untitled, 2002, mixed media, 12 x 10 x 20"

The exhibition design in Berkeley was particularly effective in highlighting this kind of artistic practice. Individual pieces were perched on a series of high tables with white tops and unfinished wooden legs and illuminated with flat ambient lighting; the room resembled less a gallery than a tidy workshop with a baker's dozen projects seemingly just completed. This setting also abetted the architectural discourse often used around Fecteau's oeuvre (as it was when the work appeared during the past year in the Whitney Biennial and "Artists Imagine Architecture" at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art). His pieces often seem roomlike—some suggest miniature avant-garde stage sets with oddly angled ramps and space-age catwalks—and, while never getting too close to addressing social environments, refer to the convention of the architectural maquette. For example, one 2002 piece seems as if it were made from a hollowed-out salt lick;

it is trimmed with twine and adorned with scallop shells and a walnut husk, all painted white. Made on a larger scale, the structure would look like a domed igloo or polar bear habitat at the zoo: Like all of Fecteau's work, the sculpture thrives on a tension between its small size and its monumental aura. You'll either imagine it getting bigger or picture yourself shrinking to run around inside it, ready to play some part in a drama about creative block. The story probably involves some kind of emotional outburst, one conjured up in the mind of the viewer daring enough to enter. Once inside this aesthetic worldview, you'll find an artist hitting an important point in his artistic development, creating sculptural platforms rife with so many possibilities.

—Glen Helfand

ARTFORUM

A THOUSAND WORDS

Vincent Fecteau TALKS ABOUT HIS NEW SCULPTURES

Things in my work happen over what seem like large spans of time. I had been wanting to change scale for several years, to move away from something that is read as a model to something closer to a "sculpture." Initially, it was a very useful concept—making model-like sculptures or models of sculptures or maybe sculptures of models as a way of dealing with my idealistic view of art, its overwhelming possibilities—but I became tired of thinking of my work as a stand-in for something else. Often in the past, the scale was determined by the collage elements. The pictures I used were a certain size, and I built the pieces around them. Part of wanting to make a change in scale coincided with a desire to get rid of the collage elements.

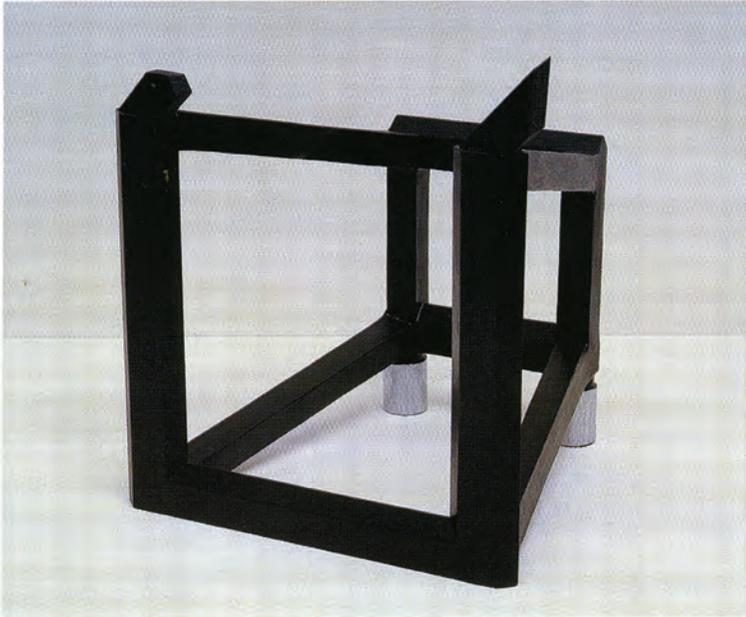
Once I was no longer tied to collage, the field was wide open—but large sculpture was out of the question. Technically and conceptually, it's very intimidating to me. I never studied sculpture in school, and my only experience dealing with 3-D visual problems was in an amazing architecture class I took as an undergrad at Wesleyan, which was probably one of the reasons I started making model-like sculptures and using foamcore. My working practice is very intuitive, and decisions are made in the process of making and taking things apart. It seems too difficult to me to work this way on a large scale. I wanted to find a size that could accommodate the range of materials I was interested in using—foamcore, paper, craft items like pinecones, Popsicle sticks, balsa wood, etc.—to make a place where all these materials with their individual scales could meet. Papier-mâché was necessary to support the larger size of the sculptures while allowing me to manipulate the surface color and texture. I could remain interested in the handmade

object, experimenting with its idiosyncrasies and imperfections, approaching the idea of the handmade on both conceptual and physical levels.

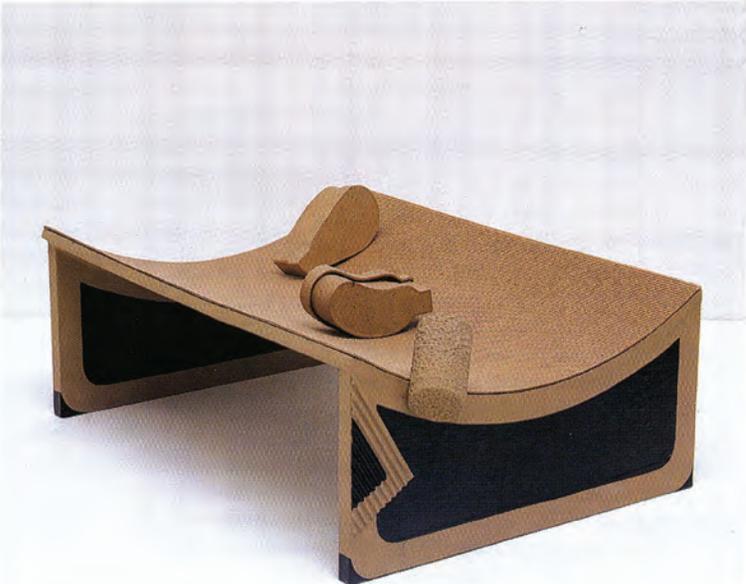
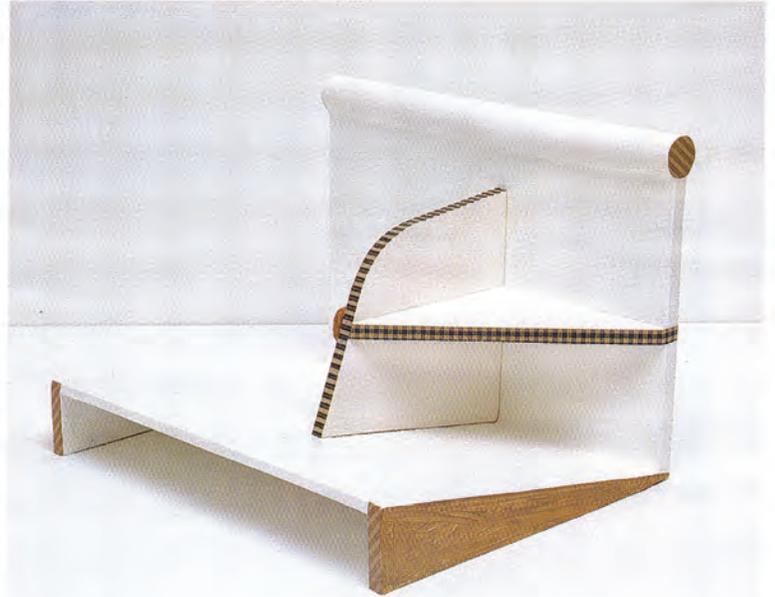
Most of the material elements have been floating around in my studio for years, but it's difficult to pinpoint why something resonates for me. Much of it has to do with formal properties: color, shape, texture, and size, the excitement of the way some things relate, rhyme, or collide with others. For example, I've been interested in using half a walnut shell for a long time. Originally, I liked the way its texture was or wasn't related to this faux-crinkled paper I was obsessed with, and I kept trying to pair the two. That never amounted to a piece, so the walnuts went back into a box.

Weirdly or not, I never considered using a whole walnut, it was always about the half—its having these very specific primary references (food, holiday) and then these secondary references (testicles). I like using things that have several layers of specificity and combining them with others to accentuate and simultaneously compromise those specifics. On this sculpture with nutshell, the papers have a specificity all their own: They describe a tastefully banal, craft sensibility, employing a tan color related to the walnut's but calling into question the papers' banality. Is the walnut a 3-D manifestation of the patterned paper or the cancerous result of it? The walnut might look like a testicle or a turd, but its location on the sculpture interferes with that reading. It's a decorative element, but it's not decorating anything. It's the real in relation to the unreality of the rest of the sculpture.

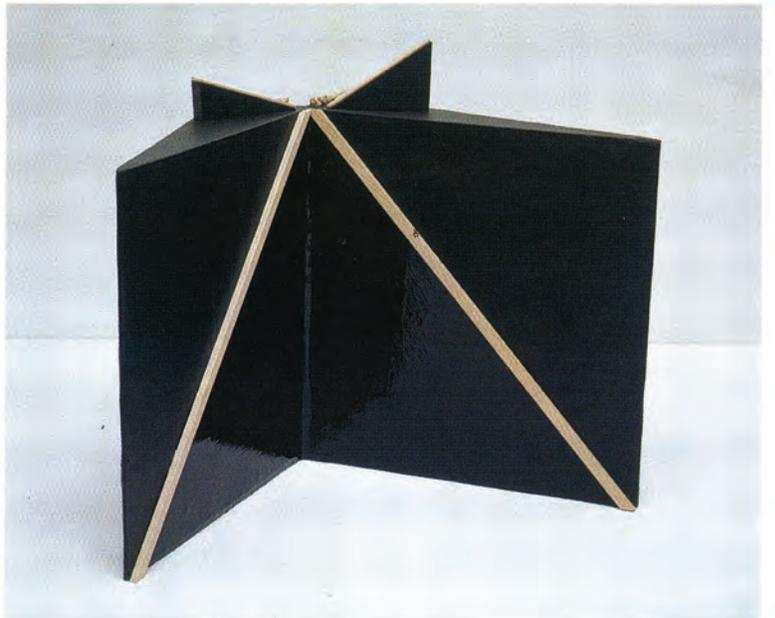
I like to work on a group of pieces all at the same time, spending long



Top right: **Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2000**, mixed media, 12 x 17 x 14½". Bottom right: **Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2000**, mixed media, 13½ x 19½ x 13".



Top left: **Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2000**, mixed media, 16 x 14½ x 14". Bottom left: **Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2000**, mixed media, 8 x 20 x 15".



periods just staring at things and trying to activate or access a feeling that somehow relates to what I'm trying to make. Usually I'm looking through magazines and listening to music, aware of the work in the room but not specifically concentrating on it. When I'm open to things but not fixed on an objective is when I'm most likely to discover a connection that helps a piece feel more resolved. There's this gay bar in San Francisco called The Detour. It's an archetypal gay bar: black walls, mirrors, chain-link fences. The one lighting effect is a kind of projector that spells out the name of the bar. If you look at the projection directly, all you see is a vertical line of red light. Only by

turning your head can you see, in the corner of your eye, for a brief second, THE DETOUR. I find it strangely compelling, since you can never be sure you saw it. It disappears as soon as you try to see it. I've begun to think of it as a diagram for the creative process—a process that, I think, requires a substantial amount of faith: faith that materials can transcend their representational limitations and locate new meaning. For this transmutation to work, the viewer must also have faith in its possibility. That's one of the most beautiful things about art, the faith or will that can make a rubber band or a pushpin the location of all this meaning and at the same time acknowledge the limitations of its reality. □

Vincent Fecteau is known for making small, bracingly private constructions out of foamcore and collage elements. As much as his inventions, through maquette-like scale and goofily specific found photos (of towels, toilet-paper holders), investigate the sculptural possibilities and erotic atmospherics of decor, the glue that holds Fecteau's artless-seeming oeuvre together is a quirky querying of what art is and what it does—of how and why and if art differs from craft.

The new sculptures, which he exhibited at greengrassi gallery in London last fall, enlarge the weird theater and intensify the mysterious energies of his previous work while abandoning all photographic collage material. Elegantly wrought geometries—often in papier-mâché, almost always in (and somehow about) three hues (black, tan, and white)—the pieces proffer an utterly idiosyncratic baroque: pinecone, walnut shell, dusting of “snow,” burlap fringe, and everywhere cunning but by no means erotically muted textures. In the earlier structures, Fecteau interrogated the libidinal possibilities lingering in dumb magazine clippings and foamcore representations of corners, nowhere corridors, and basements, yet the miniature scale distanced any human body. Suggesting by turns a Tony Smith (resting on film canisters?) or, just as casually, a Gene Moore—gone-goth window display for Tiffany's, the sculptures now seem haunted by bodies or parts no longer (if ever) present—articulated chambers for desire's spooky special effects.

—BRUCE HAINLEY

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

ARTFORUM

OPENINGS

VINCENT FECTEAU

DENNIS COOPER

Young artists tend to be ninety percent nerve and ten percent whatever else. They rise and/or flop depending on the complexity of their cleverness. Vincent Fecteau is different—not that he's not exceedingly clever, etc., but he seems strangely unsure of himself. So unsure, in fact, that unlike other "Slacker" artists such as Sean Landers or Jack Pierson, he doesn't flaunt his feelings of inadequacy. Instead he fumbles, nitpicks, and beautifies away, lost in a blissful if nerve-racked daydream. Fecteau makes art the way kids build backyard spaceships, with meticulous attention to detail, a grudging respect for the trash he works with, and no real

hope of re-creating what he sees when he closes his eyes. He's shooting for the sublime, albeit in a backhanded way. His collages and sculptures are exquisitely calculated, goofily designed, emotionally weird low-tech containers for the ineffable, whatever *that* is. He's not sure what he's

getting at, or even how best to express his confusion, which is why his work constantly shape-shifts.

Fecteau's obsessive search for meaning (or whatever) takes him to some unlikely places—cat calendars, *E.T.*, content-free celebrities like Dan Aykroyd—but he can't quite translate the unusual effect these things have on him. Actually he's not even sure his art is the right place to try to manifest his private search, but it's not like he has any choice. All he can do is fine-tune his ambivalence and hope that if he's enough of a perfectionist on the surface, the work will communicate what he can't. A strange



unfocused beauty, specific but indefinable, radiates from his art's cautious comedy of errors, as scarily familiar as it is tingly on the eyes as it is amusing to deconstruct. "For me, art is all about frustration," says Fecteau. "It comforts me to think of my pieces as models or diagrams for other pieces . . . not artworks in and of themselves. But they suggest the possibility of other artworks. That makes me feel better. Otherwise I'd feel like I was trying for something that's impossible. It's like the thing in pop music that's so intangible yet magical. There's something there, and I can't figure out what it is. And I'm trying to look for it in all these different places."

Fecteau's work has similarities to that of other artists/foragers of pop culture like Richard Hawkins, John Miller, Jessica Stockholder, and Nayland Blake, all of whom he admires. But his art has just as much if not more in common with self-consciously modest visionaries like Vija Celmins and Richard Tuttle. Incorporated in his witty toying around with abstract forms and found imagery is both a kind of awe at people's ability to find meaning in the banal and a melancholic resignation to the peculiarity of his task. "My continuing struggle is that I want to express this cheesy emotion that I know isn't cheesy," he says. "And I don't know how to do it."

When Fecteau was an undergraduate, he interned for one intense summer with the late Hannah Wilke. Though there's little evidence that her work directly influenced his, her contentious relationship to the art world opened his eyes. "I was doing these drawings that were really bad. Hannah used to say, 'Don't be an artist. It's no fun. Go into interior design or something.' And I saw how difficult it was for her, just on a day-to-day basis. She was a real artist—she had this conceptual basis she was working from. But she did all these other things that were coming from her narcissism and whatever else she was going

through. So I think she did influence me in the way she structured things, and in other ways." Wilke's process provided a sobering contrast to the agenda being promoted at the time in Wesleyan's art department: "Talk about p.c. The conceptual work being done there was really emotionally vacant. And whenever I'm confronted by something like that, I just want to do something horrible."

Fecteau moved to San Francisco on graduating, and soon thereafter he had his first one-person show, at that city's late great renegade gallery, Kiki. For "Ben"—the show's title was lifted from Michael Jackson's love song to a pet rat—he lined the walls with silly, eerie photocollages, mostly made of cat's heads scissored from magazines and organized into towering piles of various sizes and shapes. Some of the cats' eyes were both emphasized and partly obscured by a layer of glue, simultaneously paying tribute to the creatures' mysteriously monotonous stares and parodying—with Fecteau's characteristically strict yet reticent delicacy—our tendency to project meaning and reciprocal interest into things that are essentially functional. The cats became advertisements not for their own indecipherable needs but for our neediness; they remained harmless and innocent even as our projections crystallized on their surfaces.



Other works combined Fecteau's own photographs of cats with appropriated images of *E.T.*, that universal-by-default symbol of sanitized horror. One of these pieces grouped the images in a circle that seemed at once decorative-wreath-like and defensive, like a wagon train geared for enemy attack. On the floor were small sculptures resembling comically inept rat traps or pet-hamster houses built out of shoe boxes. Again, Fecteau's designs emphasized the touching and ridiculous ways in which we salve our terror of the unknowable by attempting to capture and disempower it in its most palatable forms.

Fecteau's newest pieces broaden the range of his references and reveal an even more poetic formal approach. They are deeper and more mysteriously comical, and the relationships they create between found imagery—including such complicatedly resonant items as Jonathan Livingston Seagull, the Anne Frank house, and liquor bottles—are simpler, less overtly theatrical, and capable of housing greater indecision. Physically, they're increasingly insecure and vague, as though they longed to exist in a form somewhere between the second and third dimensions. Even more than in his previous work, one feels Fecteau's inordinate complicity with the objects of his fascination. As the work loosens, its mazelike internal world materializes, and the artist's touch grows ever more enigmatic and inconsolable. □

Dennis Cooper is a writer who lives in Los Angeles. His most recent novel is *Try* (Grove Press, 1994), and a film version of his earlier book *Frisk* is in the final stages of production.