



ART & EXHIBITS

This SF sculptor is a certified ‘genius.’ Why isn’t he famous in his hometown?

A studio visit with Vincent Fecteau as he preps for Wattis Institute exhibition, his first SF show in 17 years



Charles Desmarais | September 4, 2019
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Sculptor Vincent Fecteau works deliberately in his San Francisco studio, without a phalanx of assistants.
Photo: Paul Kuroda, Special to The Chronicle

“There are ways of being invisible in this world,” says Vincent Fecteau offhandedly, just as we begin our conversation. “Being an artist is not one of them.”

It is a telling comment. Fecteau is tall, with a ready smile and a model’s face and frame. A sculptor who has received major awards and shown at top museums, he is represented by Matthew Marks Gallery, one of the most powerful dealers in contemporary art. In 2016 he received the highest accolade of all, when he was tapped for the MacArthur Fellowship – the so-called genius grant.

He is a man who could hardly fade into the background, no matter how he might try.



— An untitled 2019 work by Vincent Fecteau, who in 2016 was granted the MacArthur Fellowship – the so-called “genius award.”
Photo: Nicholas Lea Bruno, CCA Wattis Institute

Still, Fecteau, 50, has made choices that do not fit the stereotype of the international art star. To live in San Francisco, far from the critical and market center of New York. To work deliberately, and without a phalanx of assistants. To nest with his husband, landscape architect Scott Cataffa, in a quiet Balboa Park neighborhood, volunteering each week at a local hospital. Beyond some specialists and his circle of personal friends, he is the famous Bay Area artist few people here seem to know.

Not since 2002 has he shown in his adopted hometown of nearly 30 years. But that will change when a small exhibition of recently completed works opens Thursday, Sept. 5. True to the low profile he clearly prefers, Fecteau's show is not being held at one of the big museums but at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts – an excellent venue artistically, but modest in scale and appointments, run by the California College of the Arts.



An untitled 2019 work by Vincent Fecteau. A Fecteau show is opening at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, run by the California College of the Arts.

Photo: Nicholas Lea Bruno, CCA Wattis Institute

Fecteau works on groups of sculptures at the same time, making “eight or nine or so” pieces every year and a half. By that measure, the seven objects in the new show represent a substantial effort on their own.

But if most sculpture, being three-dimensional, offers multiple views, depending on where we stand, it very often has a “front” – a preferred point of view. Fecteau's recent sculpture doesn't work that way. Every vantage reveals what seems a different object, as we follow counterintuitive shifts in form, unobtrusive variations in color and surface. We might call the seven-object display at the Wattis a show of 28 works of art, and counting.



In his San Francisco studio, Vincent Fecteau notices a slight gap he'll fix on one of his untitled sculptures.
Photo: Paul Kuroda, Special to The Chronicle

Fecteau's studio is a pristine and bright converted garage with full-height windows and glass doors opening to a lush garden. On this visit, nine new works, none approaching 3 feet on the longest dimension, are arrayed about the room. Two each on two large work tables, the other five on the floor, they are substantially complete, the artist says.

The mood in the room is as sunny as the garden. When I ask about the music playlist softly streaming in the background, he tells me it is Elliott Smith radio. It sounds sweet, but that's the guy who committed a particularly gruesome suicide, I think to myself.



An untitled 2019 Vincent Fecteau sculpture. The show of Fecteau's work is the first in San Francisco since 2002.
Photo: Nicholas Lea Bruno, CCA Wattis Institute

Fecteau cheerfully warns me not to make unconsidered comments about the work. "If you tell me, 'That looks like a cat,' I won't be able to see it as anything else." It's as if the objects need time to take on their own identity, apart from the associations we might immediately conjure.

The same could be said of a human being. The personality he is performing in this moment, the lens through which I might see him today, these are not just data. If they are not starting points, they are limits.

Still, I hazard an observation about the unconventional forms that morph and meld as the eye explores the miniature worlds Fecteau has made. Parts of them are hard-edged, architectonic; other surfaces are drapery soft, or ... fleshy? He supplies the word, smiling thinly: "Limbs," he says.



An untitled 2019 Vincent Fecteau work. “The only thing that I’m interested in these days is that thing that leads me to the next step,” Fecteau says.

Photo: Nicholas Lea Bruno, CCA Wattis Institute

Emboldened, I respond to the dark intricacies of structure in the works, space that seems more trapped than enclosed. The way freeway underpasses always feel, the way Giambattista Piranesi described his imaginary prisons in the 18th century. I pose my thoughts as a question: “What if I said there is something ominous about these?”

Immediately, I feel I have been impertinent. It’s such a nice day; he’s such a generous host. Thankfully, he doesn’t hesitate. “It’s been a hard year.” After a beat, he adds, “There are dark forces in this country.”

It’s a matter-of-fact response, guileless and unrehearsed. There was a time when he felt insecure about so instinctual an approach to art, in the face of critical demands for “theoretical rigor.”

Years ago, he told *Art in America* magazine, “I have this friend who once said to me, ‘You know, you’re not an intellectual artist,’ and at first I was so horrified and offended. Then I realized that he was right and it was so freeing. I’m not that person, and I will never be, and that’s OK. It sort of allowed me to let go and embrace another, more directly intuitive way of thinking about things.”

That experience may explain a certain distrust of the art establishment systems that have so readily accepted him. He draws an analogy to what he sees as a difference between spirituality, which is like art, and religion where, as in the art world, “the pope wears Prada slippers.”



An untitled 2019 piece by Vincent Fecteau. He hand-forms maquettes in resin clay that are scanned and enlarged to produce plastic foam armatures.

Photo: Nicholas Lea Bruno, CCA Wattis Institute

Now, he trusts himself. “The only thing that I’m interested in these days is that thing that leads me to the next step,” he says.

For the current series of works, he hand-formed maquettes in resin clay that were then scanned and enlarged to produce plastic foam armatures. These he covered and molded with papier-mâché, a material he often uses. Perversely, he painted some a buttery pale yellow – the same color as the CNC-routed plastic forms – as if to back out of commitment to the drama or emotion of strong color. Others, though, are predominantly deep blue or purple, the hues of night. Of bruises.

Any of these might be adorned with scraps of thin paper, or maybe hardware attachments. Some reveal unanticipated patches of mottled tones, or perhaps a dark umbra along one edge. One sports torn bits of newsprint and small rounds of wicker – a reference to a famous Cubist painting by Picasso, I think, though I’m certain he wouldn’t want to anchor it to that image alone. Another has stuck-on squares of burlap and stalks of dried grass – a country character emerging from a roll in the hay.



An untitled 2019 piece by Vincent Fecteau. When asked if he makes art to be loved, he quickly replies, “Absolutely!”
Photo: Nicholas Lea Bruno, CCA Wattis Institute

If there’s humor in the work, there is also empathy. He might look at a piece and realize, he says, “That piece is not happy.” Or, “It’s uncomfortable,” and then spend a day or more altering it.

It had not been easy to arrange a studio visit with Fecteau that would include an interview on the record. I say that I will not report his answer, but ask, does he make art to be loved? “Absolutely!” he answers, so quickly that I want to be relieved of my promise, and he agrees.

“The whole thing is going to embarrass me, anyway.”

“**Vincent Fecteau**”: Noon-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Thursday, Sept. 5, through Nov. 9. Free. CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 360 Kansas St., S.F. 415-355-9670. wattis.org