

Vincent Fecteau @ Wattis Institute

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by Renny Pritikin



Untitled, 2019, papier mâché, resin clay, acrylic, cardboard, 21.75 x 25 x 23 inches

My earliest memory related to architecture has to do with being a child at the beach. I was digging a tunnel under the sand, trying to rendezvous underground with my friend who was doing the same thing a yard away. I had spent a considerable amount of time going down diagonally, concentrating on the damp sand, when suddenly my hand was grasped by another's; my friend had broken through and we had coordinated our efforts perfectly to meet in the middle. What I remember most, though, is the shocking aliveness of his hand squirming in my palm, so fleshy and kinetic after many minutes of concentrated interaction with the passive and moist grains of sand. It spoke of the way that the built world acquires meaning by being inhabited, but also of the power of the imagination to conceive a structure that enables human interaction to happen. I think that is the place where Vincent Fecteau's work begins.

The artist has been a fixture in the Bay Area since the 1990s, notably since his participation in an early show at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in 1994. In that exhibition, *Next to Nothing*, curated by René de Guzman, he had not yet developed his signature style of small-scale sculpture. However, he showed what might now be considered an ongoing substrate of his work: found images (in this case cats' heads) cut out from mass-circulation magazines.



Untitled, 2019, papier mâché, resin clay, acrylic, metal, raffia, 26.5 x 30.5 x 17 inches

The pyramid-shaped collage, installed on a wall, measured about seven feet tall, narrowing at the top to one feline after starting on the floor with seven. It had little to do with the work that later brought him international acclaim and a recent MacArthur Fellowship. Or did it? Over the years he has continued to use found magazine images on occasion. This early work does reveal a few telling characteristics and values that are still in evidence in his best-known work, and in the Wattis exhibition. These include: exacting attention to every design decision; an arch but very subtle sense of humor; and an awareness of the viewer's body in relation to his work.

The current untitled exhibition, on view at the Wattis Institute, is made up of seven sculptures on white pedestals evenly distributed around the gallery, and four large color photographs mounted on three walls. (There is also a photomural visible only from the street.) The images were contributed by the late Lutz Bacher, a long-time friend of the artist. The pictures are not meant either as a collaboration or a two-person show, but rather as a bit of flavoring. Depicted are what might be stills from a film in which a toddler sits on a highchair, which then collapses and sets her to bawling. The broken wooden fragments beneath her turn out to unintentionally echo parts of Fecteau's sculptures.

They begin as handmade resin clay models which are then replicated in computer-cut foam and covered with papier maché and paint: earth tones and blues, mostly. The most persistent reference made by these hybrid objects is to architectural motifs (steps, doors, cornices, arches, windows), but they also deny that understanding by either morphing into pure abstraction or starting up another recognizable narrative when seen in the round. Almost every work exhibits a dual nature, from colors (brown and tan, purple and straw, off-white and blue/black) that alternate front-to-back to morphological conundrums (like an adobe house melting over a wind-etched sandstone canyon or a parasitic blob consuming the axle and tire of an overturned tractor-trailer rig). The sculptures occupy their assigned spaces fully, not small and precious, nor



Untitled, 2019, papier mâché, resin clay, acrylic, burlap, raffia, 20.5 x 27.25 x 34 inches

voluptuously overflowing: they belong where they are, not on the floor. Their duality rests with the fact that they're stolid objects and at the same portals to someplace else. They call to mind a range of everyday accouterments that are cousins of Fecteau's creations in heft, delicacy or awkwardness: a sewing machine, a doctor's satchel, a desktop computer, carryon luggage, an engine block — with carefully instigated undercoats of color operating as subtext. While these analogies are apt, they likely do not reflect Fecteau's intentions, which are ephemeral. I offer them only as handles for understanding the works' attraction and presence.

At the beach, I think I was shocked by the tug of my friend's hand because of my lifelong trait of being able to concentrate with a totality that used to frighten my parents and confuse my friends. Tunnel vision, I guess it is. That, I imagine, is the kind of concentration that Fecteau summons as he contemplates his work in the studio. He is known to take weeks, sometimes longer, on every piece. Every alteration, subtraction or addition seems to be calculated according to its effect on shadow and light, shape and balance, color relations and the visual and emotional impact it will produce. It is a form of assemblage not with found materials but with structure dragged up from the depths of intuition.



Untitled, 2019, papier mâché, resin clay, acrylic, wood, 22.25 x 26.25 x 27.5 inches

Because our view of these sculptures falls somewhere between waist-height and aerial, you must manipulate your body to follow the lines of the work, to peer through the gaps and to find the psychological trap doors strewn throughout Fecteau's inventions, to discover his hand reaching out to yours.

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Vincent Fecteau @ [Wattis Institute](#) through November 9, 2019. The artist will be in conversation with ceramic sculptor Kathy Butterly on September 25 @ 7:30 p.m. at [Nahl Hall on the CCA Oakland campus](#).

About the author:

Renny Pritikin retired in December 2018 after almost five years as the chief curator at The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. Prior to that, he was the director of the Richard Nelson Gallery at UC Davis and the founding chief curator at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts beginning in 1992. For 11 years he was also a senior adjunct professor at California College of the Arts, where he taught in the graduate program in Curatorial Practice. Pritikin has given lecture tours in museums in Japan as a guest of the State Department, and in New Zealand as a Fulbright Scholar, and visited Israel as a Koret Israel Prize winner. He is working on a memoir of his experiences in the arts from 1979 to 2018 and is poet in resident at the Prelinger Library in San Francisco.

