

FRIDERICIANVM



Kassel, March 31, 2021

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*VINCENT FECTEAU*

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documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH

Naomi Deutschmann, Communication

Friedrichsplatz 18, 34117 Kassel

T +49 561 70727-2526 / [press@fridericianum.org](mailto:press@fridericianum.org)

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### PRESS RELEASE

*Vincent Fecteau*

April 3 – September 5, 2021 (opening is postponed)

With more than sixty works, the Fridericianum presents the first institutional solo exhibition of the US artist Vincent Fecteau in Germany.

Since the early 1990s, Vincent Fecteau has been making sculptures and collages from simple, sometimes everyday materials – such as newspaper clippings, papier-mâché, foam core, corks, popsicle sticks or shells – that display diverse manifestations. Some of his works are small-scale, rectilinear, monochrome or abstract, while others are expansive, intricate, colorful or narrative. They are the outcome of a long, intense creative process that begins with the selection and combination of materials. This is followed by the continuous and careful processing of these components until the multifaceted nature of each object is articulated. Often, the properties of the chosen media and the manual production method are visible here. During the production process, Fecteau does not subject himself to any conceptual framework. His action is guided by intuitive reactions to the various media. The results of this approach are often difficult to describe in words. What at first sight appears to clearly be within our grasp, defies classification upon closer inspection. This circumstance plays a part in the enigmatic nature of the formulations and tempts one to engage in the manifold associations the artist's sculptures and collages generate. The objects evoke images of model-like architectures, stages and showcases, but also of bodies, limbs and organs. However, these notional associations and ideas are very hazy and largely dissolve swiftly into abstractions. Despite their ambiguities, the works repeatedly reveal references to the formal languages and approaches of historical tendencies. Thus, allusions to the avantgarde movements of the early 20th century can be discerned just as can references to post-war art or postmodernism. At no point, however, does Fecteau give the impression he is indulging in reminiscence. Quite the opposite. The works leave no doubt that they are testaments to their time. This can be detected both in their formal characteristics and in the exploration of queer forms of identity, life and culture often manifested in them. In this regard, Fecteau's preoccupation with values, ideas and perspectives that can be located beyond heteronormative worldviews is informed by his personal experience of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the social changes accompanying it. The importance of his works for contemporary art discourse thus results not only from their compositional finesse, poetic force and pronounced obduracy, but equally from their sociopolitical aspirations and their basic empathetic stance.

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Vincent Fecteau was born in 1969 in Islip, New York, and now lives in San Francisco. From 1987 to 1992 he studied at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. As early as 1993, he participated in group exhibitions, which were followed by his first solo show at Kiki Gallery in San Francisco in 1994. The show *The Scene of a Crime* at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 1997 marked the start of the reception of his work within a museum-related context. His first international exposure came with his participation in the Whitney Biennial in 2002, followed by focused presentations at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in 2004, the Art Institute of Chicago in 2008, Inverleith House in Edinburgh in 2010, Kunsthalle Basel in 2015, the Vienna Secession in 2016 and the CAA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco in 2019. In Germany, an institutional appreciation of Fecteau's artistic work has so far been lacking. The exhibition at the Fridericianum aims to remedy precisely this. Based on over sixty selected works created between 1993 and 2020, the show will provide a comprehensive overview of Fecteau's oeuvre.

[Download press images here.](#)

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### LIST OF PRESS IMAGES AVAILABLE FOR DOWNLOAD

1.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Chorus #2*, 1994.

© Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Buchholz, greengrassi,  
Matthew Marks Gallery. Foto / Photo: Aaron Wax

2.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Dramatization* (Ausstellungskopie/exhibition  
copy, 2019), 1994.

© Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Buchholz, greengrassi,  
Matthew Marks Gallery. Foto / Photo: Aaron Wax

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3.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Shirley Temple Room #1*, 1994.

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Matthew Marks Gallery. Foto / Photo: Aaron Wax

4.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Untitled*, 2000. Private collection, London. ©

Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Buchholz, greengrassi,  
Matthew Marks Gallery. Foto / Photo: farbanalyse

5.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Untitled*, 2006.

© Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Buchholz, greengrassi,  
Matthew Marks Gallery.

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6.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Untitled*, 2008.

© Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Buchholz, greengrassi,  
Matthew Marks Gallery.

7.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Untitled*, 2014.

© Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Buchholz, greengrassi,  
Matthew Marks Gallery. Foto / Photo: Ron Amstutz

8.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Untitled*, 2015.

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Matthew Marks Gallery. Foto / Photo: Ian Reeves

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9.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Untitled*, 2015.

© Courtesy of The Artist and Galerie Buchholz, greengrassi,  
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10.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Untitled*, 2019.

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11.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Untitled*, 2020.

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Matthew Marks Gallery.

12.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:

Vincent Fecteau: *Untitled*, 2020.

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13.



Bildnachweis / Image Credit:  
Vincent Fecteau, Foto / Photo: Scott Cataffa

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VINCENT FECTEAU

\*1969 in Islip, New York  
Lives and works in San Francisco

SOLO EXHIBITIONS (selection)

2021

Fridericianum, Kassel

2020

Galerie Buchholz, Berlin

2019

Misako & Rosen, Tokyo

CAA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco

2018

greengrassi, London

Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles

2016

Secession, Vienna

2015

*You Have Did the Right Thing When You Put That Skylight In*, Kunsthalle Basel, Basel

2014

Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

*Night (1947–2015)*, The Glass House, New Canaan

2012

Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Berlin

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2010

Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh  
greengrassi, London

2009

Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

2008

*Focus: Vincent Fecteau*, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

2006

Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne

2005

greengrassi, London

2004

*journal #7*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

2003

Feature Inc., New York  
Marc Foxx, Los Angeles

2002

*Recent Sculpture*, MATRIX 199, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive  
*Recent Sculpture*, MATRIX 199, Pasadena Museum of California Art

2000

greengrassi, London

1999

Marc Foxx, Los Angeles

1998

Feature Inc., New York

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1997

Ynglingagatan 1 Gallery, Stockholm

1996

*New Work*, Feature, Inc., New York

1995

*Introductions*, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

1994

*Ben*, Kiki, San Francisco

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (selection)

2019

*Magic Ben Big Boy*, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

2018

*Dime-Store Alchemy*, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York

*Crossroads: Carnegie Museum of Art's Collection, 1945 to Now*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

2017

*Tomma Abts, Lutz Bacher, Trisha Donnelly, Vincent Fecteau, Mark Lecky, Jack Goldstein, Hervé Guibert*,  
Galerie Buchholz, Berlin

2016

*Home Improvements*, Fraenkel Lab, San Francisco

*The New Contemporary*, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

*Primary structures and speculative forms*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

*The Campaign for Art: Contemporary*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

*Embracing the Contemporary: The Keith L. and Katherine Sachs Collection*, Philadelphia Museum of Art,  
Philadelphia

2015

*National Gallery 2: Empire*, Chewday's, London

*Le Souffler: Schürmann meets Ludwig*, Ludwig Forum, Aachen

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*Second Chances*, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen  
*Off Broadway*, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco

2014

*Abandon the Parents*, Statens Museum for Kunst, National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen  
*Quiz*, Galerie Poirel, Nancy

2013

Carnegie International, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh  
*Nayland Blake, Thomas Demand, Trisha Donnelly, Vincent Fecteau & Wade Guyton*, Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles  
*Elie Nadelman, Jim Nutt, Tomma Abts, Vincent Fecteau*, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne

2012

*Automaton*, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne  
Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
*Closer – The Dennis Cooper Papers*, Kunstverein Amsterdam, Amsterdam  
*B. WURTZ & CO.*, Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles

2011

*Absentee Landlord*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis  
*Sculptural Acts*, Haus der Kunst, Munich  
*Cloud*, Foxy Production, New York  
*Quodlibet III- Alphabets & Instruments*, Galerie Buchholz, Berlin

2010

*Contemporary Collecting: Selections from the Donna and Howard Stone Collection*, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago  
*Hauntology*, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley  
*The More Things Change*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

2009

*Quodlibet II*, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne  
*Chinese Box*, Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles

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2008

*Begin Again Right Back Here*, White Columns, New York

*Sbit*, Feature Inc., New York

*Passageworks: Contemporary Art from the Permanent Collection*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

*Kiki: The Proof is in the Pudding*, Ratio 3, San Francisco

2007

*Strange Events Permit Themselves the Luxury of Occurring*, Camden Arts Centre, London

*The Recognitions*, The Fireplace Project, East Hampton

*A point in space is a place for an argument*, David Zwirner Gallery, New York

*Good Morning, Midnight*, Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York

*You Always Move in Reverse*, Leo Koenig Inc., New York

*The Recognitions*, The Fireplace Project, East Hampton

*Exit Music (For a Film)*, Grimm/Rosenfeld, New York

2006

*FOCA Fellowship*, Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena

*Dereconstruction*, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

*Pure Land: Fecteau-Hill-Pederson*, Ratio 3, San Francisco

*Galerie Buchholz at Metro Pictures*, Metro Pictures, New York

2004

*Teil 1 Mullberg*, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne

*Abstract Reality*, SEAD Gallery, Antwerp

*Happy Medium*, Clementine Gallery, New York

*Gallery Artists*, Feature Inc., New York

2003

*The Alumni Show*, Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University, Middletown

*Ishtar*, Midway Contemporary Art, Saint Paul

2002

*The Longest Winter*, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton

*Artists Imagine Architecture*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

*Now is the Time*, Dorsky Gallery, New York

*Tomma Abts and Vincent Fecteau*, Marc Foxx, Los Angeles

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Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
*Guide to Trust No.2*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

2001

*The Devil is in the Details*, Allston Skirt Gallery, Boston  
*Marked: Bay Area Drawings*, Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, Sonoma  
*Marked: Bay Area Drawings*, Hunter College at City University of New York, New York  
*Maureen Gallace and Vincent Fecteau*, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco  
*Off the Wall*, Gallery 400, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago  
*Smallish*, greengrassi, London

2000

*Here Kitty, Kitty*, Nexus Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta  
*Juvenilia*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

1999

*Calendar 2000*, Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Annandale-on-Hudson  
*Persuasion*, University at Buffalo Art Gallery, Buffalo  
*The Art Council 1999 Grants to Artists*, Jernigan Wicker Fine Arts, San Francisco  
*B.m.W (Black met White)*, ANP, Antwerp

1998

*Softcore*, Arkipelag Festival, Historiska Museet, Stockholm  
*Architecture and Inside*, Paul Morris, New York  
*Inglennook*, Feigen Contemporary, New York  
*Lovecraft*, South London Gallery, London

1997

*Hello*, Feature Inc., New York  
*Bay Area Now*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco  
*The Scene of the Crime*, UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

1996

Feature Inc., New York

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1995

*Wildside*, LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), Los Angeles

*lo-fi*, Lauren Wittels, New York

*In a Different Light*, University Art Museum, Berkeley

1994

*The Ecstasy of Limits*, Gallery 400, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago

*Next to Nothing*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

*Bong*, Kiki, San Francisco

*Sparkalepsy*, Feature Inc., New York

1993

*Dress Code*, San Francisco Art Commission Gallery, San Francisco

*Caca at Kiki*, Kiki, San Francisco

## AWARDS

2016

MacArthur Foundation Fellowship

2012

Visiting Artist at the American Academy

2006

Fellows of Contemporary Art Fellowship

2005

John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship

1999

The Art Council Grant

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Fanny Singer: *Vincent Fecteau*

(Text for the upcoming Kassel catalog on Vincent Fecteau)

There is a word that always comes to mind when I think of Vincent Fecteau's work. The word is *lacustrine*, an adjective I first came across in a poem by John Ashbery called "These Lacustrine Cities," a bizarre, paranoid, visionary poem from 1962. There is something resonant about how the word implies aqueousness (its literal meaning is "of, or pertaining to, a lake") though it sits on the tongue like a diamond, hard-edged and lapidary, not at all liquid. Looking at a Fecteau sculpture can feel akin to staring at a lake you've never swum in, wondering how deep, or how cold, or how alive with creatures it might be beneath its mirror surface. In this sense, all of Fecteau's sculptural works have a lacustrine quality, a lake-like tension between surface and depth, transparency and turbidity. Across the entirety of his oeuvre—including his small diorama-like mixed-media collages—a consistent parrying of, or resistance to, immediate legibility prevails.

Fecteau graduated from Wesleyan University in 1992 with a focus on painting (though he turned quickly to three-dimensional media). From Connecticut, he moved directly to San Francisco, where he has lived ever since. Early on, he worked for the AIDS activism organization ACT UP and began assisting the artist Nayland Blake. Blake introduced him to the artist Lutz Bacher (with whom he forged an unusual and lasting friendship), and Fecteau proceeded to do a fair amount of sewing and handcrafting for the two artists. Notably, his handiwork featured in the creation of Bacher's sculpture *Big Boy* (1992), a giant, anatomically-correct stuffed doll of the kind used in child-abuse assessments, but rendered Brobdingnagian (this sculpture appeared again in a 2019 restaging at Matthew Marks Gallery of Fecteau's first solo show, *Ben*, mounted at the now-defunct Kiki Gallery in 1994). The domestic-scale actions Fecteau undertook in the service of Blake's practice inevitably bled into his own. He embraced the kinds of materials generally enlisted in the making of architectural maquettes before 3D models could easily be printed: foam core, cardboard, balsa wood, popsicle sticks, etc. His method over the years has disproportionately engaged with what might narrowly be termed "craft," and relies on readily-sourced, pedestrian, or found materials, including papier-mâché, magazine pages, and the glut of curious or amusing jetsam that comprises his studio archive. Fecteau's early sculptures from the mid-nineties may seem rudimentary compared with more recent work, but a remarkably enduring creative impulse defines the whole of his output—in whatever medium he decides to work in, a preexistent, catalytic object or image generally precedes the actual making. This generative component, however, is typically eliminated or distorted through a process that relies as much on erasure as addition.

Nothing is straightforward; even an image that appears torn from a magazine might in fact be Fecteau's photograph of it, subtly manipulated, printed, re-printed, copied. There is an exigency that drives him to his manipulations though, never a calculated interest in deceit or dissimulation. Though built off of existent things—a box for shipping cut flowers (Fecteau worked for a long

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stretch as a florist), or a postcard from a friend, or a shoebox—a finished work will, more often than not, belie its origins. When pressed to elaborate on what fuels his visions, his creative compulsions, Fecteau will generally look pained—he’s been known to bemoan the predicament of being an artist, often fantasizing about alternate careers. “I’ve been doing this my whole life,” he’ll concede, “making things like this, in the basement as a kid, and now, it’s the same thing. It hasn’t changed.” When it comes to process, however, he is often elliptical about the exact materials he uses (choosing to leave them off wall texts, if allowed) and dislikes the way photography captures his three-dimensional work. A complete sense of the genetics of a piece might undermine the experience of viewing it—as might looking at a photograph of a sculpture (a collapsed, fixed, two-dimensional artifact), in lieu of circling the real thing.

Something about Fecteau’s art—especially his sculptural work from the early 2000s onward—always makes me think of the inside of my mouth, with its strange architecture comprising textures both soft and stony, the way it is filled with a muscle that swells, contorts, and inquisitively traces the contours of my teeth. One can never see the entirety of the inside of one’s mouth—just as one cannot gain access to the interior of a Fecteau sculpture—yet we have an image of it articulated to us by the blind but feeling organ of the tongue. Fecteau’s sculptures, in effect, occupy the same mysterious space as the mouth—they are at once familiar and obscure. You feel you know them somehow—pieces of an automobile engine, an African mask, a pyramid, an elephant, a small city—but they remain unnamable (fittingly, Fecteau declines to title his works; everything after 2000 bears the moniker *Untitled*).

For several years, Fecteau has worked as a volunteer art teacher at a long-term care facility in San Francisco, sometimes picturing himself transitioning to a career as a psychiatric nurse. It’s a fragment of biography that calls to mind the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (1920–1988), whose late career was devoted to art therapy. Clark always intended her manipulable, hinged metal *Bichos* (1965) to be touched, and would use these small sculptures in her treatment of psychotic and mentally ill patients—they were devices designed to integrate the visual apparatus into a pure awareness of the body.

The *Bichos* (literally “critters”) became small beasts as they moved; there was no ideal shape, no front or back—they were fundamentally unstable, mercurial structures. The Brazilian writer and psychologist Lula Wanderley described Clark’s relational sculptures as not dependent on “a sensorial outlining of shape nor some quality of surface, but [on] something that dilutes the notion of the surface and makes the object to be lived in an ‘imaginary inwardness of the body’ where it finds signification.”<sup>1</sup> *The imaginary inwardness of the body*. The simultaneous investment in and disavowal of surface—in Fecteau’s impure world of abstraction, these contradictions improbably

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<sup>1</sup> Lula Wanderley, “The Memory of the Body,” 1993, unpublished, quoted in Guy Brett, “Lygia Clark: In Search of the Body?” *Art in America*, July 1994, p. 58.

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reconcile. We are standing back at the lakeshore, staring out across its limpid epilimnion, and yet we can also feel the water all around us.

I imagine holding one of Fecteau's critter-like sculptures, moving my fingers along its nubby, painted papier-mâché surface like braille. Tracing a scalloped edge. Peering beneath a buttress, or into a lightless cavity. They seem to invite inquisitiveness, even haptic interplay, like the wooden toys that sit on the floor of a doctor's waiting room, structures that thousands of children feel compelled to engage with, pushing wooden beads along swooping wires, stacking blocks, dulling the surfaces with the oil from their small fingers. The skins of Fecteau sculptures allude to something hidden but alluring, as if the surface were given salience by what is tantalizingly invisible—similar to how the texture of a voice is sensuous and appealing because it carries the cavities, hollows, and fleshy densities of the mouth and the body from which it emanates.

Fecteau's process is restless, often frustrated. He might build a limb, then choose to amputate it; paint a base layer in one color, only to conceal it entirely with another. It is a physical, but also spiritual, grappling with form that without material resistance would never be resolved. At some point in the 2000s, Fecteau began searching for an alternative to the time-consuming technique of sculpting with pure papier-mâché. He discovered a material called plasticine clay—an extremely malleable substance that never dries. After working on the same four sculptures for over a year, however, he realized he required a material that would resist him more, that would prevent forms from being endlessly fugitive. Without this tension, a work could remain in eternal flux. Though Fecteau returned to working with less flexible media, there is still no precise moment of resolution for him—if a gallery or institutional exhibition does not forcibly remove work from his studio, he might continue to tinker ad infinitum.

We're left with a forest of works, rhizomatically connected, some more filigreed, others spare; some queasily-colored, others egg-shell, delicate, beautiful. The collages, though materially distinct, are conceptually affine. In a conversation about her "Artist's Choice" exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, *The Shape of Shape*, (in which a sculpture of Fecteau's was prominently featured), the artist Amy Sillman indicated that she was "playing with the way form and shape and language and no language meet, distress each other, and confuse each other. It's partially about confusion and pleasure and resolution and then more confusion." And, in what I felt could have been a response to Fecteau's work alone, "I feel that abstraction is urgent because of that kind of play that form forces you to engage with when it cannot be named and yet you're standing right in front of it and there it is, and it's gotta be something."

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Mark Godfrey: *Faux Models*

(Text for the upcoming Kassel catalog on Vincent Fecteau)

Audiences outside the United States were introduced to Vincent Fecteau's work in the pages of *Artforum* with an article by Dennis Cooper published in April 1995.<sup>i</sup> The two-page spread was illustrated with two of the artist's collages of cutout cats, one structured as a kind of pyramidal pile, another as a tapered column. Some of the kitties' faces were collaged intact, while others' eyes were removed and replaced with human ones, which was pretty freaky. Both works had been shown the previous year at Kiki, a small gallery in San Francisco, alongside a series of floor-bound shoe-box-based objects called *Shirley Temple Rooms* in reference to the place at the Neverland Ranch where Michael Jackson's child guests spent the night. It was all connected by a narrative conceit involving Jackson's song "Ben," from the 1972 movie about a rat by that name and its boy owner. In the years after, Fecteau began to collage images of seagulls and colorful cushions from home-décor magazines onto small structures made with foam core that, by his self-imposed rule, could be no larger the collaged images; in 1996, at Feature Inc. in New York, he placed some of these structures on the floor as well. This kind of outsider, low-fi aesthetic, and Fecteau's attempts to make nothing as precious or long-lasting as a conventional "sculpture," connected him to the "slacker" artists of the 1990s, while the titles and collaged elements referencing gay lifestyles and shared obsessions (as in his 1993 work *Bars I've Been In, Boys I've Been With*) linked him to figures such as Nayland Blake, for whom he worked, and gallery stablemates such as Richard Hawkins.

Given his previous work, anyone visiting Fecteau's first exhibition in London, held at greengrassi in September 2000, might have been surprised. The artist had jettisoned essential elements of his work of the '90s: the collaged pictures, the narratives, and the titles, too. Coming into the show, one encountered two tables, each hosting three untitled objects somewhat resembling models or maquettes and not quite feeling like sculptures. A valid question would have been this: had there been a complete shift in Fecteau's work, or did the sensibility remain constant and the changes relate only to materiality, form, and appearance?

One object was composed of two flat, semicircular arches, one horizontal, lying flat on the table, joined to another rising from its feet at a ninety-degree angle (fig. XX). In the middle of the horizontal arch was an empty toilet roll aimed toward the center point of the vertical arch's imaginary spring line. The arches had been made with papier-mâché, then covered with burlap. Another small piece of burlap covered the toilet roll. Instead of cutting the burlap to the precise outlines of the arches and the toilet-paper cylinder to emphasize their shapes, Fecteau allowed it to overspill; he even frayed the ends somewhat. Two light gray pushpins completed the piece, although it was hard to tell whether they held its parts together or were a weird kind of decoration. Another object in the exhibition stood about a foot tall and was painted glossy black (fig. XX). Its shape was a bit like an upright open book, but more complicated, and it seemed to have a front and a back. Two long, thin

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popsicle sticks extended diagonally from the top of the book’s “gutter” to the bottom outside corners of the open “pages.” On the back, a strand of twine lined each of two vertical edges. On one of the back planes, a rubber band hung from a black pushpin.

A year before this show, Ronald Bladen’s minimal work of the 1960s had been displayed at MoMA P.S.1 in Queens, New York. Fecteau, had he visited, would have seen works such as the black painted-aluminium *Cathedral Evening* (fig. XX), first exhibited in 1969, the year of the younger artist’s birth. A more famous structure of that decade—perhaps *the* most famous—was Eero Saarinen’s stainless-steel Gateway Arch, completed in 1965 in Saint Louis, Missouri (fig. XX). Fecteau’s objects of the 2000s were certainly not making reference to Bladen or Saarinen, but these 1960s structures stand for the kinds of things from which Fecteau’s work departed and may help us to locate its character more clearly. The Gateway Arch and Bladen’s outdoor sculptures were feats of technical planning; both required teams of constructors, and both, with their dramatic swoops and cantilevered elements, might be said to embody a kind of virile prowess. Fecteau exchanged all this metal for kindergarten art tools and the low-fi materials sold in craft shops. He also played with the idea of scale. Viewers of works such as Saarinen’s and Bladen’s are supposed to be impressed by their huge dimensions; Fecteau, by contrast, wanted to tease his audience by creating an unsure scale. He did this in a sneaky way: he gave the impression that his objects were models for larger structures, only to find ways to show that they weren’t. The job of a model is to make you ignore its actual dimensions and imagine the thing it represents when scaled up. Fecteau decorated his objects with pushpins and rubber bands. These elements were so clearly themselves, rather than standing for anything else, that they insisted that the objects they decorated be appreciated at their own, intimate size, even while those objects still looked like models for something bigger.

A couple of years later, Fecteau had his first institutional show, presenting thirteen works at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in the museum’s MATRIX Program for Contemporary Art. These were, in many ways, continuations of the objects shown in 2000, again resembling models, maquettes, or even toy versions of huge structures, but only at first glance. One was composed of black diagonal planes, like a cross between an old household iron and an Imperial Star Destroyer from *Star Wars* (fig. XX; another one, gray, looked like the corner of an industrial building half constructed but already in ruins (fig. XX). The objects did not resemble anything from the history of Western sculpture. But both had elements within them that recalled the materials of heavy construction and the ways certain postwar American sculptors had appropriated those materials. I am thinking particularly of another figure associated with the Bay Area, Mark di Suvero—his I beams and the screws, nuts, and bolts that fastened them. Fecteau’s objects incorporated pretend I beams and fake bolts, made of papier-mâché. In the black work, these were painted to resemble rusty iron; in the other, they were covered with gloppy paint. This was already a cheeky departure from the way di Suvero and his contemporaries had used actual I beams and industrial fasteners, but to make things even stranger, in another of these objects, Fecteau used small

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twigs in the place of columns. Once again, there was a weird shift in scale: little bits of the sculptures pretending to be huge I beams, small twigs being absolutely themselves. The objects were quirky and wry, not so far in character from those 1994 cats.

### *Queering Sculpture*

In the two exhibitions just described, at greengrassi and the Berkeley Art Museum, Fecteau showed his objects on tables, just as models are displayed in architecture offices, and flirted with the architectural model as a reference point. As the 2000s progressed, having already discarded collaged magazine pages and individual titles for works, Fecteau got rid of more elements, including the rubber bands, twine, popsicle sticks, and fake I beams and screws. He also exchanged tables for white pedestals and made works for the walls, too. By 2008, with a show at the Art Institute of Chicago, it was clear that this artist was producing things that, without any doubt, had an identity as abstract sculptures.

From this time on, there has been a nice rhythm to Fecteau's practice. He has had regular solo shows in London with greengrassi, in Germany with Galerie Buchholz, and in the United States with Matthew Marks. These have occurred in strict rotation, and he has also alternated pedestal-based shows with wall-relief shows. From time to time, new works have appeared in exhibitions at public institutions: the Whitney Biennial in 2012, the Carnegie International in 2013, Secession in 2016. There was always an exhibition on the horizon to premier a new body of work, but Fecteau never overcommitted himself and made sure that he could spend a year and a half or so on each group of nine or ten sculptures, allowing them to take shape slowly, half destroying them and then rebuilding them until they made sense and were finished. Each body of work has had a specific formal character: one group was very colorful, another stony gray and black. The pedestal sculptures in one set were elongated, because each one began with a long, thin cardboard box used for packing flowers; one series of wall reliefs were all reversible. Mostly, he has used papier-mâché, but from time to time, seemingly out of boredom rather than because of any technical limitations on papier-mâché's part, he has switched to plaster or gypsum cement, partially covered with resin clay, only to turn back to papier-mâché for the next body of work. He made all this art just like this, away from the art world's main market cities, in a small studio in San Francisco, only sporadically working with an assistant, and for much of the time while holding down a second job at a florist's shop. It has been a steady pace of shows and a steady pace of life. It all sounds incredibly conventional, so very polite. But the abstract sculptures Fecteau has produced are completely unusual and original, brilliantly encapsulating his artistic genius—to use a word associated with a major award he won during this time.<sup>ii</sup> And they are inevitably and undoubtedly queer.

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The simplest way to argue for the queerness of the sculptures would be to point to things in them that are semifigurative or allusive: the exposed bottom of *Untitled* (2006) the orifice-like holes at the front of wall reliefs such as *Untitled* (2010) and *Untitled* (2014). These things are there, but they are a bit obvious, and Fecteau's work would not be very compelling if it worked only in this way. A better way to conceive of abstract sculpture as "queer" is to posit an operation of *queering*. Writing about Julie Mehretu, the art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson gets this idea across well: "Throughout her work," she writes, "Mehretu queers the mark. No object or action is queer in and of itself—queerness only comes into being in relation to a set of standards or norms."<sup>iii</sup> In another essay, Bryan-Wilson argues for the importance of Nicole Eisenman's paintings not so much because of the overt narrative content of her imagery but because of the way that, through their surfaces, and thanks to the artist's juxtapositions "of the slick and the raw within a single picture," Eisenman queers those images and the way we experience them. "When the viewer feels invited or solicited by the sensuous tactility of Eisenman's textures, this is part of her specifically queer, and formalist, figuration, its both-at-onceness and its neither-norness. . . . The oscillation between texture and atmospheric mood generates productive, queer friction in her works, as the eye cannot rest only on the surface of the painting, but is also pulled into its emotional punch by way of representation."<sup>iv</sup>

So much for painting. If we call to mind people who have queered sculpture in recent years, usually we imagine artists whose careers began during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and who looked back to the last major generation of sculptors in the 1960s, understood the "standards or norms" of Minimalism, and very deliberately queered them. Examples might be Robert Gober's *The Ascending Sink* (1985; fig. XX), which reworks Donald Judd's "stacks"; Felix Gonzales-Torres's *Untitled (USA Today)* (1990; fig. XX), which looks back to Robert Morris's *Untitled (Corner Piece)* (1964); Jack Pierson's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Part II* (1990; fig. XX), which refers to Carl Andre's *Equivalent* series of 1966; Tom Burr's *Deep Purple* (2000), whose reference point is Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1986); and Roni Horn's *Pink Tons* (2009; fig. XX), which queers Tony Smith's *Die* (1962). The works by Judd, Morris, Andre, Serra, and Smith implied dispassionate, objective, sexless viewers who were hyperaware of their own perception and thinking about the relationships between their bodies, the sculpture, and the gallery container or architectural setting. Gober, Gonzales-Torres, Pierson, Burr, and Horn had in mind viewers who were sexual and historical subjects encountering institutions that excluded their desires and a country that often failed to recognize the lives and losses of their communities. The works by Gober, Gonzales-Torres, Pierson, Burr, and Horn provoked thoughts of loss, fear, contagion, desire, love, hiddenness, ambiguity, and changeability.

Fecteau queers abstract sculpture in a completely different way from these artists. He does not start off with a reference point in sculptural history. Instead, he works intuitively and without knowing in advance what he will be making, allowing himself to be surprised, annoyed, frustrated, and eventually satisfied as a work takes shape, comes apart, and resolves again. "I'm interested in what my hand

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knows that my brain doesn't quite know," he has said.<sup>v</sup> Fecteau was talking about how a sculptor's hands create forms and textures instinctively, but these hands are, of course, part of a queer body that negotiates everyday life from that position. Can we say that queer hands queer sculptures? Possibly—but each sculptor will do this in a different manner. Let's look at what Fecteau does with forms and colors, and with displays, too.

As I have said, Fecteau's series of works were reasonably distinctive between 2008 and 2020, but to try to explain what I mean by his queering of sculpture, let us take as an example *Untitled* (2011; fig. XX), now in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, because it is from the first group of Fecteau's works I remember seeing. Without being fussy, it is extraordinarily complex in form, unlike any shape one might find in geometry or nature, even though parts of it do recall the rim of a human ear or the interior of a half-eroded shell. Though small enough to fit on a pedestal, it has a bulky presence there. This is because it does not read as an object made from small, assembled components but as a single form comprising thinner planes and thicker masses, and none of it seems fragile. And yet, from any one angle, it is quite difficult to tell whether an element is half an inch thick or five inches thick or, alternatively, whether it starts out thin and thickens into a solid mass. There is also no way to verify the thickness of any element, because if you were to move around the work to try to check, the sculpture would be so surprisingly different from the new angle that you would forget what you had been looking for.

The bottom of the sculpture is flat, and there are other flat planes running vertically in places, probably resulting from cuts Fecteau made through the material while the work was under way. He is known to saw up sculptures midway through the process of making them and to reassemble the parts, and although the flat planes here are markers of that, there is no way to know where a sawed-off part was reattached or if, instead, it was discarded. Most of the exterior is curved planes, always going off in different directions and swoops, some graceful arcs, some very steep falls; some of these curves end in gentle lips, others in semisharp ridges. There are also tubes: one thick, bent, pipe-like form rises from the bottom, and another, thinner tube juts off the side like a bicycle handle. The various curves and ridges conceal some parts of the "outside" of the sculpture from some viewpoints; these parts are revealed as you walk around, or as you crouch or stand on tiptoe to get a different viewing angle. Some of the external curved planes have holes in them, acting as windows to shadowy inner sections, and there are cavernous spaces toward the middle of the sculpture that are hard to see into from any angle. But, actually, there is no clear distinction between interior and exterior, nor between the sculptural body and the negative spaces its solid parts almost enclose, because with every shift in one's orientation toward the object, one reads the masses and empty volumes differently. Having tried my best to describe the work, I realize that if I were to give this paragraph to someone and ask her to draw the work on the basis of my account, there is no way she would depict anything close to Fecteau's sculpture.

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So, why is this queer, and how does Fecteau queer sculpture differently from the way Horn or Gonzales-Torres or Burr or Pierson did? As I have said, he does not start off with a reference point, but if we think about the history of modern abstract sculpture, we can recognize points of difference, even if Fecteau was not concerned with them himself. Previous abstract sculptures tended to rely for their dynamism on binaries, sometimes resolutely using one part of a binary to the exclusion of its opposite, as in Jean Arp's curved masses with no straight planes and Kārlis Johansons's constructions made from linear elements with no curves (figs. XX, XX). Other modern sculptors placed the two parts of a binary in opposition: Katarzyna Kobro's planes and negative spaces (fig. XX); David Smith's bulky masses and linear elements; Barbara Hepworth's and Henry Moore's solids and holes (fig. XX). Fecteau queers sculpture by refusing and undoing these very binaries, from organic/geometric and curved/flat to plane/mass and interior/exterior. And these binaries are undone exactly as we change our orientation in relation to the sculptures, which grow more and more unknowable the longer we try to comprehend them.

To return to the Whitney's *Untitled*, its forms are made even stranger because of the way it is painted. About half of the bottom of the sculpture is painted in a fairly consistent light lavender, ending exactly at the point where one part of the structure meets another. Another part of the bottom is painted in a similarly consistent bright orange, and this orange stops at the limits of some planes. In these places, the orange performs a similar function to the lavender, visually identifying a distinct part of the sculpture. However, elsewhere on the sculpture, the coat of orange paint fades out before the end of a plane, which gives it an alternative character—less structural, more like a dressing. The bulk of the top half of the sculpture is painted a beautiful teal, and there is so much teal in comparison to the orange and lavender that the sculpture feels weirdly top heavy (fig. XX). Stranger still is the way the teal is painted. It is far less uniform than the orange or lavender, thicker here, thinner there, but pretty regularly spoiled by smears of black that read like places where the object has been rubbed or roughed up a bit.

Can sculpture be queered with color? Even if Fecteau's colors are sometimes drawn from the interior décor magazines to which I've already referred, no color is queer in and of itself. Still, the way in which Fecteau uses color does indeed queer his work. Again, to understand this more clearly, one might call to mind examples from sculptural history: Anthony Caro's works of the 1960s, where either a whole sculpture was a uniform color or different, distinct parts of it were different colors; Judd's enameled aluminium works of 1989, where each unit of a larger object has its own distinct color; Jeff Koons's *Celebration* series, where each color is shiny and perfect; and, in a very different tenor, Franz West's sculptures, anarchically and absent-mindedly painted, without even the care to cover all the papier-mâché mulch below. None of these artists allows color to work as it does in Fecteau's *Untitled*, where orange fades to teal like blended make-up, where teal is dirtied up, where the whole painted surface, in its varying thickness and texture, bears witness to the artist's careful touch. Fecteau's color combinations are also kind of queer. "Why pink and purple?" he was once

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asked, in reference to a different work. “Well, I think that they’re kind of horrible together. They are very unserious colors,” he replied.<sup>vi</sup>

I want to think as well about how Fecteau displays his work. The very decision to use pedestals is a bit queer, “tasteful” in the manner of the neat furnishings depicted in the magazines Fecteau collects. The move is also a rejection of the earlier rejection of the plinth by Minimalists and Post-Minimalists, who saw themselves as heroically and radically disrupting such conventions of sculptural display. When, after Minimalism, artists in Europe began to use pedestals again in the 1980s, they almost always did so in a kind of absurd way: Fischli/Weiss overpopulating a gallery with more than a hundred pedestals to show the clay objects in *Suddenly This Overview* (begun 1981), or Franz West using crudely painted, oversized cardboard boxes in place of pedestals. At the time of his Art Institute of Chicago exhibition, when Fecteau decided to embrace the orthodoxy of clean, white-painted plinths, it was not with any of this blatant absurdity, but it was still a perverse move, a brilliant embrace of a kind of tidiness to offset his peculiar sculptures. He has since always used pedestals in a very polite way, not overspilling their boundaries, for instance, as Caro did in his tabletop sculptures of the 1960s and ’70s.

Much queerer is Fecteau’s way of showing his bas-reliefs, already an odd category of sculpture. For his exhibition at greengrassi in 2010, Fecteau made works that were secured to the wall by fixtures that penetrated all the way from the back to the front of the sculptures. But back and front could switch, as the objects could be taken off the wall, reversed, and hung back again. If Fecteau’s plinth-based works had always made viewers consider their own orientation toward the sculpture, these wall reliefs dramatized the idea of unfixed orientation in a particularly imaginative way. Odder still was Fecteau’s next move with his wall reliefs: in his 2014 show at Matthew Marks, he set each sculpture into a cavity in the wall, so that the work’s outer edges pushed right up against the plane of the wall. These works were particularly baroque in the dense profusion of their folds and lips and rims, and as you looked into them, there was a strange sense that their darkened recesses were deeper than the sculptures actually appeared to be from the side. Cutting into the gallery architecture here was less like something Gordon Matta-Clark might have done and much closer in effect to Robert Gober’s *Drain* (1990), queering the entire space by allowing us to think of it as a kind of penetrable body rather than a blank white container.

### *Returns and Resistance*

Fecteau presented ten sculptures in Vienna at Secession 2016 and disturbed the space in yet another way: despite the works’ classical appearance from the entrance of the exhibition, each sculpture was so narrow that, from some angles, the whole installation almost disappeared into the cavernous white room. One of the sculptures had a bit of ribbon running over two of its shorter edges. This was quite a discreet addition, not immediately noticeable from a distance, perhaps a kind of memory trace of

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the decorative ribbons tying the flowers whose boxes had determined the shapes of all the works. In his next exhibition, at greengrassi in 2018, Fecteau presented a particularly austere group of sculptures, stone gray in color. Some were much more open than before, like eroded machines or skulls. Just as the work got more brutal, so Fecteau applied more and more dressing to their surfaces: a tiny, jagged fragment of tulle, some netting or raffia, a curly willow twig, a pale green wooden dowel. These were strange combinations, and in many ways, they were reminiscent of the material juxtapositions in the first objects the artist had shown at this gallery, eighteen years earlier. This phase of Fecteau's use of materials, as well as his painting of the sculptures' surfaces, began in this restrained way, but since 2018, as the artist has mined his early work more and more, the combinations have become flamboyant. In the new series of 2020, as well as using rope, tulle, ribbons, and brightly painted cardboard tubes, Fecteau has encased whole objects, such as wicker baskets, in the bodies of the wall reliefs.

Sadly, while I have been able to see most of Fecteau's exhibitions over the past ten years, I could not get to Berlin to visit this latest exhibition at Galerie Buchholz, which was open to the public from September 11 to October 31, 2020, because of COVID-19 travel restrictions. Fecteau could not travel, either, and installed the show remotely. During most of the pandemic, I have had to "experience" art through flat images circulating on screens. But the viewing conditions of 2020–21 have just intensified what artists have had to confront in recent years—the dissemination of their work in PDFs distributed by galleries, on museum websites, and in online reviews, rather than through encounters "in the flesh." Many of Fecteau's contemporaries make sculpture that accepts this situation. Some fellow artists appear to tailor their work specifically for it, designing sculptures as iPhone-friendly backdrops for anticipated Instagram selfies. Not so Fecteau. Indeed, each of his sculptures resists these conditions, insisting that its twisted and curved, colored and caviated body, in all its intimate weirdness, be experienced by yours, in all yours. This, perhaps, is a queer resistance to the conditions of the digital image. In the pandemic, at the time of this writing, when people cannot visit art galleries but are instead barraged by invites to OVRs,<sup>vii</sup> I miss seeing Fecteau's work, but I know that his resistance is more necessary than ever.

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<sup>i</sup> Dennis Cooper, “Openings: Vincent Fecteau,” *Artforum* 33, no. 8 (April 1995), 84–85.

<sup>ii</sup> Fecteau won a MacArthur Fellowship, familiarly known as the “genius grant,” in 2016.

<sup>iii</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Julie Mehretu: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA),” *Artforum* 59, no. 4 (January–February 2020),

<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202002/julie-mehretu-81917>.

<sup>iv</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Draw a Picture, Then Make It Bleed,” in Samantha Topol, ed., *Nicole Eisenman: Dear Nemesis, 1993–2013* (Saint Louis, MO: Contemporary Art Museum Saint Louis; Cologne: Walther König, 2014), 105–6.

<sup>v</sup> Vincent Fecteau, speaking in a video posted on the MacArthur Foundation’s website following his award in 2016, accessed January 23, 2021, <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/957/>.

<sup>vi</sup> Brooke Kellaway, “The Sculpture Is Never Finished: An Interview with Vincent Fecteau,” *Sightlines* (Walker Art Center blog), September 18, 2012, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/the-sculpture-is-never-finished-an-interview-with-vincent-fecteau>.

<sup>vii</sup> OVR is an acronym for Online Viewing Room, a term used frequently in the COVID-19 period, especially between galleries and collectors.