

*Vincent Fecteau*

September 5 – November 9, 2019

Here are ten attempts to say  
something about an untitled  
exhibition of untitled sculptures  
by Vincent Fecteau.



These sculptures are tools.

perhaps to become a tool for  
other people as well.

Some artists begin with an idea or an opinion, and use it to make an artwork—first comes the meaning, then comes the object. But for Vincent Fecteau, ideas never work. His sculptures don't come as a result of an idea but are the tools he uses in his attempt to generate ideas and make meaning.

He begins with an initial impulse or desire (the specific trigger quickly becomes irrelevant) and proceeds by folding, cutting, twisting, trimming, adding, leveling, scraping off, smoothing out, carving away, turning over, twisting back, and adding again. He ties knots into other knots. Bit by bit, he locates the sharpest edges of whatever emerges—the parts of an object that cut into meaning in a way that makes ideas nervous or that puts them on alert. Eventually, each sculpture is wound up until it can't be made any tighter, sharpened until it can't be made any sharper, and it is released into the wild,



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These sculptures are abstract.

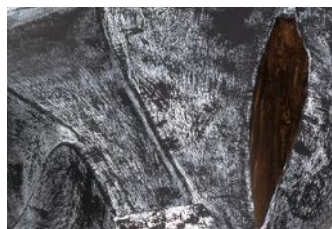
Everything is abstract.

By which I mean—a thick sludge of matter, energies, and consciousness is all there really is, at the end of the day. And these sculptures are simply tools that try to access the abstract. They work at getting a bit closer to it, maybe even to stick their toes in it, to get dirty with it. Fecteau doesn't invent an abstract form as much as he learns how to find one.

These sculptures don't believe in distinguishing the abstract from the really real. Abstraction is not a chosen style or a composition, but is deeply human—it's about the lived experience of locating and co-existing with it. Any other artwork, be it a figurative painting or a realistic photograph, is just as abstract as Fecteau's, only differently so.

That said, these sculptures aren't anchored to the world by being connected to a recognizable topic, message, or, worse, an instruction for how to think or what to believe.

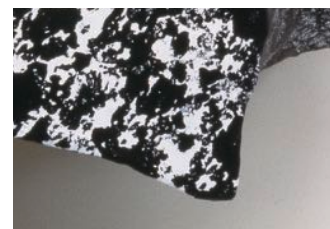
Instead, they communicate by speaking a language art is particularly good at—that of arranged shapes, colors, textures, intuitions, and intentions. *I decided not to approach content directly, but to trust that it would follow me as I moved around the room.* (Fecteau)



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These sculptures are made by Vincent Fecteau.

Fecteau grew up on Long Island, went to Wesleyan, studied painting, interned with Hannah Wilke for a summer, didn't like New York that much. He took time off from college and moved to San Francisco in 1990 to work with ACT UP. He worked as a studio assistant to Nayland Blake for a few years, hand-painted ceramics, and ended up as a florist. He had his first show in 1994, consisting mostly of photo-collages of cats. When Blake decamped for the East Coast, Fecteau took over his apartment and has been making his handcrafted sculptures ever since. When I asked him what he was reading these past few months, he mentioned *Now the Night Begins*, a novel written by the French filmmaker Alain Guiraudie (*Stranger by the Lake*). He lives near Balboa Park in the Mission Terrace neighborhood. There is a great painting by Tomma Abts in his kitchen. He bikes everywhere.









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These sculptures are necessary.

Like practically any other work of art, these sculptures are made by someone who needs to make them. The question is not to ask *how* Fecteau makes them but *why* he makes them. The answer, always, is somewhat embarrassing or humiliating, since the sculptures end up saying more about the artist than anything else. They reveal too much, because all self-portraits reveal too much. In all they say about his achievements and capabilities, they say just as much about his limitations. They contain his secrets.

But these objects also embody the contradictions that all of us are: they appear calm yet agitated, exposed but also secretive, fully formed but still formless.



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These sculptures are traps.

Vince sends me a Youtube link. It's a talk by the artist Don Potts, from 1981.

*You go to that feeling, you work on the trap, the trap sucks the feeling in, makes the feeling a little bit more concrete, you go back to the trap, you get rid of the junk, you build a more pure version, you go back to the feeling, and you just go back and forth. And over the course of the whole process, you start sucking this thing in, sucking this thing in—the trap is starting to catch it. (...) And then, one part of this trap becomes very important. No fussing around in this area. Other areas, you know, there's some glue hanging off it, or maybe an inch too big, it's not important. (...) What you're trying to catch is something you've never had your hands on. It's subtler than you can think, than your awareness can comprehend. So the trap has to be subtler than any trap you've ever made. You can't use old trap-making techniques. It will just get you so far, but it won't*

*take you that last step, to catch that thing. So you're all alone, well not all alone, mom is always around, [laughter], but you can't go to history books, you can't go to past work, you have to just respond to what it is you're trying to catch. And it gets incredibly exciting. (...) At the last moment, when you put the last touches on the trap, something will happen. It's not a trap anymore, it is what you've been trying to catch. This thing becomes that awareness or that idea, or whatever—you can't talk about these things with words, you know. And there it is. And you look at it. And there have been times when I've just, you know, cried. Not, you know, going-to-lie-down-on-the-bed crying, [laughter] but emotion will just pour out of my eyes. (Don Potts)*









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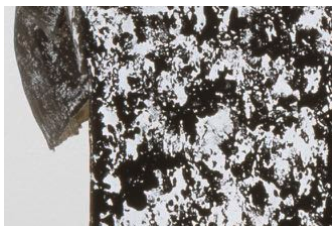
These sculptures are leaps of faith.

The painter Agnes Martin talked about *surrendering* the intellect. For many, to allow experience to precede cognition is a scary proposition. It puts us in a vulnerable place—walls need to be down, filters off. But what is art about if not vulnerability? Clicking back to Don Potts: *you need to be working right at that bottom edge of your nervous system.*

Fecteau never draws and never makes preliminary sketches—he jumps right in. When he makes a cut into a shape, he can't click undo but can only allow consequences to determine his next set of decisions. There is no safety net. It's like when you delete that sentence you've become really attached to, even though you don't yet know what will replace it. These sculptures don't *know*, they *believe*.

*These sculptures are made the way kids build backyard spaceships, with meticulous attention to detail, a grudging*

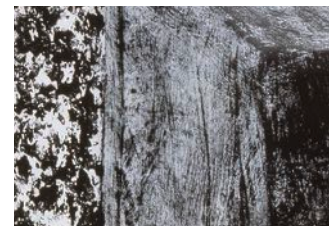
*respect for the trash he works with, and no real hope of re-creating what he sees when he closes his eyes.*  
(Dennis Cooper)



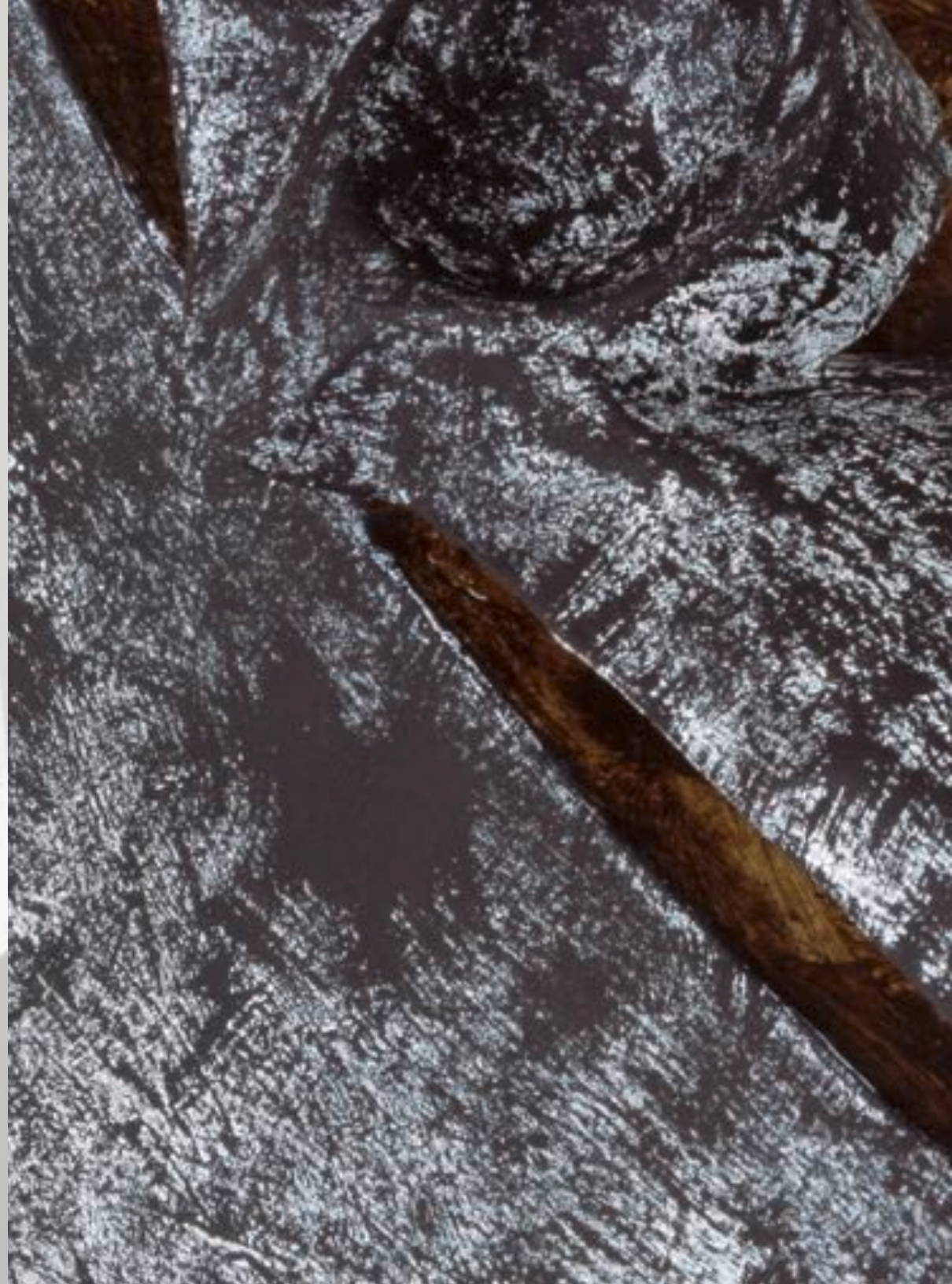
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These sculptures are new.

Even if they resemble others that came before it. They were made all at once, as a group, over the period of a year and a half. Decisions have migrated from one to another, making them siblings, of sorts—related but self-sufficient. They are made of carved foam, painted papier-mâché, and bits of resin clay. Some 3-D scanning and a 5-axis CNC router were also involved at one point in the process, which, for the artist, has been an experiment.









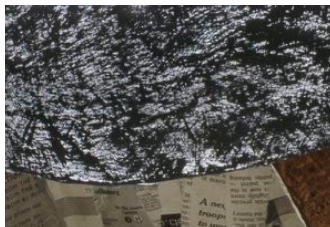
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These sculptures are evidence.

These sculptures are the physical traces of a desire, an intention, or an impulse. They provide evidence of personal and material limitations. They capture the artist's present state of mind, putting it on display for all to see.

They are also evidence of a battle between what is and what needs to be. They began on an open battlefield, where possibilities seemed endless. The material made a move, the artist made another, and art made yet another, each maneuvering itself away from, around, but also closer to the other. As they close in on each other, the decisions get smaller and smaller. The grip tightens.

To some of you, these sculptures will resonate, or strike a chord. They will prove that you share something with someone else. They are evidence that you are not alone.



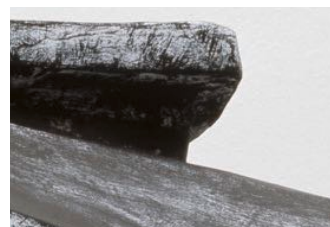
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These sculptures are here.

They sit on white pedestals, on display in a gallery. They claim space, perhaps even *compress* space. They are not models or surrogates for something else. They aren't *also* elsewhere, the way images can be. *They exist in the world irreducibly and uncontainably* (Fecteau). Their job is to make manifest, in physical form, some of what is *not* here, or at least not visibly so—the psyche, the libido, and everything else that remains unsaid and unsayable.

Also here are photographs by Lutz Bacher. She and Fecteau have been friends for many years, often sharing ideas and inspirations. Sometimes, Fecteau would come across an object or a situation and would immediately know—*that's a Lutz*. He would have to pull over or stop to take a picture, and send it to her. She would usually respond with an emoji or two. Years later, much to his delight, he would find out that she had turned the image or object into an artwork. Before

she passed away, just a few months ago, the two artists had the idea of including some of those in this exhibition—works by Bacher that had originally been images Fecteau had found and sent her. They come back to him now, charged with life and friendship.



These sculptures are untouchable.

Which is ironic, because they were made by hand and consist of nothing other than the physical traces of the artist's own touch. But these sculptures are untouchable in the way sound is untouchable—physically felt but impossible to actually hold on to. They look like what a polyrhythmic piece of music might look like, where many rhythms are made to intersect and overlap, even if they're all happening at the same time, on top of each other.

*I imagine an artwork as a fire that people gather around,* Fecteau once said. His sculptures are untouchable not because they might burn your hand but because the “art” in them is located in the energy they generate and in the emotions they mobilize.

And, like the warmth of a fire or a melody, these sculptures can't be photographed. Should you try, most of the object will be absent from the image—and

that's sculpture's great advantage over other forms of art: it's always hiding something. As Don Potts said about his traps, *if too much of the hook is exposed, the fish doesn't bite.*

P.S. These sculptures are not art.

*Art is an ideal. It's not an actual object. Objects can be evidence of an aspiration to “art,” but I think “art,” as a concept, is something bigger. It's truth. It's beyond museums and galleries and even artists. It's out of our reach. How we use our limited means to try and approach this truth can be very moving.* (Fecteau)

– Anthony Huberman





## Public Programs:

September 7

Fanny Singer performs a close reading of Vincent Fecteau's newest body of work.

September 25

Vincent Fecteau and Kathy Butterly are in conversation.

*Vincent Fecteau* is on view at CCA Wattis Institute from September 5 to November 9, 2019.

Vincent Fecteau (b. 1969, Islip, NY) has had solo exhibitions in prestigious institutions around the world such as Secession in Vienna (2016), Kunsthalle Basel (2015), The Art Institute of Chicago (2008), and The Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archives (2002), among others. His work was featured in the 2002 and 2012 Whitney Biennials in New York and the 2013 Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, among other major group exhibitions. In 2009, he curated an exhibition of works from SFMOMA's collection. The MacArthur Foundation named Fecteau a 2016 MacArthur Fellow. He currently lives and works in San Francisco.

*Vincent Fecteau* is curated by Anthony Huberman and organized by Leila Grothe. This exhibition is made possible thanks to generous support from Joachim and Nancy Bechtle, Katie and Matt Paige, and Helen and Charles Schwab. Special thanks to Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne; greengrassi, London; and Matthew Marks Gallery. With love to Lutz Bacher.

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Images: Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2006, papier-mâché, acrylic, 35 × 78 × 65 cm. Collection Daniel Buchholz & Christopher Müller, Cologne.

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