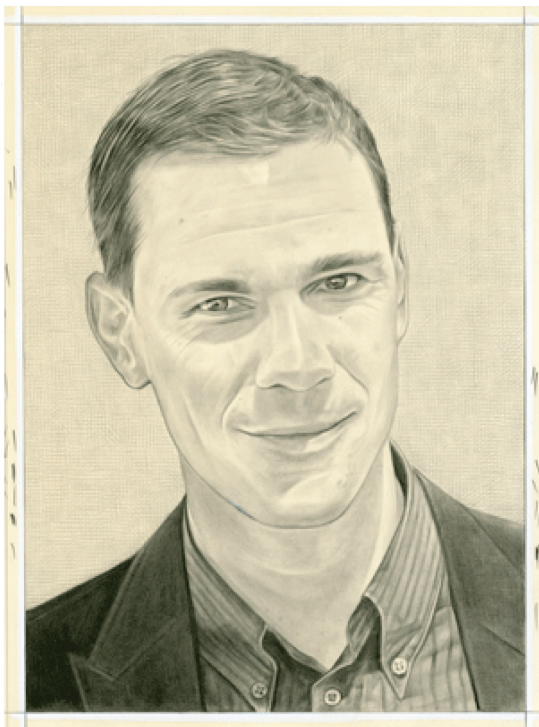


IN CONVERSATION Vincent Fecteau WITH CONSTANCE LEWALLEN

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-mache 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**