



## Vincent Fecteau

### Vienna Secession, Vienna

The “-ism” has long been declared unfit for describing trends in contemporary art—but of course, to declare something dead is to beg young artists to purpose it anew. Curated by Annette Südbek, Vincent Fecteau’s recent solo show at Vienna Secession [July 1–August 28, 2016] refreshes two such “-isms” from previous centuries: existentialism and formalism. Never extinct, existential angst lurks in the background of many a critical mind in the same way that formal concerns inevitably arise in the artistic one—even if they are rejected.

Fecteau once told an interviewer for *Art in America* that he was probably attracted to bas-relief because he doesn’t understand it. I am probably attracted to Fecteau’s work because I don’t understand it. His papier-mâché sculptures—rectangular forms built from florist boxes—solicit flashes of profound and attractive clarity, followed by moments during which it is difficult to remember or articulate their profundity. I oscillate between infatuation and skepticism when faced with the works; it is in their conceptual unclarity that they feel “right,” it is their apparent unreasoned existence that makes them so strong. The work leaves viewers wanting more, creating space for them to complete their meaning, or to accept their meaninglessness, in an existential manner.

Existentialism is, ostensibly paradoxically, a useful framework with which to think about a meaningless and unknowable world as a space to *create*. Fecteau’s papier-mâché sculptures suggest a similarly silly profundity. His complex bas-reliefs resist being photographed. Even in their presence, the best one can do is acquire multiple partial views. Just as their forms resist an immediate and holistic view, they also slip out of any definitive understanding.

At times inevitably and at times intentionally, Fecteau’s works reference a world beyond abstraction. During his public conversation with Bruce Hainley at the exhibition’s opening, the artist pointed out that the color of one sculpture screams “southwest”—but that little can be made of this resemblance. The works pique an interest they can’t appease, reflecting the experience of trying to make meaning in a world that lacks reasoned existence. Fecteau’s viewers are invited to accept the pleasure of these resemblances without rationalizing or justifying them. Working directly with materials, without a preliminary sketch, Fecteau employs a process that is similarly grounded in “being,” rather than in governing theories.

Other inevitable external references include the art historical ones. Not only is the Secession a gorgeous home for Fecteau’s work, but its modernist history frames his formalist grammar. It’s not as if Fecteau is directly referencing particular modernists so as to make a point, but rather that the limitless web of potential connections and formal comparisons his works evoke is ultimately empty—and in that emptiness is a sort of freedom, a proverbial “blank canvas.”

Yet the apparent immodesty of Fecteau’s formalist abstraction is subverted by his humble materials—balsa wood and papier-mâché are typically reserved for models. This humility is especially evident when the artist speaks about his work: he doesn’t claim to know what he’s getting at. He remains committed, however, to a kind of philosophical pursuit of knowledge. As Fecteau was once quoted in *BOMB* magazine, he believes “that there are some essential and probably ultimately unknowable truths to being human that can be accessed through art-making.”

In the legacy of abstract expressionism, the works evoke affect and evince the artist’s raw encounters with material. They evoke a sort of “mood”—and the contemplation of one’s own moods, according to philosophers such as Heidegger and Sartre, reveals fundamental aspects of the self.

Accompanying the sculptures on view in Vienna is a book of collaged images that get at nothingness in a different way, reusing and dissecting representational images. Like the sculptures, they make references to the real world, combining these references in ways that feel magical and spontaneous, rather than reasoned. They are stoic, but also deeply silly—one features a male abdomen cut out from a Tommy Hilfiger advertisement collaged atop what appear to be Greek ruins. The sculptures and collages speak to our present condition of image oversaturation. Fecteau views his rectangular forms as screens, in a sense. Indeed, they offer a sort of shallow depth in the way that the Internet promises limitless information—all meaningless without interpretation. In his work’s nothingness lie infinite possibilities, yet in the screen’s infinite possibilities lies nothingness.

The papier-mâché of which his sculptures consist is associated with crafts more than with “finished” artworks. It is also by nature endlessly additive in its process; with its imprecision, it is an inconclusive medium. For Fecteau, the works “feel” done when they no longer irritate him, when they produce a feeling of oddness and rightness at the same time. To pronounce *papier-mâché* is to flirt with the line Fecteau toes between silliness and sophistication: do you choose the proper French pronunciation and risk sounding pretentious or butchering it, or do you anglicize the word as you would in a grade school art class?

Fecteau recalls in an interview with *Art in America* that someone once told him, “You know, you’re not an intellectual artist.” The statement was met first with horror, which then yielded to a feeling of freedom. Fecteau clearly works from this place of liberation. Liberation and despair are, according to Nietzsche, the two possible responses to the acknowledgment that life has no intrinsic meaning. This divide explains my initial oscillation between skepticism and adoration: upon a first encounter with these works, it is difficult to define their aim. At the core of Fecteau’s hollow sculptures is nothingness; around it, meaning is made.

Amid today’s prolific, socially engaged art practices, it’s easy and tempting to dismiss formalist work as apolitical. It prioritizes form over content while working in the legacy of modernist avant-garde visual language, which was often intended as radical and subversive yet was often received as self-referential and isolating, and which would later become a bourgeois commodity. *But nothing is apolitical*. Fecteau’s works revel in open-endedness, yet that’s not to say they don’t make a claim—to make anything is to make a claim. Fecteau’s work is radical today for insisting on art as justified in and of itself, on sculpture as sculpture. And yet, his is not a bourgeois insistence on the autonomy of art, on art as separate from the social. Rather, it’s a re-emphasis on material existence in an art world that had, perhaps until recently, abandoned discussing objects for discourse itself. Fecteau’s works flip the process in which ideas generate forms; instead, his forms generate ideas or moods, and revel in the freedom of purposelessness.

—Emily B. Watlington

ABOVE: Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2016 [photo: Hannes Böck; courtesy of artist and Vienna Secession, Association of Visual Artists, Vienna]