

FLASH ART

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NO-BODY



The survey relies heavily on works produced from the late 1980s through the 1990s, and in this period Blake deftly navigated the fraught landscape of the culture wars, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the rising tide of conservative politics in America. As we confront a renewed assault from similar political and social forces, Blake's work generously offers examples of how modes of protest can be located in an aesthetic and material practice.

Meticulous in presentation, tastefully arranged, and aesthetically restrained, the exhibition might initially pass for something more conservative.

However, Blake's work suggests a subtle yet radical alternative to the traditional reconciliation between meaning and form while refusing to provide us with a comforting didactic resolution. Rather, it opens a space where we too are asked to reevaluate the complicated politics surrounding the representation of identity in contemporary popular culture, and to recognize the contradictions of living in a time when representation often takes precedence over reality.

4 VINCENT FECTEAU

CCA Wattis Institute,
San Francisco
by Michele D'Aurizio

In Vincent Fecteau's most recent solo exhibition at the CAA Wattis Institute – his first show in San Francisco, his adopted city of residence (he was born in Islip, NY), in fifteen years – seven brand-new sculptures, unmistakably Fecteau's, sit on white pedestals. They appear slightly bulkier, more muscular, and their surface treatment somewhat less powdery than sculptures I had seen before. I also notice features that I don't remember detecting in any of the artist's previous body of work: proto-functional items, like eye-ring screws or peering tubes; a staircase and other explicit references to architectural forms; and baffling thingies: raffia fibers, tiny pieces of jute, but also a flawlessly executed black burlap ribbon. They contaminate otherwise smooth surfaces more like forgotten traces of the process of making, rather than manifest ornaments.

I learn that, on this occasion, Fecteau experimented with a new

technique: if in the past he would make his objects entirely by hand, in papier-mâché or clay resin, for these new ones he had small-scale clay models 3-D scanned, enlarged virtually, and sculpted by a CNC router out of foam. He then finished the shapes with the usual veneer of acrylic paint. If Fecteau's sculptural practice has often raised questions about the dividing line between art and craftsmanship, this new body of work recasts that diatribe into the more ancient antithesis between the man- and the machine-made. As I rehearse in my mind the object's gestation, I can't help but envision an equivocal relationship with technology in which artistic invention lends itself to mechanical production, only to later re-appropriate the latter's output in a frenzied attempt to upset the integrity of the industrially manufactured whole, reintroducing human imperfections and restituting the object to the realm of the sensible.

In a 2001 *Artforum* entry, critic Bruce Hanley wrote that Fecteau's sculptures "investigate the sculptural possibilities and erotic atmospherics of decor."

Today, it is hard for me to see these sculptures as marginal and subtle as only ornaments can be. The gaze perceives them as hard-to-dismiss entities – they are elephants in the room. And, leveraging their material criticality, they point to the following truth: how they are made and what they are made of – their intimate nature – is somewhat unimportant; they themselves are casts of the mind's deepest secrets, dream's navels given a three-dimensional shape. (So the ribbons and the strings are bits of suppressed memory surfacing to consciousness; and the hooks, the tubes, and the stairs hint at that process taking place.) Yet if Fecteau's sculptures are representations of the unconscious, that unconscious has the aspect of a prototypical machine. What are they if not models for spaceships, power stations, high-sea oil platforms, brutalist housing complexes, and, broadly speaking, the architectures of techno-utopia? The seven sculptures are surrounded by a photographic series by the late artist Lutz Bacher. Bacher and Fecteau were friends, and Fecteau used to share with Bacher found images that the latter occasionally transformed into artworks. In their earlier life, the images comprising the series had been Fecteau's. They depict a young girl, blonde and dressed in a flowery blouse, in different emotional states: here she's absent, lost in her thoughts; there she is choked up, shedding tears. The coexistence of many sentiments in one individual, in one space, parallels the abstractedness of Fecteau's sculptures: one can attach to them as many meanings as their surface's many facets. Yet Bacher's contribution also points to a state in life – infancy – when the struggle between consciousness and unconsciousness is at its earliest stage, a stage when creativity is pure and the functioning of the mind hasn't been engineered yet by the machines of society.



5 KARA WALKER
From Black and White to Living Color: The Collected Motion Pictures and Accompanying Documents of Kara E. Walker, Artist

Sprüth Magers London
 by Henry Broome

Coinciding with the artist's Tate Modern Turbine Hall commission, Sprüth Magers London presents the first retrospective of Kara Walker's films. In addition to notes, storyboards, and wall-mounted puppets, the exhibition, devised by curator and writer Hilton Als, includes eight color and black-and-white videos set in the antebellum American South during the time of the transatlantic slave trade. Acted out with small black paper puppets and silhouettes, the films reveal how narratives and cinema produce and reproduce African American history and trauma.

In Walker's cut-out characters, black and white become caricatures – they're reduced to their most basic, base form. Bulbous lips and bulging rumps. Floppy long fringes and pointy noses. Like the silhouette, the stereotype "says a lot with very little information," Walker has said.

8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker (2005) is based on *Song of the South*

(1946), Disney's Uncle Tomish depiction of the southern states after the civil war. In Walker's interpretation, a white boy threatens to have Uncle Remus whipped if he doesn't tell him a story, reflecting the way Hollywood's founding fathers reinforced black mental servitude, long after the abolition of slavery.

Other films invert the stereotyped hyperactive black male libido, seen as a vile threat to white women's honor and purity. In *Fall From Grace, Miss Pipi's Blue Tale* (2011), the governess attempts to seduce a plantation worker. He rejects her advances, most likely for fear of accusation of rape. She eventually ensnares him under her mangrove-root-like dress, but they're caught by the master, who in a fit of jealous rage mutilates and murders the black labourer. Conversely, in *Six Miles from Springfield on the Franklin Road* (2009), a film derived from historical, first-person testimony, a gang of white men subject a young black girl and her family to sexual violation, murder, and arson. The contrast in narratives exposes the way legal protection favours white women, a disparity still seen today in the disproportionate number of black men killed by US police, powerfully shown by Arthur Jafa's video *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016).

Earlier in *Fall From*