



Capital City Arts Initiative

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, The Felt Works, an exhibition by artist Svea Ferguson, at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from February 8 – May 30, 2019. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Pierette Kulpa, who provided the following essay.

breathe, sigh, heave



*Could it be you've been there all along,
cyanotype on vinyl flooring,
55"x11"x6", 2018*

In Svea Ferguson's recent work, sculptures cling to walls. Abstract forms embrace, sag, and lilt, and they transform on their vertical supports. The thin, minimally colored, cut forms mimic human actions as they comport themselves as weighty, massive objects, highlighting the fact that they are composed of relatively heavy, though inexpensive, materials. They imitate the instinctive way that we – as humans – conduct our bodies through space. In the same breath, Ferguson makes allusions to classical sculpture and its drapery (one might think of the Parthenon marbles), as well as serpentine Renaissance forms (Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel figures come to mind). What makes this collection of work fascinating is that for as much as connections are drawn to the past, they are equally drawn to the present. The use of linoleum and vinyl create parallels with modern art, in particular Minimalism, a mid-twentieth-century art movement concerned with distilling art materials into their most basic compositions and forms. Not to mention the fact that these are the very materials that we build our modern-day lives out of. Ultimately, though, for Ferguson, her sculptures create a distinct link with the most basic human functions: breathing, sighing, and simply being. With this body of work, Ferguson interrogates how art can address these ephemeral, but essential, acts.

Rather than depict these actions, and the emotions that predicate them, Ferguson makes you feel them. The works give you pause as the forms inspire contemplation. We have these funny idiomatic sayings in English such as "catch a breath" and "hang out." It is this slang that is literalized in Ferguson's pieces, as the viewer is given the opportunity to investigate the malleability, fragility, impermanence, and strength of her art – and by extension – our body. It is undeniable that everyday life is increasingly hurried and fast-paced. So, it is rare to find time to meditate on seemingly (and that's the key word here) insignificant

tasks such as inhaling, exhaling, and standing. But in actual fact, we are nothing if not breathing and if not tethered to the planet. Nor have we much choice about those “activities.” Indeed, respiration and gravity are well beyond our control. Ferguson’s work does much to make us ponder these inevitable, unalterable situations. Through her art, we take them less for granted as we are reminded of their existence.

Though these forms are abstracted, they claim classical sculptural traditions in unexpected ways. It is typical among ancient sculptures that drapery clings to bodies. It conceals the voluptuous and muscular forms of gods and goddesses or, as in many nudes, it reveals them, drawing attention to their very lack of clothing. Classical sculpture is made out of precious materials, such as bronze, marble, and porphyry (a hard, purplish stone often used in the monuments of Roman and Byzantine Emperors). It was typically painted, patinated, or otherwise decorated. In some of Ferguson’s work, we have the same detailed decoration and attention to the subject, albeit with inexpensive materials. *Golden Boy*, for example, luxuriates in its own



Golden Boy, rubber baseboard trim, 20"x7"x8", 2018

beautiful form, a tight, elaborate knot, but also in its reference to an expensive sculptural material: gold. Ferguson acknowledged the effortless nature of this particular form and the ease with which it revealed itself during the process of creation. In actuality, this is a prefabricated piece of rubber baseboard trim, and its ornate, dare we say over-the-top color, gives it a decorative quality in the fine art, rather than in the practical, sense. It evokes connotations of the precious objects that were worn or carried in ancient civilizations such as fibula (garment buckles), coinage, or amulets. Its reflective quality seems to conceal more completely its composition from prefabricated materials, and as a result, it is perhaps the piece of greatest artifice in the exhibition.

The echo of the human body and its essential activities in this work is made with allusions to classical architecture and textiles, both of which protect our body, as well. The sensuous curve of an ionic volute or a languid acanthus leaf of a classical column is referenced in *Could it be you've been there all along*, the verticality of the strips pressed against each other, and their speckled surfaces suggestive of the fluting on a column and the grain of a metamorphic stone, such as marble. The composition of fabric itself is referenced in the braided and tied strips that make up *A braid is just a braid* and *Through your skins*: the textiles that we use to cover our body referenced on a smaller scale.



Through Your Skins, rubber, 76"x14"x4", 2018



Landed Lip, MacTac,
42"x10"x5", 2018

In our conversations about the show, Ferguson revealed the direct influence of the human form on *Landed Lip*. Created out of adhesive MacTac, a material used for labels, medical tapes, and commonly used as a shelf liner, when unfolded and laid out on the floor, *Landed Lip* is a giant upper lip. The isolation of this single part of the human body by way of a sticky material forges connections between the roles of the mouth that are both messy and clean. Tasks such as eating, spitting, and producing saliva, come to mind, as well as the role the lips have to hold sticky glosses and lipsticks. But the mouth also forms eloquent phrases, it negotiates and proclaims, it tastes and it kisses. Ferguson unites these distinct tasks, among the savory and the unsavory, in this work. *Landed Lip* underscores that though the mouth is home to the vile, bland, and flavorless, it can also create the good, beautiful, and loving.

The late sculptor Robert Morris, active in NYC, was at the forefront of using soft, prefabricated materials, particularly industrial felt, in abstract sculptures of the 1960s and 1970s. Ferguson's exhibition is in close dialogue with these works. Like Morris, Ferguson uses soft, malleable materials, many of which are ubiquitous and industrial, such as: vinyl flooring, latex, linoleum trim, and MacTac. Morris's best known works are made out of industrial felt, a material that resists the easy pliability of wearable fabrics. Ferguson has made similar choices with her linoleum, latex, and vinyl. They are not fabric, per se, but they exist somewhere between the hyper-flexibility of fabric, and the rigidity of stone, bronze, or steel. They are easily manipulated, cut, bent, and nailed when necessary, and they are transgressors to the fine art realm, just as Morris's industrial felt pieces were. Typically, these materials coat

the floors, labels, and windows of art galleries, not the walls. These attributes appeal to Ferguson, who created most of these sculptures in the studio and then adjusted them in the gallery as they were being fastened to the wall.

This process of making is referenced in the prints as a diptych, a two-paneled artwork meant to be viewed in tandem. These are cyanotypes, a photographic blueprint process that involves the treatment of objects (here, paper) that makes them light sensitive so that they can record the image of whatever is placed upon them. *Untitled (soft gestures)* references the artist's hand directly by including it in the print, and indirectly, by exposing the brush stroke of the coating that has made the paper light-sensitive. Their faded images suggest the passage of time and decay. The dimness of the print mimicking the dissipation of breath from the body or the relaxation of shoulders as they sink down one's back with an exhale.



Untitled (soft gestures),
cyanotype on paper, 20"x30", 2018

Ferguson's work draws attention to non-figurative art in new ways. It attempts to picture intangible actions such as breath and gravity. And it reconciles formal problems in sculpture, such as how prefabricated, industrial materials can bring to mind ancient, Renaissance, and modern art. It also references the human body using the very materials that are employed to protect, decorate, and house it. Ultimately, Ferguson's collection is one that inspires us to do as the artworks do, pause, breathe, sigh, and move through the exhibition with composure, grace, and awareness.

Pierette Kulpa
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Artist Svea Ferguson

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