

On materials and margins

*A curatorial essay on *The Moments Between*, an exhibition of new work by Rafael E. Vera
January 15- February 21, 2015*

By Jessica Cochran, Curator

*Houses are vessels of desire, but so much of that desire is not for the physical artifact itself. For admiring houses from the outside is often about imagining entering them, living in them, having a calmer, more harmonious, deeper life.*¹

In *The Moments Between*, Rafael E. Vera presents new sculptures fabricated with concrete, pillows, rebar, wooden palettes, palette trucks, panes of glass and dollies. Soft surfaces meet hard edges where lightness and weight collude in works characterized as much by finesse as they are by heavy lifting. Contextualized within broader *bricolage* tendencies in sculpture today, defined by historian and critic Lane Relyea, “Neither studio-made *objet* nor store-bought commodity, most of the new *bricolage* seems to either precede production or to postdate consumption—it seems to come from storage bins and trashcans ... of Home Depot, Google, and eBay.”²

Vera utilizes building materials and domestic objects, which revel in a state of in-between-ness and occupy ambiguous space relative to production and consumption. And while many other artists are interested in the nostalgic or social aspects of found or discarded stuff, Vera looks forward only: his palettes, furniture, and other objects are often fabricated entirely from scratch and combined with brand new pillows, cinder blocks or palette trucks sourced for artistic purposes alone. This is because his care lies in subverting the gentle, persistent *inertia* of each object to become something new—in replacing dormant narratives with counter-narratives by way of *bricolage*. In this way, each sculpture is a proposal. After all, it is the “job of the artist,” as Rebecca Solnit pointed out in a recent essay on materiality, creativity, and the home, “to find out how materials and images speak, to make the mute material world come to life...”³

Why does Vera build quotidian objects from scratch? Individual palettes, which hang perilously from the ceiling in one installation and serve as a platform in another, are perfectly designed and constructed out of clean, blonde wood. Two wooden chairs, on which lay a concrete and rebar column, are perfectly realized, with no design element pointing to a specific time or style, past or present. The result of each fabrication is that each object becomes slightly *other* in appearance—gently removed from the visual cues of commerce, brand or use. What is at the heart of this (un)creative act, this (un)necessary labor?

¹ Rebecca Solnit, “Inside Out, or Interior Space (and Interior Decoration),” in *The Encyclopedia of Trouble* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2014), Kindle edition.

² Lane Relyea, “Welcome to Yourspace,” in *Your Everyday Art World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), Kindle edition.

³ Rebecca Solnit, “Inside Out, or Interior Space (and Interior Decoration),” in *The Encyclopedia of Trouble* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2014), Kindle edition.

In a world ever full of choices, options, things and more things, we are all, it seems, called upon constantly to be artisans, curators, stylists, procurers, and producers. In his book *Ways of Curating*, Hans Ulrich Obrist observed, we "...create more material goods each year than the previous one. Today we are awash in cheaply produced objects to a degree that would have been difficult to imagine a century ago. The result, arguably, has been a shift in the ratio of importance between making new objects and choosing from what is already there."⁴ It is true, we do make and have more things. So what Vera does, by tactically mixing carefully selected found objects with those he fabricates from scratch, is a conscious move to assert control and calculation over the creative production of space as an interpretation of discursive familial or social relations. Such an approach might be compared to contemporary strategies in poetry, where found text and authorial text mingle together on the space of the page (or screen). And as poet Kenneth Goldsmith, known for appropriating found text into poetic work (often in the form of transcription) recently pondered in the *New Yorker*, "What is it that I'm lifting? And why? What do my choices about what to appropriate tell me about myself? My emotions? My history? My biases and passions?"⁵

While Vera's work is deeply autobiographical, it is so without many clues or much information. Embedded in the titles one will find little in the way of poetic reference; no meaningful objects or sentimental ephemera are tucked in among the objects. The works are corporal in scale but the body is missing: installations seemingly "on pause" situated as small stage sets, vaguely coherent narrative constructions through which, if we look hard enough, we might access a memory or two or visualize a possible future. To the artist, they are emphatically about the interior, domestic space, but yet they are comprised of the stuff of building infrastructure, construction sites, and (often marginal) public space. Vera and I considered productive potential inherent to the many paradoxical subtexts of his work, and so we decided to create an invitational space for artists within the context of the solo exhibition. Individual works by Jessica Bardsley, Jaclyn Jacunski, Kirsten Leenaars, and Sonja Thomsen pick up, amplify or animate the following ideas, each of which are crucial and deeply embedded in Vera's work: *family life, death, the specter, the commons*. Along with an abstract painting selected from Vera's own archive of past work, these convene in the gallery space as curatorial paratext⁶, or, support elements that orbit (and collude with) the work of the original author as something of a malleable, productive framing device.

Theaster Gates recently said, "Because if we keep moving things around, form starts to emerge, a form we never would have imagined."⁷ For an artist's book published on the occasion of the exhibition, Vera conceived of the phrase "closed eyes gaze." It's not often enough we give credit to the outer limit of our imaginary as that which activates the power of actually doing. Undoubtedly made possible by both his *closed eye gaze* and disciplined, exploratory labor, Vera's work is deliberate and materially present, allowing a space of new forms and narrative potential that is careful and slow moving.

⁴ Hans Ulrich, *Ways of Curating* (New York: Faber & Faber, Inc, 2014), 24.

⁵ Kenneth Goldsmith, "Why I am Teaching a Course Called Wasting Time on the Internet," *The New Yorker*, November 13, 2014, accessed on December 2, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/wasting-time-on-the-internet>.

⁶ In literary analysis, paratext is generally defined as the myriad elements that support a text, such as typeface, layout, illustrations or copy supplied by editors and publishers

⁷ Words spoken by the artist during a visiting artist lecture, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, September 2, 2014.