

# VIRGINIA FLECK



W O M E N   &   T H E I R   W O R K

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MARCH 4 - APRIL 10, 1999

AUSTIN, TEXAS

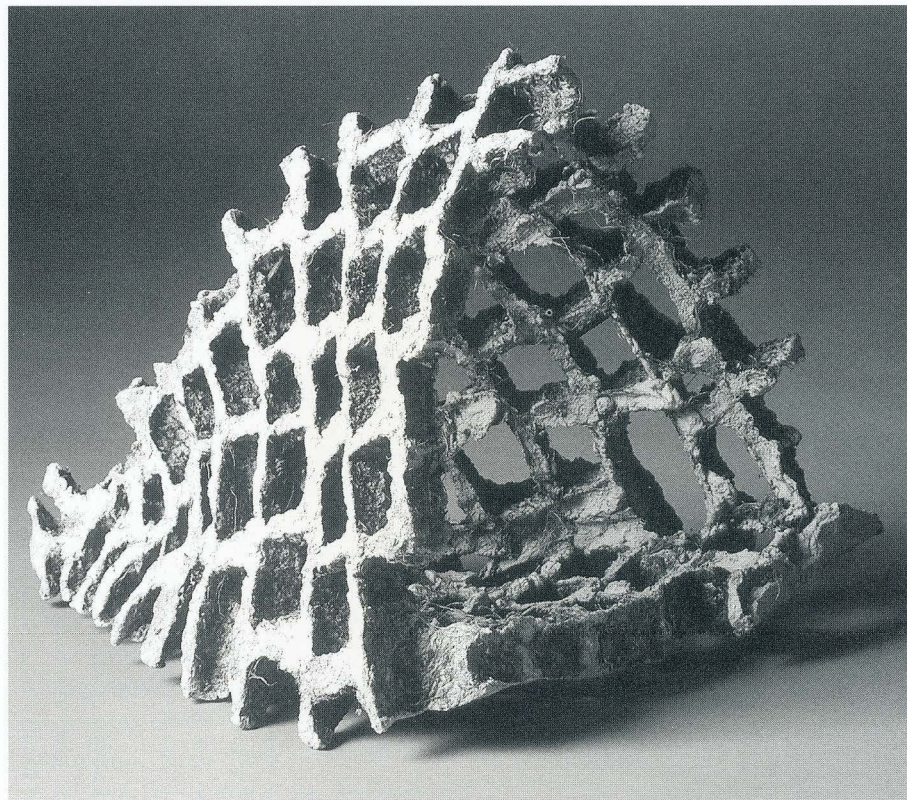
## VIRGINIA FLECK: Substance & Remembrance

*April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.*

—T.S. Eliot, from *The Waste Land*, (1922)

Virginia Fleck's sculpture occupies a space between the present and the past, between substance and remembrance, between objects and their ruins. Using materials such as sod, mortar, birdcages, furniture parts, and fabric, Fleck animates our senses and stirs our memories through imprints, traces, and fragments. She does not provide us with confessional narratives or social commentaries, but rather invites us to make our own intuitive associations. We will not encounter the Freudian dreams or horrific visions of surrealists such as Dali or Magritte. Instead we confront poetic objects, reminiscent of Joseph Cornell's evocative boxes, the magical assemblages of Betye Saar, or Meret Oppenheim's sensual *Fur-Covered Teacup*.

Like Oppenheim, Fleck's work triggers visceral responses. Her somatic *Split Top*, 1998, an assemblage of birdcage pieces, mortar and fabric confront us as a coherent organism. The juxtaposition of diaphanous cloth with the yellow and pink mortar-encrusted sections of the birdcage suggests fragile biological tissues protected by an armature of bones, muscles, and impenetrable skin. Or is it the delicate tissue which holds together the ponderous flesh? The piece is unified through a dainty floral pattern resembling a network of neurons that winds through the fabric and has been imprinted onto the mortar as it seeps through the wires of the



*Skeleton*, 1997, 16" h x 18" w x 14" d, sod and mortar with sod removed.

birdcage. Fleck finds birdcages disturbingly paradoxical, since they serve to confine creatures that are destined to fly. Recurring in much of her work, these metaphors for cruelty function as "miniature architecture" which she then "renovates" by rendering them unable to contain their intended occupants. And in destroying these tiny prisons she transforms them into something that palpitates and comes alive.

The corporeality of Fleck's art is perhaps a natural extension of her work as a professional massage therapist. Just as she uses her hands to manipulate skin, muscles, and bones, she also imparts a sort of tactile knowledge to her sculpture. For

example, each of the cement discs in *Genetic Quilt*, 1998, reveals a different texture of bumps, grooves, and puckers from the variety of fabrics from which they have been cast. Looking closely at their surfaces, we see breasts, viscera, fingerprints, warts, and cellular organelles. Like bulges of skin or teeming protozoan, their arrangement also conjures up images of molecules, perhaps even a double helix. Such interpretations are close in keeping with Fleck's own response to the piece as something which suggests genealogy. She sees the work not only as a biological entity, a sort of genetic code, but also as a patchwork of family history. Using fabric from cast-off curtains, souvenir pillows, and even a Union Jack flag to create her textures, Fleck imbues each disc

with a sense of nostalgia. We recall treasures from Grandma's house—an heirloom quilt, her "button box," or collection of shells. The soft faded colors echo the palette of the body, but also that of dried flowers from a wedding bouquet or funeral wreath. One can almost detect the faint scent of lavender sachets and rosewater.

Fleck's ornate *Spheres no.3, 4 and 5, 1999*, explore memory and nostalgia in another way. Large hollow spheres reminiscent of the empty spaces within her birdcages, these objects display a Baroque solidity quite different from her ethereal discs. The patterns of cloth and metallic patinas remind us of encrusted artifacts rescued from the damp earth. Pretty and playful, they could be priceless jewels or kitschy baubles—a gift from a young girl to her mother, its beauty calculated by the innocence of juvenile eyes.

In addition to the evocative qualities of fabric, Fleck incorporates cubes of sod into much of her work. For her the sod may stir up some ancestral memory of her Irish great-grandparents, who were no doubt intimately familiar with the earthy peat that is still harvested for fuel in Ireland. Fleck makes her own sod from root-bound wheat grass which she cultivates and allows to die, leaving only the "dull roots" as traces of the once nourishing plant. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust—the roots could be seen as troubling reminders of death and decay. Or they could be understood as comforting relics from nature, functioning much like the sacred body parts of medieval saints, which allow the devout to encounter a supernatural realm between life and death through tangible objects. Fleck's *Woven Square, 1999*, sod cube, could be understood to represent this interconnectedness between the physical and spiritual worlds. Each interlocking part winds into the next to form an infinity. And yet each

of the sod elements which comprise this infinity is absolutely unique, a specific record of time and place, a tangible reminder of our earthly existence.

Like the Earth artists from the 1960's and 70's, Fleck uses materials from nature as a vital component for her work. However, she does not attempt to impose herself on her medium or to transform the environment. Instead, Fleck establishes a partnership with her materials, allowing them to help shape her objects in terms of their unique qualities and limitations. Building up her sod pieces with mortar as if laying bricks, she allows them to evolve organically. The results are undulating surfaces and irregular perimeters.

These works invite us to make anthropomorphic associations. The creases and ripples of Fleck's floor piece, *Segmented Sod, 1999*, form a sort of topography, as if we are encountering a miniature landscape. But the scale of the work is human. Were these depressions produced by the weight of a body? Or is the work itself a human form, covered with a hairy skin, and supported by a skeletal structure? In a similar way, the freestanding columns in *Female Form, 1998*, could be likened to the thighs of a primeval fertility figure that has been endowed with the power of creation. And yet this fecund body is also very fragile, succumbing to the forces of nature as it folds in upon itself. In the equally delicate *Skeleton, 1997*, Fleck has removed the sod blocks entirely, leaving only traces of the flayed skin in the skeletal mortar. To look at this corpus of work is to see ourselves described, as John Berger has written, by familiar but somehow incongruous forms:

*We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is*

*continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as what we are.*

(*Ways of Seeing, 1972*)

In fashioning this relationship between objects and ourselves, Fleck's work does not represent the figure, just as it does not create narratives. Instead it summons our memories and desires through evocation. In this way Fleck's work shares many of the aesthetic traditions found in aboriginal Polynesia. Here artistic objects were valued, not for their ability to represent a specific form or tangible idea, but rather for their embodiment of a residual sacredness. Each object contained multiple layers of spiritual essence, or mana, imbued by the gods, the maker, a succession of users, and a diversity of movements, sounds, and scents. The artist gave tangible form to the spiritual realm through abstracted constructions in natural materials. These constructions in turn served as templates on which to record collective memories, family histories, and genealogical records. Functioning similarly as sensation rather than text, Fleck's sculpture exists as we experience it. Each person's reaction to her objects will be unique and necessarily valid, adding yet another layer of meaning to the complex web of associations and corporeal memories embodied in her work.

Anastasia Easterday, Ph.D.  
Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History  
Southwestern University  
Georgetown, Texas  
February 1999

# VIRGINIA FLECK

Born in New York, NY 1960

Resides in Austin, Texas

## EDUCATION

- 1986-89 School of the Museum of Fine Arts,  
Boston, MA.  
1978-80 Maine College of Art, Portland, ME.

## AWARDS / RESIDENCIES

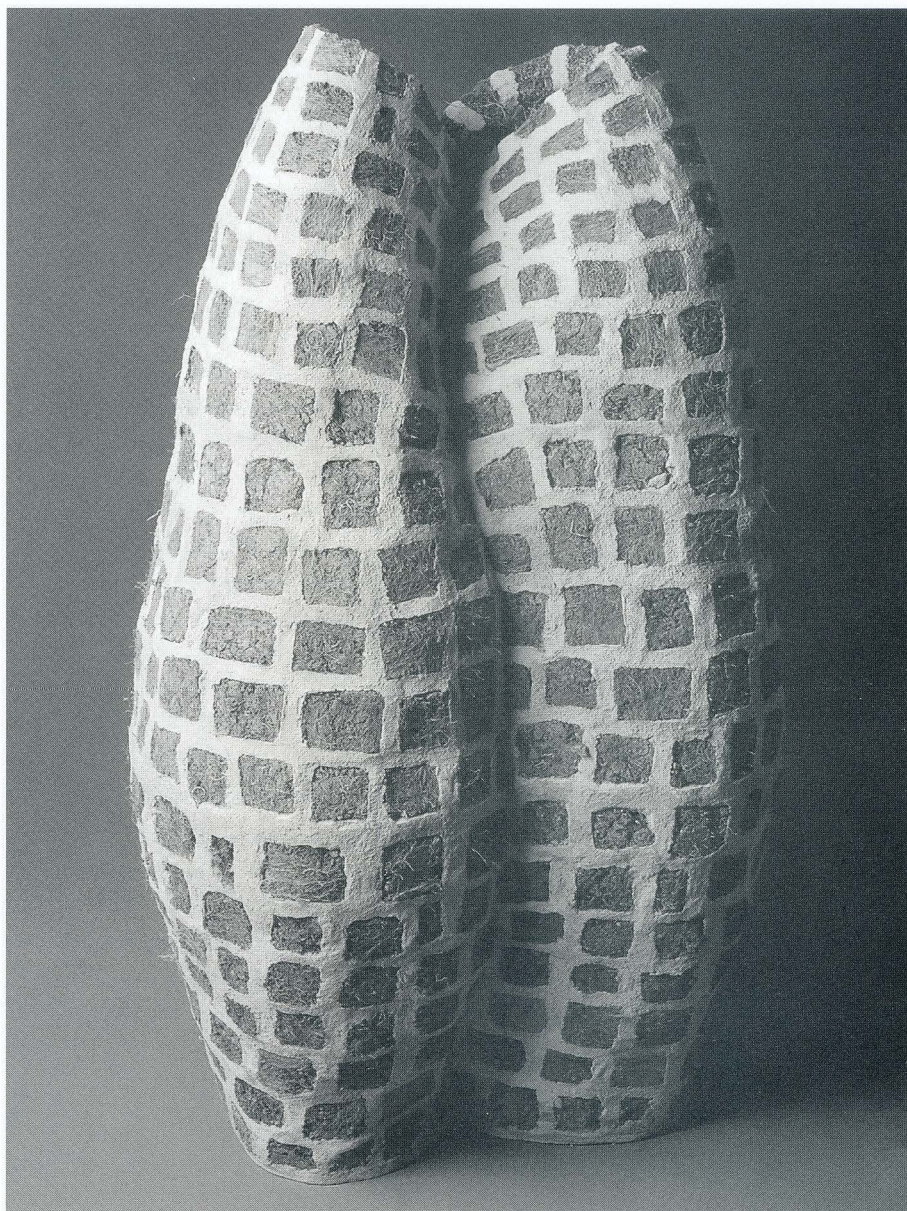
- 1997 Artist in resident, Stone Quarry Hill  
Sculpture Park, Cazenovia, NY  
1996 Honorarium and residency, Lubbock  
Fine Arts Center, Lubbock, TX  
1995 Grant and residency for large-scale  
installation, Connemara Conservancy,  
Dallas, TX  
1989 Public Art Grant, Cambridge Art  
Association, Cambridge, MA

## ONE & TWO PERSONS EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 **New Work**, Solo Show at Women & Their  
Work Gallery, Austin, TX (brochure)  
1998 **Virginia Fleck—New Work**, Solo  
show, Rudolph Poissant Gallery,  
Houston, TX (essay)  
1996 **Recent Work**, Slover McCutcheon  
Gallery, Houston, TX (two person show)

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 **Ground Swell**, Austin Museum of Art at  
Laguna Gloria, six person show curated  
by Katie Hernandez-Coles (brochure)  
1998 **Critics Choice**, Dallas Visual Art Center,  
Dallas, TX., group show juried by  
Elizabeth Ferrer, Director, Austin  
Museum of Art and Stephen Vollmer  
curator El Paso Museum of Art.  
(catalogue)  
1997 **The Visceral Intellect**, Women & Their  
Work Gallery, Austin, TX., members  
show juried by Sue Graze.  
1997 **Red Dot Sale**, Women & Their Work  
Gallery, Austin, TX (invitational)  
1996 **Dream Auction and Show**, Women &  
Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX.  
(invitational)  
1995 **14th Annual Sculpture Exhibition**,  
Connemara Conservancy, Dallas, TX.  
Grant for large scale outdoor  
installation. (invitational)  
1994 **Compelling Spaces: Site-Specific  
Artworks**, Austin Museum of Art at  
Laguna Gloria, six person show curated  
by Mark Lesly Smith Ph.D. (catalogue)  
1994 **Pinball Arcade**, Mills Gallery,  
Boston, MA. A project of The Revolving  
Museum. (invitational)  
1994 **Memory and Desire: THE WINDOW**  
Texas Fine Arts Association, Austin, TX  
(invitational)  
1994 **Self-possessed**, Laguna Gloria Art  
Museum, Austin, TX. Exhibition



*Female Form, 1998, 48" h x 30" w x 19" d, preserved sod and mortar.*

organized by the Texas Fine Arts  
Association. Lynn Zelevansky,  
Museum of Modern Art, juror.  
Traveled to Lubbock Fine Arts Center,  
Fire House Gallery in Del Rio, J. Wayne  
Stark, College Station. (catalogue)  
1993 **A Show Without Walls**, Austin Artist's  
Cooperative, Austin, TX. (invitational)  
1993 **Yard Space 11: Transformations**,  
Austin, TX. Installations in ordinary  
backyards.

1992 **Garden of Art Project**, Site-specific  
installations by 3 artists on a wooded  
4 acre site in west Austin.

## COLLECTIONS

Dr. Cal K. Cohn, Bellaire, TX  
Women's International News Gathering Service  
(W.I.N.G.S.), Austin, TX  
Dixie Williams, Austin, TX  
June Torosian, Franklin Square NY



*This Panel: Genetic Quilt (detail), 1998, 54"h x 27"w x 3/4"d, cement, oil paint.  
Cover Panel: Sphere no. 3, 1999, 20" diameter, lace cast in man-made stone, oil paint.  
Back Panel: Woven Square, 1999, 25"h x 38"w x 38"d, preserved sod and mortar.*



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Now celebrating its 20th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1582 artists in 185 visual art exhibitions, 81 music, dance, and theater events, 19 literary readings, 12 film festivals, and 127 workshops, in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Women & Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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