

APPEX.

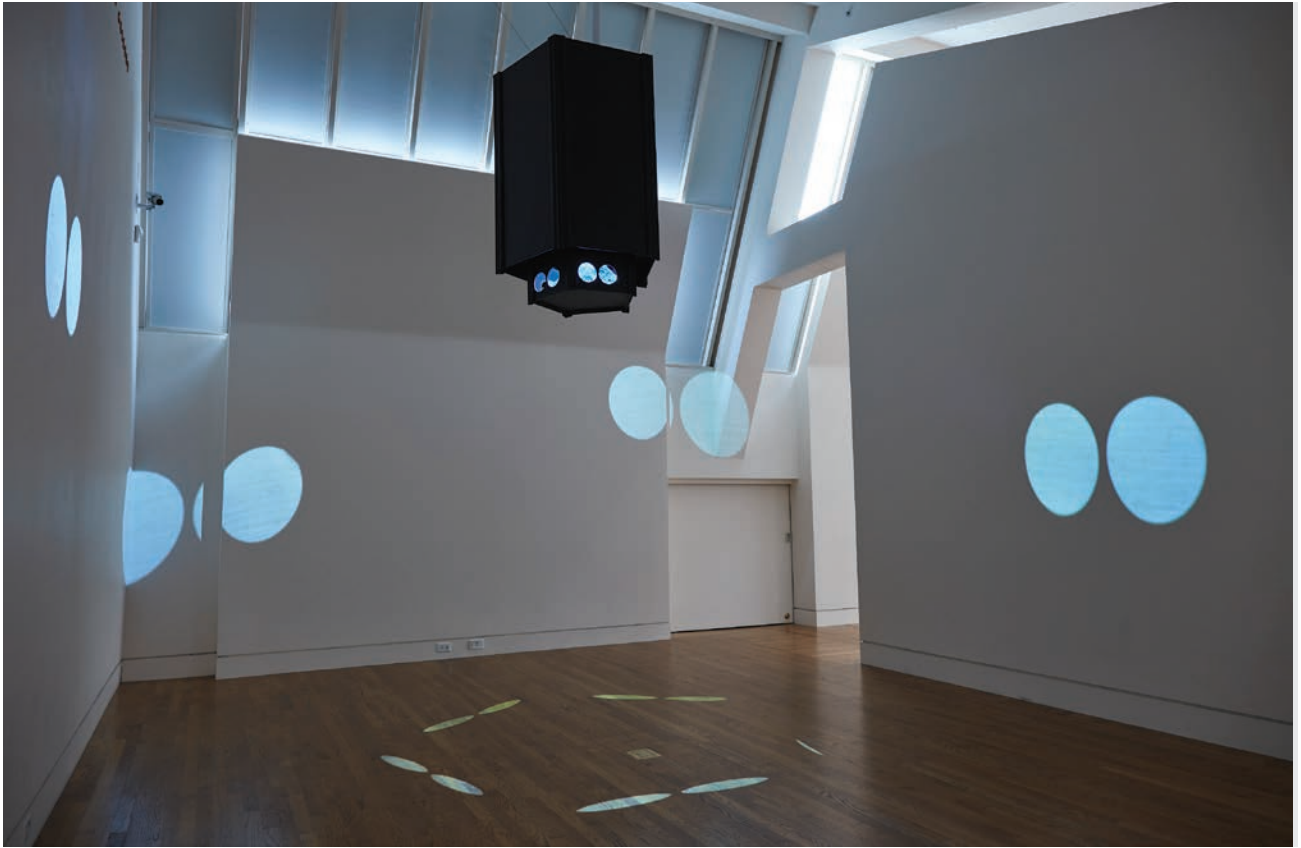
LAURA FRITZ

August 24, 2019 – February 23, 2020





Specimen A038, (detail), 2019. Photo by Ben Cort



Convocation, 2019. Photo by Ben Cort

APEX: LAURA FRITZ

Laura Fritz's long-held interests in architecture, domestic interiors, and animal movements come together in this spare exhibition. There are no moments of spectacle, but rather a quiet and reductive experience that invites the viewer to ponder the void. There is discomfort in the elusiveness of the objects, which provide only a fleeting moment of familiarity.

Delicate yet stable, Fritz's sculptures are pristinely made and painted in black with the slightest sheen. *Void Vase* is a square-shaped vessel on a table with thin legs. Similar arrangements might be found in many homes, but in this instance, the vase sits slightly off-center and contains neither flowers nor knickknacks. Yet the empty vessel is hardly a futile offering; instead, it offers the viewer a moment to pay attention to varying degrees of uncertainty. John McCracken's *Black Box* (ca. 1965) comes to mind when considering Fritz's body of work, *Void Vase* in particular.

Though both artists evoke modernist concerns and use labor-intensive methods to produce seemingly effortless appearances and pristine surfaces, the viewer's experience of their work is very different. While McCracken addresses the physical self and a sense of expansiveness, Fritz carries the viewer to a psychological and inward space. *Void Table* presents another familiar object: a table with what might be a space for storage or a drawer just below the tabletop. This dark space invites the viewer to look into it, to reach for something, anything. Fritz's voids evoke the experience of swimming in a cloudy pond; the viewer must weigh the attraction of being in the cool water considered against the unknown of swimming alongside other creatures. Similarly, what is apparent in Fritz's sculptures must be weighed against what is hidden.

Fritz utilizes trim moldings throughout the installation. Like the domestic objects she alludes to in her work, these ready-made

forms are ubiquitous in interior spaces, framing doors, windows, cabinets, ceilings, and floors. They are decorative elements that bring a tidy completeness to a room. But in Fritz's work, they become sculptural forms, not as frames, but as objects unto themselves. *Angular Wall Piece* is an elegant example of this, casting dramatic shadows reminiscent of a grandfather clock or an old doorbell chime cover, and suggesting the form of her *Convocation*, installed on the other side of the wall.

Convocation is the most complex installation in the exhibition. A pentagonal, chimney-like structure occupies the interior northern space of the gallery, with two round eyelets on each side of the bottom of the sculpture, projecting swarming images onto the walls as five round pairs at varying levels. Appearing as moving stereographs, the swarms gets closer into view until it becomes evident that it is a murmuration of Vaux's swifts, filmed during this much-anticipated natural event that occurs each September in Portland, when the birds roost by the thousands in Chapman Elementary School's unused chimney. Though Fritz's sculptural form that holds the projection echoes the chimney, its particular pentagonal shape also alludes to the continuous loop of the pentagram—similar to the constant looping motion of the swifts. *Alvarium 2* also incorporates movement. Standing just over six feet tall, the interior of the cabinet-like object is hidden from the viewer. But visible through the coolly lit top, the viewer recognizes the natural motions that bees use to communicate and forage, a language unknown to us.

Specimen A038 is the most tactile piece in the exhibition as well as the most mysterious. Fritz creates a precious aura, in fact, a literal shrine surrounding the glistening object. The sculpture combines modest materials of wood, trim molding, and resin, further dramatized by lighting. The resin piece, partially hidden, appears to have organic, crystal-like forms that bounce off light. This visual experience requires that the viewer be physically present to look closely, while simultaneously offering little insight as to what it is. In an effort to ponder the void, negative spaces, familiar yet mysterious forms of communications we can never fully understand (as in the swifts and the bees), Fritz's installation invites us to question what kind of sentient beings we are if we are not fully embracing these unknown veracities.

—Grace Kook-Anderson

The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Northwest Art

Laura Fritz in Conversation with Grace Kook-Anderson

Architecture has been a focus of your work for some time. Can you talk about the architecture you grew up with in the Midwest and what drew you specifically to the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe?

I grew up in Park Forest, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. This was a noted planned and integrated community by Chicago developers Philip Klutznick and Nathan Manilow after World War II, and a place that valued architecture. Some of the buildings I spent time in, unbeknownst to me, were considered important architecturally. Faith United Protestant Church, which my family attended, had been designed by acclaimed midcentury architect Paul Schweikher (1953). It made great use of material and light. The public library, which I spent countless hours in, was also a classic midcentury modern building that drew visitors. Later, when I attended Drake University, I had daily views of Meredith Hall, designed by Mies van der Rohe, at the center of campus. It wasn't until years later that I realized this building had strongly influenced my table design. I felt right at home with Frank Lloyd Wright architecture as I had been surrounded by it, or architecture influenced by it, for my entire childhood. I was particularly interested in the way these buildings integrated or contrasted with the landscape. Spending time around and inside them influenced my sense of volume, lighting, proportion, and use of negative space. I developed a keen interest in placement for dramatic effect and the unfolding of space. My work isn't just about the object—it's about tuning the entire environment, total design.

The APEX exhibition series inhabits the fourth floor of the Hoffman Wing, designed by the building's original architect, Pietro Belluschi. The gallery, which once housed the Museum Art School studios, has skylights facing the northern light and a pitched ceiling. How have you responded to the APEX space in this particular body of work?

I began by spending time in the space, and I constructed prototypes in a range of proportions and volumes to test how they would feel in the gallery. Placement was also important, and I chose to hang *Angular Wall Piece* near the ceiling to emphasize the verticality and soaring angles of both the gallery and the piece. I also chose to have all the skylights closed except for the one directly above the piece, further accentuating the chapel-like upward motion and allowing for more dramatic spotlighting in the



Void Table, 2019. Photo by Ben Cort

rest of the room. For the tables, I kept the general flow and experience of moving through the space in mind as well as accentuating the verticality in the tall thin legs, which also have an animal-like presence. I designed *Convocation*, the ceiling-mounted video piece, to engage the entire room it occupies, with video spilling rhythmically from the reflector array onto the walls and floor. Its pentagon shape accentuates the unusual angles that are specific to the space yet also set it apart.

You've researched bee swarms and have been interested in the movements of animals. What drew you to this subject and what has been revealing in your research?

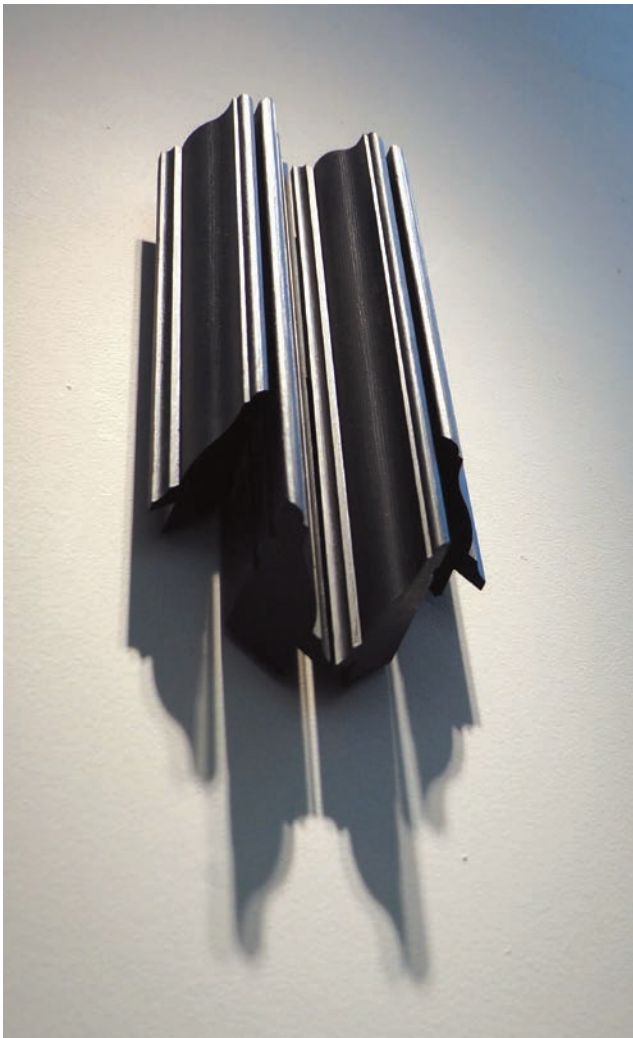
I'm concerned about our precarious environmental situation and the decreasing population of animals, such as bees and other pollinators. I worked with Dr. Ramesh Sagili of the Oregon State University Honey Bee Lab to shoot video of their bees, which you can see in *Alvarium 2*. For *Convocation*, this unusually large swarm of swifts has convened in a city and they have adapted to it. In both pieces, the flickering motion and light focus the viewer's attention intently upon the relationship between their movement and the confines of the cabinet or space. The goal is to bring about curiosity and empathy in the viewer regarding their situation. The contrast of natural and manmade highlights the animals' vulnerability and response, subsequently evoking ours.

*The titles of your works are descriptive yet elusive at the same time. Can you talk about domestic familiarities like *Sconce*, *Table*, and *Vase* in contrast to mysterious examples such as *Specimen* and *Void*?*

I like to refer to familiar objects and take them out of context, often by altering their function or their form, blending programmatic cues that could suggest scientific research facilities, sensitivities of the sacred, and habitual domestic accouterments. These mixed signals allow for more ambiguity and cause the viewer to make more of a concentrated effort to parse the situation. For example, a sconce is expected to hold a candle, emitting light. *Sconce* in my show does not emit light on its own, but only passively reflects light and a splinter of the viewer's own image. It heightens sensitivities and amplifies glimpses. *Specimen A038* combines a scientific name with a domestic, or even shrine-like, setting. Throughout history we have used both science and religion in our attempts to make sense of the unknown. Even the domestic is designed to mitigate uncertainty.

Convocation is a complex piece and there are many layers to the work. Can you break some of this down for us?

What most interested me when I developed *Convocation* was the phenomenon of murmuration, the piece's interaction with the space, and connections the viewer may draw in the process of evaluating the situation. If you are aware that the subjects of the video are swifts, it is likely that the pentagon shape may appear to be a chimney. I've also heard interpretations of this shape as a server or a furnace. Most commonly there are assumptions that the flying creatures are insects, and then sometimes birds or bats. I am interested in the cool tension that results from the efforts of the mind to create connections between disparate elements before they are fully understood. Scientists refer to these cognitive phenomena as apophenia. What also interests me is that as human beings we also carry out our own form of murmuration in the form of social groups.



Angular Wall Piece, 2019. Photo by Jeff Jahn

BIOGRAPHY

Laura Fritz (American, born 1970) is a Portland-based artist originally from the midcentury planned community of Park Forest, Illinois. Her installations explore the psychological interplay between space and objects, and have been shown at the Des Moines Art Center; Reed College, Portland; Soil, Seattle; Aljira Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, New Jersey; the White Box, University of Oregon, Portland; and the Couture Stipend Series at the New American Art Union. Fritz is also a recipient of an Oregon Arts Commission Individual Artist Fellowship in the Visual Arts (2014). She holds a BFA from Drake University and attended the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are courtesy of the artist

Void Sconce, 2019
Wood, plexiglass
8 ½ x 8 ½ x 4 inches

Alvarium 2, 2019
Wood, reflector, video
72 ½ x 15 x 21 ¾ inches

Void Vase, 2019
Wood
Table: 39 ¾ x 15 x 5 inches
Vase: 4 x 6 x 6 inches

Sconce 2, 2019
Wood, plexiglass mirror
29 ¼ x 4 ½ x 4 inches

Void Table, 2019
Wood
44 ¾ x 19 ½ x 23 ½ inches

Convocation, 2019
Wood, reflector array, video
57 x 35 x 35 inches

Angular Wall Piece, 2019
Wood
17 x 7 x 3 ¼ inches

Specimen A038, 2019
Wood, plexiglass, resin
Shrine and specimen: 4 ¾ x 7 ¼ x 4 ¼ inches
Table: 39 ¾ x 15 ¾ x 13 ¾ inches

COVER
Specimen A038, (detail), 2019. Photo by Ben Cort

Copy Editor: Gretchen Dykstra
Graphic Design: Bryan Potter Design

APEX

An ongoing series of exhibitions featuring emerging and established artists living in the Northwest. Presenting contemporary art in the context of the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Center for Northwest Art, this program continues the Museum's 126-year commitment to exhibiting, collecting, and celebrating the art of the region. APEX is supported in part by The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Endowments for Northwest Art.



This artist's project is supported by funds from the Oregon Arts Commission.

