

**DOUGLAS MILLER**  
on  
**Ashton Bird's *Pompeii***



Your first encounter in SOUP Director Ashton Martell's October solo exhibition "Pompeii"—titled after the roman city buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 BC--is a quote on the wall in the first room: "Pompeii is an analogy depicting motifs of time, the erosion of memory, fossilized emotions, and records of human existence." The brief artist's statement suggests that Pompeii is not a romantic lament or an ironic gesture, like the Ruin Porn of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre. Instead, the three-room installation of repurposed materials feels intensely personal if cryptic, like Martell's woodcut print series "Overfeed," whose grotesques devour one another in his characterization of excessive indulgence. With no additional verbal frame or figural content, Pompeii immediately confronts its viewer with necessity of interpretation.

Thankfully, the installation is rich for those who are up to the task.

Viewers can take up that challenge immediately in the first room, where pieces of rug, sheets, and baseboard cover the wall like a grand tapestry. Conspicuous gaps between the elements immediately stand out—is

Martell trying to trying to tell us something about the constitution of memory? That it is artificial, full of holes, and put together imperfectly? I can't be sure, but a rich series of complimentary readings (the impossibility of neatly narrativizing or compartmentalizing our past), suggested by repeating asymmetrical and contiguous elements, quickly followed. I can't know if Martell meant any of it, but that doesn't make it less interesting.

The installation gets darker between the second and third room. A series of columns, which begin as waist-high pieces of driftwood sunk into cinder blocks at diagonal angles, grow into in 12 foot tall pillars made of wooden doyles, chicken wire, ceramic clay (Martell's former specialty), strange teal seat cushions, cinder blocks, as well as kitschy gold colonnades. The most haunting element for many viewers may be the small handprints pressed into the clay siding of the tallest columns, but what sticks in my mind is the way the materials in the last columns felt squeezed together. A commonplace metaphor for memory is a set of drawers, but those last columns inspired a darker understanding: that human memory functions as a trash compactor, ruthlessly crushing our sense-impressions into narrative events in an brutal, gruesome, and utterly mechanical way.

The installation reaches its powerful and mysterious crescendo when viewers look beyond the columns in the third room. Taking up the south wall, at two and a half stories, are two rows of five-inch wide dusty black strips of roofing vinyl, each about six feet tall, and layered over each other like tightly drawn shutters (except for one conspicuous gap or crack). The minimalist use of prefabricated materials without any figurative or biographical elements has the effect of leaving the visitor feeling overwhelmed and enveloped. Is Martell denying the past any personal or philosophical meaning? Is he referencing a personal block in his own struggle for meaning, or is he purposely blocking Pompeii's visitors from discovering his installation's less abstract inspiration? Or does the crack in the upper left corner suggest that any general conclusions about the nature of emotion and memory are brittle and weak? Or perhaps, rather than making the statement, is Martell prompting us to be heroic in the face of all the interpretations put henceforth?

I left Pompeii feeling there was more there than I could see or describe. Martell's story—many of them, probably—are hidden in the work, or possibly rubbed out, and he has not chosen to reveal them. But that

isn't necessary; after all, if great artists hide their lives in their work, then attentive viewers can find themselves, if they are willing to listen.

Ashton Bird's Portfolio  
[www.ashtonbird.com/](http://www.ashtonbird.com/)

Thank you Doug.

Sincerely,

SOUP experimental