Josh Faught’s highly embellished, hand-stitched sculptures and installations revel in banal sentiment while celebrating domesticity, personal discovery, and political agency. His works combine traditional textile and homespun techniques, including loom weaving, knitting, and crocheting, with tawdry objects such as campy buttons, greeting cards, or calendar pages. A sense of urgency and anxiety underlies his labor-intensive sculptures, formed through repetitive processes and purposefully left with frayed edges and unraveled threads. Faught tempers this unease by incorporating collective calls to action: pages from self-help books, political slogans, and humorous sayings such as, “Sorry I missed church. I was busy practicing witchcraft and becoming a lesbian.” Such expressions poignantly encapsulate the human needs to self-identify and to find systems of emotional support.

For the SFMOMA commission, Faught created a network of sculptures that respond to the historical importance and emotional resonance of the Neptune Society Columbarium. Situated in San Francisco’s Inner Richmond neighborhood, the Columbarium was built in 1898 as part of the Odd Fellows Cemetery. Once in danger of being torn down due to an early 1900s law forbidding cremation and burials within city limits, it was protected under the Homestead Act of 1934. It is the only nondenominational cemetery in San Francisco, housing more than eight thousand unincorporated niches. Purchased by the Neptune Society in 1980, it is the final resting place for everyday people, cultural figures, artists, and members of San Francisco’s elite. It has also developed into a repository for queer history and activism within the Bay Area. During the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, many gay men were interred there, and a permanent memorial to Harvey Milk is installed near the entrance.

Its main building is a striking, light-filled rotunda with columns that determine a circular path for visitors. Illuminated by stained-glass windows and mosaic-patterned floors, the contemplative space houses ashes in niches that line the walls and are often decorated with memento mori memorials maintained by loved ones of the deceased. Such arrangements pay tribute to those who have passed, forming a picture of who they were in life. Flowers and photographs are augmented by holiday decorations, lighted knickknacks, and personal items, each embedded with emotional significance. The space is maintained by caretaker and historian Emmett Watson, who keeps the memories of the dead alive through public tours. “It’s a sort of living monument, as opposed to a tombstone, which is just about death, nothing about life,” he explains. Faught’s work similarly engages with themes of memory and remembrance. BE BOLD For What You Stand For, BE CAREFUL For What You Fall For (2013) responds to “the stories gleaned from the objects in the vitrines, creating an historical bridge to an unlived yet psychically familiar community.” Installed within the Columbarium’s walls, the sculptures provide their own form of commemoration. The largest of the three pieces, hanging in the rotunda, consists of strips of loom-woven fabric whose hues shift from bright rose to subtle lavender to deep blue. Its imagery relates to the passage of time, as seen in a stitched clock striking twelve, and includes elements of kitsch, like the greeting card in which a cat mulls over its to-do list. Snack foods rendered in plastic and rubber also appear. The freestanding sculptures, in the stairwell and the Dome Room, combine knit panels and crocheted loops; one includes a weave pattern that spells out a passage from the exhibition title. Human scale, they are looser than the central sculpture; their colors, patterns, and textures bleed into one another, their forms dependent on their wooden structural supports.

Faught’s palette is typically derived from raw fibers hand-dyed with organic materials or coated in spray paint or nail polish. For his installation in the Columbarium, he restricted his palette to the colors that William Morris articulated in the early twentieth-century Arts and Crafts movement. He used “cochineal pink (made from ground-up bugs), indigo blue (a dye steeped in mythologies of sorrow and sadness), walnut brown, and weld yellow.” Faught explains, “All of these dyes have a somewhat fugitive quality to them, which extends to some of the thematic narratives in the content of the work around transition and time.”

Faught has previously addressed the theme of time passing in works such as Nail Polish and Cookies (2013), which includes a wooden plaque that reads: “You know you’re over the hill when happy hour is nap time.” Calendars, days of the week, and clocks punctuate Between the Witching Hours (Throwing Shade) (2009) and Calendar (2012). Activism and identity politics also frequently appear. His 2012 solo show, Longtime Companion, references the term used in the 1980s by the New York Times to describe the surviving same-sex partners of AIDS victims, while its centerpiece includes detailed re-creations of panels from the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.

Rife with autobiography, Faught’s work freely divulges personal details. It may include cards sent to him by his mother or his grandmother, who taught him to knit. Enlarged reproductions of PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) newsletters reference his own uncomfortable memories of attending such meetings as a teenager. And various fake snacks, such as chocolate chip cookies and nachos, recall his mother’s junk food-filled kitchen cabinet.

Compelling, responsive, and sentimental, Faught’s intricate installations are rich in social and cultural implications. Forging a connection between the mass-produced and the handicraft, his new work serves as a vehicle of contemplation, memory, and protest. Inside the Columbarium, it appears to be at home. Lit by stained-glass windows and surrounded by decorated niches and artificial flowers, the sculptures reveal in their idiosyncrasies while achieving a symbiosis with their surroundings. Their message is one of empowerment, remembrance, and, perhaps most important, levity, as they insist we not take life too seriously. Together, they remind us that identity is continually reworked and stitched together and sometimes requires paying acute attention to the smallest details. —Jenny Gheith
It Takes a Lifetime to Get Exactly Where You Are, 2012. Handwoven sequin trim, handwoven hemp, cedar blocks, cotton, polyester, wool, cochineal (made from ground-up bugs), straw hat with lace, toilet paper, paper towels, scrapbooking letters, Jacquard woven reproduction of a panel from the AIDS quilt, silk handkerchief, indigo, political pins, disaster blanket, gourd, gold leaf, plaster cat, cedar blocks, and nail polish; 96 x 240 in. (243.9 x 609.6 cm). Courtesy the artist and Lisa Cooley, New York

Untitled, from BE BOLD For What You Stand For, BE CAREFUL For What You Fall For, 2013, site-specific installation in the Neptune Society Columbarium. Hand-dyed, handwoven and crocheted hemp; indigo; cochineal (made from ground-up bugs); weld flowers; wool; cedar; greeting cards; sequins; lamé yarn; Nine to Five (VHS); Clockwatchers (VHS); pretzels (plastic); pins; scrapbooking stickers; Halloween decorations; fake flowers; metallic cheerleading pom-poms; engraved stone; and a jar with the "ashes of telephone solicitors"; 72 x 96 x 36 in. (182.9 x 243.8 x 91.4 cm). Commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, courtesy the artist and Lisa Cooley, New York
Tanya Zimbardo: I visited the Columbarium the other day, and no one was there. “Over the Rainbow” was uncannily drifting down from the balcony; it was the first time I can recall hearing sound there. It felt like this nostalgic compilation was being played for the first time I can recall hearing sound there. It felt like this nostalgic compilation was being played for a departed but psychically present community.

Josh Faught: Without a doubt, the mix CDs stacked against the makeshift boom box on the second floor are one of the space’s most unusual aspects. I’m not sure if you looked at their titles, but they are distinctly moved by a statement he made: “I believe people are both decorative and utilitarian. A small gag-gift jar reads, “The ashes of problem clients,” functioning as a playful moment of office-life ennui while coexisting as a funereal urn.

TZ: Is Emmitt Watson, the Neptune Society’s caretaker and historian, has worked mostly alone to restore the Columbarium, and he regularly offers tours. How did talking with him frame your understanding of this place’s function as an emotional support structure?

JF: I first visited the Columbarium as part of a group. Emmitt was gracious enough to lead us on a tour of the rotunda, highlighting the narratives of many of its residents. I remember feeling particularly moved by a statement he made: “I believe people should be remembered for more than the day they were born and the day they died.” At that moment it became clear how these objects have become stand-ins or substitutes for experience or lives lived. A political sticker on the outside of a niche is just as relevant or irrelevant as a Halloween decoration draped over it or a bag of chips placed beside it. They become bits and pieces of what I perceive as a very queer archive within this space of rest.

TZ: In your teaching and research, you’ve considered the history of highly politicized textiles and fiber works in the Bay Area and beyond.

JF: I became interested in textiles as a means of inquiry and expression after learning about the Art Fabric movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which used textiles to explore feminist activism and alternatives to Eurocentric art history. Formally, it’s hard to use such anachronistic materials without referencing this particular period. Crocheted hemp, yarn, textiles, and language become implicit and explicit platforms for identity construction and for expressing the ambivalence and excessure of these unstable constructions. There’s something specific about the Columbarium’s history that is also important to me: the building suffered incredible decay and disrepair until 1979, when Emmitt took over as caretaker, and then the reopened Columbarium coincided with and became a memorial or witness to the early years of the AIDS epidemic.

TZ: I’m curious how you are envisioning the freestanding sculpture in the Dome Room.

JF: This crocheted and woven sculpture is dyed in a dark shade of indigo. An image of a clockface emerges from it, restlessly ticking a time that does not change in a space where time is kind of irrelevant. A series of woven pockets hold videotapes and other flair or ephemera. A pin on the face of the cloth reads: “I know I went into this room for a reason.” The piece is supported by a cedar armature, which juts out to the side to hold a woven cloth emblazoned with the mantra “Be careful for what you fall for,” a line from the title of the commission. It felt appropriate to create a link to the room’s somber flamboyance. The Summer and Winter weave structure used for this line of text was developed in the nineteenth century to produce covelets. Traditionally, the cloth would be white on one side and blue on the other, making it seasonally appropriate year round. A number of the works exist in an ambivalent haze or malaise. My work in the stairwell is dyed in weld flowers, another dye used at the turn of the twentieth century that ranges from electric yellow to gold to sickly green. In terms of language in the works, I’ll be pulling from everything from Halloween decorations to fake food props to greeting cards. One card in particular features two vain carrots, one asking the other: “You look so young! Did you get peeled or something?”

TZ: You took your title from a found sign.

JF: I’m very interested in locating this place where flamboyant decoration and political urgency exist in an ambivalent haze or malaise. My work in the stairwell is dyed in weld flowers, another dye used at the turn of the twentieth century that ranges from electric yellow to gold to sickly green. In terms of language in the works, I’ll be pulling from everything from Halloween decorations to fake food props to greeting cards. One card in particular features two vain carrots, one asking the other: “You look so young! Did you get peeled or something?”