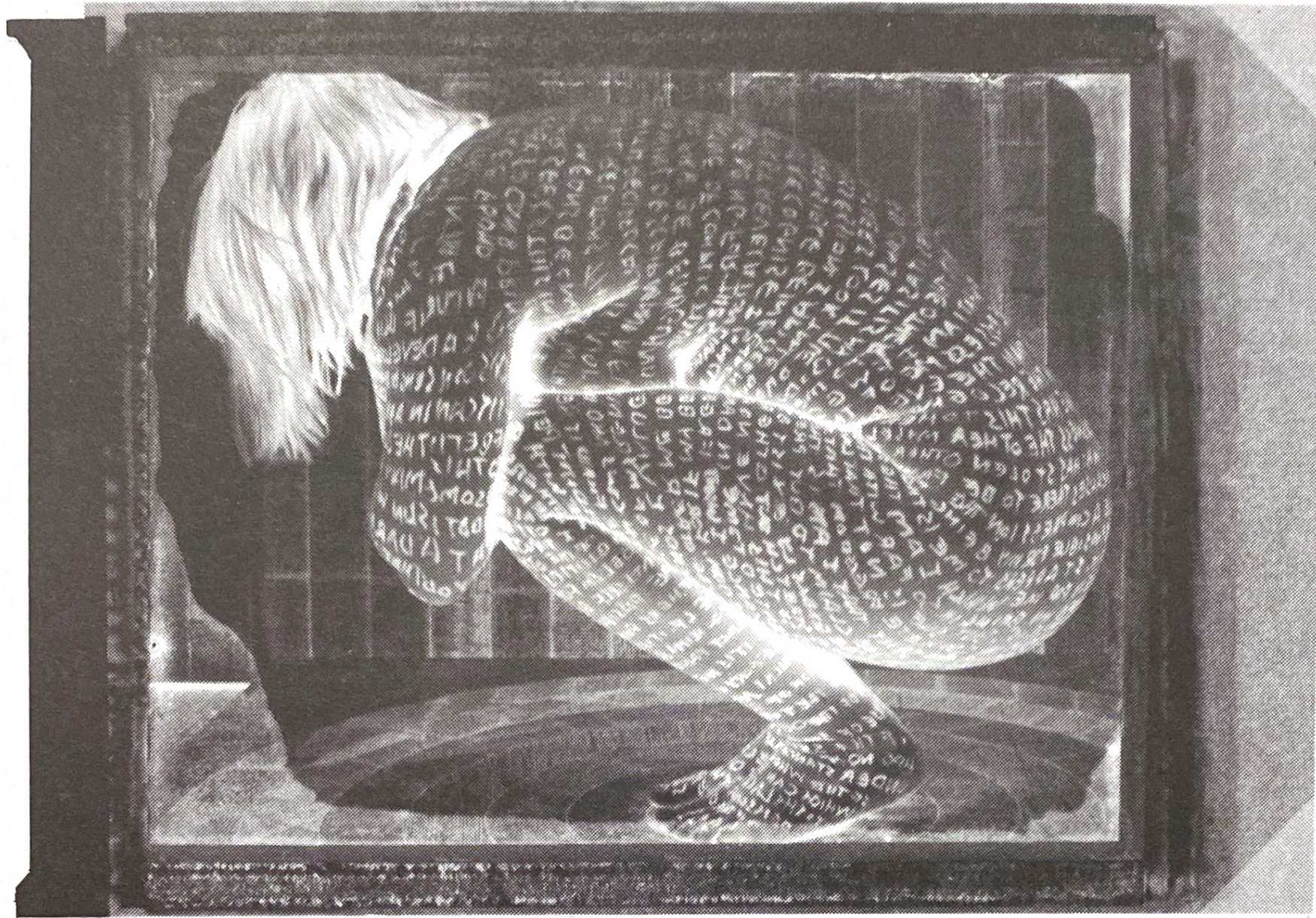


Physical Evidence



John Roche, *Still Life*, 1992, type 55 Polaroid, edition 6, AP, 14 x 16"

**Joan Bankemper
Luca Buvoli
Byron Kim
Ruth Libermann
Glenn Ligon
Jody Lomborg
Pike Powers
John Roche**

April 12 through May 28, 1994

Curated by Molly Sullivan

This exhibition was first presented at the Procter Art Center at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

Lehman College Art Gallery

Physical Evidence

This exhibition represents a diverse assemblage of work—paintings, photographs, sculpture—different mediums with specific histories. These are works whose corporeal presence is accentuated by the artist's explicit concerns with manipulating various materials to emphasize the surfaces of their work. "To be judged by the color of our skins," "appearances are everything," "beauty is skin deep,"—these are some of the cultural mores that are examined in this exhibition.

The works are compelling, not only for the power and seduction of their physicality, but because they seek to establish a relationship with the viewer—one that encourages physical longing, while simultaneously encouraging the viewer to ask what issues the materials suggest. What is it we know about the work based on its structure; and what do we guess the artists want to communicate to us through their use of these materials? How do we as viewers interpret these "skins" to find a language common to our everyday experiences? For each of these artists there is a moment of crisis that is very important to their work; a moment when the physical structure, in all of its seductive beauty, invites a greater understanding of larger issues at stake. This is the common principal that informs each of these artists' work.

A recent newspaper article described a new teaching tool in which children were asked to make faces: grimaces, smiles, frowns, and then to describe to their classmates what they were feeling when they made these expressions. The children also were asked to touch the face, and feel the expression of the classmate in order to understand more directly the physical contours various states of mind elicited. The exercise of this class was to teach children how to identify, understand and empathize with different emotional states that they and their classmates experienced.

In many ways these artists are suggesting the same assignment. Coupled with various art historical and artmaking issues that inform how the artist chooses his medium and style of working, these works are physical expressions based on varied motivations. By suggesting basic principals—presence and absence, mind and body—these artists have created a rich and seductive means of communicating with their audience.

Running Out of the Blue (Scale 1:4) by Luca Buvoli represents his running stride reduced in scale to a fourth of his natural step. Running, which Buvoli did competitively as a teenager, refers to the artist's desire to engage issues of artmaking and allegories of physical presence and absence. By its placement on the gallery floor, the work re-impresses the image of the physical activity of running. Suggestive of Muybridge's turn-of-the-century studies of motion, Buvoli's sequential, syncopated arc is a continuum of repetitive energy. Vibrant blue (the color of Buvoli's running shoes) and tautly paced, the sculpture reminds us, too, of the drawings of action heroes—the one, two, three, LEAP! of Superman's blurred image leaving the telephone booth to save mankind. Here it is notable that the work refers not only to issues of impact and energy, but also to the language of drawing. Yet the fragility of the work, a delicate interweaving of tangled cast-off materials, such as plastics, used clothing, and cardboard, is at odds with those attributes one would associate with action heroes or competitive sports. Running is a solitary sport in which the competition is the body's domination over opponents such as time and distance. For Buvoli it was a gauge by which to judge, understand, and control the body's relation to both a physical and mental environment.

Sfondo, another example of Buvoli's work, can be envisioned as growths or appendages to their environment. Created with wire, plexiglass, and cardboard (art packing materials), and used clothing (sometimes the artist's or a friend's, sometimes purchased on the streets), these fragile, monochromatic elements redefine a two-dimensional space (the wall). The viewer is asked to question what he/she knows of his/her environment, much in the same manner Buvoli must have done when he left his native Italy and arrived in New York.

By "decorating" the wall with these constructions, the artist also subverts the authority and discipline of the structure—a contemporary manipulation not unlike those of the Italian fresco masters whom he studied. As translated from the Italian by Buvoli, *Sfondo* refers to the background or ground—the erasing of a central, dominant, or authoritarian figure. Because the words extend from the wall, the viewer must be mindful of the works' fragility, which the artist exaggerates by the perversely minimal manner in which the pieces are installed. *Sfondo* suggests a parasitic relationship, elements that mimic the architecture of a museum or gallery space. Given the density of the City's architecture and the intensity of humanity living within its confines, *Sfondo* asks that we continually re-examine our relationship to this urban environment.

Ruth Libermann is represented by three sculptures: *Deliveries*, *Malefactors' Register*, and *Between the Line*. All three works incorporate text taken from several historical sources. In *Deliveries*, Libermann has transcribed 17th century court accounts of legal sentences for condemned prisoners who were transported to America. *Malefactors' Register* refers to broadsheets that were widely published and sold by the church. A malefactor, by definition, is an evildoer, one who breaks the law. These broadsheets described in journalistic style the behavior and confessions of condemned prisoners. The accounts were transcribed by an Ordinary (a clergy member) whose duty it was to

bring public attention to the nature of and the resulting punishment for, the prisoner's crime. Often the Ordinary's account is fictitious; if the condemned prisoner refused to give a last confession, the Ordinary fabricated one.

Between the Line uses text culled from letters written by French citizens condemned to be guillotined during the Revolution. Unlike *Deliveries* or *Malefactors' Register*, the text in this work is not translated by an intermediary. As a result of being intended for the prisoner's loved ones or family, these texts express the individual's state of mind while awaiting death.

In all three works, Libermann etches shards of the text onto typewriter ribbon in precise, often difficult to read cursive. The ribbon is then placed in narrow plastic tubes and hung by magnets from a suspended steel plate, as in *Between the Line* (their skin-like shreds suggesting caged masses huddled together); or placed behind small, square lenses of glass and mounted to the wall as in *Malefactors' Register* (like preserved butterflies); or pinned line-by-line directly onto the wall as in *Deliveries* (suggesting memorial epitaphs). The artist does not copy the entirety of a document, but rather cuts and splices paragraphs and sentences to create the essence of the story.

It is an eerie, voyeuristic experience to examine these works. Guillotining separates the head (intelligence, reason, and spirituality) from the body (corporeal, earth-bound) and it is uncomfortable to look up from underneath *Between the Line*. But with all three sculptures, reading these personal tragedies is tantamount to rediscovering a graveyard in one's own backyard. Libermann's work separates the human voice from the drone of historical distance. The works ask us to re-examine the mythology of history and to ask whether or not there is an experience too painful to be communicated through art? In reading these resurrected accounts, we become intimates of the condemned. The immediacy with which these voices communicate re-introduces contemporary issues of justice, crime, and punishment. The minimal manner of arranging the text, almost altarlike in its austerity, further emphasizes the obsessive weight these minute, fragile scratchings hold.

Jody Lomberg's paintings are complex layerings of color subsumed and overgrown by knitting. She is one of a new generation of artists who are re-exploring the history of Minimalism and expanding upon its past doctrines. It is important to know that the artist does not create a painting in order to have the knitting attached; the reverse is true. The knitting exists as the skin or web, to which the painting is its subservient and domesticated support. Knitting, by its cultural and historical associations, is female. It is craft. It is utilitarian. From those definitions, painting is knitting's opposite. Melding the two conceits has given Lomberg fertile ground with which to play.

The edges of Lomberg's canvases are painterly. The wall above the top edge of the canvas glows with the afterimage of paint. Or, color from the underpainting, effervesces upwards and we catch glimpses of it when our eyes move across the canvas. *Giocondo Smile* glows. And it sheds. Black, loopy yarn resembling a draped shawl, hangs from the bottom half of the work. It is an odd juxtaposition—like a Surrealist accident of Yves Klein-like, cobalt-saturated canvas becoming entangled in a grandmother's crocheted afghan.

In *Breath*, Lomberg has created a work of extraordinary sensuality. Skintoned yarn is densely and imperfectly woven. The result is a painting whose left canvas is dimpled to reveal the second skin of the painting beneath. Loose strands of yarn trail off one side and dangle suggestively. Countermanding the sensuality of the left panel, is a square of white paint floating over an underpainting of pale yellow. The rim of yellow paint heightens the provocative allusions the yarn suggests, while simultaneously acting as a formal device, preventing the white of the canvas from disappearing into the wall on which it is hung. This work is typical of the balancing act Lomberg mines; knitting as the alter-ego to painterly brushstrokes, the sublimity of painting in contrast to the course sensuality of the yarn.

These works are secretive. They reveal only as much as they hide. By knitting, the artist creates a provocative dilemma where in another realm, the space between the canvas and the knitting, acts as the lodestar for her contradictions. For example, in *Chase*, a diptych, Lomberg has painted the knitting which is then pinned bandaid-style to its canvas. Hoary, sticky-looking, this half of the diptych is a dense, tactile mass. It is the inversion of the black, Reinhardt-esque canvas to its right. On this half of *Chase*, Lomberg has knitted a square grid over the entire surface of the painting. Through the pattern of the knitting, we are only just able to glimpse the underpainting; the sense of hidden depths beyond the yarn is tantalizing. Lomberg teases, suggests, surprises, withdraws.

John Roche's small-scale black and white photographs of female nudes can be viewed both independently and in relation to the performance that precedes the photograph. All of the photographs represent the image of a woman whose body has been covered, "graffitied" with text. The act of writing on the nude is a painstaking, laborious process which can take many hours to complete. Roche uses text from philosophical writings and psychoanalytical readings, conversations, dreams, books, and film scripts. These photographs serve as a window into the intense and detailed process of writing on the model. Yet, because the "performance" has already occurred, these photographs have a frozen, documentary distance to them—a kind of clinical, after-reading that does not allow the viewer to experience the performance's sensuality. Our voyeuristic gaze is impeded by Roche's manipulations of both the negative and the photograph itself. He frequently varnishes, draws in pencil over the images, or reprints the negatives, making it difficult to easily read the text covering the model.

For the past several years Roche has worked editing and shooting films. These photographs are a precursor to his new work, and a clear sense of control and environment pervades the photographs exhibited. As in *Cross*, which depicts a close-up of the nude's torso from her shoulders to her knees—arms crossed, legs crossed—the text seems to hover over her skin as if it were superimposed onto the film. The sepia brown of the varnish suggests yet another layering or filtering process and the text flows in an ambient drape over her body. It is difficult to focus on, even when we attempt to decipher the narrative. The model's physical form, folded and confined within the frame of the photograph, is emblematic of the struggle to express ourselves both within and outside language.

The images themselves are startling: Is it her real skin? Is she tattooed? How did this occur? Why a woman? At the foreground of all of these questions is the issue of vulnerability. As with many artists, need dictates the subject or tools that are used. So too, with Roche's use of a female model—she was the only friend who allowed Roche to work in this manner as he could not afford to pay for a professional sitter. The artist has objectified the model by "giving" her a second skin constructed from the writings of his personal musings, dreams, and psychological theories. The model, becomes the vehicle by which the artist reveals himself.

Joan Bankemper explores several mediums and is represented here by a wall sculpture and several large-scale photographs. With the sculpture, *Untitled*, Bankemper has wrapped together dozens of fluorescent light tubes to form a fence-like structure that repeats the vertical planes of the gallery wall. A primary interest that informs her work is the issue of internal versus external definitions of space. Bankemper wraps found and everyday objects such as cooking utensils, light bulbs, bathroom fixtures, tools, etc. in black rayon tape. In so doing the original use of the object is denied. By virtue of their new taped "skins," lightbulbs which once gave light are now transformed into fetishes, passive objects of desire. In *Untitled*, the artist's obsessive binding of each fluorescent tube has created an object entirely different from that which we would expect. Our knowledge of the object's original identity is crucial to our understanding of the "otherness," it assumes, now that the artist has mummified the sculpture. Its scale is proportionally more aggressive and the tape's blackness gives the sculpture an appearance of dense, significant weight. Bound together and wrapped, these fluorescent light tubes are transformed from object into structure.

With Bankemper's photograph, *The Great Necromancer*, named for a Houdini magic trick, the artist's manipulation of the photograph's depth of field is evident. This photograph is part of a body of work that was culled by the artist from images of pre-Columbian vessel forms. Having selected the images, Bankemper re-photographs and enlarges them, wrapping the surface of each vessel form with the black tape. Suddenly, we are confronted not only with an object whose scale is completely out of proportion to its original state, but one whose appearance by virtue of being taped now suggests a three-dimensional presence within the two-dimensional format of the photograph.

In selecting vessel forms to photograph, Bankemper has deliberately chosen forms whose cultural iconography would represent male or female sexuality. The artist assumes that Freudian terminology is so much a part of how people define what they see, that she deliberately focuses on the image's power to seduce by reinforcing its "sexual" stereotype. Bankemper is particularly attracted to the history of defining the feminine. This work parallels the nature of how we define our sexuality by imparting sexual codes and definitions to objects of beauty.

Byron Kim's painting *Emmett* represents both a portrait of the artist's son, as well as a re-examination of issues of Minimalism. Like Lomborg, Kim mines the history of Minimalist painting and pushes the dialogue another step. *Emmett* consists of 3 inch by 3 1/2 inch panels painted over with egg tempera. Each color-saturated, monochromatic panel represents the artist's exacting reproduction of the flesh tone of an area of Emmett's skin. The relation of specific color to the child's body, is further reinforced by each panel's diminutive size. Specific to Kim's work is the understanding that while each panel is in itself a complete painting, it is also part of a much larger community.

Black and White is a collaboration between Byron Kim and Glenn Ligon. Each of the 32, 4 x 8 inch panels represents a standard portrait measurement. Unlike *Emmett*, each panel is painted from pigment applied directly from the tube. Arranged in a grid format, each panel represents a paint company's formula for varying fleshtones. Immediately obvious is how artificial, even ludicrous, are these representations. On one side of the grid, the artists have laid out "white" fleshtones; on the other side, "black." Clearly, no one panel accurately reflects either; they are simply labels that are extremes.

Color theory, as taught in history and painting classes, been expanded by Kim to include contemporary social issues. Where once color-field painting involved an effort to represent the abstract, something spiritual and universal within the confines of the canvas, Kim and Ligon rework the theory to include the spectrum of identity. How does skin color influence assumptions and preconceptions about who we are? Where does our skin color locate us within social histories? Organized like the pages of a high school year book, the artists have provocatively and humorously questioned the narrow strategems and empirical assumptions of the Minimalist school to include the perspective of "artists of color."

Pike Powers exhibits candy-colored latex and vinyl sculptures which are pinned to the wall like deflated balloons or shed skins. As in *Nymphettes* and *Happy Birthday*, the artist works by constructing an assemblage of objects which she glues together. She then paints the surface with latex. Once the paint has dried, she peels away the casing, dismembering it from its structure. The importance of creating a construction and assembling mass is secondary. This sculpture is a reductive act—its essence is powerfully balanced as much by what is no longer part of the work as the skin that now exists.

These works are initially playful and humorous to view, but with further scrutiny, the materials and their constructions suggest more disturbing associations such as body bags and blood banks. Powers makes use of bathroom fixtures, including sinks and drains, to arrive at some of the forms in her work. The hygienic uses of this hardware are specifically chosen and alluded to by the sculpture. In a time of crisis over AIDS, health-care, and violence, these works suggest a fragile vessel.

Untitled is a more organic and sensual work than *Nymphettes* or *Happy Birthday*. Its nipples surface, fleshtone coloring, and rubbery material refer much more directly to the body. Constructing *Untitled* from vinyl, Powers has created an intensely provocative work. Like Louise Bourgeois's bronze abstraction resembling female breasts, *Untitled's* associations are specifically feminine. This work, too, has weight and volume, and projects presence instead of the ghostlike afterimage suggested by her other two works.

In both instances, however, Powers' has created sculptures, whose sensorial power to communicate a range of emotions and issues reminds us of the image of a classroom of children making faces. What identity would you give to these expressions?

Molly Sullivan
March, 1994

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Exhibition Checklist

1. Jody Lomberg

Breath, 1993
mixed media, diptych, 18 x 36"
Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

2. Byron Kim

Emmett, 1994
egg tempera on panels,
16 units: 3 x 2" each, 13 1/2 x 11 1/2" overall
Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York

Emmett at Twelve Months:

1	5	9	13
2	6	10	14
3	7	11	15
4	8	12	16

1. Under Big Toe
2. Hair
3. Behind Ear
4. Rim of Nostril
5. Lips
6. Calf
7. Dark Area of Lower Eyelid
8. Mongolian Blue Spot
9. Inner Wrist
10. Upper Rim of Ear
11. Back of Neck
12. Cheek
13. Heel of Foot
14. Whites of Eye
15. Eyeball
16. Back of hand

3. Jody Lomberg

The Twisted One, 1993
mixed media on canvas, diptych, 32 x 36"
Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

4. Luca Buvoli

Running Out Of the Blue (Scale 1:4), 1991
plexiglass, wire, pieces of old clothing and curtain, monofilament,
variable dimensions
Collection of the artist

5. Ruth Libermann

The Malefactors' Register, 1994
typewriter ribbon, wire nails, glass, 10 x 127"
Collection of the artist

6. Jody Lomberg

Giocondo Smile, 1993
mixed media, 73 x 30"
Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

7. Luca Buvoli

Sfondo #10, 1990
plexiglass, wire, pieces of old clothing and curtain, monofilament,
variable dimensions
Collection of the artist

8. Pike Powers

Untitled, 1990
vinyl, 47 x 35 x 4"
Collection of the artist

9. Pike Powers

Happy Birthday, 1990
vinyl, 41 x 84"
Collection of the artist

10. Pike Powers

The Perilous Magic of Nymphettes, 1990
vinyl, 100 x 56"
Collection of the artist

11. Luca Buvoli
Sfondo (Closed Bracket #9), 1990
plexiglass, wire, pieces of old clothing and curtain, monofilament,
Collection of the artist
12. Joan Bankemper
Untitled, 1993
fluorescent light tubes and black rayon tape, 93 x 98"
Collection of the artist
13. John Roche
Nude Descending, 1992
unique silver gelatin with graphite, 26 1/2 x 20"
Collection of the artist
14. John Roche
Cross, 1992
unique silver gelatin, varnish, 16 1/2 x 13"
Private Collection, New York
15. John Roche
Through A Glass Darkly (For Julie Kay), 1990
unique silver gelatin, varnish, 22 1/2 x 17 1/2"
Collection of the artist
16. John Roche
Untitled, 1992
unique gelatin photograph, graphite and varnish, 28 3/4 x 28 3/4"
Collection of the artist
17. John Roche
Soliloquy For Elizabeth Volger, 1992
silver gelatin, pencil, varnish, 24 x 13 3/4"
Collection of the artist
18. John Roche
Still Life, 1992
type 55 Polaroid, edition 6, AP, 14 x 16"
Collection of the artist
19. John Roche
Still Life, 1994
wood shelf, 111 x 79 x 16 3/4", for performance
20. Joan Bankemper
The Great Necromancer, 1992
black rayon tape, photograph, canvas, 96 x 76"
Collection of the artist
21. Byron Kim & Glenn Ligon
Black & White, 1993
oil paint on 32 panels, 43 x 71"
Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York
22. Jody Lomberg
Take Cover, 1992
mixed media, diptych, 28 x 39"
Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
23. Luca Buvoli
Sfondo (Open Bracket #9), 1990
plexiglass, wire, pieces of old clothing and curtain, monofilament,
variable dimensions
Collection of the artist
24. Ruth Libermann
Between the Line, 1992
plastic tubes, magnets, typewriter film ribbon, steel plate, wire, steel
weight, variable dimensions
Collection of the artist
25. Ruth Libermann
Deliveries, 1991
typewriter ribbon, wire nails, variable dimensions
Collection of the artist
26. Jody Lomberg
Chase, 1993
mixed media on canvas, diptych, 18 x 36"
Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York