



soma

an installation for *In The Material World*
curated by John Brunetti
Evanston Art Center, Evanston, Illinois
January 13-February 19, 2002.

Joan Livingstone at the Evanston Art Center

Art in America, November 2002
Marsha Miro

Joan Livingstone has long worked with felt, making sculptures about states of being and transformations. Her recent exhibition, "*soma*," consisted of one older work from 1998 and six new pieces dated 2002. A professor of fiber and material studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 1983, Livingstone here creates containers for feelings and thoughts about the physical, social, psychological and cultural effects on the body of trauma. The exhibition was a response to the events of 9/11, and the works speak by implication of countless other traumas.

The theme was established with "*Illusions of Security (for Joseph Bueys)*," six stacks of 30 layers of gray felt rectangles, glued together with oozing honey-colored resin and topped

with a Beuysian red cross. The appropriation refers to Beuys's use of felt and fat as agents of renewal, a model for Livingstone. The stacks recall both towers and tombstones.

While the felt in this piece was manufactured, Livingstone usually makes her own. The rhizomatic structure of felt (it is not woven but consists of a dense tangle of fibers), along with its isotropic nature (it is the same wherever it is cut), give her sculptures homogeneity of surface and characteristics similar to those of skin. This effect was clearest in two wall pieces: one, "*Skinned*," in which flaps of white felt hung from sharp rusty hooks like pieces of flayed skin, and another, "*Suck Up*," in which forms suggesting a torso and a phallus were filled with an epoxy resin that wicked through the felt, emerging on the outside like hairs on skin or like drips of body fluids.

Two free-hanging pieces, "*Trophies*" (1998, long black, erect phallic tubes of sacking cloth filled with epoxy rubber) and the nearby "*Lured*" (white felt inverted funnel/vaginal forms), employ a dialectic of hard/soft, male/female. Beyond the S-M implications of these tense forms, hung like war trophies by industrial tethers, Livingstone evokes a mix of cultural values relating to gender.

In "*Filtered*," the title describes the action: honey seeps through crumpled felt hat like forms of brown, gray and white; it collects in glasses affixed to the wall by laboratory clamps. When a glass fills up, an attendant pours it back into the funnel/hat, beginning the cycle again. The connection to Beuys is here, but so, by implication, is an allusion to the endless process of cleansing, through bodily or other sorts of filters. This work exemplifies the disturbing beauty of the whole show.