



*Jane Lackey/Joan Livingstone*

Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago, IL

March 31 – May 2, 2000

*Opening Positions, Opening Form*

Tim Porges

"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

Walt Whitman, "*Song of Myself*"

In the same sense in which everything you dream is you, every object of art is a self-portrait. No matter how minimal, systemic, immaterial or large, it's all you. And this universe of self-portraiture (in which you may or may not choose to believe) is divided at its core. Either you begin with your self, your measure of all things, or you begin with whatever you find in the world outside. For all the recent critical interest in *The Body*, most non-performing artists start in the latter position, communicating through things and gradually assembling a public self, a body of work. Having done so, you can take the position that no matter how casually Freudian you choose to be in discussing your work, it's always there first, sopping up the attention that might otherwise fall, uncomfortably, on you. And the work is so much more *interesting* than you are, anyway. Otherwise, why bother with it?

In the middle of this imaginary universe, between world-as-self and self-as-world, is a familiar point of rotation: the point at which the binaries (self and other, mind and body, so on and so forth) of whatever theory's in play at the moment meet, around which they spin. This rotational point is, precisely, a point of Absence; the *objet petit a*<sup>1</sup> to which all fetishism drives, and from which it is invariably deflected by the spin of its essential distinctions. Moving out into the world of foreign objects, the distinctions blur. Even Whitman's "omnivorous egotism" finds enough of a world to get lost in. What is remarkable, then, about visual artists is how persistently most of them will remain defined by their initial choice of self or other, and how richly that choice plays out in the arts and sciences of identity.

Joan Livingstone's new work recalls the moment when sculpture and anatomy were advanced in tandem by Leonardo, who used sculptural wax to fill and harden the soft inner organs of cadavers. Scientific anatomy begins there, as does the sense of the inner body as a site and subject for art. Like Louise Bourgeois, the artist whom she most resembles in terms of practice and temperament, Livingstone offers herself to the world through a protective screen of objects, from which we read back to the position and body of an assumed subject. And, though the resin-saturated tubes of **At Capacity** could be tagged as absent privileged signifiers of the feminine, and the artful jumble of **Seeped** appears to be the partial index of a native but foreign body, returned from abroad, all this is ultimately beside the point, a distraction. Because it's process (dripping, seeping, drooping; materials accommodating to saturation and gravity) that is the subject here. Ultimately, the work is undeniably organic. No doubt about that. What it's resisting, for all that, is definition, especially final definition. This isn't so much a resistance that comes from the body itself (Livingstone's body, or yours), as it does from our own disinclination to be defined by it, by what it wants, by what it resembles, by its noises and smells.

Whereas Livingstone's body is the Freudian body -- the remembered or dream body of organic representations -- Lackey's body is the systemic body, a body of codes: an archive. Though the universal archive is a perennial fantasy, the archives of the real world are defined, like paintings, by their limits. The object surfaces of the **smear** and **blot** paintings are truncated versions of the elegant ellipses that made up Lackey's **marker** series of 1996. As well as conveying a kind of mid-century science-fiction optimism, these ellipses imply an infinite, mysterious interiority.<sup>2</sup> But what are the rhetorical implications of a truncated ellipse? Its abridged space is less personal, less interior, and more social, more cultural. And within this newly objective space, what we find are citations from another limited archive: an abridged collection of the total human genome. These sequences of nitrogenous bases: adenine (A), thymine (T), cytosine (C) and guanine (G) are a partial instruction manual for the assembly of a human cell, and, fractally, of a human being. Lackey's **hive** stacks extend the metaphor laterally: the human body is an archive of archives, like a hive of bees, all servants and carriers of a common code.

Livingstone's appropriation of the forms of anatomy maintains her work, whatever the anxieties that leak from it, as external, the other-body we imagine and generalize

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Laurie Palmer, *in code*, Grand Arts Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri, 1996.

discursively. Lackey's coded body is a familiar grid and a child of science. As in nature, the image is there before the work: the face you wore before you were born. What draws a line between these two is not so much a difference of ideas, as an initial disposition: self or other. It's a choice we all make, and it marks us, as long as our chromosomes do, if not longer.