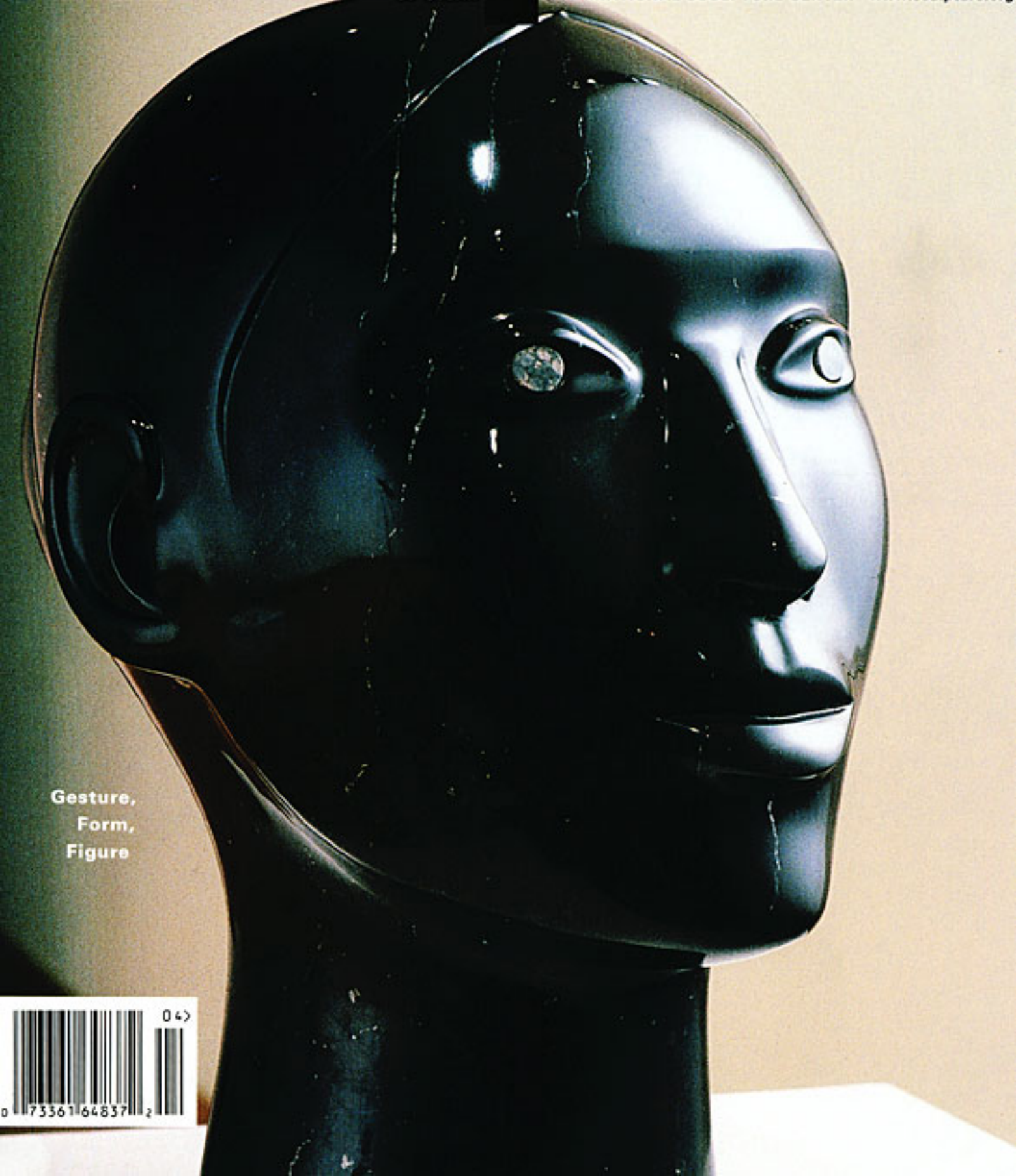


# Sculpture

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Gesture,  
Form,  
Figure



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**On the Cover:** Elizabeth Catlett, *Naima (Head)*, 2001. Black marble, 15.5 x 8.5 x 15 in. Photo: Manu Sassoonian, Courtesy June Kelly Gallery.

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## Joan Livingstone's Place in the World

by Victor M. Cassidy

Joan Livingstone draws on fresh visual sources to construct beautiful, exquisitely crafted felt sculptures, which she exhibits in elaborate installations. The primary theme of her work is how we know the world through our bodies. The artist grew up in Oregon, where she measured herself against the mountains and geography of the Pacific Northwest.

Instead of making sculptures one at a time, Livingstone often creates pairs, triads, or sequences of forms in relationship. She exhibits these in stage-like scenes, placed on the floor, leaning against the wall, piled on a table, or suspended from the ceiling. She makes much more imaginative use of gallery spaces than most artists. Installation is so central to Livingstone's method that she has originated a course called "Installation: Materiality + Context" at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where she is Professor and Chair in the Department of Fiber and Material Studies.

Livingstone also investigates what goes on inside the body—breathing, ingestion, excretion, and fluid movement. Her treatment of these functions never shocks or titillates. She has a scientific detachment from her subject matter. In recent years, she has explored mechanical analogues to these functions—ventilators, precipitators, funnels, and fluids seeping through membranes.

The artist was in college on the West Coast when Magdalena Abakanowicz exhibited her barbaric *abakans* in Los Angeles and inspired tapestry makers to throw their looms out the window. Livingstone got into fiber because it suddenly became "the most challenging, engaging, exciting place to be." Joseph Beuys, who worked in felt and shared her sense of theater, has influenced Livingstone, as well as Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois.

After school, Livingstone wove hangings, but she soon discovered felt, a primitive textile made by pressing

animal hair into flat sheets. She cuts the stiff, skin-like felt into shapes, which she sews together under tension to make three-dimensional objects that stand up without armatures. She may suspend and tether unfinished pieces in her studio so that the forms wrinkle, bend, and twist to take on the look of life.

When a piece assumes final shape, she saturates it with resin, which dries stiff. Next, she repeatedly rubs pigment into the felt and sands it down to create a tactile, seductive surface. Her colors are subdued—the natural grays or white of the industrial felt she uses, black, and sometimes a blush of pink.

Felt is "a rather literal metaphor for the skin," Livingstone says, "that vulnerable, responsive membrane holding our insides in and distinguishing us from outside matter." Like skin, felt "stretches, contracts, expands, and responds to gravity, incision, tension, and repair." Some of her most successful felt sculptures are the oversized pod, seed, vessel, and flower shapes—hollow forms with living interiors—that she made in the early '90s. This work led logically to her explorations of bodily functions. *Breathing Lessons*



Left: *Suck Up*, 2002. Felt, suture thread, epoxy, pigment, glass, and metal. (left) 66 x 9 x 9 in.; (right) 17 x 10 x 10 in. Below: *soma*, 2002. View of installation at the Evanston Art Center.





(1994) is a cheerful group of bladder-like shapes that dance across a wall like music on a page.

Since 1996, Livingstone has investigated the relationship between "internal pressures or tensions, and the external shape of a body," as she puts it. She has poured epoxy rubber, resin, or hydrocol into sewn and formed felt and cloth sacs to cause distortion, stretching, saturation, and seeping. Using such industrial liquids, which she calls "toxic," has toughened her work. Her installations have grown to engage—and often to overwhelm—the entire gallery environment.

Over the past few years, Livingstone has perfected her technique and personal language. *At Capacity* (1998–2001) is a spectacular group of more than 50 brightly colored, funnel-like shapes hung on a long wall and installed on the floor. To investigate absorption, wicking, and seeping, Livingstone cast liquefied polyurethane rubber and epoxy resin into handmade felt funnels over a period of three years. "Repeatedly poured, filtered, and re-poured, the forms harden to reveal this condition of transformation, of simultaneously filling and emptying," she states.

**Above:** (on wall) *At Capacity*, 1998–2001, felt, rubber, and epoxy resin, 120 x 480 x 12 in.; installed with *Afterwards* (on floor). **Right:** *Seeped*, 1998–2001. Felt, pigment, epoxy, resin, rubber, and metal, 62 x 110 x 44 in.

*Seeped* (1998–2001), a 22-piece installation of felt, resin, epoxy, and rubber hose gathered around a sulfur-yellow metal table, explores time, deconstruction, and reconstruction. "The work is supposed to look like it just got piled there," the artist says. "It had a life once. Will it have a life again?" The over-catalyzed resins that Livingstone used in some parts of this work seep out their internal substances, bubbling and encrusting the surfaces of the objects.

In January and February of 2002, Livingstone showed *soma* at the Evanston Art Center. "Issues of intimacy and distance, filtration and absorption" were at the center of

this installation, which included seven works, one on the floor and the others suspended or wall-mounted.

*Illusions of Security (for Joseph Beuys)* (2002) is a floor piece made from felt and "fattened resin" instead of the felt and animal fat that Beuys employed. Beuys "suggested that art could be a healing force with the potential of regeneration," says Livingstone. She wonders if this is still possible, "especially post-September 11 and given our current political crisis."

*Suck Up* (2002), a striking, entirely original creation, embodies the many strengths of Livingstone's current work. Made from felt, suture thread, epoxy resin, and pigment, *Suck Up* has resin bubbling through its seam lines to reveal its structure. The surface, an exoskeleton really, is a glory of shapes, surfaces, textures, colors, and tones.

"The best art is a dance," says Livingstone. "The artist makes a certain move, the work responds, the artist responds to that, it responds back. It's a situation of observation and tension and response. There are surprises and things that happen along the way that you consider and alter, shift, respond to—and it's very rewarding."

*Victor M. Cassidy is a writer living in Chicago.*

