Perbert

Herbert

The Art Gallery
University of California / Irvine

Curated by Catherine Lord

Laura Aguilar
Judie Bamber
Robert Blanchon
Patricia Cronin
Nicole Eisenman
Martha Fleming
and
Lyne Lapointe
Lyle Ashton Harris
Rinaldo Hopf
Doug Ischar
Deborah Kass
Glenn Ligon
Catherine Opie
Paul Pfeiffer
Eugene Rodriguez
Connie Samaras
Millie Wilson

Queering the Deal

CATHERINE LORD

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PERVERT

STRATEGIES to reclaim by naming, along with a willingness to shift ground so as to keep self-representation an act of opposition rather than a tool of reduction, have assumed central place in struggles of cultural domination and resistance. What to call us then? "Homosexual" sounds hopelessly old-fashioned, unless one camps wildly with the "o"s and really purses the mouth around that "x." "Gay and lesbian" sounds dowdy, a stab at assimilationist good manners rendered anachronistic by the fact that affirmative action is now circling the sink. "Dykes and fags," leaving aside any debate on the merits of revamping derogatory labels, has come to sound rather twenty-somethingish, if not outright teenaged. "Queer," just lately the tag of an unrepentant, in-your-face militant sexuality, has penetrated the academy and come out on the other side smelling sweetly like theory, allowing the Q-word to be flaunted with impunity by even the most blatant of homophobes. And ironically, despite the attempt to put into circulation a term for homosexuality that, unmarked by gender, might accord the lesbian a status equal to that of the gay man, "queer" has become a word that can as easily erase the lesbian as include her, reinscribing the privilege of (white) gay men while simultaneously disavowing any such intention.

"Pervert," then, will do, on this occasion. After all, it's what we've been called since the doctors and the police made us up a hundred years (or so) ago. It's what some of us like to call ourselves. It's honest: no, we are not necessarily nice people and we are certainly not just like you. It suggests that heterosexuals aren't exempt from the apparatus of sexual pathology, reminding us, indeed, that around the early part of this century something called heterosexuality meant an "abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex."[1] "Pervert" is both a noun and a verb, allowing it to shift from epithet to act of transgression to defiant self-appellation, depending on who is speaking and who is listening. And finally, "pervert" suggests the precarious status of heterosexuality. This fiction of a monolith, this monolith of a fiction, has claimed for itself the status of the original, the normative and the real

by inventing the homosexual as a defective copy. Perversely, however, the copy must be endlessly sought, endlessly surveilled, and endless represented, in order to bound and maintain the institution of heterosexuality. As Judith Butler has written,

> **Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself. Indeed, in its efforts to naturalize itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the *effect* of its own originality; in other words, compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of "man" and "woman," are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real.**[2]

Pervert, then, meaning to corrupt, to turn the wrong way, to lead into error. The seventeen artists in this exhibition work through various means and materials. On the surface, their preferences run from the apparently explicit to the apparently arcane. Fully cognizant of the power of visual representation to naturalize, they have all have taken on the blind spots in that old dream of heterosexuality. Simply, heterosexuality is what we see and what we expect to see, a constant injunction, a constant reminder. For these artists, these (with great affection and respect) perverts, the choices are subterfuge, camouflage, and code, all the while taking careful aim at the cracks in the facade. Nothing is sacred—neither the windows of a cathedral, designed to put a figurative imprint on light itself, nor the heroes and heroines of the broadcast television beamed directly into the "private" living rooms of the American family; neither the family photo album nor the fallen leaders of the international left; neither the most ladylike and feminine of painting genres nor the most weighty of monuments to American virility and patriotism, right out there in public for anyone to see; neither the conventions of documentary portraiture nor the artifacts of popular culture, neither the marks by which history is conserved nor the lines by which we protect science from fraud, reason from fiction.

I began to think about *Pervert* in the fall of 1994, wanting to curate an exhibition that would do more than gather together, or display in one or two clean well-lighted rooms, work in the visual arts by gays and lesbians (or dykes and fags, or queers, or whatever). In part, my interest came out of my reservations about several shows that had been mounted just a few years earlier: *Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men* (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition, 1988), *Erotophobia* (Lafayette Street Project Space, New York City, 1989),

All but the Obvious: A Program of Lesbian Art (LACE, 1990), and *Situation: Perspectives on Work by Lesbian and Gay Artists* (New Langton Art, San Francisco, 1991). They were, well, *surveys*. They were projects that attempted to include work that their various curators found "interesting," or good, or provocative, by artists who would, basically, define their political identity as gay or lesbian.[3] Though the shows were small miracles, given the budgets of their producing organizations, and though they allowed the rare pleasure of seeing work by lesbian and gay artists gathered together, the fact that they were based upon an affinity of "sensibility" meant that the curators didn't have to define what they meant by homosexuality, much less heterosexuality, much less how that great organizing axis of sexual object choice might actually play out visually.

I must say, though, that during the course of organizing *Pervert*, whenever some skeptic would say to me, wearily, "Oh, I get it, you're putting together *another* gay and lesbian show," I'd always marvel that the extraordinary historical paucity of gay and lesbian shows could so blithely be transmuted into excess by those accustomed to the luxury of believing that the art is always more important than the artist. After all, there have been very few exhibitions in addition the ones mentioned above, most notably Harmony Hammond's *A Lesbian Show* in 1978, the *Great American Lesbian Art Show* in 1979, organized by Bia Lowe, Louise Moore, Jody Palmer, Barbara Stopha, Tyaga, and Terry Wolverton, as well as Dan Cameron's *Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art* in 1982.

Rather than organizing an exhibition that grew out of scarcity, however, I wanted to pull together something that would reflect the explosion of gay and lesbian cultural production that began in the late '80s in North America, Great Britain, and Canada, that intense moment of cultural resistance provoked by state repression of both material existence and representational potential for gay and lesbian peoples. ACT UP, for example, was founded in New York in 1987, in reaction to the U.S. government's genocidal inaction in the face of an epidemic perceived to affect mainly gay men, people of color, and drug users. In Great Britain, the passage of Clause 28, which prohibited state funding of any cultural work that promoted "pretended family relationships," sparked massive resistance from the British cultural community, much of it in the form of work that addressed precisely such relationships. In the U.S., attacks on the federal funding of work by Andreas Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, and David Wojnarowicz galvanized the arts

community to protest. The late 1980s was a classic sex panic, a time in which conservative efforts to maintain power in the face of an economic depression produced a reinvention of "family" values, a determined effort to gain control over the bodies of women and the poor, and a pathologizing of sexual deviance. For gays and lesbians, the era initiated (another) state of siege, and it generated, in creative and tenacious opposition, an extraordinary wave of gay and lesbian cultural producers, who came out of the closets to go not just into the streets but into academies, schools, universities, studios, publications, museums, and galleries. The cultural work produced over the last five years—in film, in video, in the visual arts, in performance art, and in critical and literary theory—has generated debates that resonate throughout, and have utterly transformed, many of the progressive discourses of late twentieth-century culture (feminism, say, post-colonial theory, or psychoanalytic theory). Artists have at once shaped and been shaped by these debates, providing visual ammunition for investigations centering on representational strategies while themselves using theoretical work to inform, to justify, to provoke, to ground their production.

Hard as it is to remember, or to want to remember, what things were like before this uncanny, impossible, even hilarious moment of queer chic that none of us trusts to last, the mainstream art world had consisted of a remarkably conservative arena of commodity speculation directed at objects vacated of any powers of social observation or transformation. To have even one foot out of the closet was acceptable only for a few tokens. Most young artists who wanted market success adopted modernist or postmodernist rationales that demonstrated, at best, trepidation about readable content, much less overt politics. Despite the critiques made by feminists and by artists and theorists of color, the situation held.

In the late 1980s, however, two factors allowed a radical change in attitudes toward gay and lesbian artists/theorists and toward queer content. First, the results of government inaction in the face of the AIDS epidemic brought home, as nothing else could, the fact that homophobia was a matter of life and death. Second, the repercussions of right-wing attacks on homoerotic imagery could easily be framed in terms of a liberal tradition of "freedom of expression." Thus, in support of AIDS activism and in support of censorship struggles, arts organizations and publications that had previously shown little interest in queer artists and theorists began to show them, to publish them, and to seek them out. Gay and lesbian organizations and publications, never

known for their avant-garde aesthetic stance, began to make more systematic efforts to cover the relevant debates in mainstream art circles. Many established artists, scholars, and writers, who while not in the closet about their sexual preference, had hardly made it the center of their work now began to do so: think, for example, of the early work of Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, Marlon Riggs, Deborah Kass, Kate Davy, Ruby Rich, and even Susan Sontag. Finally, many young visual artists and cultural studies types who could previously have counted on entrenched homophobia in their academic training, could now predict at least pockets of support from faculty in a position to defend gay and lesbian studies as a legitimate area of inquiry.

This, then, was the impetus for organizing *Pervert*. As it happened, at the same time Nayland Blake, Larry Rinder, and Amy Scholder were producing *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice,* for the University Art Museum in Berkeley. This much larger exhibition of almost 150 works, by almost as many artists, queer and heterosexual, proposed to explore "the resonance of gay and lesbian experience in twentieth-century American art."[4] Both our exhibitions would have been unthinkable, politically and aesthetically, five years earlier: the one for not refusing to essentialize gay and lesbian identity, the other for framing the exhibition with a work devoid of any assimilationist possibilities, to say nothing of a word that could become a political liability.[5]

For many of the artists in *Pervert*, the verb implies taking on heterosexuality at its root, its central institution—the family. Policed by the right with an ever more vindictive and desperate intensity, the family is, in theory and in all too tangible reality, the site of the reproduction of heterosexuality. It is the site to which us queers have no legal entitlement, from which we must be expelled altogether (witness the extraordinarily high suicide rate among gay and lesbian youth, or their disproportionate presence among runaways),[6] or erased by the refusal to name us (witness all those bachelor uncles and maiden aunts). Little wonder, then, that so much work by queer artists, in all media, has turned, one way or another, on dismantling the heterosexual family in order either to make room for its queer members or to invent and make tangible other modes of kinship—other alliances, other passions, other memories. One need only think of the novels of Dorothy Allison and Jewel Gomez, the media work of Gregg Bordowitz or Yvonne

Rainer, or the photographs of Nan Goldin, Kaucilya Brooke, or even Robert Mapplethorpe.[7]

Laura Aguilar uses the strategies of classic black and white photographic portraiture to construct and to suggest a system of extended kin. Most particularly, her series *Clothed and Unclothed*, ongoing since 1990, pairs a photograph of a clothed individual, or individuals, with another of the same person (or group) in more or less the same pose, with more or less the same expression. Artists, relatives, and friends, the sitters are the community that surrounds and sustains Aguilar. Many of them are identifiable Los Angeles figures, forming a group that cuts across and combines various gay and lesbian communities and various communities of color. In all the portraits, it's clear that subject and photographer enjoy a relationship of being known to one another. The photographs are "about"—and are often used to discuss—a politics of cultural inclusion. Margaret Lazzari, for example, writes: "Aguilar expands the range of what is considered normal to include a broad variety of races, body types and sexual orientations. Her photos extend the boundaries of 'beautiful' and thus reveal beauty in those who make mainstream straight white culture uncomfortable."[8]

It seems to me, however, that in the process of paying her respects to the extended kin she has gathered around her, Aguilar has produced a document that confounds various conventions of portraiture in a perversely resonant way. The groupings of individuals within her photographs often demolish conventions of how exactly a fiction like "family" might be constituted visually, in large part because Aguilar deploys nakedness to question the very reason for particular groupings of adults. A naked man, woman, and children, photographed together, are explicable within the conventions of family portraiture. Two naked women and a naked man aren't, or three men, or two women, one of whom is very pregnant. Then, too, the whole series resonates with the echo of anthropological or medical photography, genres in which the colored, the poor and the deviant are often first shown naked, to accommodate the physiognomic gaze, and then clothed, to accommodate the gaze of those interested in the workings of "civilization." In Aguilar's work, the assumptions which we bring to portraiture are turned on themselves. Are her subjects naked because they have a "right" to be naked, like heterosexuals, presumably without having their nakedness read through the filter of deviance? Are they naked because, like queers or the colored, their nakedness, whether defiant self-representation or imposed pathology, is the sign of their marginality? It is the strength

of Aguilar's photographs that they call into question the very use of nakedness as a convention in deducing sexuality, causing our readings to waver from one pole to the other.

Glenn Ligon's fabricated albums, displayed as specimens in a traditional library case, perform a calculated violation of the device by which the memory of heterosexual family is manufactured, packaged, commodified, and institutionalized under the guise of "private," or amateur photography. Technically montages mounted in commercial photo albums, these works are composed of snapshots of African-Americans, selected so as to appear plausible as photographs from a single family, interspersed with photographs of naked men, presumably from gay porn sources. Each of the porn photos is conspicuously labeled: "The Baby's Father," "Daddy," "Brother," "It's not Natural." The effect is an utter disruption of the visual codes by which the boundaries of the family, not to mention positive images of African-American history, are policed. By restoring sex and sexuality to the family, Ligon causes the men to read as utterly alien to the codes that institutionalize heterosexuality, at the same time justifying their presence by prominently floating terms of kinship that are at once completely applicable (e.g., "brother") and a form of queer double entendre.

Eugene Rodriguez uses the conventions of the telenovella to undercut the narrative of family proposed by broadcast television. In *Straight, No Chaser* he installs an old sofa, a television that has seen better days, and an oversized color photograph of a NORM'S restaurant. The black and white video loop that we watch from the sofa tells the story of a young Chicano man coming out to his working-class mother over the telephone by confessing that he can't make it to the baseball game with the family because he's on vacation in Palm Springs with his boyfriend. A fragment of a larger autobiographical work in progress, Rodriguez's telenovella occupies that narrow divide between fierce camp and an almost maudlin nostalgia for family, using all the seduction of melodrama to pull us into a story of profound ambivalence, of a man coming out into the supposed freedom of sexual practice that is possible only in circumstances of economic privilege. Rodriguez at once reveals the coercive pull of media representations of class mobility and the power of gender roles constructed in Mexican-American culture.

Lyle Ashton Harris takes the idea of family and simply—or indeed not so simply—enlarges it. He allows us to re-imagine family as an institution that can include elements often seen to be contradictory, as an institution that can embrace difference rather than exclude it.

Harris's family construct can encompass pride in African-American culture, love and respect for members of his biological family, as well as representations that allow gay fantasy and desire within the boundaries of the family. *The Good Life* is Harris's title for an installation combining his grandfather's snapshots, quasi-documentary pictures of friends and lovers, and posed Polaroid 20 x 24s. In the latter, Harris lovingly invents the members of his family as beings with mythic stature (e.g., his mother and her sister as *The Beautiful Ones*—but then, what is family if not mythic?) or pointedly invents himself and his friends as the driving structures that produce African-American identities in this culture (e.g., the artist Renée Cox as the Venus Hottentot, or Harris himself decked out in boxing gear, an image lobbed back to Norman Mailer). In the triptych *Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera* (1994) Harris collaborates with his brother, Thomas Allen Harris, not only to suggest a relation of struggle and alliance, but a taboo relation of charged desire between two queer brothers, a desire that could as well circulate within the family as migrate outside it.

For other artists, representing sex and sexuality—indeed, investigating the idea of what might be meant by "representing" sex and sexuality—is central to their practice. The project is both to reclaim the root notion of *sexual* perversion and to make visible the homosexuality inherent to the construction of heterosexuality. To put it another way, if in the twentieth century sexual object choice is the organizing axis that, improbably, divides humanity into two types of beings, much work by queer artists must necessarily investigate where "sexuality" is located, and how it might be pictured, or displaced, or uncovered.

Paul Pfeiffer's work often addresses the homoerotics of Christianity, insisting on restoring the spectacle of desire between men to institutionalized religion. In *Cathedral* (1994), a series of panels mimicking stained glass windows are installed in a stately procession of pinkly glowing pattern. Not until the viewer moves closer does it become clear that the panels are composed of a stitched collage of transparencies of men's bodies. Kissing, touching, groping, fucking, the jumble of pink and brown fragments float upside down and sideways, proposing themselves as the filter through which light itself, and the visible, will be given form.

Judie Bamber's paintings are a calculated, meticulous disruption of traditional representations of female genitalia, though, in fact, the difficulty of what to call the subject of these small paintings is the issue, if not their only point. Sensual without being in the least recep-

tive, these are hyperreal, dispassionately unromanticized, obsessively detailed renderings of cunts, represented so as *not* to call attention to the vagina, *not* to call attention to an opening revealed by waxed or shaved or parted labia, *not* to represent a use value other than the pleasure of looking. In a sort of lesbian magical realism, the paintings are about a specific erotics of illusion, the painstaking yet pleasurable application of paint creating a skin that itself represents the skin and flesh and hair that sight/site a lesbian desire. These are paintings about the effort to shift the conditions of visibility of the most hackneyed trope of what Teresa de Lauretis has called sexual *in*difference—i.e., the female as sign and object of exchange in a world of hom(m)osexuality. Instead, Bamber works to produce objects that incorporate "strategies of representation which will, in turn, alter the standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility, of *what can be seen.*"[9]

Patricia Cronin's paintings also focus on a lesbian subjectivity, rendering the act of sex not from the voyeur's position across the room but from the location of the lovers, from positions just beside or in between their naked bodies. That the paintings are watercolors at once corrupts the genre of landscape and reinstates within the domain of a lesbian subjectivity the erotics of the very medium so often deployed to capture a feminized nature. Delicate, evanescent, fluid, these are not images of lesbians of the sort produced in tedious multiplicity for the proprietarial pleasure of straight men, but lesbian images produced from and for the pleasure of women. The final twist of all is Cronin's insistence that the very feminine pleasure of sex between women, to say nothing painting in watercolor, need not be irreconcilable—indeed may be identical to—a politically critical practice.

Catherine Opie's work has for some years been both a record of and offering to the leather and s/m communities of San Francisco and Los Angeles. Her extended series of large format portraits depict individuals against brightly colored or opulently patterned backgrounds, with lavish attention paid to the small details of pose and the codes of costume. These are not photographs of sexual practices, but of the costumes, markings, and alterations to the body that announce the practices of sexual minorities, pictures that encode the clues to such practices within the codes of studio portraiture. These are portraits of mutable flesh, not fixed social identity. Indeed, the point is not somehow to reveal an essence embodied in flesh, but to suggest that flesh itself is used to invent identity. The bodies Opie photographs are performances, flesh subjected to a structuring desire, making clearly fictive those cate-

gories of knowledge based on the surface that the camera can record in such detail. Opie is a master of the genderfuck, whether she is documenting lesbians using hormones to "become" men, or lesbians whose gender drag is thoroughly a matter of attitude.

Alongside portraits of her community, Opie has always photographed herself. In *Self Portrait/Pervert* (1995), she is hooded in black leather, the length of her arms pierced by a ladder of needles. The word "pervert" is cut in cursive script into the skin above her breasts. Unlike the traditional portrait and in distinct opposition to Opie's other work, the sitter refuses to pleasure or comfort the viewer by returning our gaze, instead reflecting back on us our own fascination with the fissures in the bodily envelope.

Nicole Eisenmann demolishes the wall between high culture and pop culture with the dark side of lesbian humor, working with quantities of rough drawings and collages pushpinned to the wall in a frenzy of image recombination. Characters recur: castrating dyke bitches, of course, brandishing severed members, bands of bawdy Amazons, Wilma and Betty doing it like they never did on the *Flintstones*, and various hilarious versions of boys, small and fully grown, getting that first look. Eisenmann's is a world of bodies packed into the frame in a horny maelstrom of breasts and butts and cunts, punctuated by a murderously funny stream of anti-male jokes. In Eisenmann's allegory, the moral always turns out to be the dyke—vengeful, raunchy, and unrepentant.

Rinaldo Hopf's *C & B* drawings (1993) represent part of an installation titled *Cruelty*, whose other components include *Queer Pig*, a huge painting of twelve life-sized male victims of a torture scene, some apparently dead, some apparently aroused, as well as a vitrine of the ordinary household implements that might be used to cause pain. The *C & B* drawings are a grid of relentless sadistic fantasies, disembodied cocks and balls punctured and tired and twisted, all rendered in precisely schematic black and white line drawings. In them, Hopf imagines himself to be a serial killer, setting aside all boundaries of morality, or humanity, or even common sense, in order to represent a particular set of desires. These drawings are not indexical: they represent a fantasy of nonconsensual violence that far exceeds the boundaries of s/m culture, though they can certainly be read within it.

For some artists in *Pervert*, however, explicit representations of sex and sexuality are not part of the strategy. Their interest lies rather in troubling the boundaries between public and private, or in a kind of salvage ethnography of the historical record, or in a colonization of the

center from the margins. Necessarily, such work often trades in fiction, calculated projection, and displacement.

Connie Samaras's work takes the form of an extended photo-text narrative, a poker-faced *Partial Correction to the Representations of Earth Culture Sent Out to Extraterrestrials.* Samaras's extended conceit proposes the revision of the U.S. depictions of official culture produced in the late 1970s by Carl Sagan. These schemas of our planet's civilization, sent out on space missions, were purged of all references to dissident presences—female, queer, and colored—presumably to better insure that they would function as a high priced vaccine against contagion by aliens. Samaras's project derives from an obsession with the very idea of "alien," of modes of existence believed to be foreign to an essential notion of humanity. She queers the proverbial deal of this delusion, explaining why she would not have dated her mother if her mother were a lesbian (so much for any psychoanalytic theorizing about the lesbian's over-identification with the mother), or sending the story of Valerie Solanas and her SCUM manifesto out to circle the earth. Samaras also works to undermine the quotidian superstructure of our lives, recycling images of Los Angeles freeway construct or high-tech toys from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory so that these bastions too become suspect sites—contaminated, polluted, suddenly alien.

Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe have for years worked to reveal the architecture of knowledge, which is to say the architecture of social control. They have performed interventions into an abandoned fire station, a post office, a private home, a vaudeville theater, and a working ferry terminal. Theirs is work that aims to reveal the marks of past action, or inaction, on the material world. In various incarnations, it is work that aims to construct alternative repositories for memory. One subtext of their work that has recently come to the surface is what Fleming and Lapointe describe as the "organic, formal relations... between the conventions of the presentation of knowledge and knowledge itself."[10] The collages and drawings included in *Pervert* represent fragments of a site-specific installation made for the museum of Britain's oldest bookbindery, a project that called attention to the links between the forms of the letters through which knowledge is transmitted and the form of the human body, between the skeleton of the book and the architecture of the body that fetishizes the book. The drawings incorporate traces of secret knowledge and covert communication, suggesting that buried deep within the archive of canonical culture are the subtle signs of relations between women visible to the viewer

who knows what she seeks.

Deborah Kass's paintings have, in a far different register, also marked a project of reclaiming, not so much by rereading as by reinhabiting. Kass's territory is the *oeuvre* of Andy Warhol, which she reworks so as to insert her subjectivity—female, Jew, lesbian—into the enormous terrain annexed by America's first out queer male artist. Kass refabricates particular Warhols in order to insert her heroines: Barbra Streisand as *My Elvis* or Gertrude Stein as *Chairman Ma.* In other works, Kass inhabits the body of Warhol, or rather the space Warhol carved out for the public performance of his persona, in drag as the artist or as the woman. In *Altered Image II* (1994–5), Kass has restaged Warhol's celebrated self portrait, multiplying drag upon drag upon drag in an eerie colonization of the privileged space of white male play. Turncoat and raconteur mouthing the language of white male painting, Kass allows us to imagine, after Warhol, a specifically lesbian megalomania that might code us in throughout high art and pop culture.

Much of Robert Blanchon's work is concerned with the porous border between public and private, particularly as it relates to gay male desire, indeed to the very construction of "the gay male" as a social category. Blanchon has, for example, exhibited the sixteen-page letter his mother wrote him in response to the news that he had been diagnosed with AIDS, a document in which God replaces any maternal instinct. He has commissioned portraits of himself from various commercial artists, thus producing a series in which a panoply of fag stereotypes is projected onto his unspeaking body. Again and again, Blanchon returns to the ways in which the boundaries between public and private are mass produced in order to make the world safe for heterosexuality. This, in the era of the AIDS epidemic, is the implication of his photographs of engraved sympathy cards, standard formulas of compassion with the name yet to be printed, or his blueprints of rubbings of commercial gravestones, again with the information that would personalize (read: privatize) grief yet to be incised. One of Blanchon's ongoing projects is a documentation of public sculpture, or rather, the parts of monumental sculptures upon which he can project his erotics—John Quincy Adam's erect nipple, for example, or Alexander Hamilton's bulging crotch, or the rippling hindquarters of cavalry horses. Both campy and fiercely serious, this series makes nonsense of the proposition that the performance of sexuality is a private matter, or that homosexual desire can be excluded from the homosocial male bonding that underpins "heterosexual" culture.

Millie Wilson's work involves a reclamation and representation of the pathologizing histories of lesbians constructed by the medical profession and by the police. Using various media, she works to produce the conditions of visibility for what is basically a lesbian underclass, imposing those conditions on the world of high art by inserting her narratives into the (male) conventions of, say, modernism. In *Not A Serial Killer* (1994), the installation from which the *Autopsies* shown in *Pervert* are excerpted, Wilson pays homage to Aileen Wuornos, the lesbian who waits on death row convicted of killing seven tricks while working as a roadside prostitute. Writing Wuornos into the sleaze of pop culture as well as the cool material power plays of minimalism, Wilson codes her objects as the silent trophies of a murderous dyke. The garish *Autopsies*, for example, are made of stuffed faux fur car seat covers, of the sort one can buy on street corners all over Los Angeles. Likewise, Wilson produced seven aluminum boxes, and affixed to each a chest hair wig in the shape of a valentine. Each of the absurd trophies to masculine *vanitas* is given the name of one of Wuornos's dead tricks—*David*, *Charles*, *Peter*, and so forth.

Doug Ischar's film and video installations suggest a quixotic effort to salvage moments of gay male desire. He has often used found fragments of film footage, amateur and commercial, looping them to replay, endlessly, moments of longing and moments of frustration. Generally, the loops are projected on a tiny scale, so that, for example, we watch on the collar of a man's polo shirt a dark skinned young man struggling with an alligator in the water, or, in another work, an army belt buckle propped on VCR deck on the floor serves as the screen upon which we stoop to see a young man turning his head, over and over again, in an ecstasy that, as as we are gratified by the pleasure of its repetition, disappears. Ischar is a connoisseur of frustration, excerpting a few precise seconds from larger narratives simultaneously to excavate a queer possibility and to mourn the loss that the glimpse itself evokes. In *Wake* (1995), he begins to undermine the historical record by suggesting an erotics of the male left, implicating Mao Zedong along with Che Guevara. The former presides over the installation as a crudely animated video image, projected large, in which the famous faked photograph of Mao swiming rocks beatifically over the rest of the show. Another projection masks under the countdown of the standard film leader the equally famous news photograph of the dead Che, pants unbuttoned, torso naked, stretched out on crude table and surrounded by the proud figures of a doctor, a soldier, and a photographer.

NOTES

[1] *Dorland's Medical Dictionary* (1901), quoted in Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995), p. 86.

[2] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David Halperin, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 313.

[3] Not that the exhbitions were invariably curated by, or included, those who could stomach the concept of "political identity." Richard Hawkins and Dennis Cooper, for example, the curators of "Against Nature," peckishly described their project as "a reaction against contemporary art-hating activism....which we perceived as growing progressively more pervasive, more conservative, more essentialist, more predictably arid and photo-text based, more dependent on the conveyance of supposed hard fact and indisputable truth, and more and more accusatory to the point that all work outside of such prescribed practices was condemned as phobic, unengaged, and removed from social significance or import." In "Against Nature," in *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*," Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder, and Amy Scholder, eds. (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995), p. 57.

[4] Lawrence Rinder, "An Introduction to In a Different Light," *ibid.*, p. 1.

[5] On the arts front, one artist in the exhibition, in fact, was fairly uncomfortable with the title. One artist I'd wanted to include refused to participate in an exhibition with such a title. On the community front, in legendarily conservative Orange County, California, there was a kind of contained outrage. Before the exhibition opened, one of Laura Aguilar's photographs, *Cheri and Sue, 1994* was reprinted in UC Irvine's employee newsletter, along with the title of the exhibition. This generated a certain amount of disgruntled e-mail from whole outraged offices of (presumably) heterosexual employees, distressed because the photograph "infringes on our right to keep an unpolluted environment at our place of work or study," as well as letters from gay and lesbian staff upset by the "negative" image presented: "Would it have been so difficult to display a couple—male or female—standing clothed, holding hands, or with their arms around each other watching a sunset?" The e-mail campaign was quietly contained by the UCI administration's decision not to publicize any of it. As would later become clear, the UCI administration had at that time been occupied with heterosexual reproduction gone berserk at the UCI Fertility Clinic, whose directors would be accused in May 1995 of stealing eggs from some women to implant them in other women, for profit. *Pervert* continued with record attendance and nary a peep of further protest on the public front. Pamela Bailey, the assistant director of The Art Gallery, had of course anticipated problems in publicizing the exhibition. She therefore attempted to convince the UCI newsletter to run one of Robert Blanchon's photographs of Alexander Hamilton's clothed but bulging crotch; this was rejected as unsuitable.

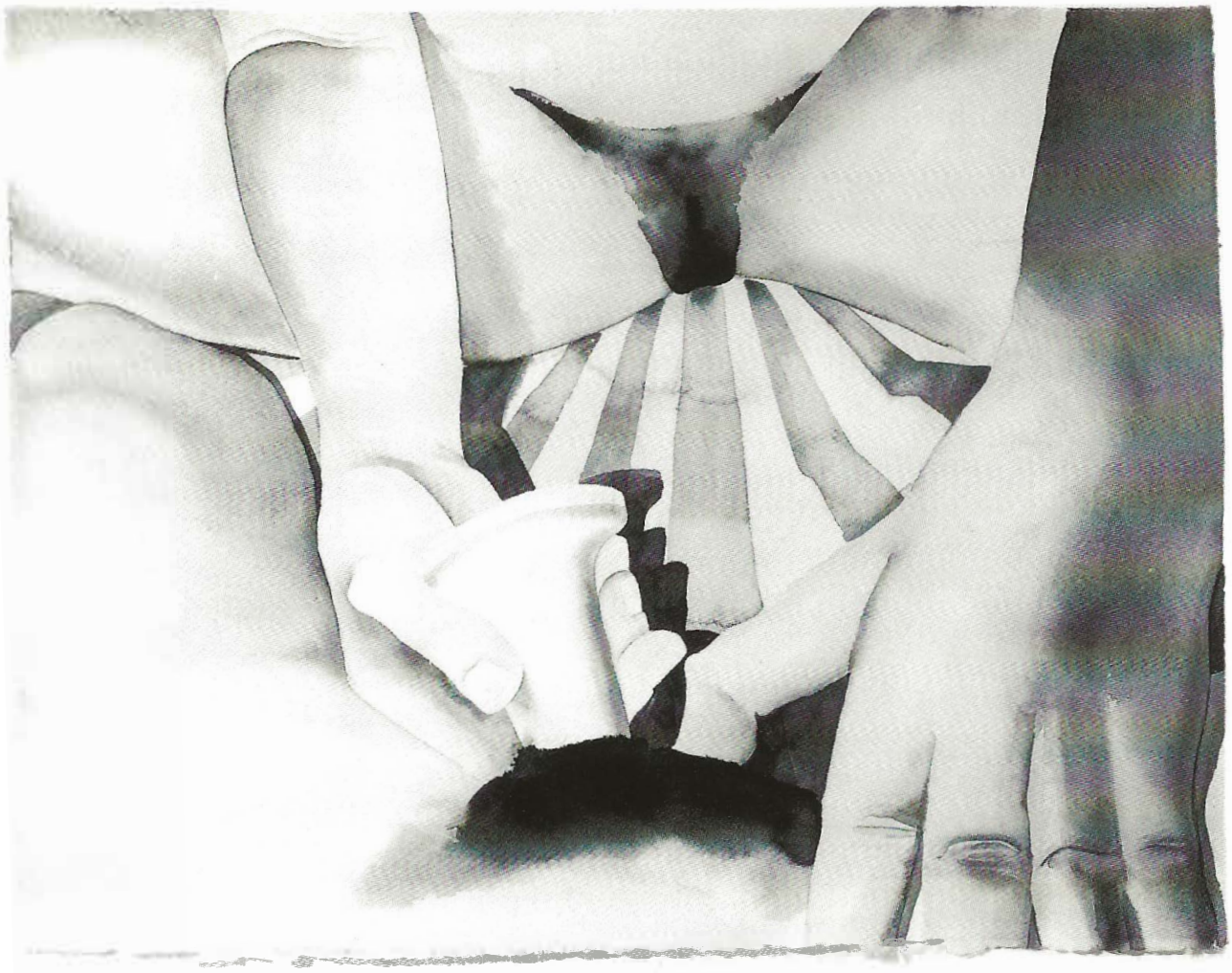
[6] See, for example, Eve Sedgwick, "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

[7] Deborah Bright's essay, "Exposing Family Values: Sexual Dissent and Family Photography," in *A Family Affair: Gay and Lesbian Issues of Domestic Life* (Atlanta: Atlanta College of Art Gallery, 1995) is an excellent discussion of such work.

[8] Quoted in Diana Emery Hulick, "Laura Aguilar," *Latin American Art*, 5:3 (1993), p. 54.

[9] Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David M. Halperins, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 152.

[10] Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe, gallery brochure for "Work 1984/1994," Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto, Canada.



PATRICIA CRONIN
Untitled #107, 1994
Watercolor on paper
21" x 26"
Courtesy of the artist