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the big shows

Helsinki New York Chicago

Edward Portras at the XLV Biennale di Venezia Summer Reading 95

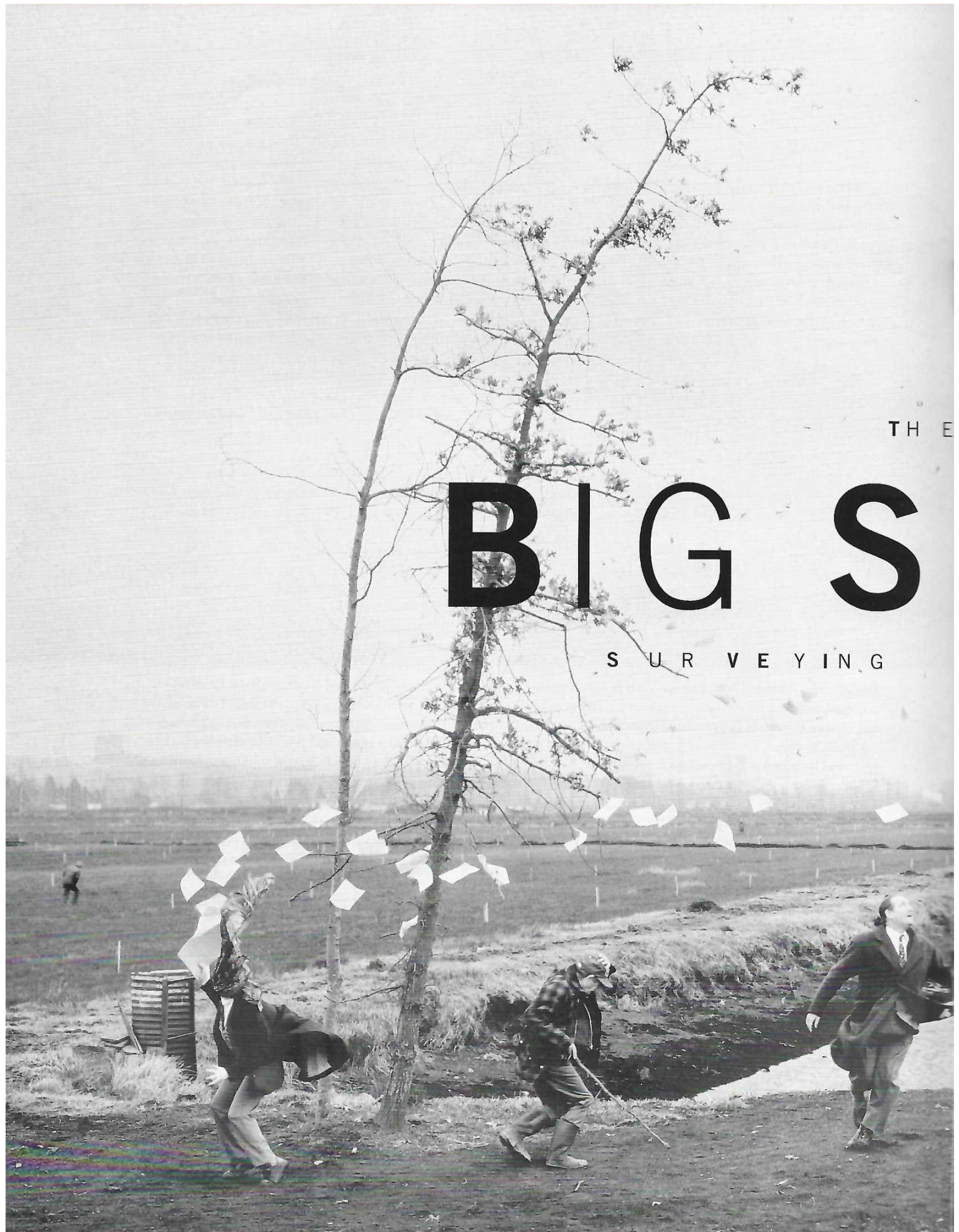


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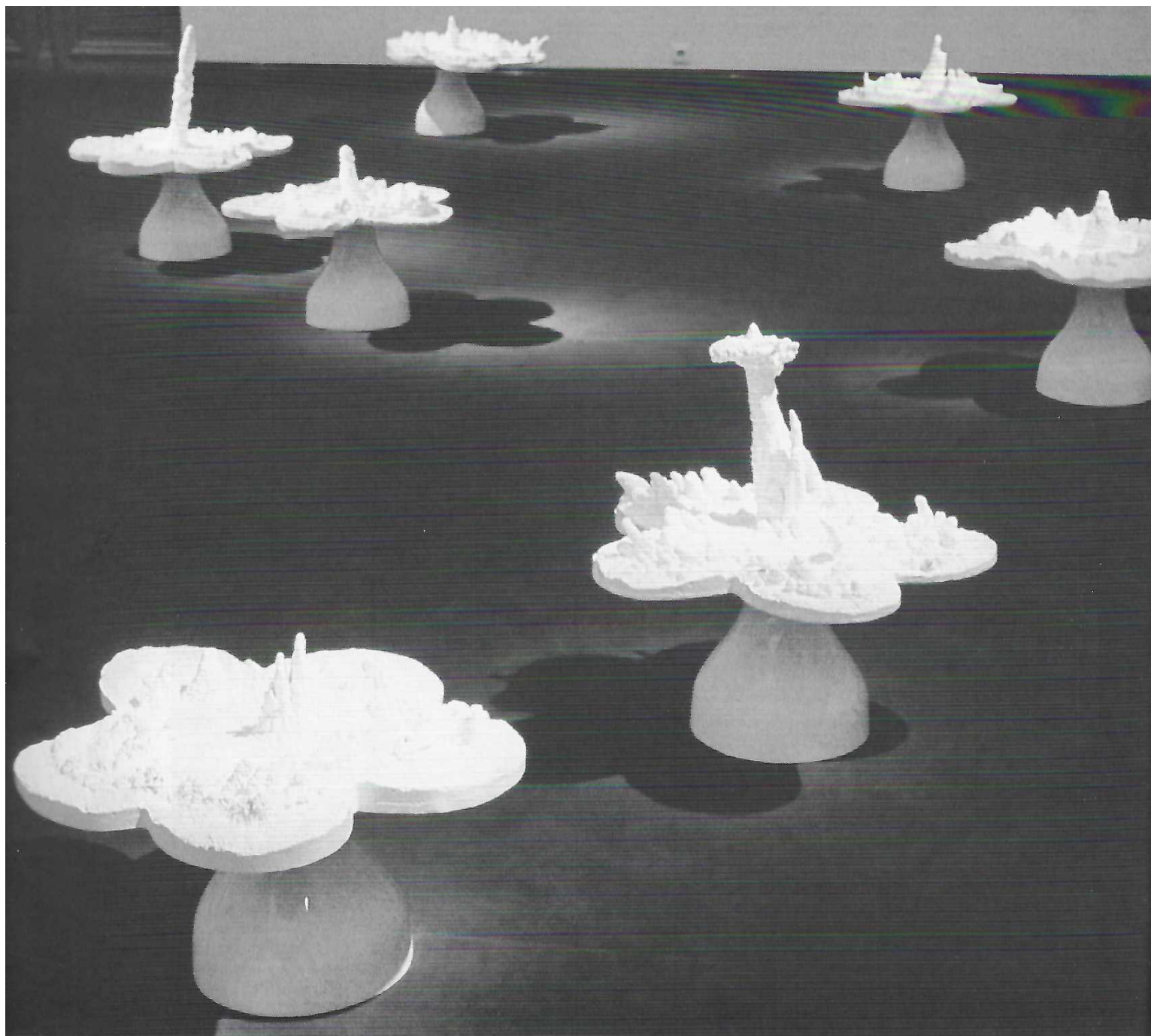
SURVEYING



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THE SURVEYS






tiplicity of styles, for there is no way to get a pulse reading that would accurately and without bias represent the best and the brightest on the scene. This is because there is not one scene but many.

Klaus Kertess did a fine job of putting up Klaus Kertess's exhibition, and that may be the most anyone could expect. And it is to the Whitney's credit that it allows individual curators to make statements instead of relying on

watered-down committee decisions. This Biennial presents what Kertess has found interesting to look at over the past few years, along with the work of some of his favourite artists from past generations, artists whom he clearly thinks have not received the attention they deserve. (People like Barry Le Va, Jane Freilicher and Milton Resnick, for instance.) Back in the days when the Biennial was able to define the current scene and give a jump-start to the career



of a young artist, the inclusion of a relatively overlooked older artist would have served to reconstitute that artist's historical role. (People like Leon Golub come to mind.) But in the mid-nineties this kind of good-natured, casserole exhibition is unlikely to stir up history.

It is not the choices of work alone but Kertess's organization of those choices that is interesting. Rather than exhibit artists together on the basis of similarity of style or materials, he grouped work that feels similar. The top floor was painting: abstract and semi-abstract. The abstract painting tended toward the traditional and included some well-executed pieces (by Terry Winters and Brice Marden) but it's difficult to sustain any originality in this saturated form. It's also an odd choice of emphasis since there has been relatively little completely abstract art shown in New York over the last few years. On the same floor were several installations by artists such as Jason Rhoades, Andrea Zittel and Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose piece included live music.

The third floor was the sex floor (the Whitney doesn't advertise this as such). This was work – in painting, photography, sculpture and installation – that refers to gender roles or sex acts and tries desperately hard to be shocking (it isn't). Much of this work was genuinely tedious but some pieces were extraordinarily wonderful, for instance, the work of Nan Goldin, Christian Schumann and Jeff Wall.

The second floor was, well, the serious and dry floor, distinguishing itself primarily from the sensuousness of the fourth and the frivolity/shock of the third. Agnes Martin has always been seen as serious and she certainly does know how to paint the painting, as does the other venerable pro, Robert Ryman, whose paintings hung next to Martin's. The work on this floor, although not really conceptual or intellectually difficult, did seem cerebral. Perhaps Kertess meant this exhibition as a depiction of Plato's anatomical divisions of the human being: the loins (third floor), the heart (fourth floor) and the brain (second floor).

On every floor historical echoes abounded. Names from generations past reverberated from many works, making it difficult to see past the accreted associations. To give three examples among excellent artists, Carroll Dunham was pretending to be Phillip Guston, Sue Williams had evidently recently been looking at work by Nancy Spero and Lari Pittman had a full-blown case of Mr. X, with the consumerism suitably updated.

Neither the Whitney nor anyone else retains the power to sum up a chunk of history with one exhibition. The

authoritative statement that people are looking for in the Biennial – the ultimate definition of the scene – is not possible given an atmosphere that doubts all surety. Where, in this post-authoritarian age is our Clement Greenberg? Pssst. The Newt (crawls).

ARS 95 AT NEUM AND CITY SITE! HELSINKI, 11 FEBRUARY – 28 MAY 1995!

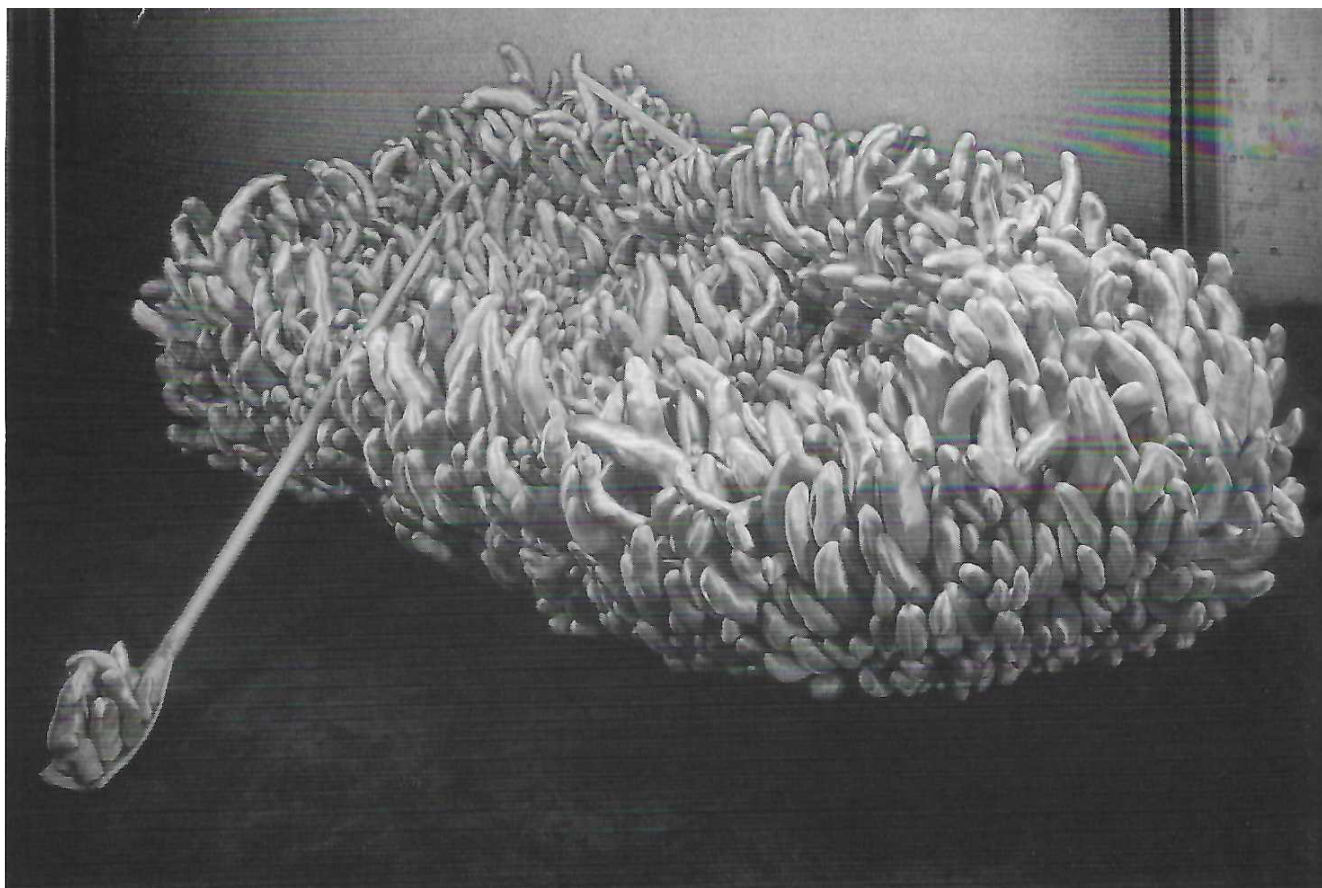
BY JOHN GAYER This fifth in the ARS series of major international exhibitions mounted by Helsinki's Museum of Contemporary Art was also the largest-ever exhibition of contemporary art in Scandinavia, presenting works by ninety artists from twenty-three countries. ARS 95 occupied the museum's entire Ateneum building as well as selected exterior locations. Considering the harshness of the recession in this nation, the exhibition represented a remarkable feat in both scale and scope.

The show's stated theme was Private Versus Public, with works exhibited according to four sub-themes: Image /Language (ground floor); Society (first floor); the Individual (third floor); and Virtual Reality, in which Asko Mäkelä presented "a world produced by electronic means" (auditorium and first-floor passageway). But these divisions were not as fixed as the allocations might suggest and there was much interplay among works and themes.

The Image/Language works explored various forms of perception, communication and understanding though not in a literal sense. While some video- and sound-installations, such as Gary Hill's *Remarks on Colour* (1994), a large video projection in which a girl reads from a text by Wittgenstein, did employ verbal and visual elements, other works referred to other language systems. For example, Markus Raetz's cleverly crafted sculptures, which appear to change shape as one moves around them, might be calling into question the structure of visual language, while a selection of paintings in the main exhibition room appeared to link image with sound and other notational forms. Through both its composition and its title, Gerhard Richter's dramatic suite of four large paintings, *Bach I-IV* (1992), suggested musical movements, while Richter's narrow palette and the textures created by his technique provided an underlying rhythm and theme repetition. Other works in this section were Brice Marden's canvas of stacked, freely linear forms and Jonathan Lasker's horizontally ordered arrangements of variously patterned square modules.

A range of works were exhibited under the rubric Soci-

Helen Chadwick, *Pissflowers* (1991-92), bronze, cellulose & enamel, photo courtesy Nykytaiteen Museo, Helsinki



ety, some of which did not hesitate to address Finnish society in particular. Of the works pertaining to Finland, Alfredo Jaar's installation commented directly on Finland's tendency to isolationism. *One Million Finnish Passports* (1995) appeared to consist of exactly that. Neatly stacked over a foot deep on the floor, they were displayed behind a security-glass partition and were seen by many as commenting on Finland's restrictive immigration and refugee policies. Also included here were two works from Komar & Melamid's *The People's Choice* (1994–95), based on the results of research regarding public taste in painting. Using Osurvey results from Finland the artists exhibited a series of large colour graphs as well as two paintings that realized the most and least desirable images.

Much of the work on the third floor (the Individual) used the body in some way – as a source of imagery or as material or production process. Anish Kapoor's *My Body Your Body* (1993), a sumptuous deep-blue pigmented cavity in the wall, suggested both male and female forms in a mystical expression of physical love. The shape of Kapoor's work was inverted by its neighbour, Yayoi Kusama's *Violet Obsession* (1994), which consisted of a row-boat filled with a dense growth of soft-sculpted, violet phalli. Semen and urine were materials in Henrik Plenge Jakobsen's clinical

installation *White Love* (1995), visible via the transparent tubing and plexiglass-fronted washing machine through which they circulated, while urine was used in the production of Helen Chadwick's *Piss Flowers* (1991–92) – a synthetic garden of white plaster flowers cast from the hollows formed by urine in packed snow.

Also notable were Rudolf Schäfer's serenely haunting photos of corpses, and installations by Tony Oursler, Portia Munson and Luciano Fabro – the latter's *Sisyphus* (1994) deploying a large marble roller and flour to humourously unite Greek mythology with the making of pasta. Work by Finnish artists included Nina Roos's seductive oil paintings on plexiglas and Outi Heiskanen's *Bush Wind People* (1995) – an installation composed from dozens of her skilful and delicate etchings.

In presenting so much it is not surprising that ideal exhibition space could not be found for each artist's work. For example, the aggressive colours and textures of Marianna Uutinen's large canvases were at odds with the garden-effect of Chadwick's *Piss Flowers* and their proximity gave the room a crowded feeling. Similarly, because Mike Kelly's floor installation was given inadequate space it required a railing to protect it. Nevertheless, ARS 95 provided an exceptionally rich experience of art and ideas.

Above: Yayoi Kusama, *Violet Obsession* (1994), mixed media, photo courtesy Nykytaiteen Museo, Helsinki / Opposite top: Alfredo Jaar, *One-million Finnish Passports* (*Miljoona Suomen passia*) (detail, 1995), installation, photo courtesy Nykytaiteen Museo, Helsinki / Opposite bottom: Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios* (detail, 1994–95), installation, photo courtesy the artist & Brooke Alexander, NY

