

MICHAEL JENKINS

a quick survey by Mitchell Anderson

Michael Jenkins' practice traffics in feelings of otherness and separation, of formative memory and the longing and loss of lives dreamed. His works were exhibited widely and internationally throughout the late 1980s and 1990s and were central to artistic conversations regarding the personal and the poetic in art. They deal with youthful feelings of otherness, queerness and the tremendous loss and alienation of the AIDS crisis unfolding as he emerged artistically. Compressing and abstracting the architecture and symbols of childhood, celebration and death, Jenkins' practice can be viewed as a link between the uncanny craft of Robert Gober and the minimal-conceptualism of his friend and collaborator, Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The images rendered trigger recollections real and imagined and speak to a society scattered with love, sickness, desire and broken dreams.

Raised in Atlanta, the deep south of the United States, Jenkins finished his studies in the mid 1980s and sought to embed political content in geometric forms and colors, in a critique of the professed purity of hegemonic color field and constructivism. *Blow* (1986), a visual play on Barnett Newman's triangular *Jericho* (1968-69), skews the titled religious reference of a biblical battle won by breath towards a sexual immediacy and a rejection of the art historical canon's straight acting aloofness. Elsewhere stainless steel plates, the kind used to cover glory holes in public bathrooms, were taken as painting supports. One group, *Supreme 1-9* (1986), features monochrome stripes, their title referring to the decision of the nine American Supreme Court justices to uphold laws criminalizing oral and anal sex that same year.

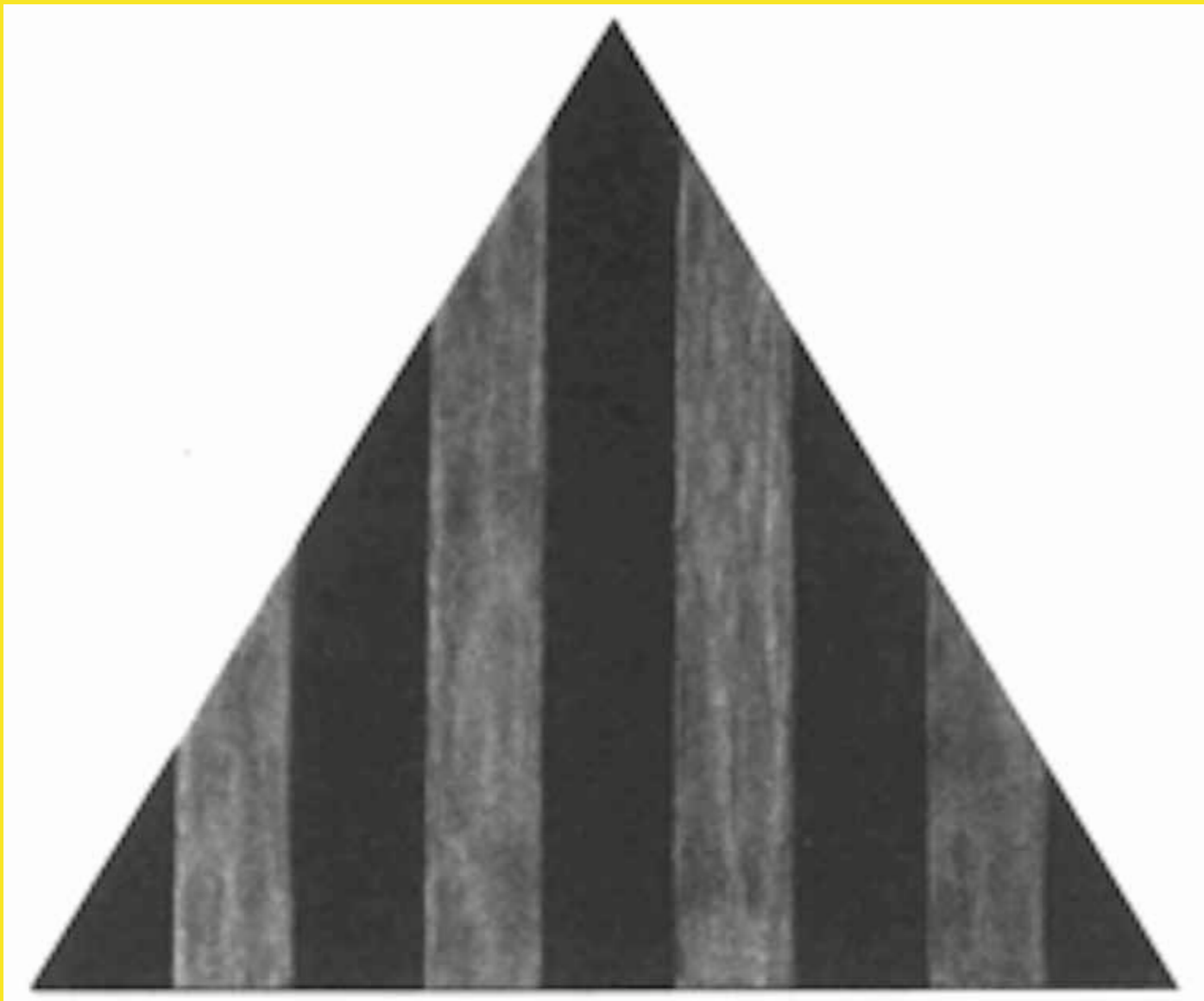
Jenkins' iconic contribution to Group Material's *AIDS Timeline, June 30, 1986* (1988), expanded his formal witness to this judgement. A large red and white striped painting with missing starry corner, it appears as both damaged Daniel Buren and damaged American flag, what Bill Berson, writing in *Artforum* contemporarily, described as a "supposedly utilitarian rectangle finally blown-up, broken, and literally voided. Jenkins stripped the flag down to nine stripes and a blank where the field of stars would be, to impugn the Supreme Court's upholding of Georgia's sodomy laws".¹

This interest in the visual structure of objects, their ability to hold human story as well as composition, continued in a series of works using the props of the sailor. Exhibited at White Columns, soon after the artist's move to New York, *That Sinking Feeling* (1988) is a series of large black case frames backed with wool blanketing material featuring indents housing black sailor shoes or white 'dixie cup' sailor caps. The white cap from above, a perfect graphic circle for Jenkins' experimental abstraction, signaling a bodily absence recent or eternal. The sailor, from Melville's *Billy Budd* through Charles Demuth, Popeye and Jean Genet's *Querelle* (and later hunky Brad Davis), has been a hallmark of homosocial fantasy for centuries. Jenkins' sailing imagery sans sailors is an unification of sexual desire and the mourning of that desire during a time where sex correlates with death. The idea of a fleet week wet dream was highlighted by the porny exhibition image of a half naked young man in sailor garb with the word 'JOIN' written underneath it. The same image would be used on a paper stack piece he would execute in conjunction with Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Join)* (1990), calling for a dispersal Jenkins describes as "ironic because real recruitment is done by the military and the myth is that homosexuals recruit."² The fetish aspect of the sailor pieces was highlighted further in the White Columns exhibition by the inclusion of a series of stretched fabric diptychs, queered hardcore Brice Marden monochromes, executed in yellow rubber and white sailor fabric.

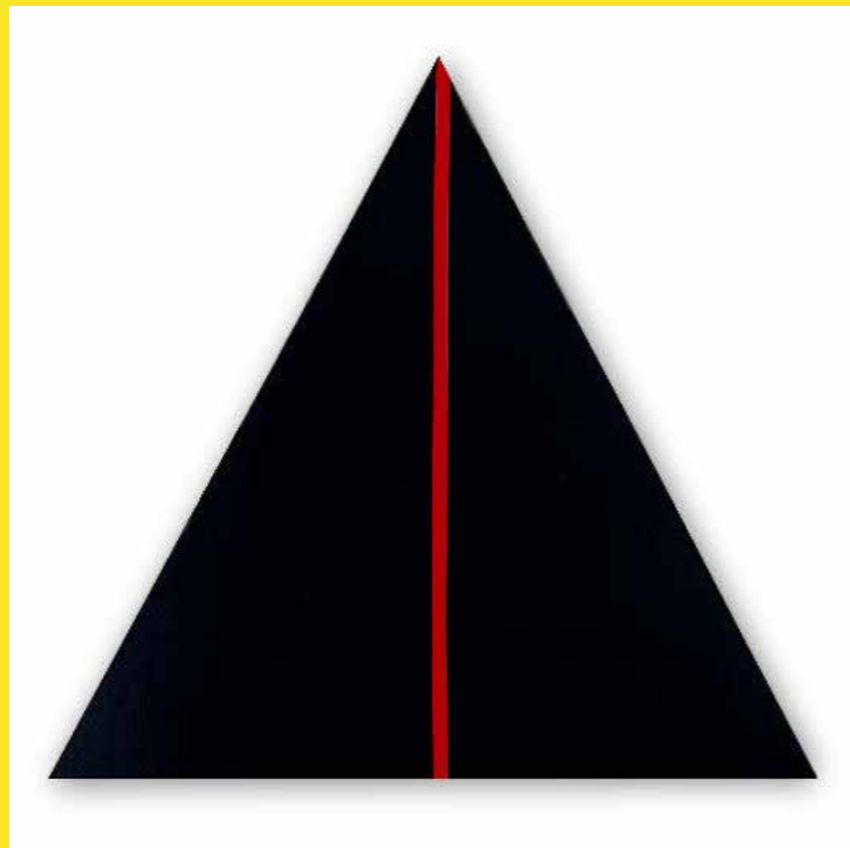
1 Berkson, Bill. "Group Material, AIDS Timeline, University Art Museum." *Artforum*, Mar. 1990, pp. 168-169.

2 Arning, Bill. "Michael Jenkins." *Bomb*, no. 40, 1 July 1992.





Above:
Blow, 1986
tempera and wax on wood
45.72 x 53.34 cm

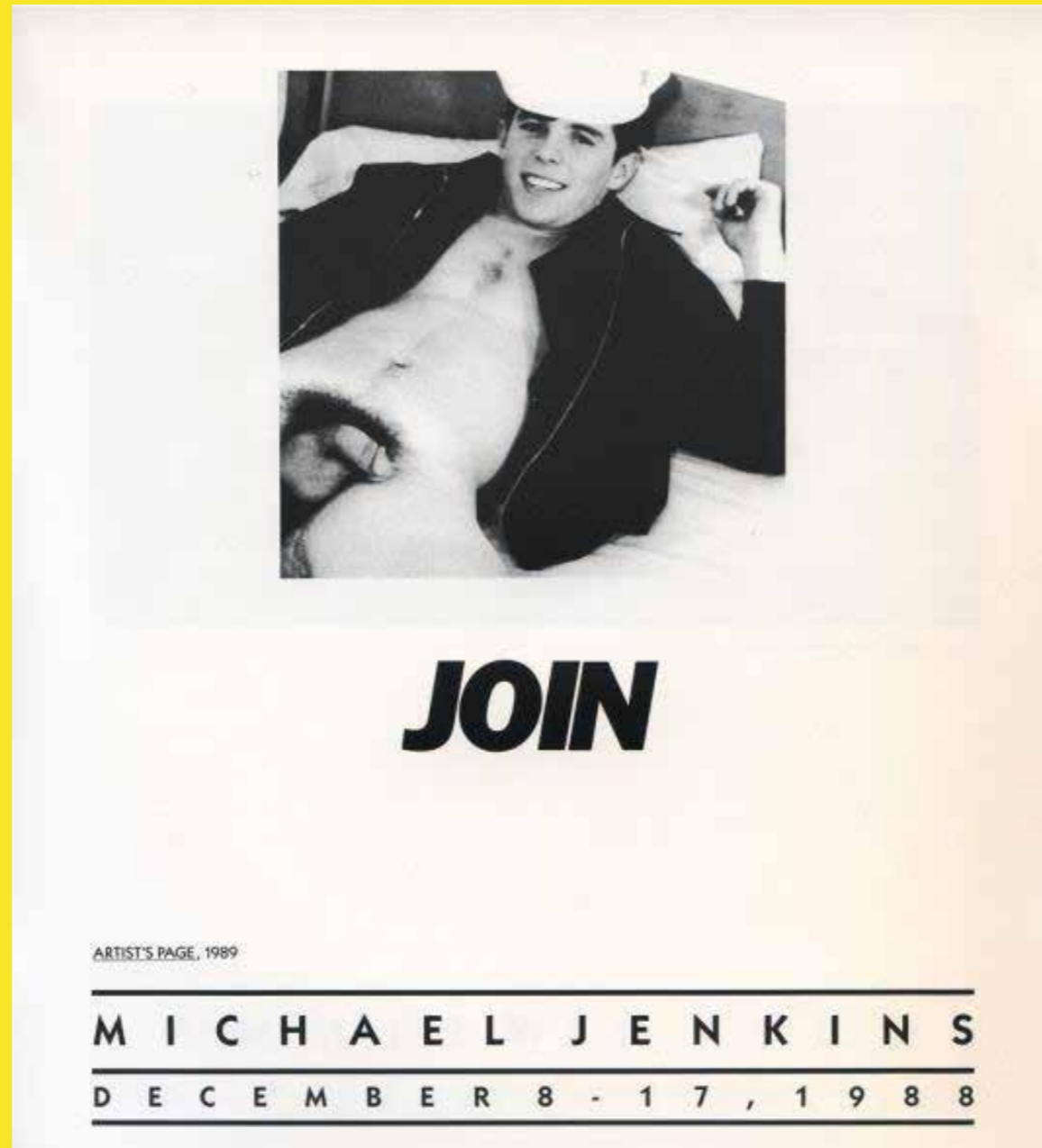
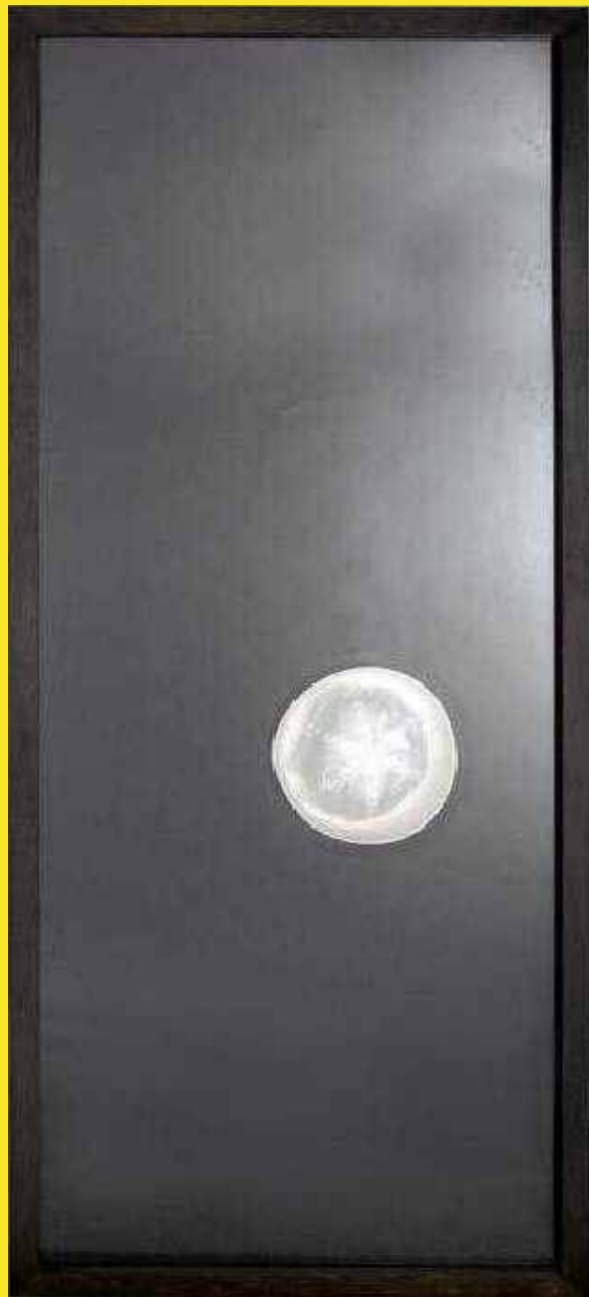


Right:
Barnett Newman
Jericho, 1968-69
acrylic on canvas
268.5 x 286 cm



Above:
Installation view of AIDS Timeline, Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1991; June 20, 1986 (1988) at center.

Installation view of AIDS Timeline, University of California Berkeley Art Museum, 1989



Upper left:
That Sinking Feeling I, 1988
Wool, cotton hat in wooden case
174 cm height

Lower left:
Gob Box, 1986
Wool, cotton hat in wooden case
42 x 42 cm

Center:
White Columns, New York artist
page

Upper right:
Untitled, c. late 1980s
Cotton and rubber on stretcher
35.5 x 29.7 cm

Lower right:
Felix Gonzalez-Torres
(in conjunction with Michael Jenkins)
Untitled (Join), 1990
Offset print on paper, endless copies
91.4 cm at ideal height x 71.1 x 55.9
cm



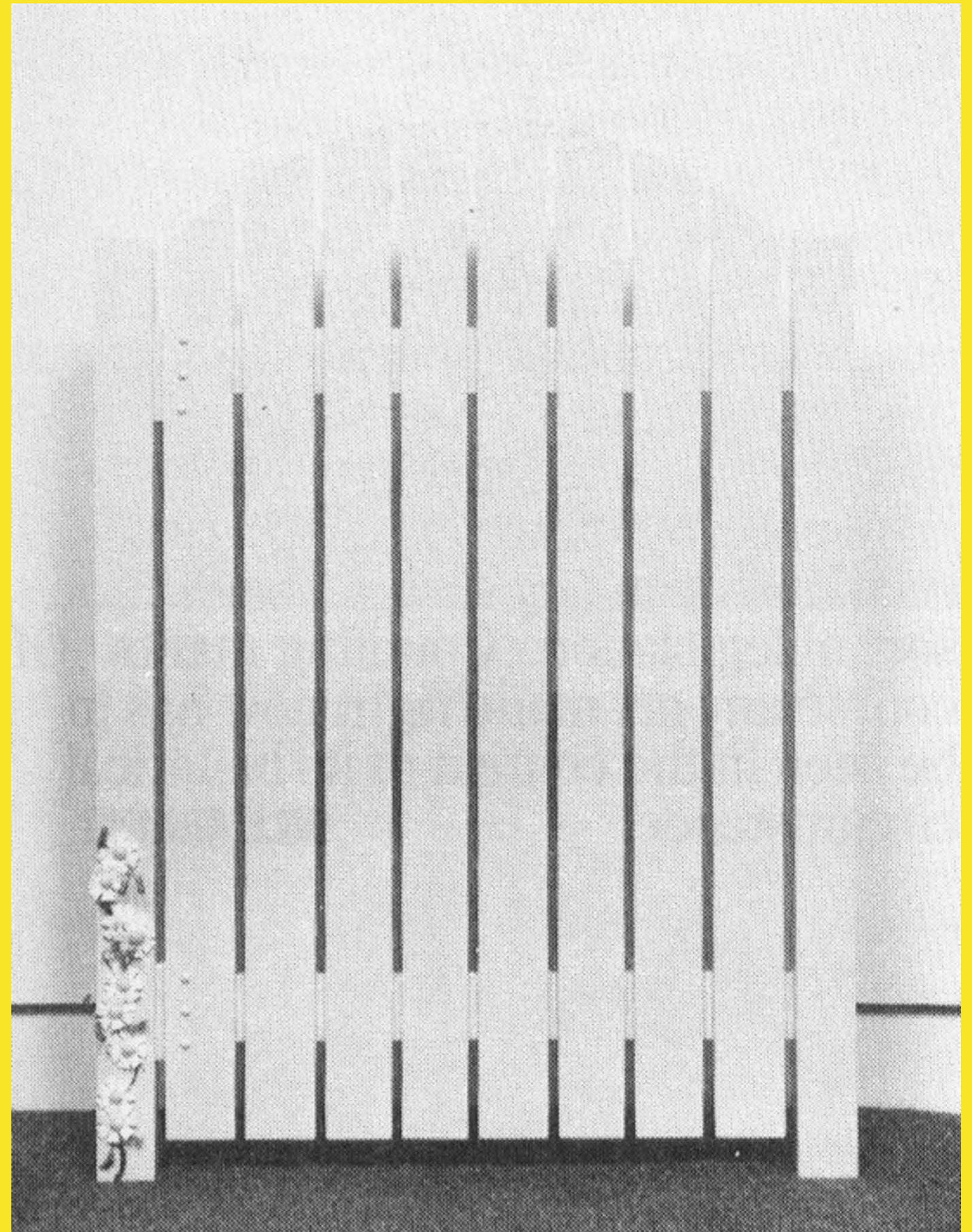


This first use of yellow in relation to the naval would prove influential for much of Jenkins' work exhibited over the next decade. Historically, the raising of a yellow flag on a ship signalled contagion or quarantine, a practice derived from the marking of infected homes and businesses with yellow plague crosses. This connotation of sickness and societal removal underlying the color of sunshine led to the majority of Jenkins' sculptures, drawings and installations, including those unrelated to sailors and the sea, executed in a uniform monochrome, like Yves Klein's blue imbued with a references to caution and the political and personal crises of the time. Jenkins' use of this hue would have Jerry Saltz, in 1991, dub him "probably the contemporary 'master of yellow'", using it to "speak of plague and quarantine, the cast-out and the forgotten, the hated and violated".¹

By that time Jenkins was creating and exhibiting sculptural simulacrum of the constructions of suburban childhood and play: picket fences, forts and rafts, castles and pirate ships. Constructed from the quotidian materials of domestic craft and week-end projects (cardboard found on the street, felt, latex house paint on wood), the objects appear as props removed from their larger stage. Fence (1990-91), continuing in his earliest interests, is a quarter-scale square of wood constructed to mimic picket fencing hung on the wall, a surreal literal contrast to Anne Truitt's white minimalist hallmark First (1961). With Rounded Top Gate (1991) the titular life size rendition leans against the wall with the addition of cartoonish flowers fabricated from felt and wire crawling up as in a vine. As opposed to the high production of Robert Gober, Jenkins' works walk a line between both minimalist visuals and post-war decoration, a reference neither high or low but decidedly middle. Gober's playpens, cribs and doors are surreally imagined from a place of adulthood where Jenkins' always exist as if from a fantasy of a universal childhood nonexistent or inaccessible film set.

Rounded Top Gate was originally exhibited beneath a wall painting portrait of Jenkins, Untitled (Portrait of Michael Jenkins) (1991), by Gonzalez-Torres in their dual exhibition, and first for both in Europe, at Xavier Hufkens in Brussels at the beginning of 1991. The titling of works and the references made to memory are important platforms in considering this work in context. Jenkins titles more in line with Gober's, what you see is what you see. Castle with Striped Interior (1991) and Raft (1990) are what the titles promise. The first made of heavy painted cardboard, much like a large toy, and the latter constructed from wood, rope and fabric, as if a childhood drawing or model had been scaled up for an adult. The possibility of the viewers' creation of these objects, in a nostalgic past or leisure present, is there in fabrication and naming. Because of this, the works of Jenkins, while dealing with alienation and a sensed loss of innocence, are always about inclusion. Birthed by the specifics of homosexual displacement and the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic all of the pieces may speak to wide and total feelings and facts within society as a whole.

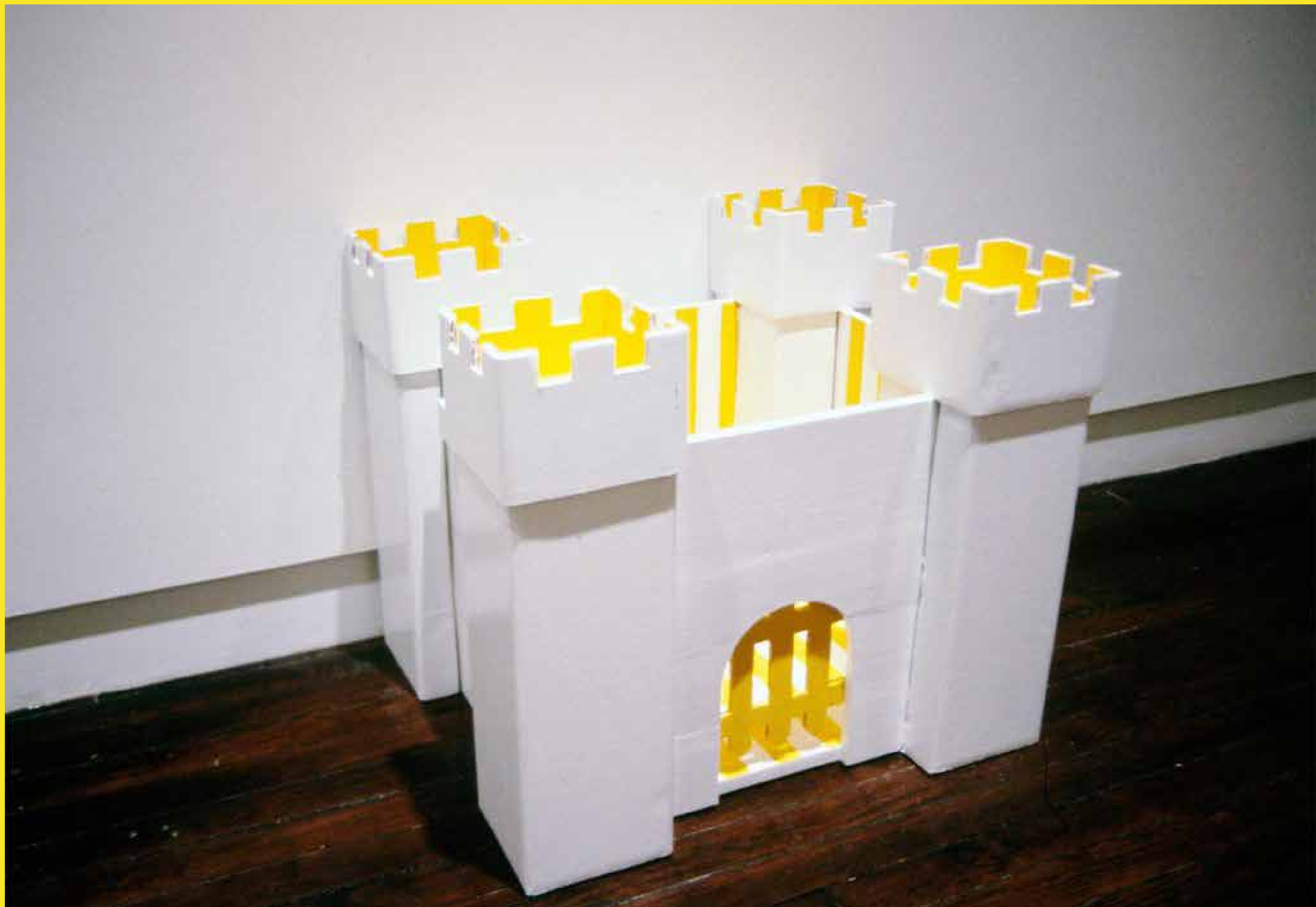
¹ "Mistaken Identity." We've Lost E.T. But The Boy's Coming Back: Peter Cain, Michael Jenkins, Michael Landy, by Jerry Saltz, Karsten Schubert Gallery, 1991, pp. 9.



Opposite left:
Fence, 1990-91
Paint on wood
29.8 x 29.2 cm
Edition of 11

Opposite right:
Anne Truitt
First, 1961
Acrylic on wood
112.4 x 45 x 17.8 cm

Above:
Rounded Top Gate, 1991
Paint on wood with felt and wire
114.3 x 81.3 x 22.9 cm





Above:
Chest of Pearls, 1992
Paint on wood, plastic pearls

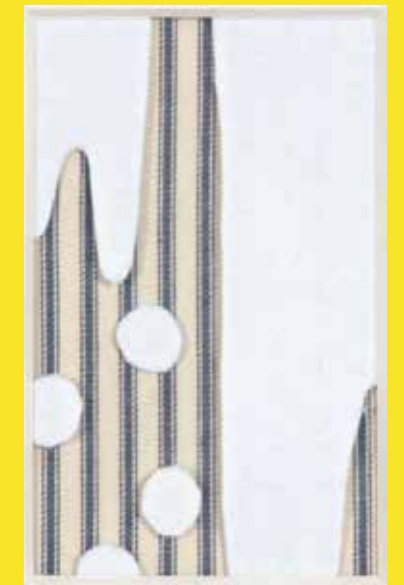
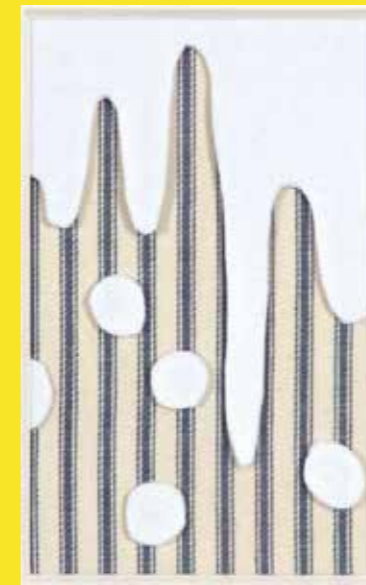
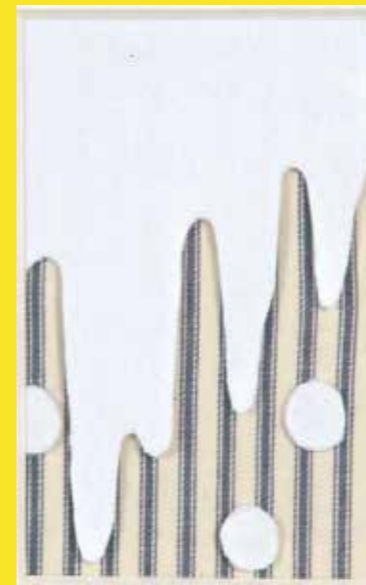
Left:
Raft, 1990
Paint on wood with canvas, rope and felt
228.6 x 167.6 x 91.4 cm

Previous page:
Castle with Striped Interior, 1991
Paint on wood and board
53.3 x 62.2 x 52 cm



Above:
Snow Scene with Church, 1993
Paint on paper and board with
tape
165.1 x 106.7 x 50.8 cm installed

Above right:
from Details #5, 1990
Felt and fabric collage
14.9 x 9.9 cm each



In many works there are visual codes and cues that compound on top of universal feelings, what Nayland Blake has described as Jenkins' development of "personal iconographies to describe emotional states".¹ His series of Details from around 1990, works on paper like Untitled (Pink Snow on Trees) (1990) and sculptural installations like Snow Scene with Church (1993) all deploy circular dots as simple visual descriptors of falling snow. The viewer is confronted with a static version of a specific cold winter silence. But, these dots also refer visually at the same time to Kaposi's sarcoma, a related illness and signifier of AIDS, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, that becomes visible as spot-like lesions across the skin. These pieces, therefore, operate double time with their initial solitary coldness and what James Lewis described in Artforum as invoking "a kind of art-and-crafts idyll, but they also make a fragile elegy out of that practice by referring to Kaposi's sarcoma lesions, to the world of the bedridden, and, more generally, to the winter of life."²

This duplicity was seen at the time of the work's creation as a new type of Camp. One, where Jenkins' work was "part of the recently-empowered tactic often used -- not merely acquired-- by gay and lesbian intellectuals".³ The works of Jenkins traffic in a heterosexual dream that is disturbed or forced to include the dreams of the normally excluded. Roberta Smith described one of Jenkins' most iconic works, Double Shower (1991), as "a pair of slightly undersized outdoor showers, complete with plumbing and fashioned in the artist's characteristic yellow wood slats. It is a structure that conjures an absent couple, perhaps two children who are best friends, perhaps two adults who are lovers".⁴ This work shows a clear connection to the paired pieces Gonzalez-Torres was beginning to create the same year, specifically his two clocks falling out of sync, Untitled (Perfect Lovers) (1991). But while Gonzalez-Torres sought to inspire the normalcy of homosexual intimacy in the eyes of a viewing public and politicians during the culture wars of the time, Jenkins' piece pushes against "the adolescent stupidity of the straight symbol, pushing past the extraneous narratives of gay pornography to break through to concerns of desire, sex, hygiene, plague, quarantine, risk."⁵ Double Shower, then, asks viewers to not just understand homosexual desire as an abstract, but aggressively insists on the acceptance, inclusion and queerness of homosexual relations, gay and straight, whether that be in the locker room, the camp shower or any of the many other places society condones the supposedly non-sexual baring of skin to strangers.

1 Blake, Nayland. In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice. City Lights Books, 1995.

2 Lewis, James. "Home Boys." Artforum, Oct. 1991.

3 Terry R. Meyers. Notes on Uses of Camp in the Work of Michael Jenkins, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 1992.

4 Smith, Roberta. "Art in Review." The New York Times, 29 Nov. 1991, p. 28.

5 Terry R. Meyers. Notes on Uses of Camp in the Work of Michael Jenkins, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 1992.





Left:
Double Shower, 1991
Paint on wood with metal
224.8 x 135.9 x 68.6 cm

Above:
Felix Gonzalez-Torres
Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1991
Clocks, paint on wall
35.6 x 71.2 x 7 cm

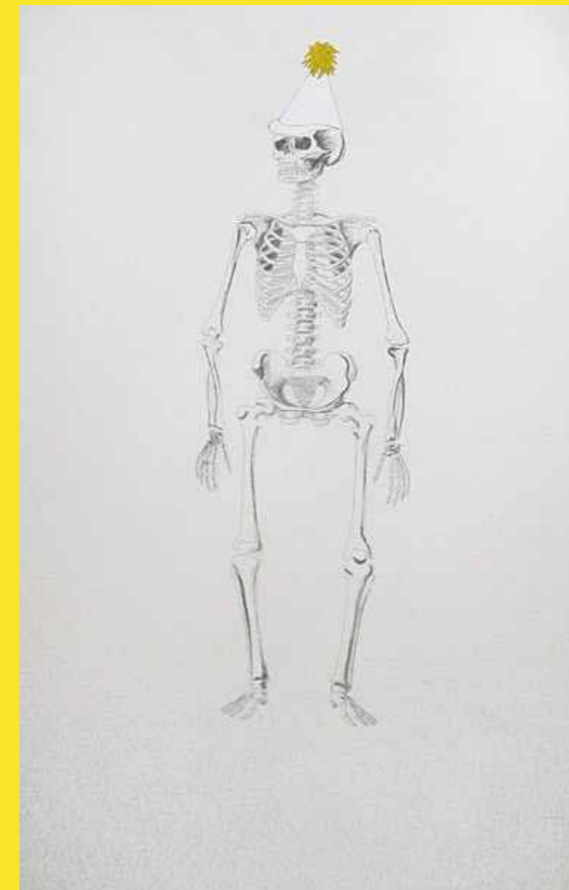
Right:
Untitled (Pink Snow and Trees), 1990
Flashe and pencil on paper
59 x 43.8 cm



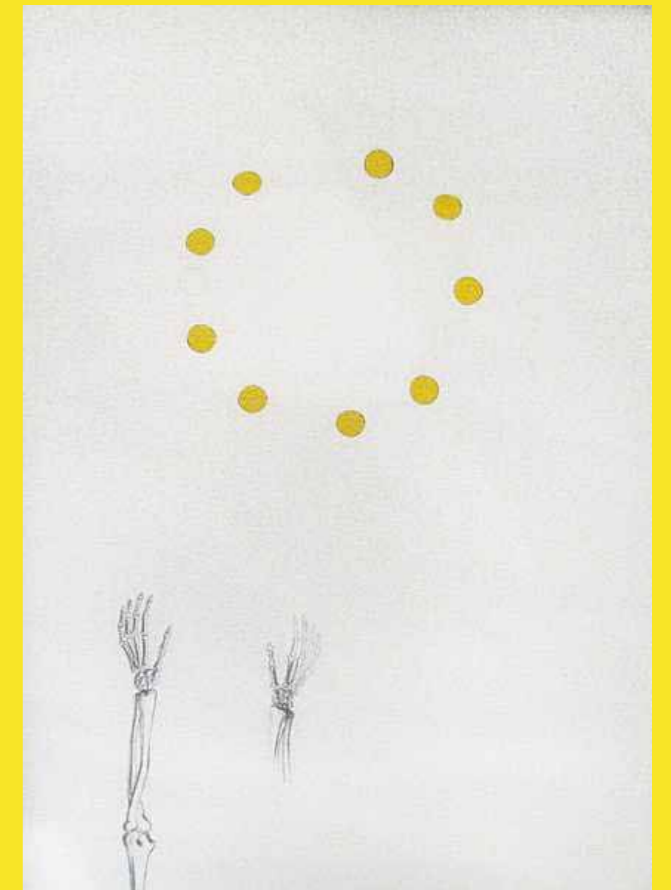


This insistence for societal involvement in the face of trauma infecting a less powerful minority may also explain the seemingly celebratory nature of many of the works. A series of large drawings show skeletons partying or entertaining against wide expanses of empty paper. Juggler (1991) illustrates a set of disconnected boned arms with nine balls arranged in a circle above them, while Skeleton with Party Hat (1991) features the mentioned figure with a conical cap with pom-pom. The balls and pom-pom provide the only celebratory color in these graphite works and, again, they are quarantine yellow. Other works bring the celebration directly into the exhibition space; Happy Birthday (1990-91) and Bon Voyage (1991) are wire and painted board assemblages that mimic banners hung at quotidian celebrations. Turned to art, not as ready-mades, but as recreations of known items, the eye is drawn to the desperation of signaling that something will be celebrated. The only question is when and where. The work of Jenkins always seems to remind that for all dreams and happiness it is important in society that it be projected outward and viewed. Those symbols of the social have afterlives.

Through the mid 1990s Jenkins, alongside constant solo exhibitions, would cement the importance of the social in his practice by taking part in a large number of duo exhibitions internationally with artists and friends in his milieu including Steven Evans, John Miller, Tim Rollins and Tony Feher. His 1996 solo exhibition at Casey Caplan in New York featured a large wall painting of Nintendo-esque bricks, Brick Wall (1996) and a recreation of a Halloween decoration devil, Untitled (1996). The centerpiece of the exhibition was A Couple of Electric Chairs (1996), two child-size creations of the titled object, side by side and executed not in yellow, but a realistic institutional taupe. It's as if Jenkins could no longer see the death around him as related to natural occurrence, one caused by sickness or plague. The United States government had dragged its feet on funding AIDS research throughout most of the 1980s and it was only in 1995 that wealthy people in wealthy countries would begin to have access to effective anti-retroviral medication and deaths from AIDS related illnesses would begin to decline. That year would turn out to be the peak of gay and AIDS related interest in the New York art world when the Guggenheim presented concurrent mid-career surveys of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Ross Bleckner. By the end of 1996 Gonzalez-Torres would be dead, Jenkins would move on to pursue other interests and the exhibition at Casey Kaplan continues today to be the last time he exhibited new work.



Above left:
Untitled (Skeleton with Party Hat), 1991
Pencil and flashe on paper
150 x 89 cm

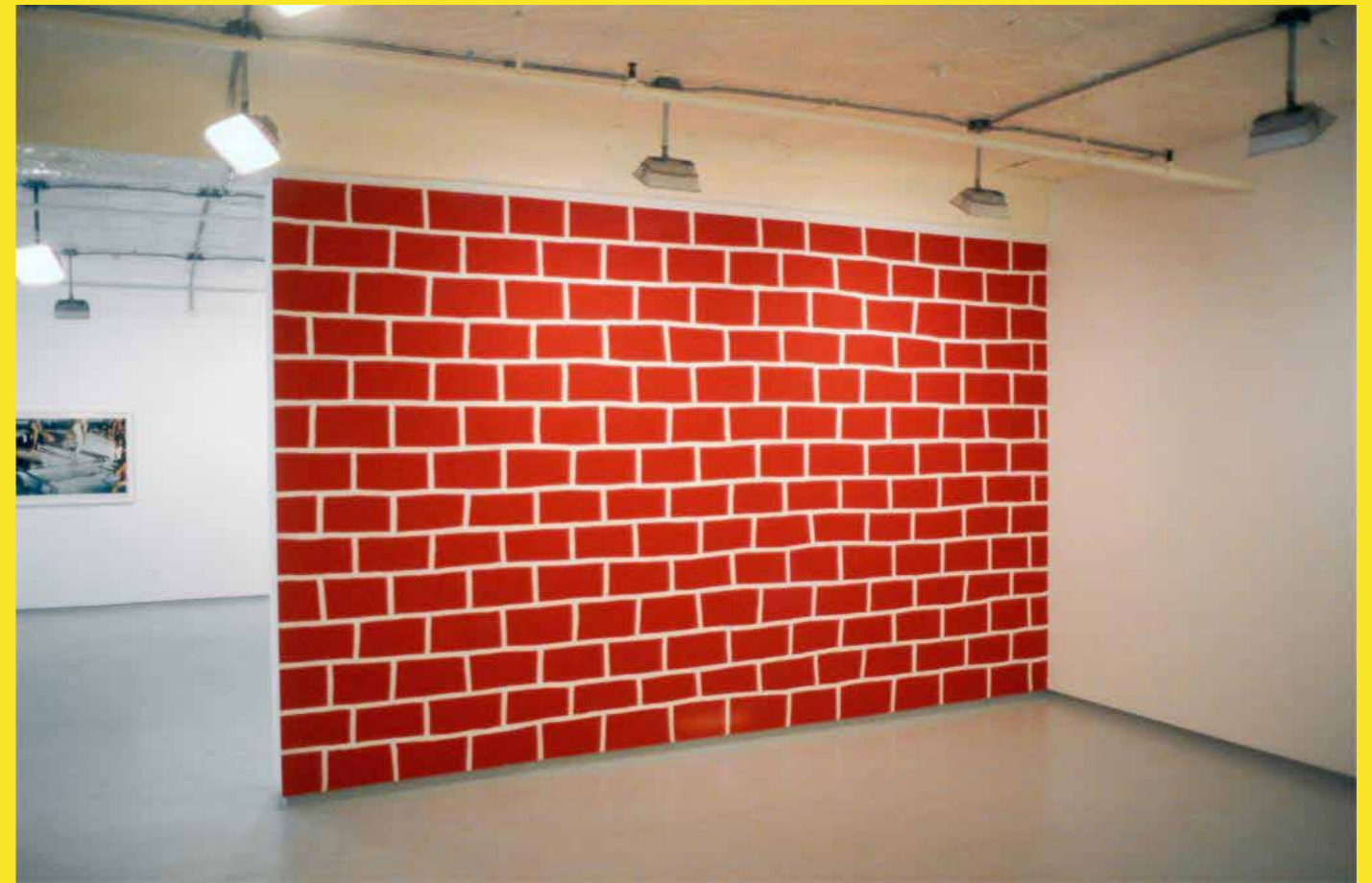


Above right:
Untitled (Juggler), 1991
Pencil and flashe on paper
68.6 x 49.5 cm

Below:
Happy Birthday, 1990-91
Acrylic paint on cardboard with wire
38.1 x 83.8 cm

Opposite:
Installation view, Karsten Schubert Gallery, London, 1991 (work by Peter Cain on left)





Above:
Brick Wall, 1996
Wall painting
Dimensions variable

Left:
Untitled, 1996
Paint on paper with metal
104 x 58.4 cm

Following pages:
A Couple of Electric Chairs, 1996
Paint on wood with metal
101.6 x 96.5 x 53.3 cm

