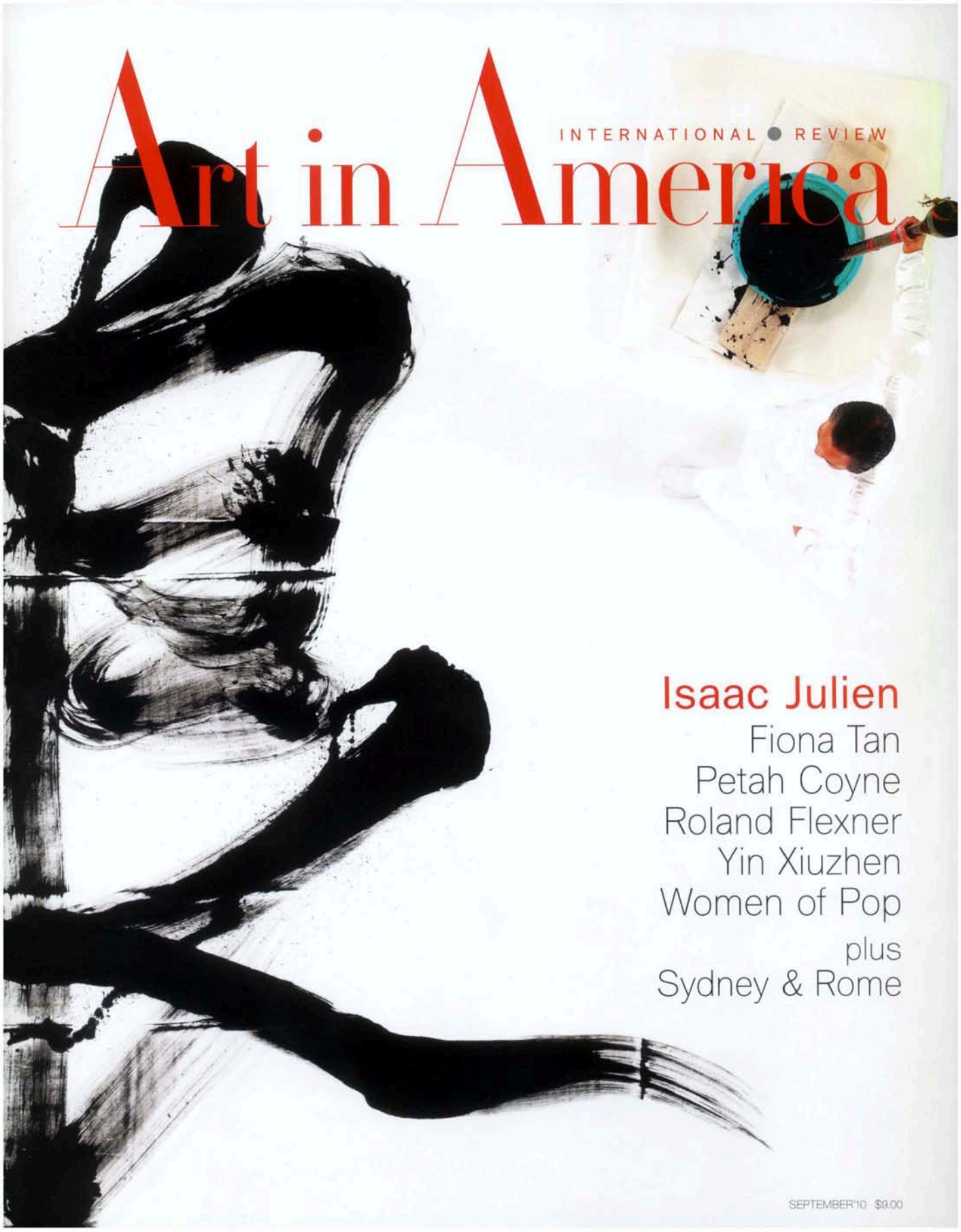


IN THE STUDIO
ROLAND FLEXNER
WITH FAYE HIRSCH

ARGUABLY THE SLEEPER of this year's Whitney Biennial was a wall of small gridded drawings, each 5½ by 7 inches, presenting fantastic landscapes formed of eddying ink on paper. With this understated contribution, Roland Flexner created something of a sensation, perhaps reflecting a desire on the part of many for the sensuous object in an exhibition that tended more toward conceptualism and media-based practices. Born in Nice in 1944, Flexner has lived and made art in New York since 1982. In his youth he socialized with members of the Nouveau Réaliste and Supports/Surfaces movements but began his career as something of a pop painter. One early work, however, involved dropping paint from a ladder onto wooden dowels. So in a way, the kind of "accidental" effects he achieves in his drawings, which are made in a manner similar to the traditional Japanese suminagashi *(floating ink) technique of marbleizing paper, emanate from a longstanding interest in chance processes.*

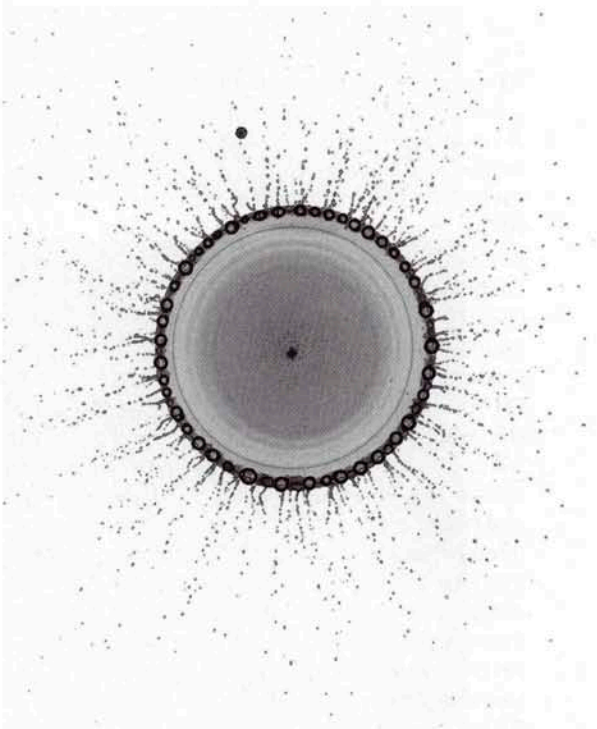
When I first met Flexner in New York in 1991, he was working on large paintings depicting the 15th-century statuettes of cowled mourning monks found at the tombs of Burgundian dukes. (By coincidence, a traveling show of these statuettes was at the Metropolitan Museum during the run of the Biennial.) In Flexner's paintings, the mourners are blown up to human scale and painstakingly rendered in varying densities of a single-hued pigment. In 1992, Flexner made an abrupt shift in scale and medium, for three years creating a series of drawings in charcoal or pencil containing mysterious figures displaying symptoms of an indeterminate agony, as well as numerous skulls, skeletons and rippling puddles. These he collectively called his vanitas *drawings.*

Then, in 1996, Flexner abandoned the vanitas *theme and undertook a series of drawings created by blowing ink-and-soap bubbles onto paper [see* A.i.A.*, Feb. '03]. For nearly 10 years, he continued making these india-ink bubble drawings, at first on clay-surfaced sheets of paper no bigger than 5¾ by 7 inches. Flexner traveled several times to Japan to study sumi ink and* suminagashi*, and returned to New York in 2005 to begin making his first sumi ink works, first as bubble drawings, then as floating-ink transfer drawings such as the ones on view at the Whitney. In the past year, Flexner has been working with liquid graphite and also making inkjet photographs that return to his earlier skull iconography. He is exhibiting these works in a show opening later this month at Massimo De Carlo in Milan. The wall of drawings from the Biennial was recently acquired by mega-collector François Pinault. I spoke with Flexner in early July in his SoHo studio in New York.*

FAYE HIRSCH Your recent graphite drawings are similar to the drawings that were in the Whitney Biennial.

ROLAND FLEXNER The ones in the Whitney were in sumi ink. I used a technique similar to *suminagashi*, where you put ink and water and gelatin in a tray, and then you manipulate the surface—you can actually "draw" on the liquid, because the ink floats. The Japanese use bamboo, but I use a brush. And I developed other types of manipulation that added to the process. The Whitney drawings had long departed from marbleizing the Japanese way.

FH How so?



Opposite, Roland Flexner making a bubble drawing in his studio, 1998. Photo Deven Golden.

This page, both untitled, 2000, india ink on paper, 6¾ by 5½ inches each.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Roland Flexner's exhibition of drawings and prints at Massimo De Carlo, Milan, opens Sept. 17 (through Oct. 30).

"THE EPHEMERALITY IN THESE DRAWINGS IS ABOUT THE WAY THE EVENT IS OCCURRING. IT IS AN EVENT, IN THE FULLEST SENSE OF THE WORD."

RF I always start from the visual point of view. I transfer the floating image onto the paper, I look at it, and orient the work according to the point of view of the result I want to achieve. And I've made the decision that the pictorial effect I'm seeking is landscape.
FH: How do the mediums differ?
RF Sumi ink is richer than graphite, which is very simple in terms of tonality. Sumi has all colors in it—literally. It has yellow, red, blue.
FH Is it actually made with those colors?
RF No, these are effects. The ink-maker proceeds according to the wishes of the calligrapher, who comes and says, I'd like a bluish tone, or the yellowish, warmer tone. The ink-maker prepares the pigments in ways that produce those warmer or cooler shades.
FH You went to Japan to study the ink.
RF I went to the birthplace of sumi ink, Nara. There are very few traditional ink-makers left, who produce it all by hand and not by mechanical means—maybe three or five families. From father to son, they're still doing the same thing as hundreds of years ago. I went to see two of those families, and stuck with one.
FH Did you tell them you wanted a certain kind of tonality in the ink?
RF No, because I didn't know much about the traditional uses of sumi. For them it always relates to calligraphy or painting. I considered it almost in a chemical way. What does it do? If you put water in it, how does the paper react? What kind of visual results do you get? I was already working with india ink, so the fact that there was a very strong tradition interested me. I was curious about the process, but it was mostly the culture of sumi that attracted me.
FH Was there something about Japanese esthetics that also interested you?
RF I'm sure it's part of what I acquired and comes into play in some way, but very minimally. In fact, the first time I went to Nara I worked very little. At first I was ashamed to tell the ink-makers that I was adding soap to sumi—I was afraid that they would be horrified. Yet every time I showed them a drawing that had a lot of soap in it, they would say oooh—
FH Good oooh, or bad oooh?
RF This particular family traded their ink for some of my drawings. They loved what I was doing—even with the bubbles.
FH So, you began using sumi with the bubbles and then switched over to the marbleizing technique.
RF I found that the sumi didn't work very well with the bubbles.
FH Was that the main reason you stopped making the bubble drawings?
RF Right. The soap that you add to the sumi makes the tones much lighter. You don't get the full range of the blacks, and the beauty of sumi is that black pigment. I felt that losing that darker tone was a shame. So I stopped adding soap, and adopted the transfer method.
FH You have said that, as time went by, the drawings lost the marbleizing effect and gained something new.
RF From the bubble to the sumi and liquid graphite drawings, my approach is always similar. I make a bubble drawing, or a sumi transfer, and the first ones will be, of course, a total surprise. I don't know what I'm going to get. But once you have one drawing, you have an example of what the ink does. If you make 10, if you make 100, you are not only documenting the flow of ink and the characteristics of the medium, but you are pushing a picture, if that's the aim. And my aim is to produce a picture—to make a drawing that has pictorial qualities. So you push with the gesture, you adapt it, and you go in that direction. And then I opt for diversity, for trying not to repeat the same kind of landscapes. I change the mixture, or the way I work, or the manipulation of the drawing while it's still wet. Things add up.
FH Are you conscious of a particular landscape you're trying to create, or is it more like an abstraction?
RF Looking at the result is the most important part of the work—not only for me, of course, but also the viewer. Don't forget—these are just inkblots, stains. I can only push them towards landscape.
FH Do you ever touch the paper's surface?
RF I do, but not with a traditional tool. I will blow on it—I use my breath a lot—either directly on the paper or with straws. With a straw you can add something very specific, like a little moon or a reflection in the water.
FH But you do look at it and say, "Oh, that's water, that's sky, that's a mountain."
RF I look at it but I have very little time—just a few seconds after the image is transferred to the paper. And when the paper is wet it immediately curls into a tube. So I'm fighting against that. For about 10 seconds, it's not so bad. I hold it in my hands. You can see the fingerprints on the back. But I try not to touch the surface with my fingers. I look at the transfer, and I have to respond very quickly. And I can produce white spots, or lines, or areas, but not black. If I want to add black, I have to dip again into the mixture. But I only dip it again if I think it will dramatically improve the image.
FH Do you throw drawings out?
RF I keep everything, but I don't keep them

Above, all untitled, 2009, sumi ink on paper, 5½ by 7 inches each. François Pinault Foundation Collection.

Opposite, untitled, 1995, water-soluble graphite on paper, 11 by 14 inches. Collection Frac Picardie.

all as whole drawings. I have a box of rejects that maybe have just one portion that is satisfying. I like to make an image that comes all at once, almost like a photo.

FH Do you keep the very first drawing of each type you make?

RF There are different prototypes. Here is the first sumi drawing I ever made. This one is more textured, as opposed to another that might be more liquid. The different types are especially apparent in the bubble drawings, which were much more controlled. The breath, the distance of projection, the quality of the mixture. And I could replicate the drawings—make two bubbles, identical, as long as they were done in sequence. The next day, the humidity in the air will be entirely different—a lot of things will change. And I've got to remember exactly the way I blew them.

FH Do you keep notes?

RF I did in the beginning but found it boring. This is not science but intuition. And I'm impatient.

FH What? When I met you, you were making those Mourners, which required the height of patience!

RF But these drawings—I want to make them and see the result. That's my impatience. It's not that I'm impatient in general. When I'm making those drawings, I'm amazed. I just want to make another one.

FH So it's a kind of enthusiasm that drives you. Because I think of you as an extraordinarily patient person.

RF I am. I will do anything it takes to produce the final result. The *vanitas* drawings took a very long time. I would spend sometimes 10 to 16 hours on a single drawing. I will spend all the time needed to achieve a certain effect. The bubbles have to be done in a fraction of a second. Ninety-nine percent of the work is done prior to the image appearing on paper. I have to make sure the medium is the right consistency. I have to get everything ready—the paper, cleaning the table. After that, there is a kind of performative aspect to my work. I know it—but for me it's more an event, not a performance.

FH Nobody's watching you, for one thing.

RF One of my dealers once asked me, "Can I come to your studio to watch you make a bubble drawing? Because selling your work, I don't know how to explain it." So I said, "Okay, come over." He took two rolls of film, and I made a few drawings. He called me the next day and said, "You know, I came, I watched you, I have all those pictures, and I still don't know how you make them." The reason, of course, is that it takes less than a second for the thing to appear. I dip my straw or hollow stencil brush in the mixture, I blow the bubble, it pops, and that's it. You don't see anything.

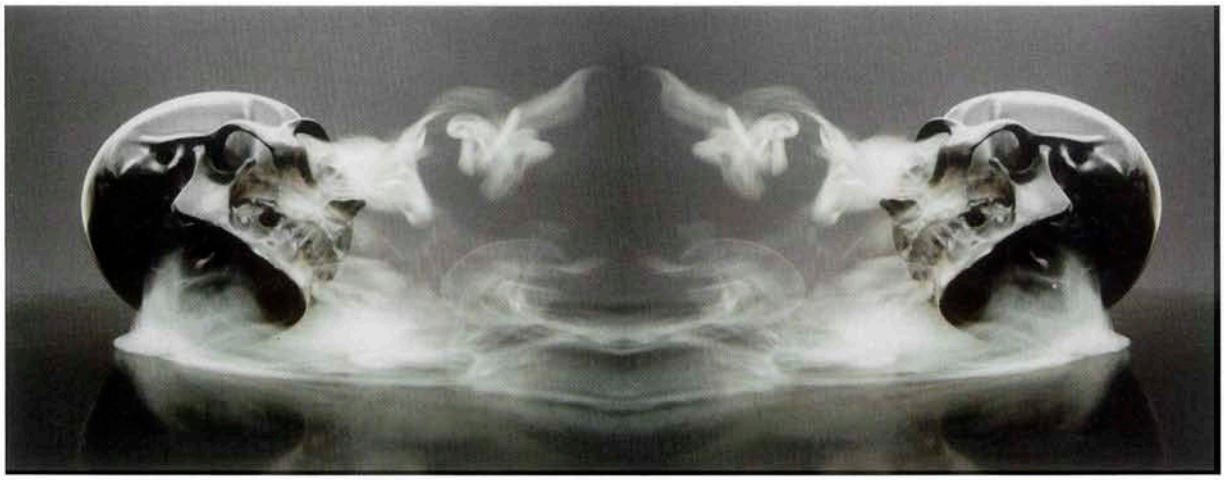
FH How are the liquid graphite drawings different from the ink drawings?

RF In the end, the graphite does something very different from the sumi. It's cooler, and it sparkles. When you scan

them—I can't believe it, when I blow them up—they are full of holes.
FH I can see that sparkle when I tilt them. Do you prefer one medium over the other?
RF They are just different. I started making them the same way as the sumi drawings, by transferring the surface of the graphite to the paper. But graphite mixed with an acrylic medium comes out almost like a paste. So I cannot do what I do with the ink, because the medium doesn't float. Instead, I have three trays, two of pure water, and a third of liquid graphite. First I dip the blank paper in water, just to have that surface ready to dissolve the mixture of graphite. The second dip is the graphite. If the paper were not wet, you would just have blobs of graphite. Because the paper is wet, the graphite starts spreading on the surface. But that way I don't compromise the intensity of the graphite by making it so liquid that I lose the dark part. Then sometimes I dip the sheet again in clear water to create more white—though sometimes I don't. Then I blow on it, I use straws. I spray Evian over the surface to create stars. After I have had a look at the image, I press on the back, with my hand. I know what I want to change before it's dry, in a matter of seconds, and apply pressure to push the graphite along. I do that with the ink sometimes, too.
FH In 1996 you co-edited an issue of *New Observations* on Gilles Deleuze's "fold," the trope he used in writing about Leibniz. You weren't making these then.
RF No.
FH When you were thinking about the fold back then, you were referring to the drapery represented in your Mourners.
RF Right.
FH Don't you find it interesting that the images in these drawings seem themselves to be endlessly folding?
RF Completely. Referring to Deleuze's book, it is still the same thing. The imagery folds the way Baroque drapery does, from one step to the next, ad infinitum.
FH So it's a continuum, with differentiation within that continuum.
RF One flow, with different currents.

FH I remember when we first started talking about your Mourners, you would refer to *le souffle*, the breath, when you were discussing the color, which you described as elastic. It seems to me there is a link, in this breath, between the paintings of the monks and what you did subsequently.
RF The drapery in those carvings is a sign. When you don't see the face, or a hand, only the fold of the fabric, the emotion of the figure is all expressed in the fold. To me, that represented a high degree of abstraction. Because there was no figure, just fabric.
FH Did you carry that idea of absence into the drawings, or did you leave it behind once you abandoned painting?
RF I think it's still there in the way I'm handling the medium. It's apparent in my paintings of the Mourners: you cannot see the gesture, or the brushstrokes. I have a tendency to erase gesture by an excess of gesture. I like the picture to be seen as a whole. I'm trying to produce an image first and foremost.
FH How about the connection between the *vanitas* drawings and this more recent work? I can see the links to the bubbles, because bubbles, in their ephemerality, were part of *vanitas* iconography.
RF I would say that the ephemerality lies in the making of the drawing. It is acted out—a *mîse en acte*. In the *vanitas* drawings, the ephemeral is at the symbolic level—the fleeting nature of life and all that. By comparison, the ephemeral in these drawings is more about the way the event is occurring. It is an event, in the full sense of the word. What's happening, though, is that the fleeting moment is in the eye of the viewer. Things appear and disappear constantly. These are inkblots. They are not made according to the laws of perspective, or anything you learn at school. But I don't believe in chance images.

FH Let's turn to your most recent work—the photos of skulls and smoke. I'm genuinely surprised that you would be interested in working this way.
RF I didn't set out to make photos as finished works. In my mind, I was drawing with smoke. I didn't think about the practical result, of making something material out of it. Smoke is smoke. But some of my *vanitas* images involved smoke, as you'll remember. It's part of the vocabulary of the ephemeral. I smoke cigars when I work, from time to time, and I had this skull made of jet—a hard form of charcoal—sitting on my table. And I had straws lying about, as always, and I started playing around, blowing smoke so it drifted around the skull.
FH Did you then ponder how you could make that activity into a drawing?
RF I thought, I have to take a picture to look at the result—maybe I'll draw it. So I took a picture, and printed it; then again, larger. I realized the inkjet print has an ambiguity of medium that I like. People think it's watercolor. I have no idea how the images came out that way, because there is no Photoshop manipulation of any kind. The light is my regular studio light, changed a bit in direction: there's nothing special. After I did a few, I realized that the smoke works like the sumi, but in reverse. When smoke disperses, it creates shades of white, instead of shades of black as with the ink. As the smoke dissipates, it becomes more and more transparent.
FH The diptychs are the same image flipped, right?
RF With one push of a button.
FH Why did you want to double the skull?
RF I was looking to expand that singular, universal portrait which is the skull. And I began to notice images in the smoke—some of faces. And, between them, the smoke was doing what the ink had done—drawing pictures.
FH They feel macabre to me.
RF Really? The macabre is something I cannot grasp. Something that never occurs to me. Never. People say, "Oh, those are scary." But skulls in modern times have lost all the traditional associations. They are just signs. You find the skull in all kinds of contexts where it has no moral or religious connotation whatsoever.
FH But come on, Roland. The smoke becomes breath, the expiration of life. How can you not have some kind of narrative about mortality going on?
RF All those things add content. But I don't want the work to be only about mortality.
FH There's also something decorative in the arabesque of the smoke.
RF The form is decorative, definitely.
FH What did you mean years ago when you said that the breath was so important to the Mourners?
RF I think I said that in relation to the fact that it is an empty figure. It is hooded, so you don't have the psychology of the face, and there's no part of the body that's apparent. From that point of view, the figure is empty. It represents the void in maybe the same way as a monochrome.
FH I see the link to your *vanitas* drawings. And now the skulls. We are, after all, dealing with death.
RF Of course, they are all about absence. But so much has been said about absence. It's not worth dwelling on—the presence of absence and all that. ○



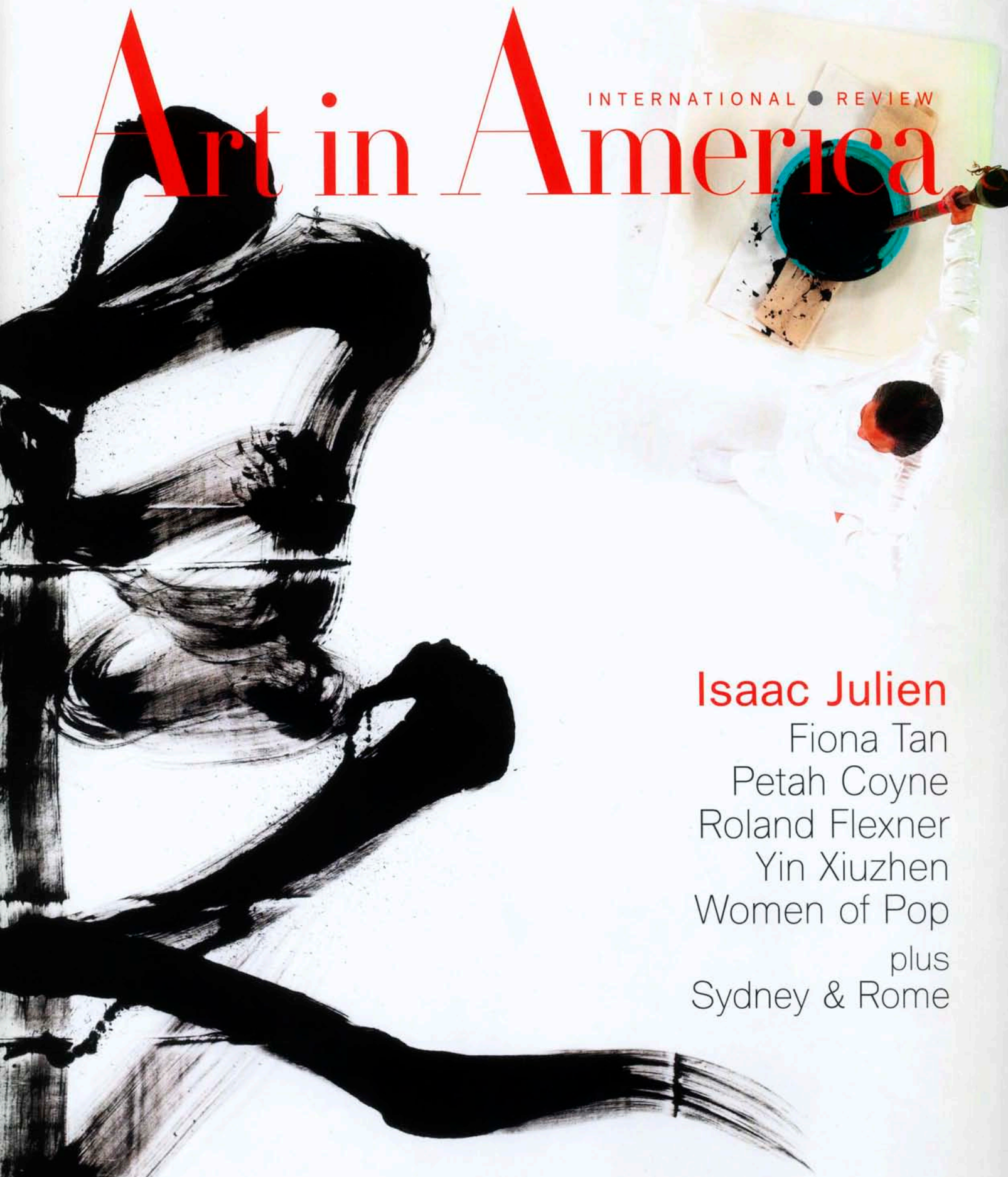
Right, *Untitled (Photo 3)*, 2009, digital print, 17 by 44 inches.

Opposite top, untitled, 2010, liquid graphite on paper, 5½ by 7 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Opposite bottom, *Untitled (3 mourners)*, 1992, oil on canvas, 80 by 108 inches.

Roland Flexner is collaborating with the artist Chloe Piene in an exhibition at D'Amelio Terras, New York, Nov.13-Dec. 23.

Art in America
INTERNATIONAL REVIEW



Isaac Julien

Fiona Tan
Petah Coyne
Roland Flexner
Yin Xiuzhen
Women of Pop

plus
Sydney & Rome

SEPTEMBER'10 $9.00