

Evan Penny in front of *Old Self* (Portrait of the artist as he will not be). Variation #1, 2010.

PORTRAIT BY MICHAEL BENSKY

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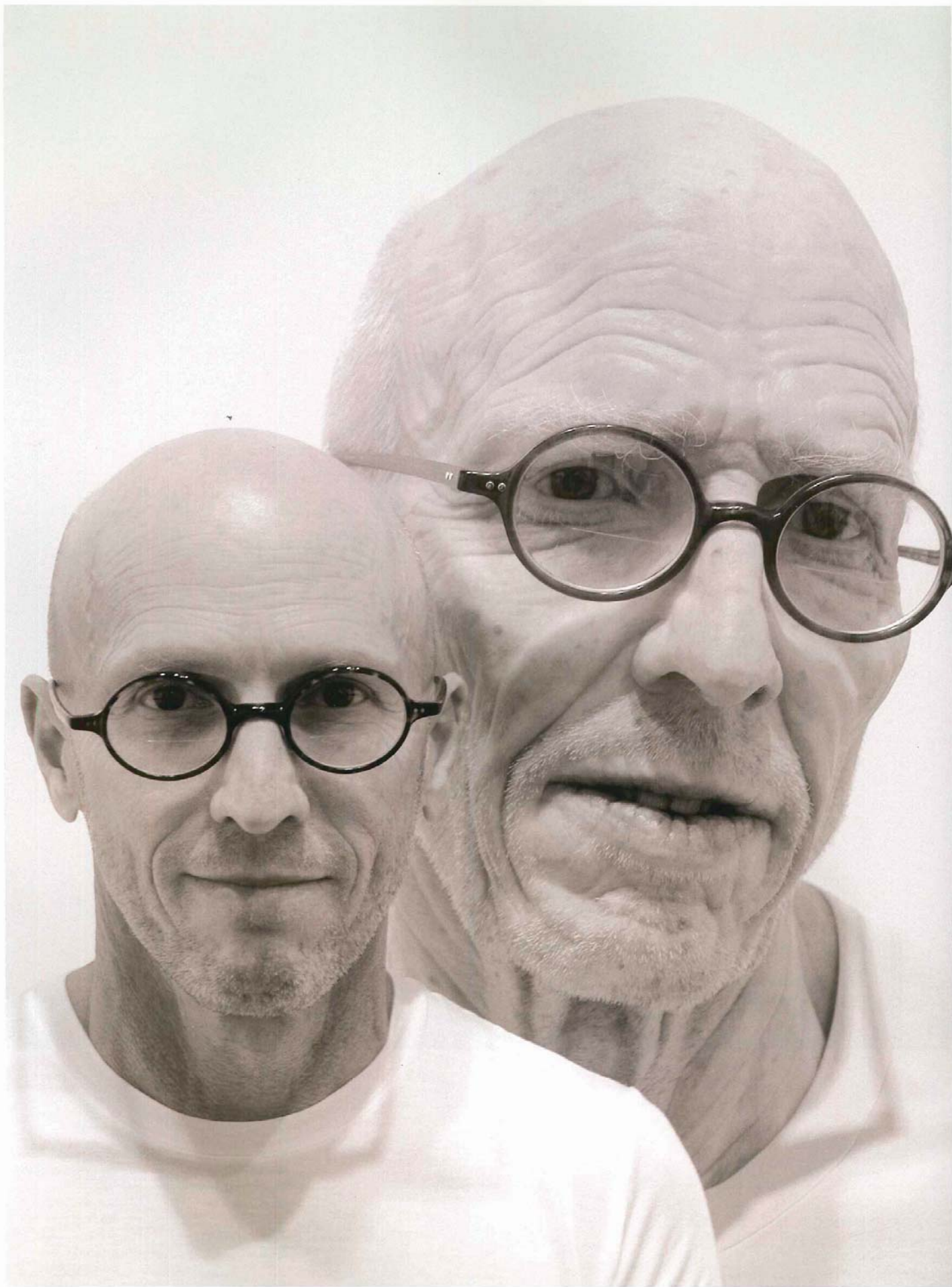
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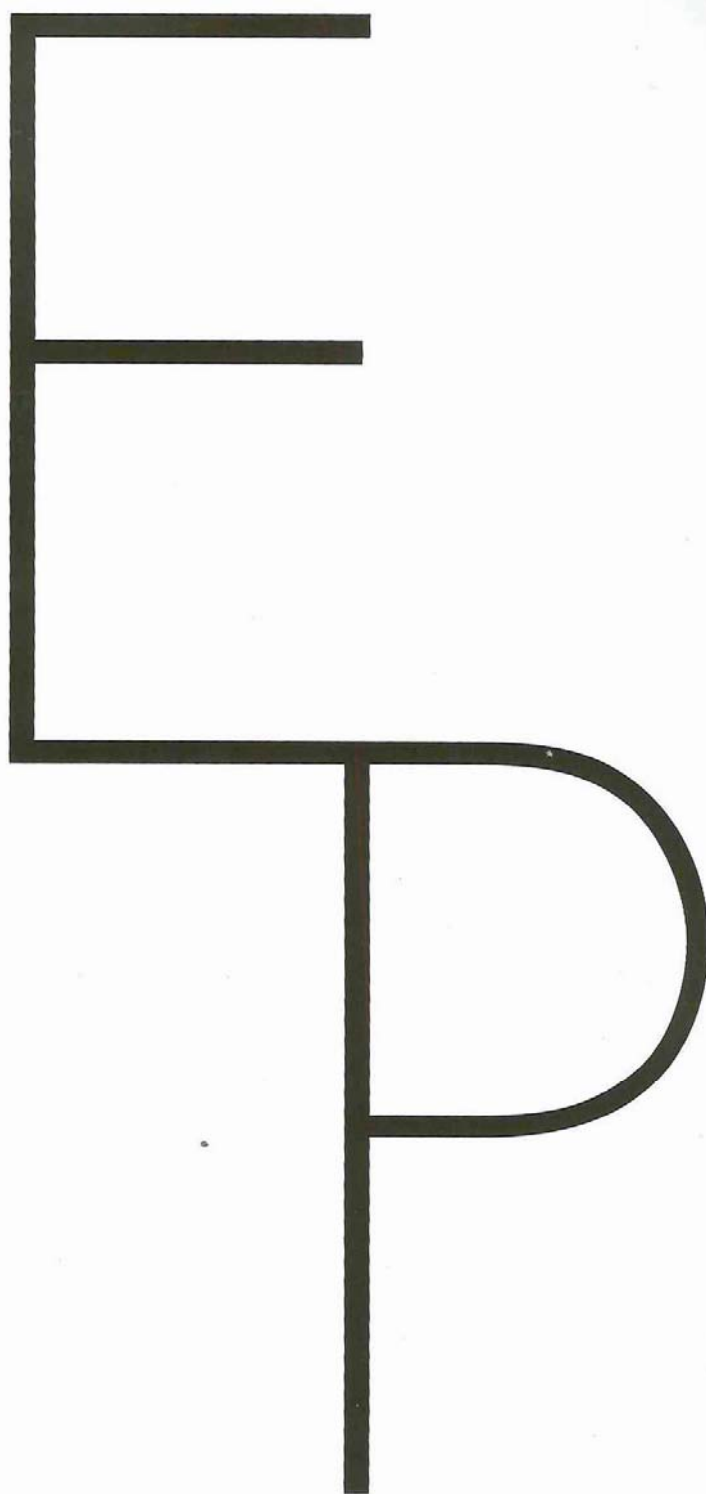
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Errata issue # 20

The interview with Antoine Roset on page 36 of the Winter 2011 issue misspelled Richemont Group and Ligne Roset.





EP

EVAN PENNY

BY KATY DONOGHUE, PORTRAIT BY MICHAEL BENISTY

Evan Penny is getting his photograph taken in front of one of his sculptures at the Sperone Westwater booth at Art Basel Miami Beach, and a crowd armed with cameras and cell phones is forming. It's not rare for an artist to be photographed with his work, but the dozen or so people wrangling to get a good shot are evidence of the unique situation, especially since the fair just opened. The sculpture Penny is posing next to is a self-portrait, in which the artist is much older and many times enlarged.

Seeing Penny's work in person is a visceral, challenging, and often uncomfortable experience that you won't soon forget. He creates impeccably crafted figures and busts using silicone, real hair, translucent and touchable skin, piercing eyes, and palpable presence. The high level of skill needed to create these sculptures is obvious in a photograph, but you need to see them in person, need to share their space, to get what they are about. We constantly encounter and live with altered, stretched, oversized, skewed, distorted, and airbrushed images of ourselves and others. Penny takes what we've normalized into our everyday from the 2D realm into our 3D space and forces us to react — and we instinctively do because it's in human form.

After the photographer was satisfied with the shot he got, the crowd dissipated and Penny sat down with *Whitewall* to talk about new work that is currently on view through March 26, 2011 at Sperone Westwater in New York and his journey from sculpting through direct observation to his latest adaptation — the use of 3D scanning.

WHITEWALL: Early on you were compared to realist, figurative sculptors, but I read an interview where you said a better comparison would be to Cézanne or Giacometti.

WW: Why did you back away from it?

EP: Well, it scared me. You might assume that with realism or a highly crafted process like mine that it's all about gaining more and more control. On a certain level, it is. But the acquiring of more information only makes things more complex and adds layers of uncertainty. The goal isn't realism; the byproduct is. With the hair it becomes uncanny. Hair is such a powerful signifier. And it took the work into a territory that I didn't understand and that I was not emotionally or conceptually ready for. I was a young artist, and so it was also bound up in the experience of the work being exhibited publicly for the first time and related to in ways that you don't expect, and realizing I don't "own" this anymore and yet, I did it. Once it enters into the public space, whatever logics and energies you have applied to it have to be reconciled in relation to how others are seeing and reacting and responding. It took me a while to really understand that that's a good thing, and a productive thing, and to feel comfortable with the loss of control at that level and to welcome it.

WW: And so how did that change your work?

EP: I had to take a big step back. I didn't know where to go with it. I needed a break from the realist, singular, highly focused object. So I spent about 10 years in a way spreading out the implications of figuration. I abandoned realism.

WW: Like with your series of "Skin Drawings" and the "Monumental" series?

EP: Right. I had three clear realizations: One was that I needed to

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EVAN PENNY: Well, yes, comparisons were made to Duane Hanson and John De Andrea, but I was a modeler, not a body caster. Early on, Cézanne and Giacometti would have been the influences, I think because of their relationship to direct observation and their interest in the subjectivity of the perceptual process. For them it wasn't about nailing down a hard reality. It was more bound up in the question, "Well, what is this thing I'm looking at? And how do you describe something so complex and indescribable as a face or a body or landscape or a mountain and your relationship to it in this atmosphere at this time of day?" In both their cases, it's a sense of acute attentiveness to the eye and the subjectivity of how the eye perceives. The size and shapes of the objects and space they were trying to describe were in constant flux. That kind of observational rigor within the vagaries of a subjective process was always, is still, of prime interest in my work.

Although I think what did change is that the early work was completely bound up in the observational process, whereas now it's more informed by our relationship to media, photography, and how that informs vision and comprehension of ourselves.

WW: Speaking of how we comprehend ourselves, *Ali* [1984] was the first piece in which you used hair. Why did adding hair have such a significant effect?

EP: As the work becomes progressively more resolved, as my technical skills improved, the byproduct was that the work becomes more realistic. Most of the early work remained in a formal context that was more traditionally sculptural. I was very hesitant to go into that kind of slice of life — realism.

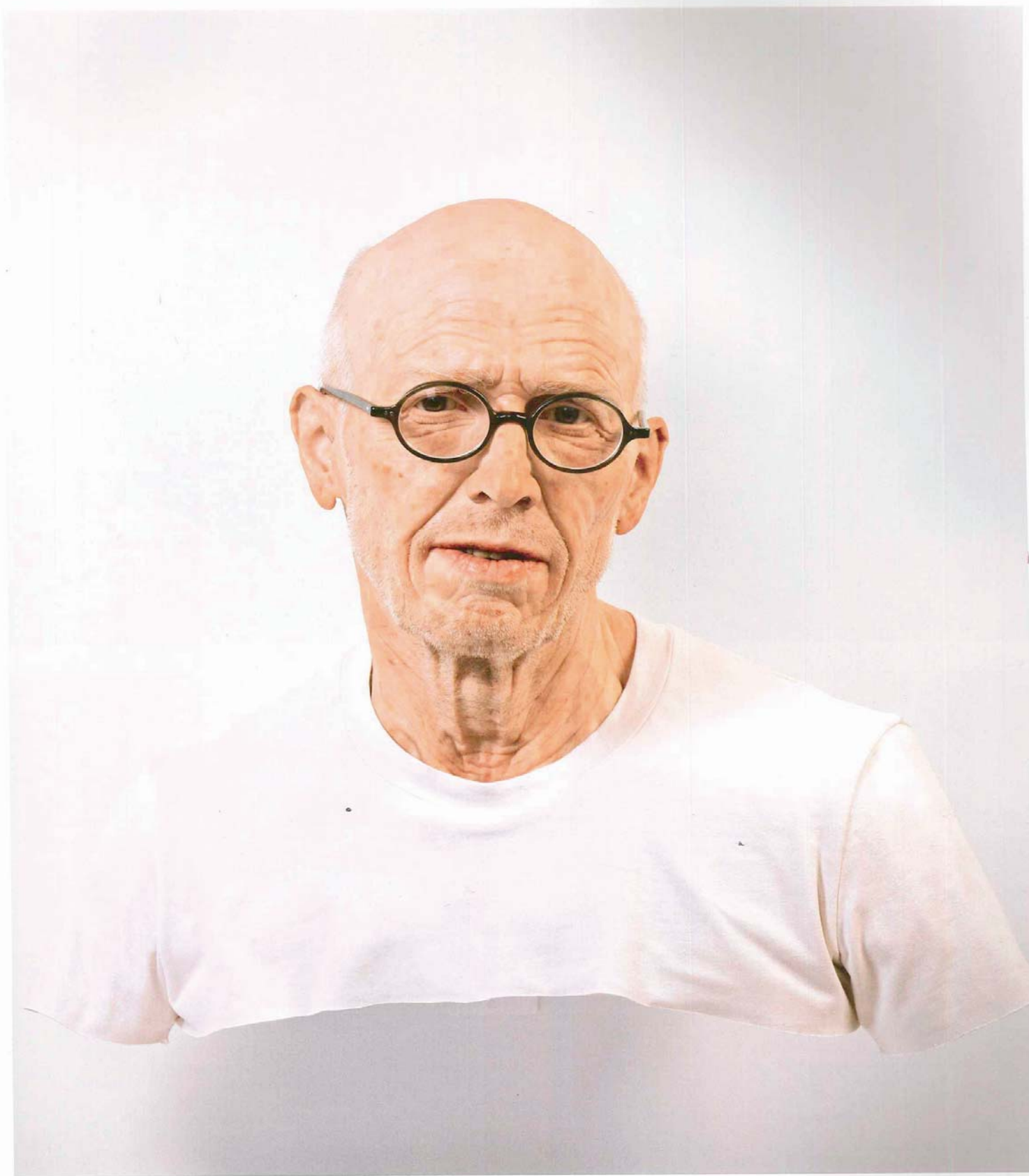
So I did that with *Ali*, which was in the early eighties, 1983, and kind of backed away from it until I did the first "Murray" pieces in the mid-nineties.

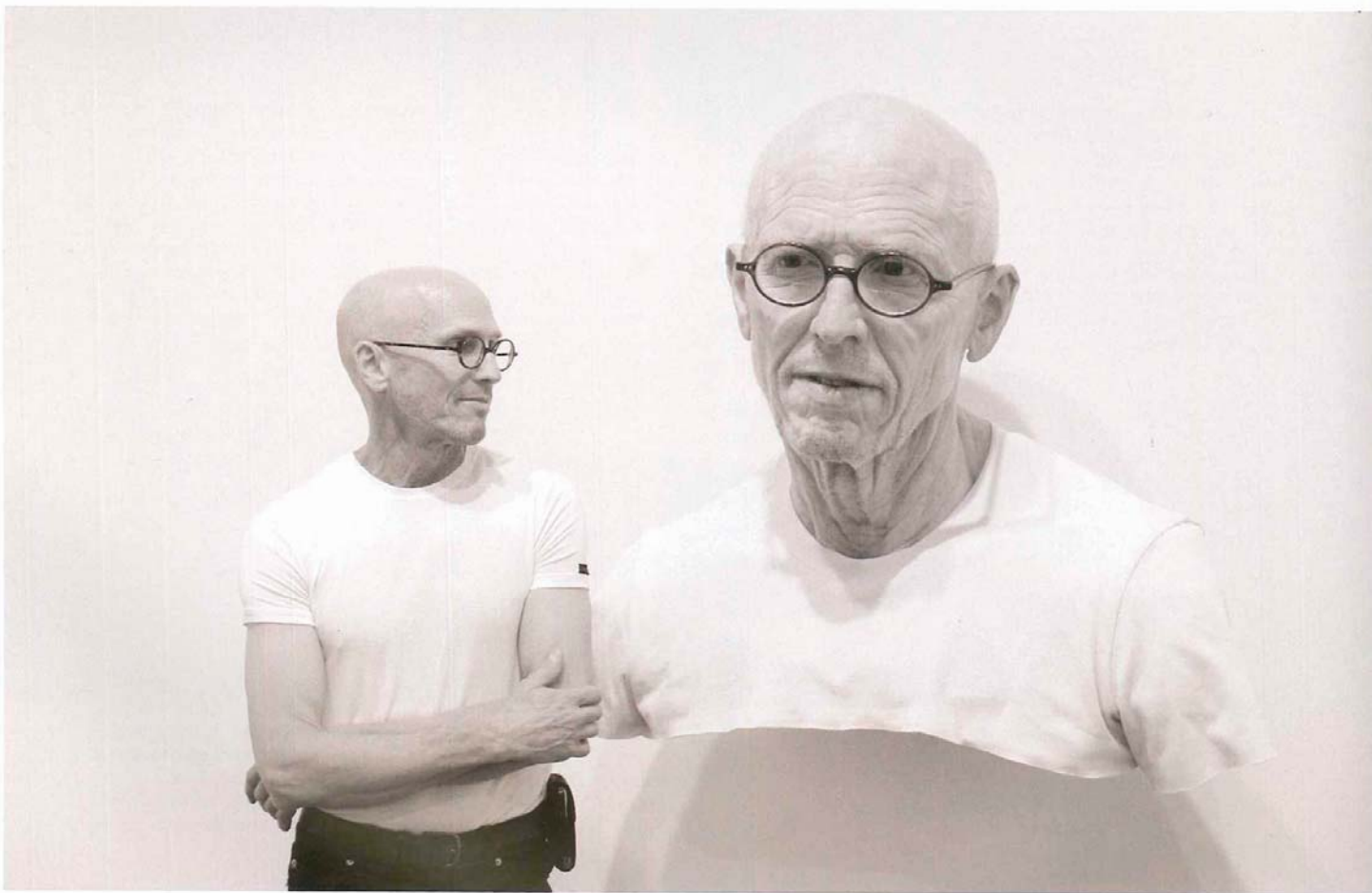
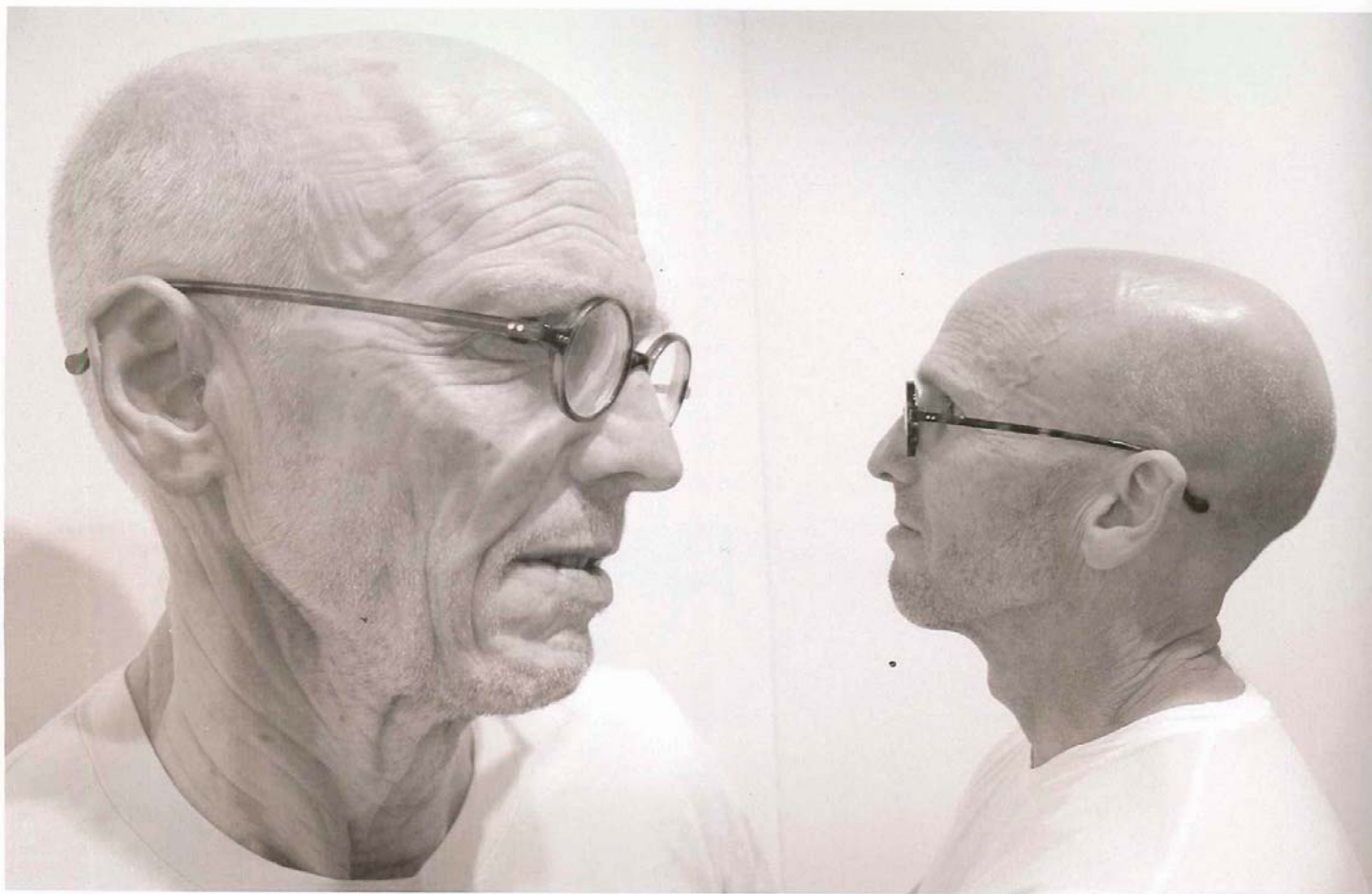
stop, and the other was that I needed to stay stopped. I needed to stop for long enough in order to create a void to eventually allow something new to come in and fill. I also realized that if I wanted to change the work I had to figure out what it was about that work that was "good" and not do that! It's what's good in the work that keeps you coming back. For example, I realized that if the strength of this work is that it is highly crafted, then the new work needs to be more hands-off and immediate. If this work is singular and focused, then I'm going to do work that is more fragmentary or "lateral" and open. In that way I realized I could open up a new space to work that was not dependent on the "strengths" of the previous work.

WW: That's remarkably self-aware. Was that around the time you started doing work in the film industry?

EP: Yes, it was at the same time, which turned out to be quite fortuitous. While my new studio direction was laying much of the foundation for how I work and think now, the fine-tuning of the

Opposite page:
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Old Self (Portrait of the artist as he will not be),
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Silicone, pigment, hair, and fabric
33 x 24 x 39 inches
Courtesy of the artist





craft was continuing to happen in my work in the film industry. I was doing film because I needed to have a job. While I was in the film industry, which was about 13 years, I maintained an active studio practice but kept the studio work and the film work strictly separate — I'm sure because I viewed the film work as a threat to my artistic identity.

WW: *Why was it threatening? Was it because in film what you make needs to feel real and your sculptural work isn't meant to feel real?*

EP: With my work, I'm never asking you to believe that this is "the" thing. It's a representation simultaneously presented with its illusory plausibility and its obvious artificiality. Viewers are able to reconcile that in real time and space in front of the object. In the film industry there is this literal-mindedness — when you're making something for the film industry you want it to be absolutely believable. You want to say it is the thing.

With film, I was placed right in the middle of the machinery of popular culture, which I found threatening, but in the end I think it gave me a good perspective on the difference between the commercial motivations of popular culture and those of the artist who operates on its periphery. Even though on the surface they might look similar and employ similar skill sets, they can be quite antithetical to each other. That gave me a lot of strength in relationship to the work I do now.

WW: *How so?*

EP: It was only once I'd left the film industry that I was able to allow that experience into my artwork. I also realized at about that time, late nineties, that I was compartmentalizing. I had, by then,

the large photographic portraits by Thomas Ruff and, on a facing wall, large sculptural masks by Stefan Hablutzel. When I looked at the Thomas Ruff photographs, I was enthralled by the plausibility of the individuals depicted in front of me, full of implied life and history. But upon turning toward the sculptural pieces, the photographs became suddenly flat and unbelievable when faced with the physical plausibility of the three-dimensional. However, upon approaching the sculptures, they in turn became implausible. Too objectlike, too big for themselves, quite unlike engaging with a real individual. At that point, the photographs and the flatness of their mediated space became believable again. I realized at that moment that this is what I'm interested in — the space in between. I try to situate my sculpture somewhere between the way we perceive each other in real time and space and the way we perceive ourselves and each other in an image.

WW: *You play with that tension of 2D and 3D by distorting images of human beings. Seeing the way you distort the human body, like in the "Anamorphs," is quite disturbing as a viewer.*

EP: Yes, we are very intolerant of any distortion to our physical being. In lots of ways that's the simple point of the work, to remind ourselves of how we feel physically in relationship. It's one of the elements we so often take for granted. If there is anything I could hope one might experience in front of the work, it's a moment of self-awareness or self-consciousness of one's own physical experience, how one experiences oneself in space. And also an awareness of the expectations we bring to images. As I'm looking through magazines or watching television, I might see a moment where there is some kind of distortion in the way the human body is represented. I ask myself, what would happen if you tried to represent that three-dimensionally; how would we relate to it then?

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all these separate histories: the early figures, the "Skin Drawings," the "Monumental" project, the early "Anamorphs," the film work, et cetera. I realized if I'm ever going to be really good at what I do, I have to bring all this stuff together and embrace the idea of the "extraordinary object" again. I realized they are all my history, like it or not. And if I can pull all of this together, then I have the chance of saying something.

WW: *And that's when you started to relate your sculpture to photography, correct?*

EP: Yes. All of the work over the last 10 years has been about photography, if I'm to make a simple statement. Photography, digital media, and now even 3D scanning — all of the work is filtered through some kind of prevalent imaging technology. I kind of draw a line in my practice around the years 1998 to 2000, with the development of the "L. Faux" project. It was with that project that my current orientation established itself. It's also the point where I started using silicone. My early figurative work was always an observation-based process in direct relationship to a living subject. With the "L. Faux" project, I still spent many hours observing my friend and model Libby Faux (coincidentally her real last name, but pronounced *fox*), but the reference is equally with photography and our relationship to the photograph or to the image world... and how we imagine ourselves through the image.

The point of genesis for that project stems from a visit to Barcelona in 1998, where I saw an exhibition, "Artificial: Figurations Contemporaines" at the Museu d'Art Contemporani. The theme of the exhibition dealt with the implicit artifice inherent in any representation of the "real." That's my turf. I was drawn in particular to a grouping of two artists' work. On one wall hung

What would happen if I take a distortion of the human body that is "normalized" in an image context, and bring that into the space we physically occupy? The *L. Faux CMYK* piece refers to the misregistration associated with print media, for example. It's very destabilizing and difficult to reconcile as an object.

WW: *I feel like a reference to Dr. Frankenstein or monster inevitably comes up.*

EP: Yeah. I think this relationship to the monster is there in all of this work. It's not my subject, but I have to understand that it's there. If I was afraid of that, I couldn't do this work. Any manipulation of the body risks evoking the monstrous.

WW: *In the last decade you've also started to do self-portraiture. In the upcoming show at Sperone Westwater you have two self-portraits, one of the younger Evan Penny and one of a much older Evan Penny. Whitewall photographed you with the older self-portrait in Miami for this article. Was that strange to be photographed with your creation of your future self?*

EP: It's not so strange for me because I live with the work. But I will say that with the old self-portrait and the young self-portrait, because I'm observing myself intently and projecting, they are more intimate works. I imagine they are more intimate than if I was sculpting myself as I appear now. They are bound up with my memories and desires. I'm finding that very interesting — the perspective of what I might look or feel like when I'm old or what I looked and felt like when I was younger. The kind of probing that I have to go through to achieve that is very personal. Standing with those pieces or looking at those pieces is a

slightly different experience for me.

WW: *Have your friends and family seen the work? Have they had any reactions?*

EP: Yes, and thankfully they've had pretty good reactions. That's one of the ways I'm able to assess if the piece is successful or not, getting an affirmation from people who know me. If they can feel me in it. The young portrait is still in the works, so no one has seen it yet.

WW: *Was the younger you done through older photographs?*

EP: Yes. Interestingly enough, it's still very speculative. You would think because those photographs exist and I have been young that somehow that should be more concrete than speculating what I'll look like when I'm old. That's turning out to be in some ways less concrete because the images and memories are less than reliable. One's feelings about who one was don't necessarily jive with these old images. I'm finding the younger portrait more difficult to accomplish than the older one as a result.

And that's really the point of this exercise. It's still bound up in the image, how we remember and how we project through images. The reason I can even imagine how I might look when I'm older is bound up in photographs I have of my grandfather and my father. One of the points of this project is time, trying to see through time and acknowledging how the technologies we are immersed in, like photography, structure time. Because we have access to these images, we imagine our lifespans in ways that are very unlike how we might have 200 years ago, before these technologies existed.

WW: *And both those self-portraits bring in a new aspect of your work — the use of digital scanning.*

EP: Yes, all the new works in the upcoming show do. The works since 2000 have gone through three phases, the first being the relationship to conventional photography, the second to Photoshop and digital-imaging processes, and now, for the moment, all come through three-dimensional scanning processes. So I scanned myself, others, and scanned sculptures that I made many years ago and used those as a starting point for the various projects.

WW: *What interested you in the scanning process? Why did you want to incorporate it into your work?*

EP: One of the things I was most interested in deals with a question of portraiture and one of the conundrums I've always faced in my process: Why, the longer I work, and the more accurate the description becomes, the more neutral the gesture becomes and the less it feels like the subject? For example with the "L. Faux" project, I worked with Libby for 400 hours. So it's an observation of Libby through the course of 400 hours. I've come to realize that the product of that labor might more accurately be imagined as "what Libby looks or feels like *in* 400 hours," not *after* 400 hours. More like a state of being. That is a "time space" quite particular to that kind of representation and accurate in its own right. It's a long-drawn-out accumulative view of the person, but quite unlike an encounter with the person or a snapshot of Libby. So a sense of the "instant" is impossible to maintain in that kind of process. Yet that sense of the moment is one of the expectations we have of portraiture, especially in photography. That's also how we live in relationship with people, more in the moment or in a series of moments. Scanning allows me to embed the "moment" into the image even though I might then spend a hundred hours sculpting over it. The original capture has caught me or someone else in a particular point in time. That's the whole point of scanning for me. One might even say that this is the first time, indexing through this technology, that I have the possibility of making photo-realist sculpture.

WW: *Viewers at the exhibition in early 2011, finding out that these are made with digital scans, might feel this is pretty timely now that we are digitally scanned every time we go through airport security.*

EP: It's a good example of how that particular technology is changing how we imagine ourselves. That, for me, is such a good



point that you bring up because that really highlights how these technologies so change us. We become different. Figuratively speaking, they change our DNA.

WW: *Do you ever think about these objects in someone's home?*

EP: It's odd. I don't know what the motivations are, and I'm sure they are varied. But that brings me back again to that early cathartic moment I had where I realized that once the piece is out there it's not yours; it's in the world, and it's going to be related to in all sorts of ways. It's really none of my business and it's more interesting that it might not be how I imagine or how I might place it in my home. It's not necessary that it be seen under ideal conditions. And I'm usually exhausted with it and ready to let it go at that point anyway. Given the length of time it takes to fulfill a piece, it's often so done before it's done. At that point it's about overcoming the tedium and fulfilling the vision.



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