



ARTIST

Robert Flynt

TITLE

Untitled

DATE

1997

DIMENSIONS

6 in H x 4 in W

MEDIUM

Chromogenic Color Prints

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1997.111

CURRENT LOCATION

1620-8C

ROBERT FLYNT

BORN

1956

BIRTHPLACE

Williamstown, MA

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1997

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 94

ESSAYS

Robert Flynt's newest photographs contain a visual 'gag' that extends from one work to another. These composite images include portraits of male friends as they appear in nineteenth century tintypes. In one, a couple of turn-of-the-century gents in spiffy frock coats exchange affectionate looks under an umbrella they share. The umbrella is a captivating prop, open in defiance of logic and superstition inside the presumably dry studio of a forgotten commercial photographer. This being a work by Flynt, the missing moisture has been restored. A veil of water floods the image, giving it the look of a photographic memory, and now the happy couple are dwarfed on all sides by a pair of youthful twentieth century giants who float, naked as jaybirds in water. The two swimmers look down on the diminutive pair like omniscient gods who know the whole story. For some time now, Flynt's photographs have combined figures underwater with a wide range of 'found' imagery. But these new works contain a glint of sly humor that has not always been present before. The situation is reversed in a second work, though the meaning remains much the same. Two poker-faced handsome fellows, whose attire suggests the 1880s, stand behind a chest-high screen that conceals the bulk of their bodies. Each man rests a hand over the top of the screen, which leaves the activity of their other hands something of a mystery. Flynt has imagined a solution to the mystery of the missing hands, at any rate, he has projected his fantasy about them onto the screen, transforming it into a homoerotic Shroud of Turin. There, two smaller nudes cavort in water, one reaching out to grab the other's bobbing cock and balls. Flynt's lighthearted, composite works are the product of a variety of technologies that were wholly unimaginable to the nineteenth century friends whose portraits they reproduce. Such men could have known little of the seamless shocks that photographic double exposure conveys, and nothing of digitalization which can reproduce, enhance, and otherwise fictionalize old battered effigies like their own. More importantly, neither could they have grasped the enormous effects of the social technologies -- medical, psychological, criminological -- that were then already casting a pall over the same-sex affection that each of these couples felt so comfortable displaying before the photographer. Perhaps Flynt's photographs are metaphors, then, for the irretrievability of the past that nonetheless draws us to it; watery metaphors as well for the greater fluidity of affection between men and between women that existed before some people and some behaviors were classified and condemned toward the century's end as 'homosexual'. But this begs the question of whether we know anymore today than the men in those old photographs about life and love and the care of self. Perhaps these superimpositions of old and new images, of the pre-gay past and the post-gay liberation present, propose that we may not, after all, be so much wiser; and that the biggest joke of all may well be on us. David Deitcher (c)1997