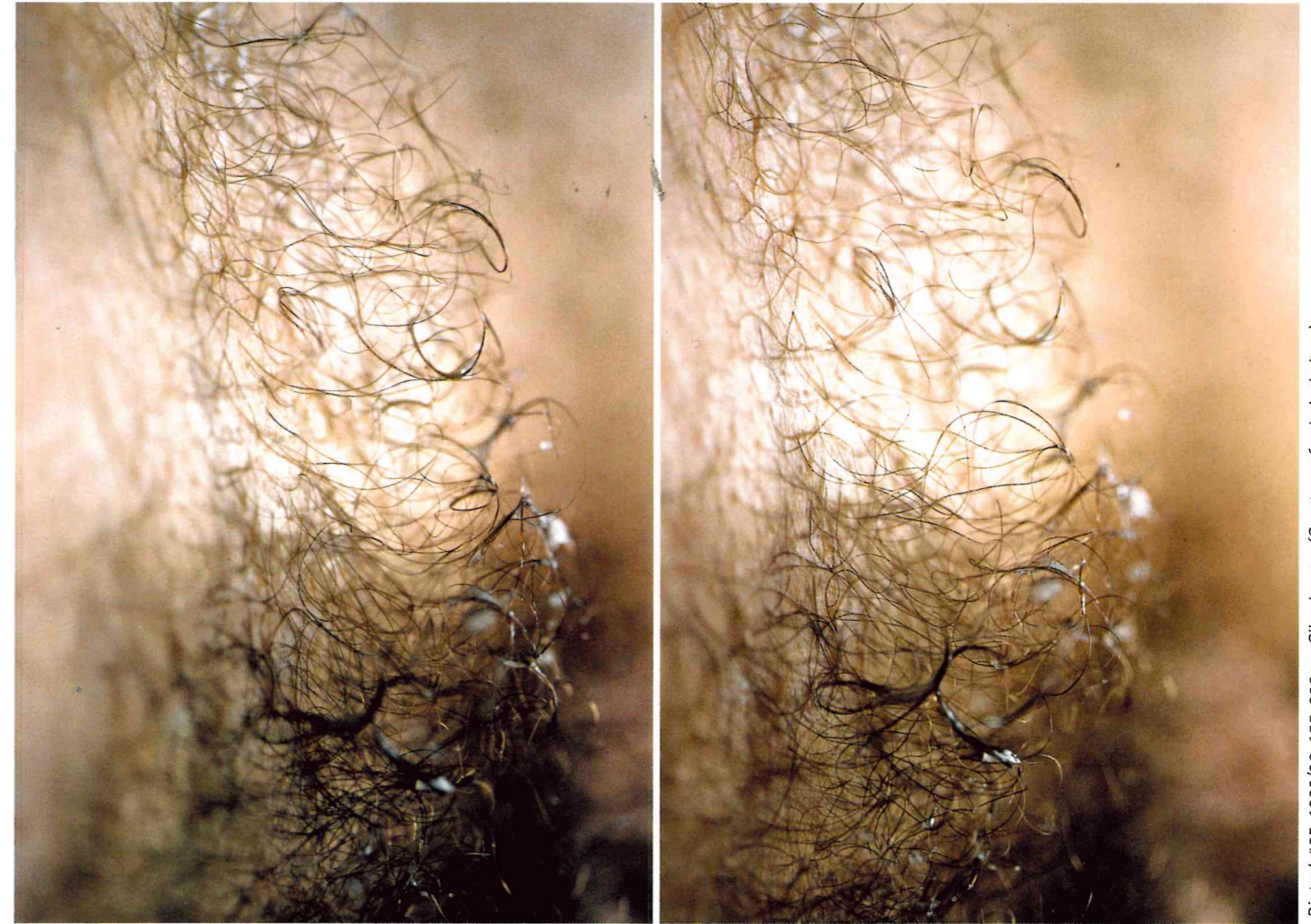


Thomas Florschuetz



Diptych #65, 1993/96, 155x206cm, Cibachrome. (Courtesy of galerie du jour.)

Between Two : Suburbia
with an essay by Stuart Morgan

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Surface is the stuff of photography, an art which poses particular problems for the literal-minded. Where is a photograph? It consists of dark specks suspended permanently on a piece of paper, and though the paper can be seen as sensual in its own right, the image exists to be looked through as much as at. Change the scale or the mode of presentation and looking must also change. Looking for, rather than looking at, is required in Thomas Florschuetz's *Suburbia* series, one feature of which is concentration on double or folded images, a reminder first that we have two eyes, second that they work in collaboration and third that looking is never arbitrary: that it always



Untitled (Echo), 1995, 155x105cm Cibachrome.

consists of looking for. Florschuetz's cibachrome diptychs play constantly on the quality of doubleness as well as on the rectilinearity of the photographic image. One other feature is relevant: the developing and printing processes which mean that no two images are alike. Untitled (Echo), for example, plays on this feature, which James Joyce called "the ineluctable modality of the visible". A curve of an ankle or wrist, half in shadow, could be read as a waist or part of an arm. (Not enough is revealed to enable the viewer to make a decision.) Curves are fattened, muscle

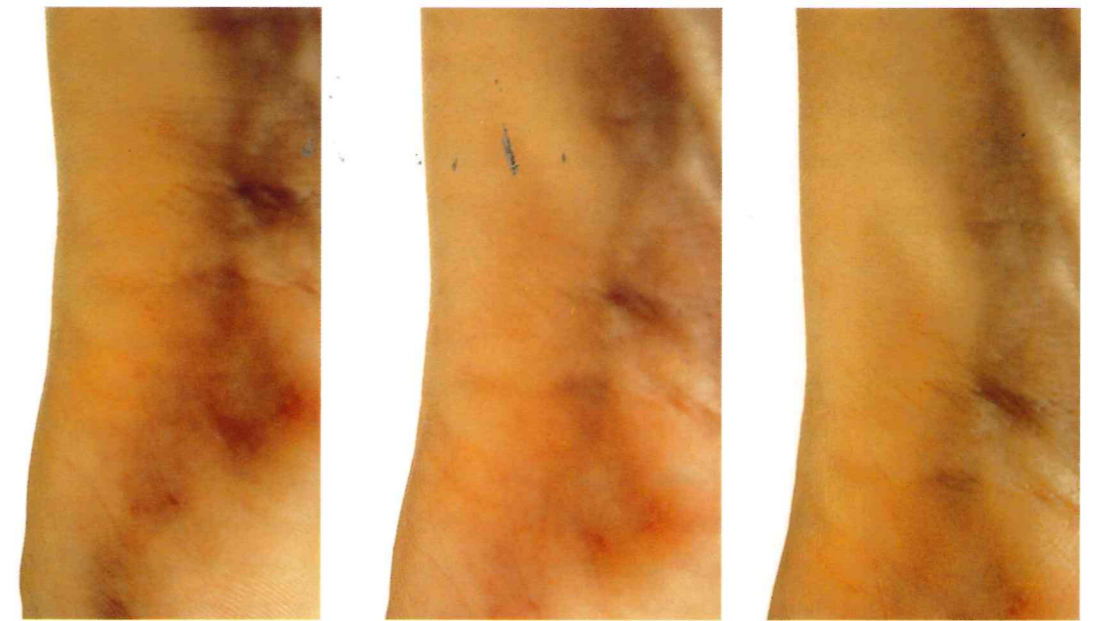
less apparent. In a triptych each of three separate, similar images paraded before us undermines the ability to judge the others. In particular, direction and force become confused; a pair of feet, oddly illuminated, seem dysfunctional, grotesque or simply wrong.

Feet and legs play a large part in *Suburbia*, an exercise in virtuoso cropping. Untitled (Diagonal), for example, uses feet again, with the same rim of hardened, discoloured skin around the heel. Arranged like a four-part flag, the practically toeless feet come to seem elongated, baggy, diseased, most like a display of vegetables or other shapes which have grown from the centre out. There is something wretched about them, and something important, as important as grotesque

in ancient times. Grotesque need not be wretched, however, as the role of the androgyne in Greek culture reminds us. The idea of bisexuality, of drifting sexual definition, is present in Triptych # 67, with its disconcerting elegance, and reference to a torso. In *Suburbia*, photography means cropping, above all. This leads to a redefinition of the subject, enhanced by magnification. (Here his inspiration might be Karl Blossfeldt, whose close-ups of flowers in particular delighted the Surrealists). As microscopes gained in power, this experience became commonplace. In Florschuetz, it serves as

a source of beauty, for strangeness is a kind of beauty too. Most disturbing, perhaps, is the feeling of human presence, whether the particular body part itself is recognised or not. These are not medical studies, nor are they domestic photographs; they are so large that

beach as the tide goes out and leaves its traces. All decoration derives from nature – the clouds, the waves, the wind – and Florschuetz reminds us of this in his work. Once again there are hints that the human body is the subject: the slight shadow caused by the curvature of the limbs, for



Triptych#67, 1995, 125x248cm Cibachrome.

the idea of a flimsy joke is out of the question, but not so large that they become monumental. Yet conclusions are hard to draw. After all, the function of the scale is to confuse.

One area of confusion is focus. In a series based on male body hair, the patterns that it makes and the quality of the skin from which hairs protrude combine to form a decorative frieze. Only areas less in focus might remind viewers that this is not "pure" abstraction. The motif is water; the way the drag of the tides is recorded on the

example. In one work in particular, Triptych # 70, in which the leg hair has been dragged in different directions, the result is expressionistic, a register of personal turmoil. Perhaps the most conventionally beautiful of the series is Diptych # 65: beads of sweat dangling from either pubic or underarm hair, the sudden loss of focus around it strongly reminiscent of dew on hedges in the early morning. Here the sudden loss of focus softens the entire composition and makes identification even more difficult than usual. The result seems less a photograph than a sculpture. The fact is

that in Florschuetz's work, photography imitates sculpture as well as operating on a sculptural scale. The result is far from being a hybrid; on the contrary, it is a new medium.

Other members of the same suite take as their task the mimicry first of human gestures but second, and more remarkably, the evocation of human emotions.

Part of a hairy leg, between ankle and kneebone, touches the underside of a foot. Both look worn and used. Two heels appear, without even the toes that should accompany them, and the violence of



Diptych # 160, 1988/96, 105x160cm C-prints.

the way the toes have been cropped leads to an uncomfortable pairing. *Untitled (Total)*, in five almost identical parts, gives the impression of a leg-lock in wrestling. Each slightly different,

the elements suggest some kind of slow torture, on the one hand, or, in metaphorical terms, a relationship in which one half is immobilised by the other. The growing oddness of the cropping is confirmed by *Diptych # 160*, a two-part portrait divided vertically, with the result that a portion of the face which is its subject is lost. Attempts to read the two parts as a whole

are permanently defeated by the fact that in the central, vertical division the tip of the nose and one nostril are both lost. And, though the eye tends to elide this to make the expected image, the focus on the right-hand side is

stronger than the left. The effect returns the viewer to babyhood, initial recognition of a face thrust forward, vast and smiling.

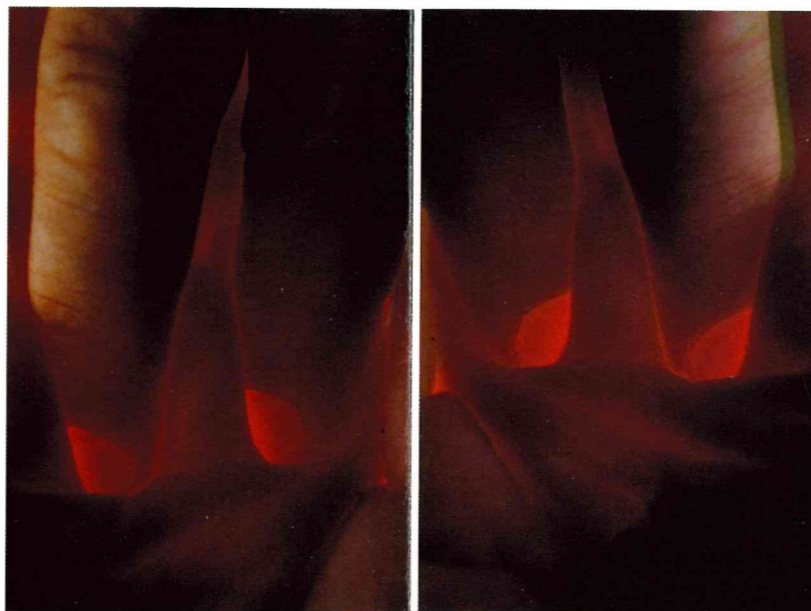


Untitled (Total), 1995, 215x218cm Cibachrome.

Thomas Florschuetz was born in East Germany in 1957 and has lived and worked in Berlin (West) since 1988. *Between Two* is his first solo exhibition in the U.K. Previous exhibitions have included *Elective Affinities* at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool in 1993, *New Photography V* at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1989 and *Image of the Body* at Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt 1993. Solo exhibitions have been hosted by Forum Stadpark, Graz, Austria 1993, Galerie du Jour, Paris 1994, Galerie Nikolaus Sonne, Berlin 1996 and Vera van Laer Gallery, Antwerp 1996.

The photographic process depends on light entering a dark chamber where the mysterious registration of an image takes place. The sliver of paper that is left at the end of this ritual bears witness to the world outside, partial and illuminated. But what if that process is blocked and light is withheld? "Held", rather, in the *Plexus* series: reminders of interiority which have something in common with X-ray plates. These large-scale works make it seem that the photographic process has been thwarted and that we are capable of looking inside the camera at a failure to engage with any exterior presence. Children make caves, hide beneath tablecloths or below stairs, re-enacting the experience of being delivered into bright light. (Dazzled, they scream once more when they are expelled.) That the spaces in *Plexus* are composed of skin; that light, seeping through fingers, enters – warm but strange – and that the entire experience of the genesis of the image is regarded as taking place within a body all lead to one frightening proposition: of on the one hand emergence thwarted, but on the other a nightmare mitigated by overtones of deep but sinister comfort, a retraction from light (which is life) but not from the warmth of the womb or camera. Warmth without total security, it could be argued, for the glow that enters in the *Plexus* works is a report from an outside world which, it seems, has been deliberately blocked out. As in Plato's cave, reality exists at one remove. The unwillingness to engage with or even contemplate the exterior is the basis of *Plexus*, Florschuetz's body of work named after the hollow between the pelvic bones.

The series *Suburbia* concentrated on the surface of the illuminated body. A pattern of brown on pink, for example, turns out to be body hair, pores and skin, blown up so large that it becomes a decorative screen with hints of bathing and flotsam, intoxicating yet somehow repulsive. The result, as always, is impressive – daunting but nevertheless attractive. Denial of the sense of touch in photography, or its replacement by a sheer reflective surface has seldom been emphasised in so complete a way. Nor has that play of attraction and repulsion which determines our reaction to hair in general, with its overtones of the primordial. In the *Plexus* works, return to a state of living death produces a similar frisson: similar, that is, until the viewer stops being fascinated by the play of outsides and insides, the cat's cradle motif that recurs in children's games. For what is withheld is so frustrating that the sense of warmth and touch and the fascination of shadows perceived through the skin can never compensate for the absence of an "outside world". Interiority alone, the feeling of being in the body, inside another body, lasts for nine months. From that time onwards, it becomes a synonym for inward-turning and lack of realism. Registering shadows and seeing, from inside,



Diptych #132, 1993/94, 106x140cm Cibachrome.

through the skin is the experience that informs the *Plexus* group, with its suggestions of powerlessness and comfort, on the one hand, and deep apprehension on the other. Imprisonment is necessary in order to be set free. Yet in future, when that freedom finally comes, life will never be so easy.

Florschuetz's studies of birth could just as easily be essays on death, however. Captivity is suggested by the images of fingers which turn into bars. The only brightness derives from spaces

between the fingers. Offset by the right-angles of the component photographs, butted together to make a larger format, these are human and protective, but will come to seem overly so. *Suburbia* (previously titled *Vor dem ersten Blick*) describes the situation precisely. Primordially precedes both light or full emergence, and the beings which belong to

this state are unformed: grotesque and dependent, like limbless growths. In a strangely titled self-portrait, the artist photographed his own body diving, a deliberate echo of the great, faked photograph of human flight by Yves Klein. Florschuetz called his version *Rhetoric*, with all the overtones of falsification that the term implies, but also the strength that a developed underlying structure can

provide. The proposition may be that the rhetorical element in his work is all-important, despite the fact that rhetoric and truth seem in polar opposition. For the element of make-believe is powerful in Florschuetz's practice, as is a strong instinct for falsification. Doesn't the warmth of the red, divided into sections, suggest the primordial hearth, a place of relaxation and, as Walter Benjamin argued, a natural site for fantasy: stories of danger told in a safe place late at night when sleep is bound to overcome the hearers? Klaus Honnef has interpreted the gaps between the dark areas, the places where light enters, as wounds in the image. Yet as well as being as red as blood, they are also the colour of glowing coals, like those of a camp-fire. If the blood-red patterns on the cave wall run counter to the sectioning of the photographic frame, the result is an alienation effect, jerking us out of our underground fantasies and into a far odder situation: an elaborate child's game like hide-and-seek, the climax of which is identification – "There you are!" – often accompanied by touching, as if to make sure of the presence of one's prey. Perhaps this strange ritual tells us something about the strangeness of photography, even at the end of the twentieth-century; a trick of sorts, a *voilà* after a process, no part of which is evident to the viewer except the move that triggers it in the first place. You press the button, we do the rest. The relation of photographs to our own physicality may be the crux of Florschuetz's entire project.

Stuart Morgan is a critic and curator based in London. He contributes regularly to *frieze* magazine and co-curated the 1995 exhibition *Rites of Passage* at the Tate Gallery in London. *What the Butler Saw*, a book of his selected writings, has recently been published by Durian Publications.



Transition, 4 pieces, 1994, 243x363cm Cibachrome.



Rhetoric, 10x7cm, 1995, Cibachrome.

Between Two: Suburbia was exhibited at Stills Gallery, Edinburgh, and Between Two: Plexus was exhibited at Site Gallery, Sheffield between 15 June and 27 July 1996.

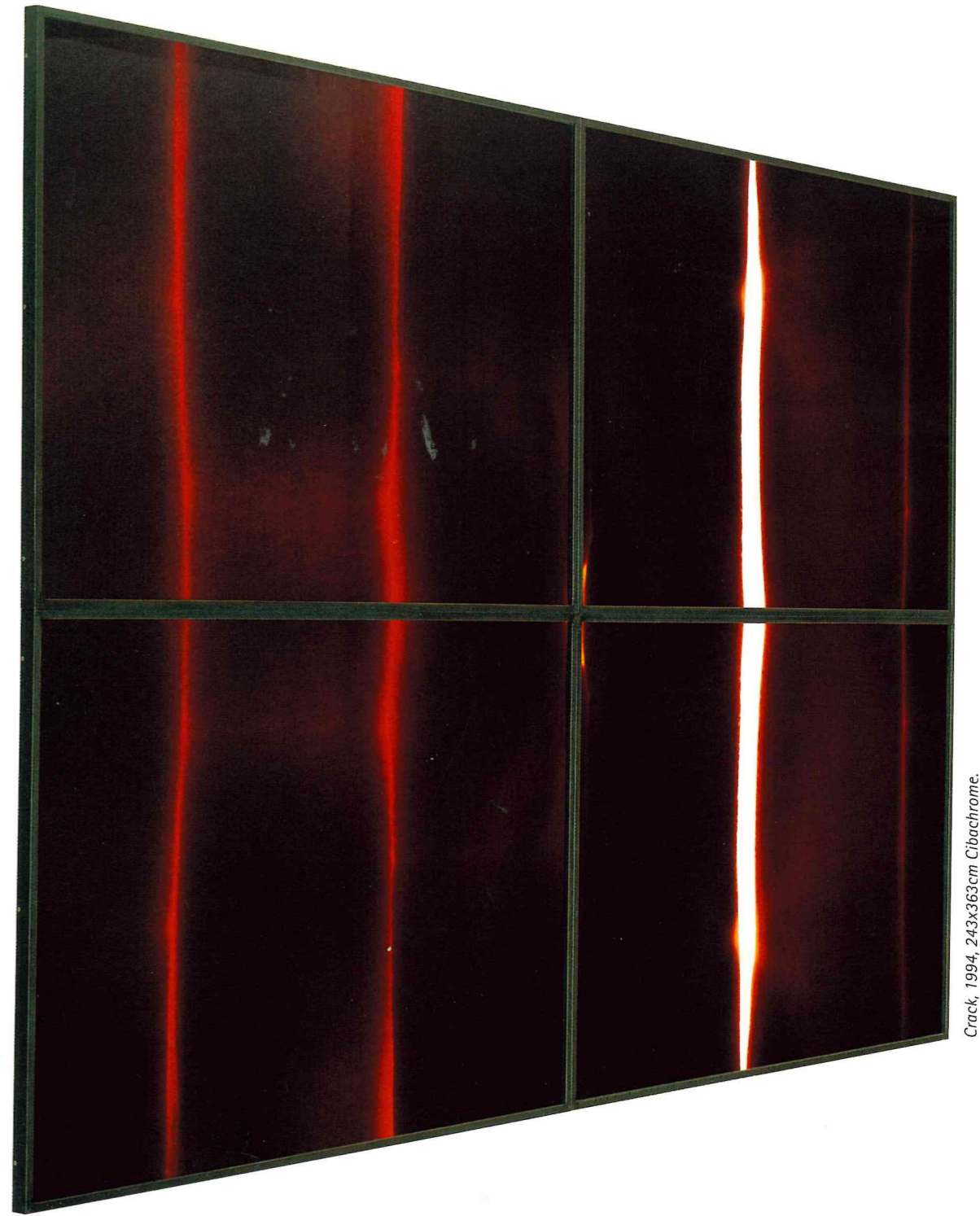
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Crack, 1994, 243x363cm Cibachrome.

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