



Alan Belcher: *Untitled Self-Portrait*, 1993, mixed mediums, 13 by 5 by 2 inches; at Jack Shainman.

Alan Belcher at Jack Shainman

Alan Belcher is a conceptualist who produces provocative objects. In his recent show, titled "Self Portraits," he took on superstition and sorcery. Neat rows of horseshoes lining two walls of the gallery (seven on one wall, 13 on the other) helped establish the show's theme. Two dozen or so sculptures displayed around the room looked like voodoo dolls, fetishes or so-called poppets, the kind purportedly used in witchcraft to represent individuals on whom black magic is performed.

The cloth dolls in this show, all about a foot tall, seem whimsical, but more creepy than cute. Belcher, who frequently uses photography in his work, has sewn black-and-white photo-booth self-portraits in place of each doll's face. In the striking installation, some of these fig-

ures were mounted on pedestals, others were shoved in the drawers of a dresser, or placed on a table in the middle of the gallery. A doll hidden under the table in a shoe box next to an apparently discarded bouquet of dried roses had a decidedly sinister aspect.

All of the dolls are well crafted. As colorful as some Hopi Indian kachinas, most wear jackets and trousers decorated with elaborate embroidery, hand-stitched by the artist. The costumes are fashioned from material cut from the artist's own clothes. Besides the embroidery, the dolls are adorned with numerous objects associated with magic, such as crystals and garlic buds to ward off evil spirits. They come complete with removable pins and matchsticks with sharpened ends, which could be used to prick, burn and impale the dolls. In some of the works, clippings of the artist's fingernails are sewn on in delicate arrangements; elsewhere, tufts of the artist's light brown hair stick out like pigtales. Belcher has literally imbued these sculptures with something of himself.

According to the tenets of black magic, possessing something of a victim's physical person is a powerful tool. By

allowing these self-representations to fall into the hands of others—in this case, collectors of his work—the artist could be seen as putting himself at risk. Is Belcher engaged in a strange game of self-destruction? More likely, he is confident of the benevolence of his viewers, who are witness to the results of his obsessive, private ritual. In any case, Belcher seems to have located, by means of these dolls, a little-explored psychic and spiritual intersection of artist and audience. —David Ebony