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— By Jeffrey Kastner

"In a world of confusion and complications, contemporary men need to know it all." So says the publisher's blurb for the book invoked by Robert Beck in the subtitle of "Glove Skinning" (Bruised) ("The Modern Man's Guide to Life by Denise Boyles, Alan Rose, and Alan Wellikoff), 2003, a central work in the artist's mordant and affecting recent show. The vaguely ironic bathroom- book wisdom offered by such DIY guides (collections of advice on, say, building a shelter or landing an airplane in an emergency) pushes a kind of prepackaged gentlemanly confidence while plugging neatly into doubts over performance and satisfying secret desires for someone to lay out what it means to be a "real man. Rendered in charcoal on cream- colored paper, "Glove Skinning" is a triptych, sewn together with thread, creased, and smudged, that depicts in detail how to flay a rabbit. For Beck, a diverse and meticulous Conceptualist whose work has often probed the darker precincts of male adolescence, sexual identity, and the American family, the image of the little animal hanging helplessly upside down acts as a kind of touchstone, fore- grounding the violence that occurs in certain masculine rites of passage.

Beck's fascination with the most catastrophic manifestations of boyhood turmoil at home or school was evident in Artwork by Kip Kinkel for His Parents, Bill and Faith, 2004. Titled after the Oregon fifteen-year-old who in 1998 killed his father and mother before murdering two (and wounding more than two dozen) high school classmates, the work is a pair of welcome mats of ghostly white silicone, scattered with little pearly bullets fashioned from wound filler, a waxy compound used by morticians in funeral preparation. With a kind of antiseptic sadness that immediately recalls Robert Gober, Beck's evocation of the Kinkel tragedy emphasizes an all-too- familiar strain of American dysfunction. If Artwork succeeded in producing the kind of uncanny memorial poetry that Beck typically strives for, The Self-Portrait of Alex King, 2003, was, by design, less lyrically inflected. A large, matter-of-fact pastel of a newspaper page featuring the sweet face of another adolescent male killer-King, a twelve-year-old Florida boy, conspired with his thirteen-year-old brother to murder their father in 2001- it evoked the mechanisms whereby the media's endless reiteration of these personal cataclysms contributes to the sense, for certain vulnerable individuals, that acts of sociopathic violence offer some cathartic chance at individuation in the public eye.

Beck's work was often most resonant when at its most oblique. A pair of large gelatin silver prints from his new series of rephotographed photos, for example, spoke to the longing and loneliness that Beck associates with traditional family structure: *Screen Memory (Mother's Room)*, 2003, features a image of Christ swaddled in labial folds of reflected drapery; *Screen Memory (Father's Room)*, 2004, depicts a flock of birds soaring tantalizingly beyond a window. Meanwhile, *Shots No. 12, 13, 14 (Daly Over/Under at Close Range with .12 Gauge "Punkin' Ball" Slug)*, 2004, physically manifested psychological trauma in three buckets packed full of pastel-color wound filler-Beck's stand-in for a kind of (damaged) body-each with a sucking wound in its center from a gun blast and exuding a sickly sweet fragrance. And domestic architectural ambience also continues to provide a vivid vehicle for Beck's destabilizing gestures. Both *Wall ("A Son Is Love")*, 2004, and *Wall Ceiling ("Bless This House...")* 2004, are strange slices of familiar home environments literally turned on their heads-the first, a chunk of cheap rec-room wall inverted and hung for display; the second, flipped over on its back like an injured insect. Each was undecorated save for the little varnished wall plaques referenced in their subtitles-their inspirational messages of domestic devotion smudged and obscured with paint, just as tellingly disfigured in Beck's scheme as the family values they were meant to express.