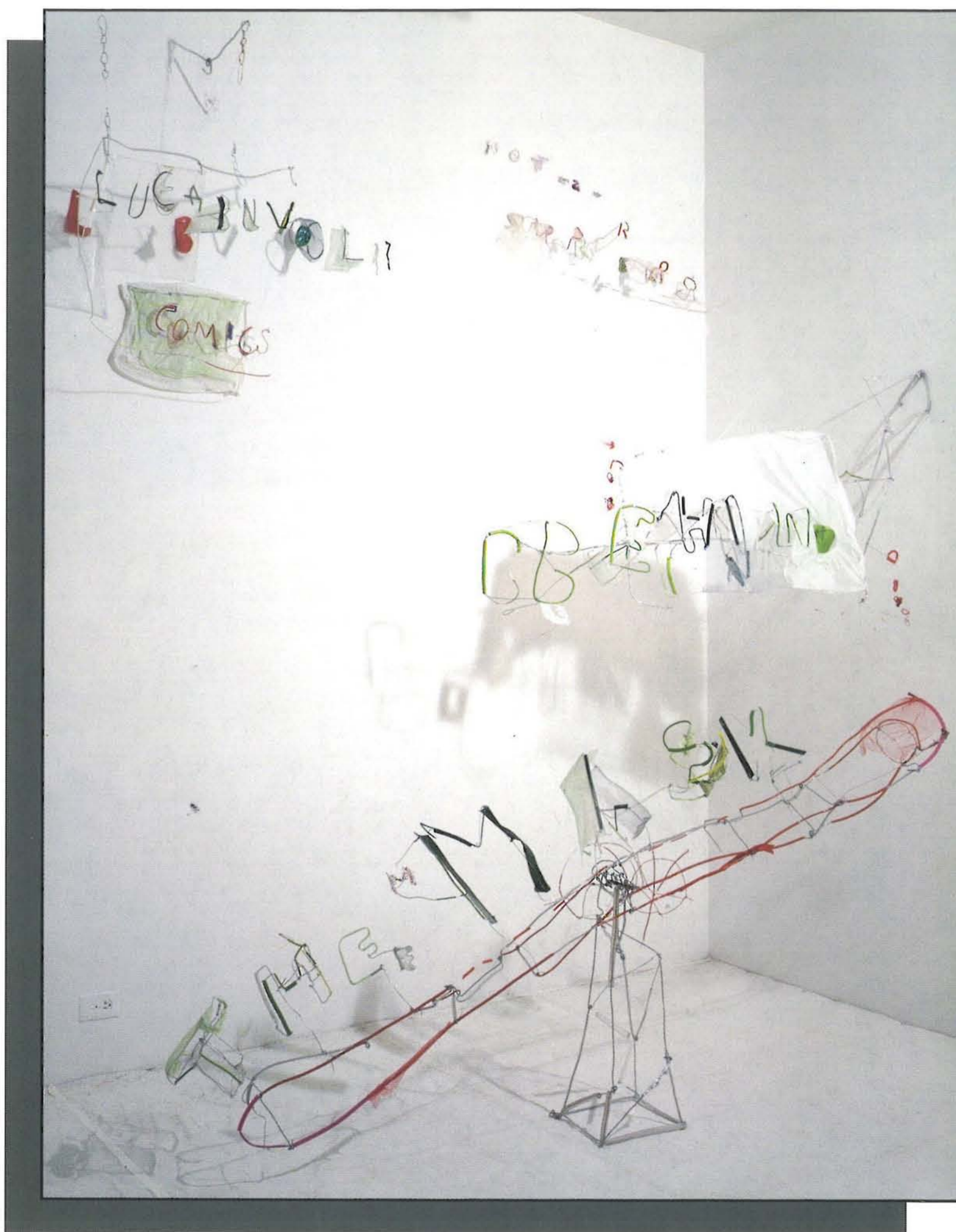
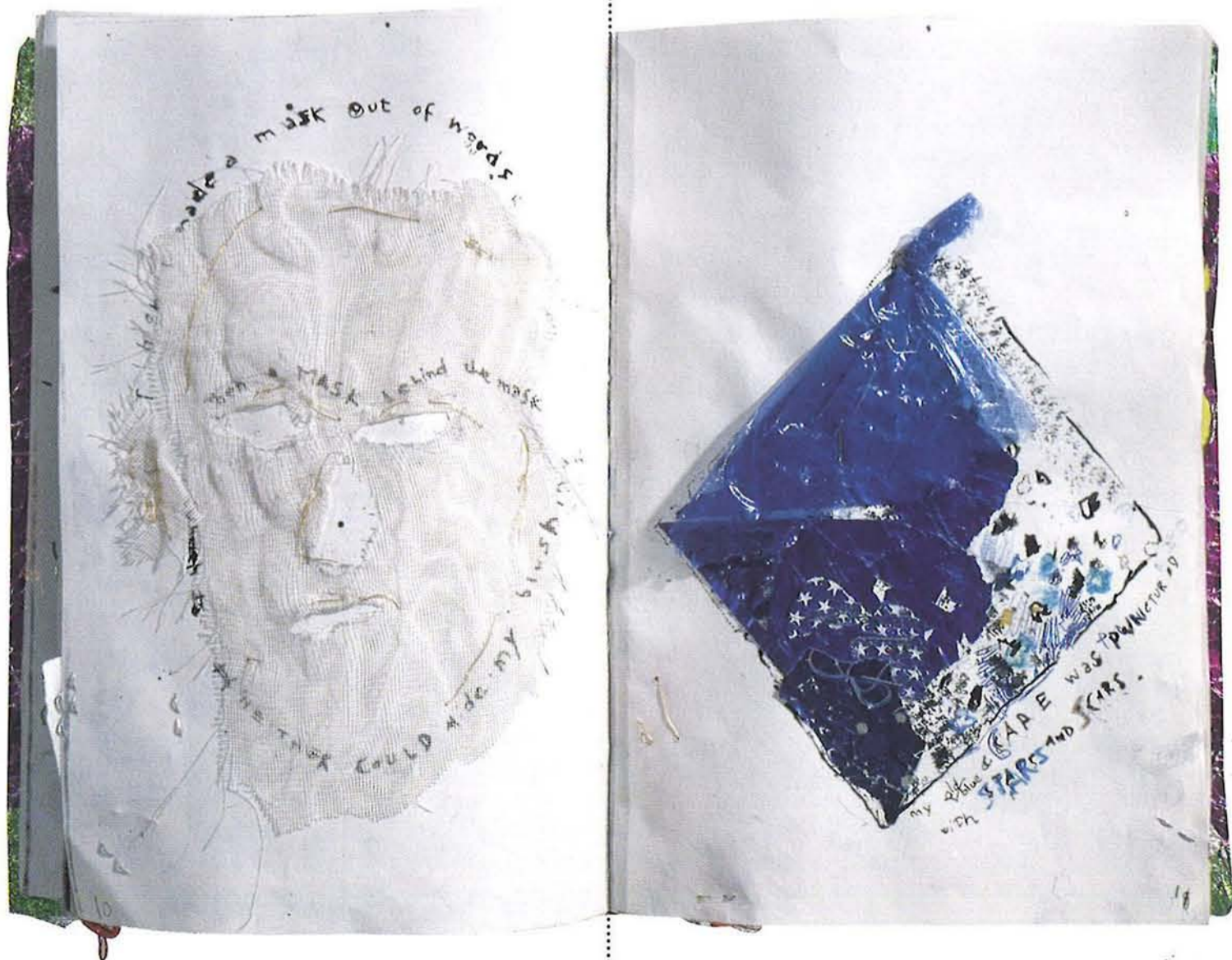


**LUCA BUYOLI**  
**BEHIND** the **MASK**



March 9 to May 26, 1996  
Santa Monica Museum of Art

Front panel: **3-D Cover of Not-a-Superhero No. 10** (Luca Buvoli Comics Sign, Not-a-Superhero Small Sign, and *Behind the Mask Sign*), 1996, room installation, mixed media, 11 x 9 x 6 feet (irregular). Right: **Comic Book Not-a-Superhero No. 10, Behind the Mask** (detail: cover), 1995, artist's book, mixed media, 10¼ x 7 inches. Below: **Comic Book Not-a-Superhero No. 10, Behind the Mask** (detail: pages 10 and 11), 1995, artist's book, mixed media, 10¼ x 7 inches.



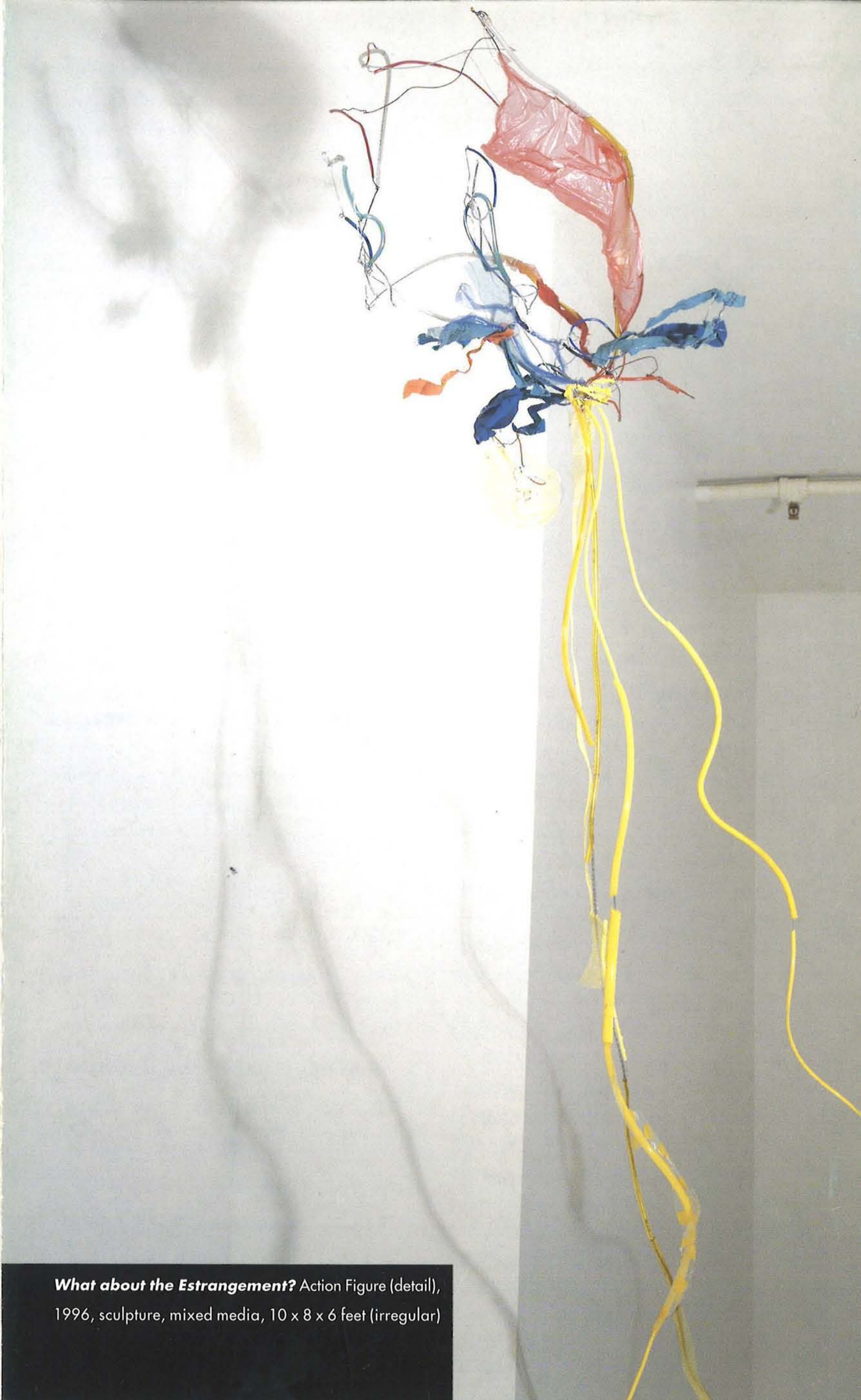
*Behind the Mask* is the tenth installment in Luca Buvoli's ongoing project entitled "Not-a-Superhero," which the artist began in 1992. It, like its nine predecessors, begins with a handmade comic book, which is the basis for individual collages and drawings, sculptures, and, in one case, a 16-millimeter, animated film. Rooted in the conventions of the traditional action-hero comic book, "Not-a-Superhero" combines the visual with the verbal, the personal with the universal in a serialized narrative featuring a cast of fictionalized characters. The series takes its name from its protagonist, known as Not-a-Superhero, a masked character who in each episode grapples with philosophical and psychological issues that confront him in the form of archetypal characters of Buvoli's creation: Dr. Logos, The Dissector, Patternman, and the Lord of Guilt.

In this episode—*Behind the Mask*—Not-a-Superhero faces the threat of being unmasked by a curious enemy, The Dissector, and having his true identity laid bare. This crisis precipitates his recounting of a fateful event from his past: the blast that destroyed his "invulnerability," and, with it, his superhero persona as Supermark. From the wreckage of this cataclysm, he retrieves the fragments of his old costume and cobbles them together into a new one. Piece by piece, he describes the elements of his ensemble—cape, gloves, armor, mask, boots—and the process through which the costume comes to embody his new, rather shy and vulnerable persona. "Then I made a mask out of words," he explains, "then a mask behind the mask. Neither could hide my blushing." At the end of this monologue, The Dissector reappears to renew his threat, leaving the reader to ponder the implications of exposing the identity of a self-revealing hero who, by his own admission, is Not-a-Superhero.

"Not-a-Superhero" has had a long evolution, beginning in Buvoli's boyhood years in Vicenza, Italy, when he first developed his

infatuation with American comic-book heroes such as Spiderman, Daredevil, and the Fantastic Four. Quick, strong, and intrepid, these superheroes represented a masculine ideal that resonated with Buvoli's aspiration of becoming a champion swimmer and runner. By the age of eight he had begun to draw his own comic-book hero—Supermark—a kind of Italian Wonderboy possessing a full complement of electronic gadgets and a modest range of powers (he could fly to the height of 12 meters). Buvoli ultimately abandoned his athletic dreams, but his passion for running and with it, the aesthetic ideal of measured and elegant movement, found an alternate channel in his study of human anatomy as an art student at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice from 1981 to 1985. His first art projects, constructed from wire, cloth, and other assorted materials, were outgrowths of his experience of running. These abstract sculptures employed his mastery of anatomical principles and explored the sensuousness of the heroic body in motion. Increasingly, however, Buvoli began to play with, and to invert, the idea of the superhero and to investigate notions of human fallibility, or the insuperable limits of one's own capabilities. This interest led him, in 1992, to conceive "Not-a-Superhero."

In developing a hero defined by what he is not, Buvoli opens a window onto very basic questions about identity and its construction, and the moral struggles of our time that are not manifest in clearly defined categories of good and evil, strength and weakness. Instead, the dreaded forces that confront Not-a-Superhero are incarnations of ambiguity, guilt, and the tyranny of language: the ever-changing and silent Patternman (who has his origins in the wallpaper of Buvoli's childhood room); the oppressive Lord of Guilt (a ghost from the artist's Catholic past); and the treacherous Dr. Logos (who signifies Western rationalism and logic as well as the all-powerful



**What about the Estrangement?** Action Figure (detail),  
1996, sculpture, mixed media, 10 x 8 x 6 feet (irregular)

Word and/or God). Not-a-Superhero struggles with these characters, occasionally falling into their traps and, in turn, provoking fresh considerations about personal and cultural identity. If Not-a-Superhero could be said to embody any one thing, perhaps it is the paradox: an idea and its contradiction rolled into one. A reincarnation of the “invincible” Supermark, Not-a-Superhero dons a costume that fails to transform him in the slightest way, but serves, instead, to magnify his deepest insecurities. An introspective hero, he speaks of “becoming a nothingness” and of an experience that is at once revelatory and degenerative, that which “takes me to pieces” and from which “reflections pour forth.” He learns, in the darkness, to see.

The paradox of “Not-a-Superhero” also lies in the construction of each episode, which, although telling a story, is highly nonlinear in its narrative. A situation is presented and with it, a tacit promise of its development and resolution (“To be continued. . .”), but it remains in investigatory limbo. The temporal and spatial characteristics of traditional comic books are fragmented and allowed to drift in and out of the individual episodes, which, finally, are almost completely lacking in actions and events. Ultimately, “Not-a-Superhero” is about inaction and non-events. Language—usually in the voice of Not-a-Superhero—defines and structures each issue, and it is often the written word that constitutes the characters themselves (Dr. Logos appearing in the guise of a crossword puzzle; Not-a-Superhero’s mask made out of words). Unlike the classic superhero’s voice, which resonates with self-righteous authority, this protagonist’s voice is faltering, fraught with self-doubt, fears, and misgivings. His is a voice that is highly expressive, marked by a subtly foreign diction that recalls the artist/author’s Italian origins and his transformation and translation of the American comic-book tradition into Italian, and then back again into English. And adding another, sen-

sual dimension to the voice—what gives it texture and almost audible sound—is the way in which Buvoli endows words with visual character: through their scratchy strokes, their echoing and reverberating forms, and the way they trail off the page.

*Behind the Mask*, like other episodes from the series, is not confined to the comic-book format. Within the Focus Gallery of the Santa Monica Museum of Art, Buvoli has created a site-specific installation comprising poster-sized collages and mixed-media sculptures. The collages provide a link between the original comic book and the large, delicate sculptures, all of which incorporate bits of humble, colorful materials that suggest a child’s fascination with things found on the ground: candy wrappers, wire, plastic, rags, and foil. Much like his earlier sculptural works, which evoked the artist’s personal memories of running, the installation here conjures images of flight. Perhaps more vividly, however, the sculptures refer to his writing and drawing, to the meandering words and characters on the pages of his comic book. The dubious hero of *Behind the Mask*, projected into the three dimensions of the gallery, bridges a gap between the fantastic and the real, attaining transcendence.

Noriko Gamblin  
*Director of Exhibitions*

----- **BEHIND** the **MASK** -----

is part of the Santa Monica Museum of Art’s Focus Gallery Series. The **Focus Gallery** is designed for individual and small group shows and was conceived to highlight new directions in an established artist’s oeuvre or to introduce work by emerging or non-affiliated artists.

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**Comic Book Not-a-Superhero**

**No. 10, Behind the Mask**

(detail: pages 12 and 13), 1995, artist's book, mixed media, 10¼ x 7 inches.

*"... and an armor.  
I could feel it growing  
on my chest, slowing my  
actions, making me more  
clumsy and shiny..."*

