Acknowledgement and Credits

A whole chain of people have been directly or indirectly involved with the shaping of my work and its process. Layering together abstract concepts and physical materials, I feel indebted to many; including people living across geographies and time!
Apart from a long list in my imaginary, here, I would like to acknowledge some handful of people who added me (and my work) into their list of core responsibilities, thus facilitating a smoother area for me to move in!
I would like to thank Nagesh HN and Santosh Sakhinala for documenting the Preview held at Hyderabad. They helped me overcome visual blindness after long midnight hours at work.
Both, my mother and father, for lending a hand to manual repetitive process at certain areas of work. Their work allowed me to restore my patience at work.
Nice Embroiderers at Lingampally, Hyderabad, who helped in some last minute execution of machine embroidery appliquè after my machine had broken down...
Sham Solah Sringar store at Lingampally, Hyderabad, my material supplier, for catering to the most mundane of demands towards materials.
Students and colleagues at the Fine Art Department of Sarojini Naidu School, at Hyderabad Central University, for bearing with my absences during work process!
The working teams at Vadehra Gallery and FICA (though I can barely tell the difference!). Vidya, Bhooma, Suruchi, for their support and help towards hosting me and facilitating my stay at Delhi. Suhani, for designing the catalogue within a short amount of time!
Prakash, at the gallery, for patiently understanding the intricacies of packing/unpacking and mounting of my works!
Raj and Yogesh Salhotra who finally photographed the works and helped in good documentation. My extended family of close friends, at Hyderabad, Baroda and other cities. And yes, Roshini Vadehra, for all the support towards the show.

Quotes used in works from:
Rainer Maria von Rilke in Seductive Myths of Lightnes - Sightscapes of an Insomniac II
Marcel Duchamp in Poetics of Desire - the Birth of Language

DESIGN Suhani Arora Sen
PHOTOGRAPHY Raj and Yogesh Salhotra
PRINTING Pragati Offset Pvt. Ltd.

ISBN 978-93-80001-09-8

Intertwinings

Recent works by RAKHI PESWANI

August 21 - September 25, 2009

VADEHRA ART GALLERY

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...growing from the middle...

Recent Works by Rakhi Peswani

Stitches are like lines that string together absence and presence. Now you see them and now you don't. When they are above the surface, they fit the visibility register. Or when they slip away from our sight, they keep sustaining their existence from the underside. What is absent above is present below, almost like a mirror image, slightly displaced.

Rakhi explores the interface between drawing and stitching, between two dimensional silhouettes and three dimensional extensions, between the language of naming, and that of seeing. It is in the gaps and overlaps between our sensations of sight, touch, smell and taste that experience unfolds and language emerges. While experience occurs in continuum, language is necessarily governed by fragmentation and repetition - the sources of its order and condition.

Detail of *Poetics of Desire - the Birth of Language*

A drawn line can mimic lines of thread that run through cloth. Even a pencil line can leave gaps in between or weave the corporeal through cross hatchings. The knitted lines between the eyebrows in Durer's portrait of his mother find as easy a translation in running stitches as in drawn lines- both lie at the source of the catachresis in our parlance- "knitted eyebrows"! Or the way same network of lines appear in Grunewald's drawings as well as his finished paintings- equal in aesthetic efficacy; lines in constant flux that continually exchange places between the figure and the ground and allow for the 'bodies of beings' to metamorphose into 'bodies of becoming'.

Out of all the Euro-American art trends that have become familiar frames of reference for Indian

Detail of *Misnomers (Re-construing the Body)*

modernists, conceptual art has made a late entry and has struck most shallow roots in a country like India that has by and large gravitated towards imagistic figuration. Minimalism, as for example, has had a short and chequered career in India, unlike its passionate reception in Japan. Rakhi Peswani belongs to this rare moment in the history of contemporary art that stages complex conversation between conceptual art, minimalism and figurative art. At the same time, she undoes academic hierarchies set up between art and craft, painting and stitching, sculpting and sewing- by weaving stories, knitting forms and embroidering concepts.

Detail of *As You Sew... (Some Notes on the Magic of Making)*

Staging infinite variation of forms that continually unfold between the poles of order and chaos, between being and becoming, Rakhi signposts the two extremes in *As You Sew* and *Seductive Myths of Lightness (Sightscapes of an Insomniac) II.*

While the first shows an obsessive concern with classification, labeling and archiving to the extent that each singular set of objects placed within boxes embody citations of sensations abstracted from any context, the latter breaks out of any constraint of a grid into an eruption of all boundaries; it stages and telescopes an almost evolutionary metamorphosis on the body of a composite creature- partly animal, partly human and partly a tree. With the focus on the interstitial spaces between the zoomorphic, the human and the vegetative, the unruliness of becoming is made visible.

Detail of *Seductive Myths of Lightness (Sightscapes of an Insomniac) II*

Stitches mimic language in their seriality, in their unfolding in time, but lines that move ahead can also fold back and move in another direction. There are no points of origin or termination. They can begin from anywhere. But they have a strange relationship

with time; time is their inevitable condition of being and yet they can bring it to a halt. Stitches celebrate slowness, they can needle time to slow down as they wrestle their way through cloth. They call attention to their own processes of making in which the being and the becoming visibly coalesce. The painstaking process of stitching itself becomes a critique of temporality as it slows down time, calling into question myths of progress. Do craft lag behind art on the account of slowness? Resonating with Homi Bhabha's indictment of today's accelerated pace of life that leaves little room for critical thinking,[1] Rakhi sees in the humble craft of embroidery the potential to de-territorialize the spaces of high art as she continually seeks to bring back the body, both of the material of the medium and the maker, as she exposes them alike in underlining the process of making art.

ARTIST'S STUDIO:

Accustomed to entering artists' studios that greets one with acrid smell of turpentine, old plastic jars with used paint brushes dipped into them, piles of paint tubes lying in the corners with drawing and sketches pinned up on the walls, I was not prepared for the different sights and smells that filled my senses in Rakhi's studio. In place of brushes, there lay scattered on the floor, scissors of varying dimensions, mounds of colorful bobbins in a corner, folds of cloth of diverse textures draped over a table, boxes full of hundreds of safety pins glinting away-millions of silver pins stuck into sponge balls, tousled hair wigs, amongst a host of ordinary objects that take on new being by being in an artist's studio.

And in place of drawings and sketches on the wall, there were loops of colored threads, a braid, and shiny rubber bands, pinned up on the soft board. And in place of sketchbooks, there were scrapbooks that carried most fragile dried leaves, flattened flowers, dead insects, pieces of handmade paper, embroidered swatches. Equally striking was how the same pair of scissors that was a tool, once wrapped in velvet becomes an image: a strange conflation of object's tool value and semiotic value. The same fate befalls a needle that loses its status as equipment once it too becomes a motif, as it halts midway through the cloth and enters the zone of representation. Surrounded by material that plays on your visual and tactile sensations, the alphabets of Rakhi's language clutter up the studio space that has certain clarity in the artists' mind. Filing these myriad surfaces and textures in her mind as if in a private archive, she knew exactly what and where to reach out for, at the behest of a sensation that urgently needed to be recast in material terms.

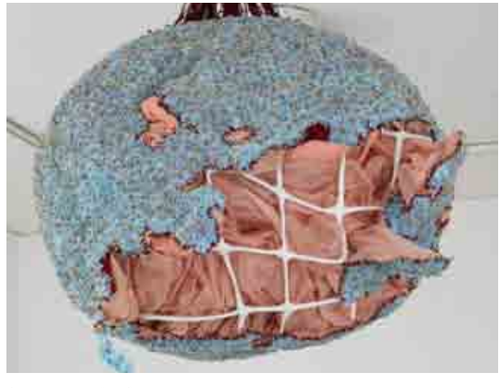
(left and below)
Detail of *As You Sew... (Some Notes on the Magic of Making)*

UNDOING DRAWING

I am not what I am; I am what I do with my hands.
Louise Bourgeois

Like all institutions, the art school in Baroda has had an ambivalent impact on Rakhi. While it has transmitted skills to her and allowed her to move across painting, sculpture and ceramics along new trajectories, certain hallowed conventions restrained her experimental fervor. The greatest among them was the compulsion of drawing as a necessary point of departure which lay at the root of the hierarchy that she found herself setting within her own major and minor practices. Her first experiment with textiles and other heterogeneous material started as a 'hobby' when she would insert little swatches of embroidered cloth into little antique glass bottles, bought from the *Shukrawari Bazaar* or the Friday Flea Market, a favorite haunt for students in Baroda. These would make suitable presents for friends when one day, her art teacher questioned her on the way she compartmentalized her practice of art and craft. This was a mind opener and the resultant self questioning pointed out that the only way out of this academic mental set was to break out of the spell of drawing.

What if she lets the sensuous materiality of medium speak to her and not be dictated by a preconceived drawing? It opened up new dialogic space with the material where medium is not what an artist has to wrestle with to gain mastery over. Can one bond with the material and hold an intimate conversation with it in a non-phallic way? By breaking open the pristine wholeness of the object, perhaps. Take as for instance, the installation titled *Being and Becoming* that splits the blue globe studded with a maze of safety pins to reveal its brown underside.



Above and right)
Detail of *Being and Becomings – (K)nights of Slow Mutations*

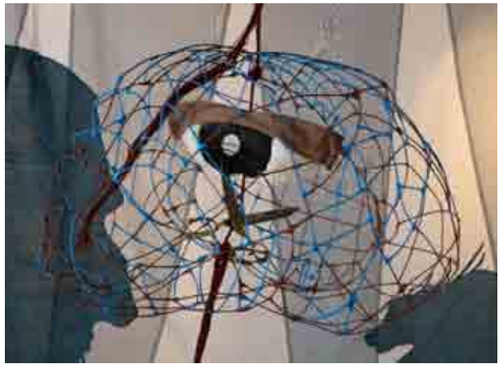
The object is caught unawares by letting the glance supersede the gaze. In place of an all controlling gaze that orders chaos into ontological stable objects, there is a glance at work that captures processes, interstitial spaces between fixed identities. As the dangling blue sphere meets the hybrid tree that sprouts from a pillow, the roots of the tree converts into animal claws as the pink gauze winds itself around an aluminum armature and begins to resemble a fresh shoot of a leaf or a new skin. The pillow with a spinal cord resembles a human torso as it writhes in agony when the blade of scissors sinks into its 'soft flesh'!

Brueghel retains a pride of place among her several mentors belonging to Northern Renaissance, ranging from Durer to Grunewald. It is not the perfect body celebrated by the Italian Renaissance masters that captures Rakhi's attention but the vulnerable body, the visceral body that leads her to Breughel –in whose works she discovers that at the heart of the phenomenological body resides the literary body- one animating the other like the parables of human folly find embodiment in the carnivalesque allegories of Breughel. Fascinated by a detail in his *Allegories* that literally shows a single eye surmounted by a pair of scissors, it captures the resonance of her practice – that pure visuality is a myth and any such claim is at once undercut by the incision/intrusion of the verbal language- just as there is no innocent eye, there is no pure, verbal speech.

In *Seductive Myths of Lightness I,* deep midnight blue velvet evoked melancholia of childhood, of sleepless nights in the mosquito net that was forced upon her by her father. While mosquitoes were kept at bay but not the nocturnal demons who visited her, tormenting her mind –slithering lizards, three headed birds, fragmented human torsos that prepared her for an early reception of Francisco Goya's paintings. As a form of exorcism, she encounters them upfront as she trapped them in appliquéd silhouettes surrounding fragmented human bodies along the walls of the mosquito net that cast the ever moving, psychedelic patterns along its surface.

Hanging in the middle is a hollow sphere that traps within its midst a floating human eye, held in place by a pair of inverted scissors. This emblem that Breughel had placed in a marginal space in his *Allegories* turns into a leitmotif for Rakhi in the way it embodies a powerful 'visual' critique of the Italian Renaissance aesthetics. In case of the latter, the invention of the artificial perspective brought within it the privileging of the visual over the tactile. This led to the gradual detaching of the eyes from the body and the formation of a new visual regime central to modern visuality. Rakhi reinstates the body by resurrecting the eye-scissors emblem in a three dimensional form. If Breughel could argue against the purity of the visual, demonstrating how images are undercut by the verbal via the eye-scissor symbol, Rakhi highlights the interpenetration of the visual and the tactile by moving between two dimensional surface and sculptural forms, and submitting to the logic of material.

(Top left) Sketch of *Seductive Myths of Lightness (Sightscapes of an Insomniac) I*
(Others) Details of *Seductive Myths of Lightness (Sightscapes of an Insomniac) I*



Of course, this does not mean a simple inversion of hierarchy where she would let the material dictate poetics to her. Complicating the dualism of subject and object, form and matter, the language of words intervenes introducing yet another dynamics- that of the rebus- where the visual and the verbal transgress into each other's territories in a mutual destabilization. In *Misnomers*, she interweaves a collage of sensuous materials with woven text and disrupts the commonplace assumption that verbs trigger in our minds- while the stuffed bra "heaves" , the labyrinthine lungs conjured out of cloth "hope" and "breathe" !

2 Panels of *Misnomers (Re-construing the Body)*

Her retake on western renaissance precisely is driven by her concerns with the body- the trajectory along which this epochal movement in the west unfolded was premised on the gradual undermining of the body that led to the regime of visuality. Hence her focus on the body- not the organic body celebrated by the Italian Renaissance for its perfection- but body as fragments, body as a thinking and feeling body that proclaims its vulnerability through poetic transformation of the material and -finally body as part of discourse or when the language intervenes and textualises the body.

As the word "Reflection" (refer to pg)is reflected by the round mirrors sewn on cloth brings to the fore a new visuality, it literally 'reflects' upon its own process of making. It is both a critical comment on the 'mirror metaphor' that was central to the Renaissance episteme and notions of mimesis and also a different take on conceptual art that freely intersperses the figuratively 'drawn/embroidered hands' with the conceptual text-'Reflection' in *Anatomical Construction of Ideas*. Striking a blow to the myth of art production that claims to spring straight from the mind untouched by the body, the images of multiple hands 'touching' the mirror bring back the body-its sense of touch, tactility and corporeality.

Unlike the mental imagery of a painterly work, which is essentially about forming meanings through mere images, I am trying to incorporate the orientation of the body and its possible imaginary along with the the visual imagination of a work... thus one work (*Anatomical Construction of Ideas*) is nothing but a rhetoric of how an imaginary idea is constructed through a play of visuals and hands…[2]

GENDER AS A STRAND

Gender invariably enters into discussion of works by woman artists whose turn to stitching and embroidery may be seen as a feminine choice! From Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, to Sheila Gowda and Anita Dube closer home, women artists have had to resist the gender stereotyping of their medium in different ways and each has cast a spell on Rakhi variously. Like Bourgeois, Rakhi is drawn to transgressing the academic definition of sculpture. It is Bourgeois' material practice that excites Rakhi's imagination and not so much her foregrounding of autobiography, articulated in strongly gendered terms. While Hesse and Gowda loom large as antecedents in their handling of unconventional textures and material, Dube's evocative use of velvet had so much inspired Rakhi that she had, at one point, dedicated a piece in velvet to Dube- in an act that paid homage and at the same time questioned latter's claim of regarding velvet as her signature material! Gender difference enters Rakhi's oeuvre in a peripheral way, always refracted by the materiality of her medium and the minimalist narrative informing her work.

Rakhi still regards her accidental discovery of Louise Bourgeois' exhibition catalogue at a friend's place in Baroda as a momentous event. Riveted to Bourgeois' costume series, Rakhi found resonance in every aesthetic decision made by the French artist- her choice of material, her extraordinary use of ordinary objects and her bold iconoclasm of traditional sculpture. Like Bourgeois, Rakhi aspires to break out of the tunnel vision of visuality that had satisfied the Greenbergian definition of modern painting. She learns from Bourgeois how to beat the modernists at their own formalist game and how to use the

> methodology of Cubism… to destroy its potency, to enact another kind of destruction of the father- in the form of patriarchal modernism. [3]

Combining her critique of an orthodox modernism with phenomenology of seeing, the visual, the tactile

and the verbal mutually inflect Rakhi's understanding of sculpture. Recasting vision in material terms, the artist looks upon the eye as not only embodied but a part of a moving and feeling body.

Body gains centrality as a metaphor and a literal presence. On most of the walls of her working space are pasted cuttings of perfect bodies- the bodies of Olympic acrobats, of ballerinas arching their bodies in impossible postures, which have sculpted their bodies to perfection through performance - bodies that are energetic and muscular? While these cuttings from newspapers, magazines and popular calendars (there is one of Yogic postures) sport bodies as a whole, they only enter her oeuvre as de-fetishized fragments, as carriers of a particular sensation, a structure of feeling.

The erotic of the body enters her work more through the play with material and less with gendered difference. The latter holds an oblique concern for Rakhi and this is where her affinity with Bourgeois ends.

Are we to put limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?

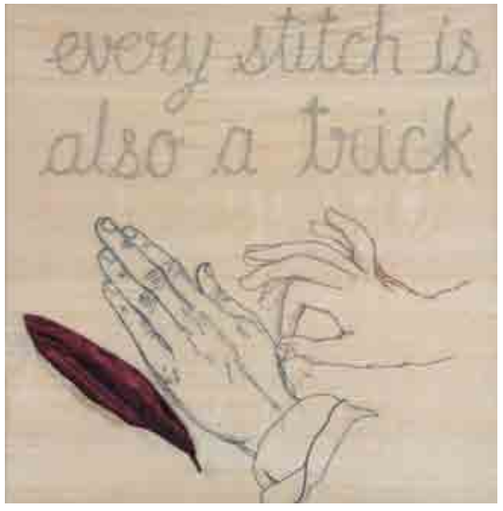
Merleau Ponty [4]

ARCHIVING THE BODY

Quite different from the rest is As You Sew in boxes that functions taxonomically and demonstrates the source of many of her imageries. Much like Rodin's *Gates of Hell* that was both his dumping ground and vibrant source of inspiration, the boxes classify objects that are counterparts of the sensation they arouse. Serving as random quotations that captured her interest at various points in time, the collected objects dismantle the narrative into an archive of sensations.

One of the walls is lined up with books that range from technical topics about art making to that of high philosophy, interspersed with books on Indian modernism. Gilles Deleuze has a wide following among this generation of young artists as a champion of non-dualistic thinking. Francis Bacon seen through Deleuze fills Rakhi with shudder of admiration – how Deleuze reads Francis Bacon's paintings in performative terms; the most evocative description of the process of painting, of the bodies shading into flesh, where the jagged edges of brush strokes cut open the body in simultaneous acts of savagery and tenderness; the insides and the outside of the body switch places, putting into question any stable equation between the figure and the ground.

Just as in Rakhi's works, the needle works as much as an instrument of violence and pain, as a means to conjure up an exquisite appearance of beauty. In the first case, the needle pokes into the middle of a stuffed eye in an upfront attack, while in a sharp contrast in another context, several needles slip into the cloth to evoke the most aesthetic effect of silvery texture.



On the Rules of the Game

A constant slippage between using her hand as a tool that holds the needle, into turning that same hand into an image,that is poised to hold a 'real' needle is more than a visual pun. Quite in line with M C Escher's visual puzzles, the performative hand doubles up as a representation as it is traced through the running stitches and captured as a contour. Quite like Merleau Ponty's famous example of the left hand touching the right hand and reversing the movement to confound the subject and the object divide. Recent revival of interest in the philosophy of Merleau Ponty in art criticism and the popularity of Deleuzean philosophy amongst the younger artists in India has to be seen in the light of "global networking and the collapse of the conventional identity politics as these were articulated in the 1960s, 1970s and beyond." [5]

Her retake of skills from those involved in drawing and sketching to that of sewing and stitching has opened her eyes to a wide arena of skills that one encounters in day to day life. Watching the cobbler in the University campus in rapt attention- the manner in which he handled leather and chose his colors, compelled her to realize how such a skill is often undervalued as manual labor. Sometimes the basis for social hierarchy of class and caste rests upon the willful undervaluing of skills and the imposition of functionality over aesthetics. [6]
Isolated she may be in her studio toiling away as a lone presence, but it is her material that not only cuts her isolation as she articulates her 'self' through embodied sensations but also connects her to the world out there, the world of commerce, of hard ware shops, wholesale markets- a world where the reality strikes back and poses her questions about her own practice. Just as her own practice elides any neat division or hierarchy among the acts of stitching, weaving, sewing, sticking, hammering and welding, it nevertheless re-inscribes these skills within the realm of art and what transpires as installations, transmogrify into sculpture in an expanded sense.

Yet, the dynamics of public sphere engage her as a corollary of her practice. Her new interlocutors become a part of her expanded constituency of the public, beyond that of the art public. In a sense, her craft based art practice makes possible for her to register, attend and reflect upon this other public on the fringes of the art world and to expand the practice of art to "think the unthinkable". [7]

Parul Dave Mukherji, August 2009
(Teaches at the School of Arts and Aesthetics,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.)

*Notes

[1] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[2] In conversation with the artist.

[3] Robert Storr, Paulo Herkenhoff, Allan Schwartzman Eds, *Louise Bourgeois* (London, New York: Phaidon, 2003), p. 100.

[4] Merleau Ponty, "The Intertwining-The Chiasm," in *Visible and Invisible* (1964), trans Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: North western University press, 1968), pp. 130-155.

[5] Amelia Jones, "Meaning, Identity, Embodiment," *Art and Thought* ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iverson (Blackwell Publishing :Oxford) 2003, p. 78.

[6] From the cobbler to the supplier of her materials at the local hardware shop, Rakhi has also aroused interest amongst the non-art public, sometimes great bewilderment when she would place order for thousands of safety pins, reels of thread or reams of gauze and wire. Quick to make the most of the curiosity that she has aroused among those who supply her material, Rakhi includes them in her list of invitees to her Preview. For easy comprehensibility, the verbal plaques that accompany her installations are bilingual.

[7] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (New York: Columbia University. Press, 2002).

Sketch for *Seductive myths of Lightness*, 2008

Images, Texts & Mutagenesis

Annotations on visual and textual quotes.

WHITE BUTTERFLIES
Night falls, hazy and purple. Vague green and mauve luminosities persist behind the tower of the church. The road ascends full of shadows, of bells, of the fragrance of grass, of songs, of weariness, of desire. Suddenly a dark man wearing a cap and carrying a pick, his face red for an instant in the light of his cigarette, comes toward us from the wretched hut that is lost in piles of coal sacks. Platero is afraid.
"Carring anything?"
"See for yourself… White butterflies."
The man wants to stick his iron pick in the little basket, and I do not prevent him. I open the knapsack, and he sees nothing in it. And the food for soul passes, candid and free without paying tribute to customs. – from 'Platero and I' By Juan Ramón Jiménez

Catalytic texts, insightful texts, soulful texts in the history of written language have changed many things in the way of looking at language system and its signs. The language used for translating and communicating thoughts into verbal or visual, verbal to visual or visual to verbal representations; has transgressed and overlapped several times. Often, as we know these representations are encrusted by metaphors (a figure of speech in which an expression is used to refer to something that it does not literally denote in order to suggest a similarity) and allegories (an expressive style that uses fictional characters and events to describe some subject by suggestive resemblances). In the process more meaning than what was intended by the author/auteur /artist originally, begins to generate. This is where the created piece transcends its periphery and reaches a possibility of infinite renditions. In a work of art all these ideas paired and fluxed with visually enticing cognition of images determine poignancy of the 'form'.

Every work of art has form, is an organism. It's most essential feature is the character of inevitability- that nothing could be changed or moved from its place, but that all must be as it is'- from Principles of Art History by Heinrich Wölfflin.

In the Principles of Art History Wölfflin formulated five pairs of opposed or contrary principles in the form and style of art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which demonstrated a shift in the nature of artistic vision between the two periods; videlicet, linear as opposed to painterly, plain to recession, closed (tectonic) form to open (a-tectonic) form, multipicity to unity and absolute clarity to relative clarity. His influence on art theory can be identified in atleast three major ways. First, a demostration of disciplinary breadth that combined both traditional and innovative theories. Second, he applied a comparative method of visual analysis, third, he insisted upon the primacy of vision.

These directions by Wölfflin were specific to his study of subject matter, that is art of 16th and 17th century; these however appear as relevant tools of formalistic analysis of contemporary art practices as well. This is to enounce, that cogitation of works of Rakhi Peswani, an assuring young artist, are possible through both conventional and innovative possibilities.

"The problematic area that I am currently addressing (and that I wish to work on further ahead) is also to locate sculptural as well as time based media within the discourses of traditional practices. These elements, equally pertinent in traditional practices get shadowed by the final outcome which essentially works along the dictates of visual showing and telling. The inability of the visual to articulate cryptic areas of time based practices is something that I am currently occupying myself with". – Rakhi Peswani 'Current Preoccupation's. (2007)

Contrarily to the Wölfflin-ish idea that the most essential feature is the character of inevitability of the 'form' in art and that nothing could be changed or moved from its place, Rakhi's works constantly pose a challenge to surpass restrictions of the form.

Since her art works are indicants of her engagement with paronomasia-with-images and the meanings associated with the same, Rakhi moves back and forth anachronistically for reference images from Renaissance to Dada to coeval non-art objects, delving into the past and present of visual archives to create new statements and legitimize them grounding on her observations and realizations.

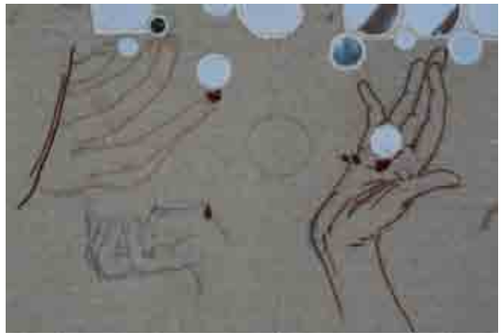
Art works of Rakhi indisputably demand attention from the viewer to be deciphered. While reading her works it is absolutely necessary to closely observe the set of images that she is working with, since each image appears with its baggage of cultural, social and literal quondam. Rakhi's recent body of nine works, some of which would be anagrammatised through the essay by means of theoretical, cultural and retentive references; are incisively named as *Poetics of Desire – The Birth of Language, Seductive Myths of Lightness, Three Studies on Retention or As You Sew – Some Notes on the Magic of Making.* These suggest a contemporary tendency of creative tension, occurring through the efforts to reach relative clarity of equation between ideas and their substantiality. Rakhi's works, simultaneously demonstrate anxieties towards tracing utmost possibilities out of the materials, meanings attached to the same, images projected through them and the final significances that are produced.

Poetics of Desire - the Birth of Language

Poetics of Desire - the Birth of Language

The surfacial connotation of the diction in the title and the work suggests anamorphism in verbalised and visual language. The hand embroidered triptych on cotton fabric with mirrors, furry woolen fabric and appliqué work measures 64" x 42" approximately and a little smaller than 72" x 48". One of the three panels holds an image of a vase (can be read as metaphorical womb) with a foetus or heart shaped image within and there is a lot of empty space around containing the phrase "*Eros, c'est la vie*"—"*Sex, that's life*", a Duchampian pun that came up when the Dada artists were posing in feminine attires and taking up pseudonyms for their own female persona. This work of Rakhi's also holds the alphabets

drafted out as E,S,S,E,N,C. These form a lexigraphy and lead the viewer to play a mind game; like in scrabble. Alter or deduct the arrangements of the letters and read; SENSE, SCENE OR SCENES, SEEN and so on. Text when juxtaposed with image in such a fashion creates innumerable open ends and more significantly sets the interpretation free of confinements. Another panel of the same work shows a Dürer-esque portrait and with mirror works construing alphabets arranged in a derelict order; A,B,E,S,E,N,C. This, at once reads ABSENCE and the third panel displays P,R,S,E,E,C,N,E the viewer can mentally rearrange the order into PRESENCE.

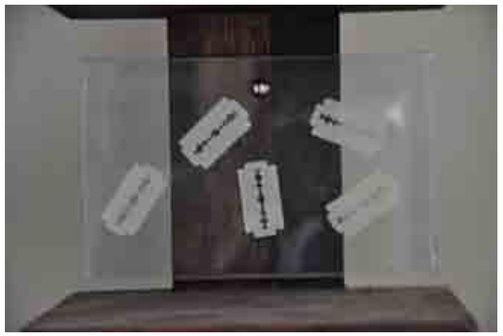


Detail of *Anatomical Construction of Ideas*

Anatomical Construction of Ideas

This 10' x 4' work is fashioned in hand embroidery on coarse moth silk fabric with mirrors creating a reflective surface texture on the rectangular piece filling in the word REFLECTION and cotton fabric for backing along with graphite drawing of hands. The 'hand' images are appropriation of those of Albrecht Dürer's and Grunewald's drwaings. Some of the hands in the work are completely embroidered while some a left incomplete intentionally. The work when displayed at the eye level would allow the viewer to find her/his reflection broken into hundred pieces of mirror bubbles. One can also read them as thought bubbles or the minutest particle of matter coming together to form the entire anatomy. The mirrors meticulously placed function both as texture and idiom on the surface. Apart, mirror is an object which speaks about vanity and prejudice, particularly, the object has been visually represented in art as tool for gaze virtually or otherwise and which more often than not, was devised as a mediator of coercion of the viewer over the viewed. The work conventionally follows a linear pattern but simultaneously creates open ends for visual interpretations.

Femininity, modernity, psychoanalysis and representation.



Details of *As You Sew – Some Notes on the Magic of Making*

'…masculinity and femininity are not which designate a 'given' and separate entity, men and women, but are simply two terms of difference. In this sense patriarchy does not refer to the static oppressive domination of one sex over another, but to a web of psychological relationships which institute a socially significant difference on the axis of sex which is so deeply located in our very sense of lived, sexual identity that it appears to us as natural and unalterable.'- from Vision and Difference by Griselda Pollock

Subtlety in the nuances of devising one artistic language that is capable of creating a seamless syntax of signifiers and signified is an attribute that Rakhi's art works live up to. Rakhi uses materials, which exhibit her indulgences towards cognizing ideas around 'feminine' or 'femininity'; examining diachronic modernist notions of art posed against craft duality (where art equates to masculinity therefore rational/cerebral, where as craft to that of the feminine and therefore emotional) and probing proliferations of visual language by uprooting the image of an object from its established socio-cultural etyma and, replacing it within a different context. All these occur through artistically exploring meanings attached to objects that are socially and culturally attached to the aforesaid concepts for ages, yet have not exhausted in the process, through materials such as appliqué, hand –embroidery or *moga* silk fabric, galvanized iron wire, wood, feathers, velvet fabric, gauze, safety pins, rope, organza flowers and many more. These materials in the works are used consciously, which are identified as intrinsic characters attached to femininity for ages.

As You Sew – Some Notes on the Magic of Making

The work is mounted on a wall in eight shelves, each shelf measuring 8' x 8" x 8". This is made out of wooden shelves, mixed media with hand embroidery, sewing tools, glass frames, ropes, threads and other miscellaneous objects. The title suggests an age old axiom and the construct of the work gives an impression of any obscure but intimate feminine corner framed by shelves which taxonomically archives mundane objects used in a domestic spheres. Each shelf holds documentary narratives such as fabric made blades stretched on a translucent screen, pins pierced on a small pillow, or buttons stitched to a piece of velvet, drawing of ants on a white piece of cloth. Each row of shelf is a metaphor for the spine in an abstract manner; one of which carries fake eyes and one among which is struck by a blade. This stealthily cites violence generated in the course of discovering aesthetics. The motif of spine appears consistently in Rakhi's other works.

On the Rules of the Game

After many long discussions at night in their crowded bed, the two boys finally worked out a pact. They would toss a coin. The loser would go down into the nearby mines and, with his earnings, support his brother while he attended the academy. Then, when that brother who won the toss completed his studies, in four years, he would support the other brother at the academy, either with sales of his artwork or, if necessary, also by labouring in the mines.

They tossed a coin on a Sunday morning after church. Albrecht Durer won the toss and went off to Nuremberg.

… When the young artist returned to his village, the Durer family held a festive dinner on their lawn to celebrate Albrecht's triumphant homecoming. After a long and memorable meal, punctuated with music and laughter, Albrecht rose from his honoured position at the head of the table to drink a toast to his beloved brother for the years of sacrifice that had enabled Albrecht to fulfil his ambition. His closing words were, "And now, Albert, blessed brother of mine, now it is your turn. Now you can go to Nuremberg to pursue your dream, and I will take care of you."

All heads turned in eager expectation to the far end of the table where Albert sat, tears streaming down his pale face, shaking his lowered head from side to side while he sobbed and repeated, over and over, "No ...no ...no ...no."

Finally, Albert rose and wiped the tears from his cheeks. He glanced down the long table at the faces he loved, and then, holding his hands close to his right cheek, he said softly, "No, brother. I cannot go to Nuremberg. It is too late for me. Look ... look what four years in the mines have done to my hands! The bones in every finger have been smashed at least once, and lately I have been suffering from arthritis so badly in my right hand that I cannot even hold a glass to return your toast, much less make delicate lines on parchment or canvas with a pen or a brush. No, brother ... for me it is too late." - from a fictional anecdote, unknown source; http://www.barefootsworl d.net/albrechtdurer.html

On the Rules of the Game

The passage above has little factual authenticity, but the narrative is alluding. The significance behind choosing human hands as a subject of study might be an admired act by artists in several periods in the history; occasionally this happened more for personal immanent reasons than anything else. However, while reading a work which emphasizes parts of human body as image (in this case usage of hand images by Rakhi) requires reasoning the reference. The same necessarily need not have direct connections to the work, rather it might manipulate the subconscious to surface and form a work, which is capable of generating diametrically contrary meanings.

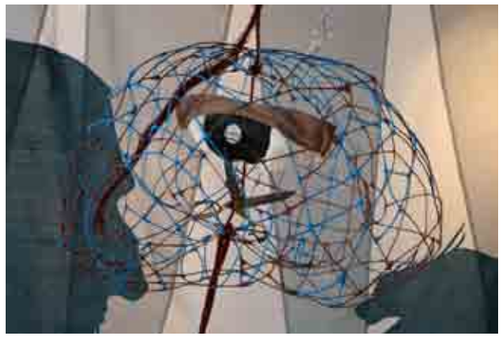
This is a diptych again made in hand embroidery and appliqué on *monga* silk and velvet fabric. These panels display two hands engaged in the act of stitching and a line of text in each. One of them stating *Every Stitch is also a trick* and the other *Every Stitch is also a prick.* Both the panels display images in similar activity and both show a detailed depiction of hands. Hands have reappeared as a subject matter for study ever since the renaissance till date. Rakhi depicted the same along with the text syntactically weaving a complex chronicle with proverbial precisions. Like all her works this one too is loaded with metaphors and seeks to open ends for reading. The work is a ground where two dimensional space is capable of catering a text- image diesis for the viewer. The text and a pun with the same, in her works are not just complimentary tools of the visuals/ images but they are catalytic in nature, which exalt the work independently by their unique characters. A viewer is left with an option to engage with the 'text' solely because of the pictorial nature attained only with extrapolated/multiple connotations of the same.

Detail of *Seductive Myths of Lightness - Sightscapes of an Insomniac II*

Icarus is a character in Greek mythology. He is the son of Daedalus and is commonly known for his attempt to escape Crete by flight, which ended in a fall to his death. Latin poets read the myth more philosophically, most of the time linking Icarus analogically to artists.

Seductive Myths of Lightness - Sightscapes of an Insomniac I and Seductive Myths of Lightness - Sightscapes of an Insomniac II

The works are sequels, one in golden and the other in blue, both creating symphony with light that is manipulated through the coloured fabric and visually wraithlike verses from poems. The first work in golden, called *Seductive Myths of Lightness - Sightscapes of an Insomniac II,* is of dimensions 7' x 4' x 7' and is a single bed space with a wooden bench inside to allow only one person at a time to lie down on it. The bench, measuring 8" x 22" x 60", in the middle of the enclosed space, is a provision left for the viewer to lie down and watch the translucent golden walls, the appliquéd images on them and watch the distorted Baconesque sculptural, body/armature hovering on top from its ceiling, where Rakhi has quoted Rilke. The two works are like anti-thesis to each other; exploring intricacies of reasoning, imagination and exhaustion. The work is made in organza fabric, cotton fabric, satin fabric, fake fur, velvet fabric, wool, iron armature, galvanized wire. The golden work of the sequence shapes a space that is generally occupied by a single bed. The golden organza fabric holds silhouettes of falling figures, a pair of feather made wings placed near to the skeletal form, reminds of the morbid myth of Icarus. The plight of every creative soul to fly but failure in the process ends in disillusionment. A severed braid hanging in the middle of shadowy images of figures similar to that of Hieronymous Bosch, (who produced some of the spectacular innovative paintings on fantasy that have ever existed) creates an eerily surreal ambience.



Detail of *Seductive Myths of Lightness - Sightscapes of an insomniac I*

The exotic of the blue work called *Seductive Myths of Lightness - Sightscapes of an insomniac I*, is executed with organza fabric, cotton Fabric, wooden bench, galvanized iron wire, gauze, velvett fabric, satin fabric, feathers. This one is a large, blue 7' x 7' x 7' work with an eye encaged within an armature bound globe-like brain in blue. Motifs like scissor and needle construe the space with culture specificity. The work stands like an uncanny organism, capable of engulfing more than one person. Precisely, this is the work which is large enough to allow people to roam inside and experience the form that defines 'space' by diddling with light, colour, and transparency. The work in some way, reminds one of the noir genre in films; sharing the dark, ambiguous and phantasmal nature.

Detail of *Being and Becomings - (K)nights of Slow Mutations*

The 19th century French historian, Ernest Renan, characterized the conceptual shift that took place during the 18th century as a change from being to becoming. At the beginning of the century, it was believed that an immutable God had created a static Nature and given us an absolute revelation of Himself in Scripture. Natural theology, utilizing Lockean sensationalism, justified studying Nature as a means of learning about God. This approach undermined the authority of Scripture by giving primacy to reason and by linking particular theological views to specific scientific theories. When those static theories, emphasizing being, gave place in the 19th century to more dynamic explanations, the theological views were viewed as having also been overturned. The scientific theories of the French philosophies , relying on a different view of Locke, eliminated God and revelation. Their theories, however, displayed the characteristics associated with becoming that would determine the direction of 19th century science. The theological position associated with becoming was developed by John Wesley. Looking at Locke in yet a third way, Wesley tried to validate a continuing, dynamic revelation of God. But this revelation was subjective, and

according to Locke, incapable of being communicated to another individual. In a culture that valued scientific objectivity, subjective religious knowledge was irrelevant. Thus the 18th century, while not presenting Christian theology with major scientific challenges in the form of theories, did raise basic epistemological questions, and science provided the answers that proved to be acceptable. - From 'Being to Becoming: Science and Theology in the Eighteenth Century'; Sara Joan Miles, History and Biology Departments; Wheaton College; Wheaton IL.

Being and Becomings - (K)nights of Slow Mutations

The work stands in satin fabric, cotton fabric, acrylic stuffing, organdie fabric, rope, hand embroidery, gauze, organza flowers, galvanized iron wire, safety pins. Dimensions of the work vary when installed providing it a malleability that lets it grow like an organism. This shows a pair of pillows, one of which suggests a spine, creating a macabre sensitization beneath the speck-less white pillow cover. This, very artistically is construed by knots on a rope. The second pillow shows a pair of bird's feet; probably any bird of prey, the feet grow up into dead branches of trees. Above hangs again a brain like form which also puns into an 'earth' which is exploding open. The form is made out of gauze and armature. The exploding earth, universal spine (read self/ being) is under the mercy of claws of circumstances and contrarily to modernist belief of 'science triumphs alone' the work expresses vulnerability, futility and limitations of the ever expanding convinced 'self' which in reality exists with a satisfaction derived out of pseudo-power.

"The thematic concerns as of now have developed over a period of peripatetic life in various Indian cities, simultaneously layered within a middle class upbringing disciplined through the practice of needle work. This small personal discovery allows me to layer this with other necessities that a liberal, capitalist economy offers. Simplistically, while providing more and more to consume, it is simultaneously expanding the needs with an ever growing discontentment…"- Rakhi Peswani. (2007)

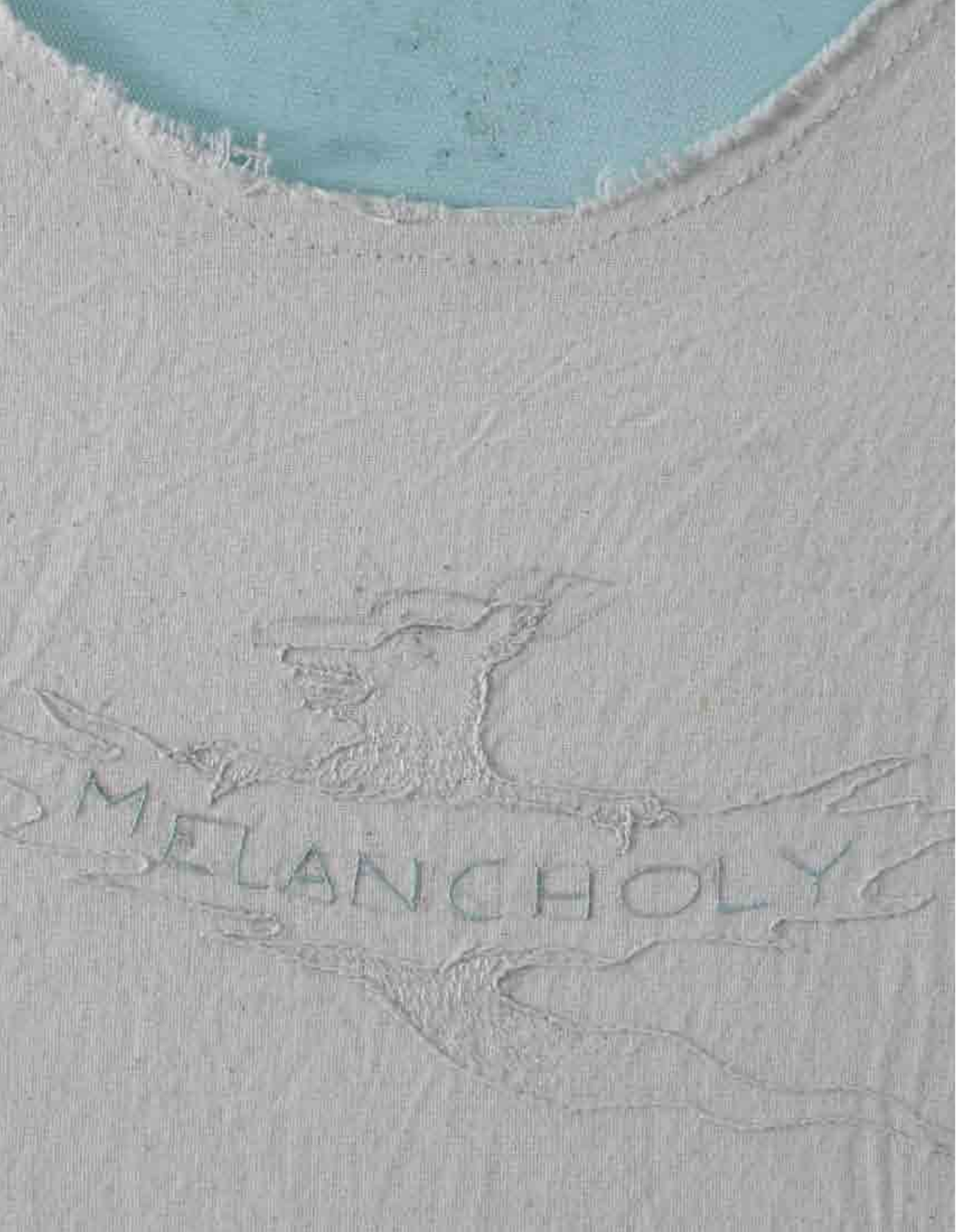
This statement from the artist specifically locates the source, class, locale and conditions of her creative impulses, but intimate engagement while studying her works reveal a universality that is present in them; this ensures the potential of translatability in the works, which transcends the aforementioned conditions, consequently succeeding in the purpose of expression/ communication. Where 'discontentment' is a reason to create, to change, to move away from the points of inception, the purpose of creating art would direct towards escapades for the artistic mind from the state of quandaries. Perceptive , articulative Rakhi Peswani's art works tend to surpass limitations posed by mediums, their conventional understandings, quondam images and memories simultaneously, sympathizing with effacing purpose of all these for the sake of evolution.

Avijna Bhattacharya, 2009
(Art critic and writer presently working from Kolkata)

1

Poetics of Desire - the Birth of Language (triptych)
Cotton fabric, hand embroidery, mirrors, appliqué,
woollen fur fabric, nylon net
64" x 42" each, 2009

Each panel with details pg 24 - 29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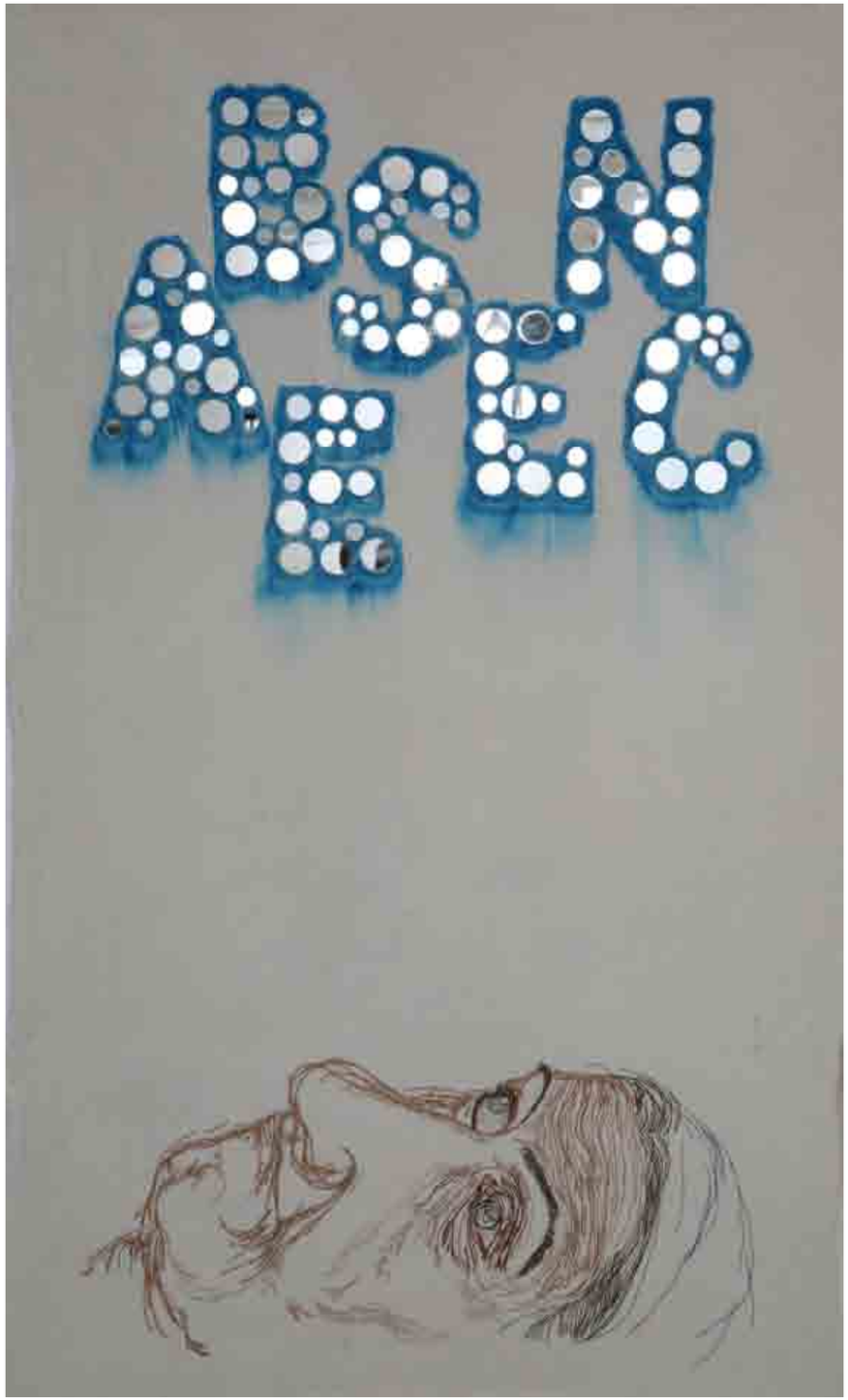
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"Éros, c'es


"Éros, c'est la vie"

2

As You Sew... (Some Notes on the Magic of Making)
Readymade wooden shelves, mixed media with varying kinds of fabric, textile tools, hand embroidery, frames in glass
8' x 7" x 9" (dimensions of each shelf), 2009

Details pg 32 - 37


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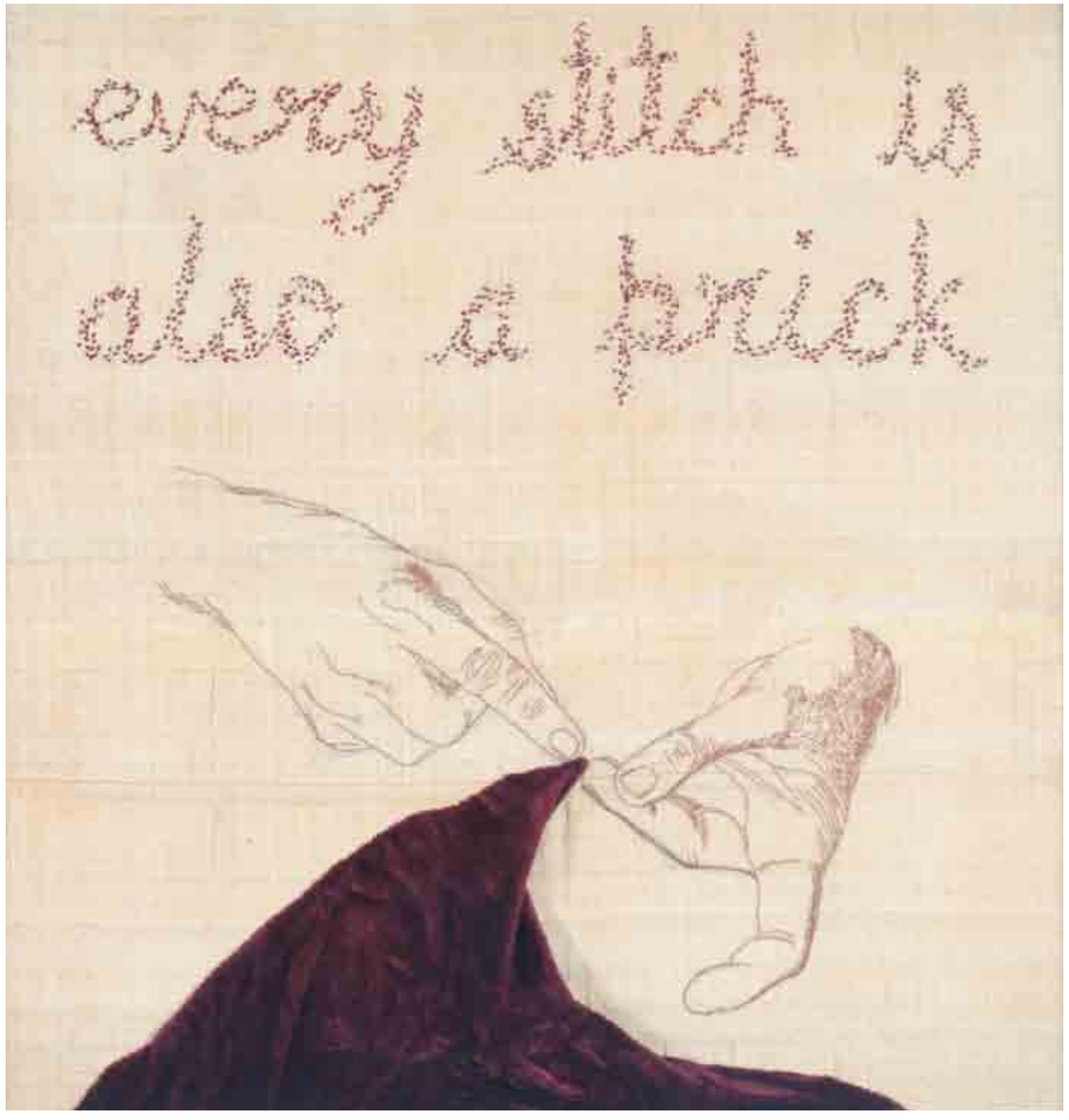

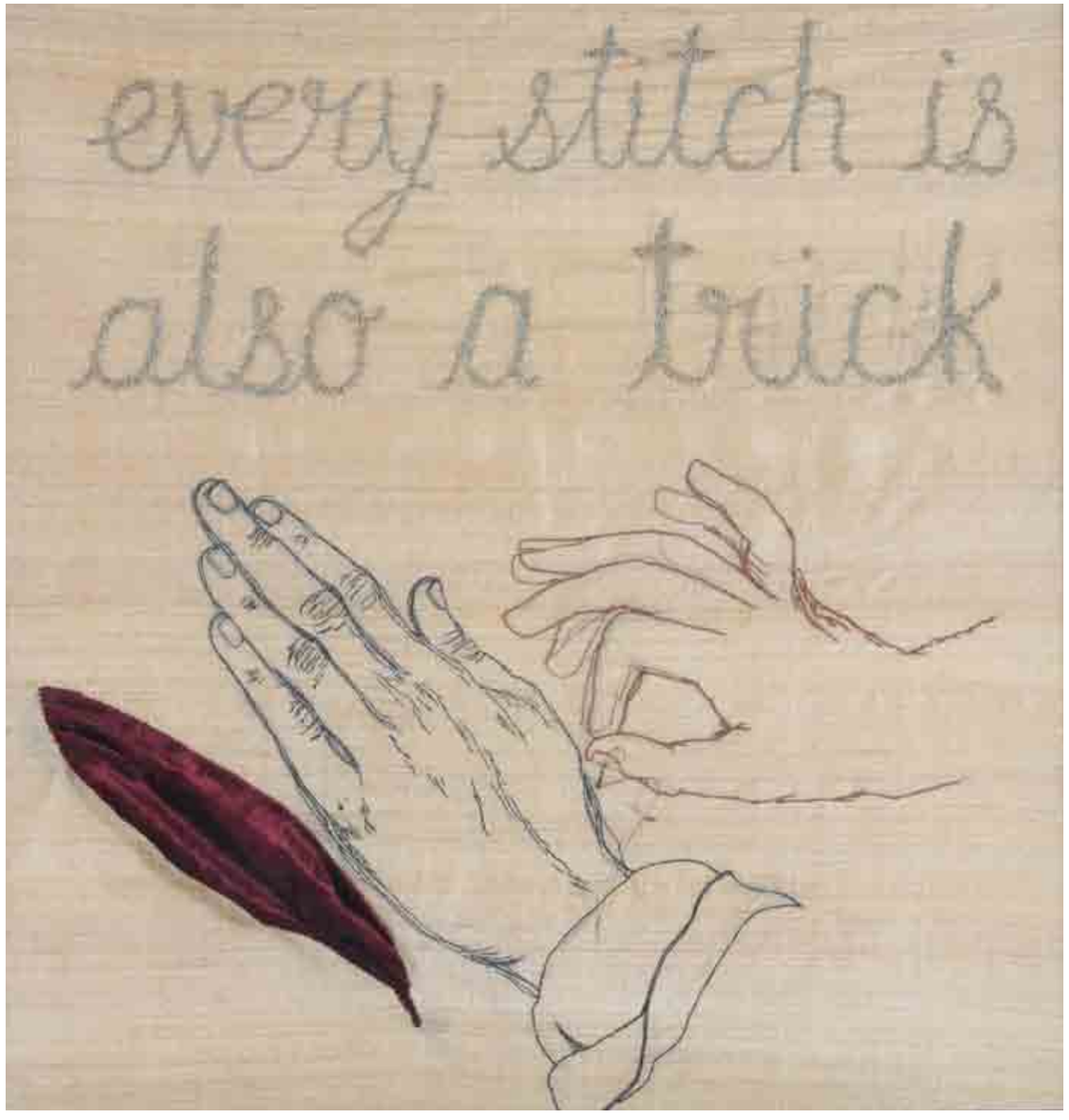

3

On the Rules of the Game (diptych)
Monga silk fabric, hand embroidery, appliqué with velvet fabric
24" x 24", 2008

Details pg 40 - 43

4

Misnomers (Re-construing the Body) in10 Panels
Cotton hand towels, hand embroidery, appliqué
19" x 25" approx, 2009

Each panel with details pg 45 - 63


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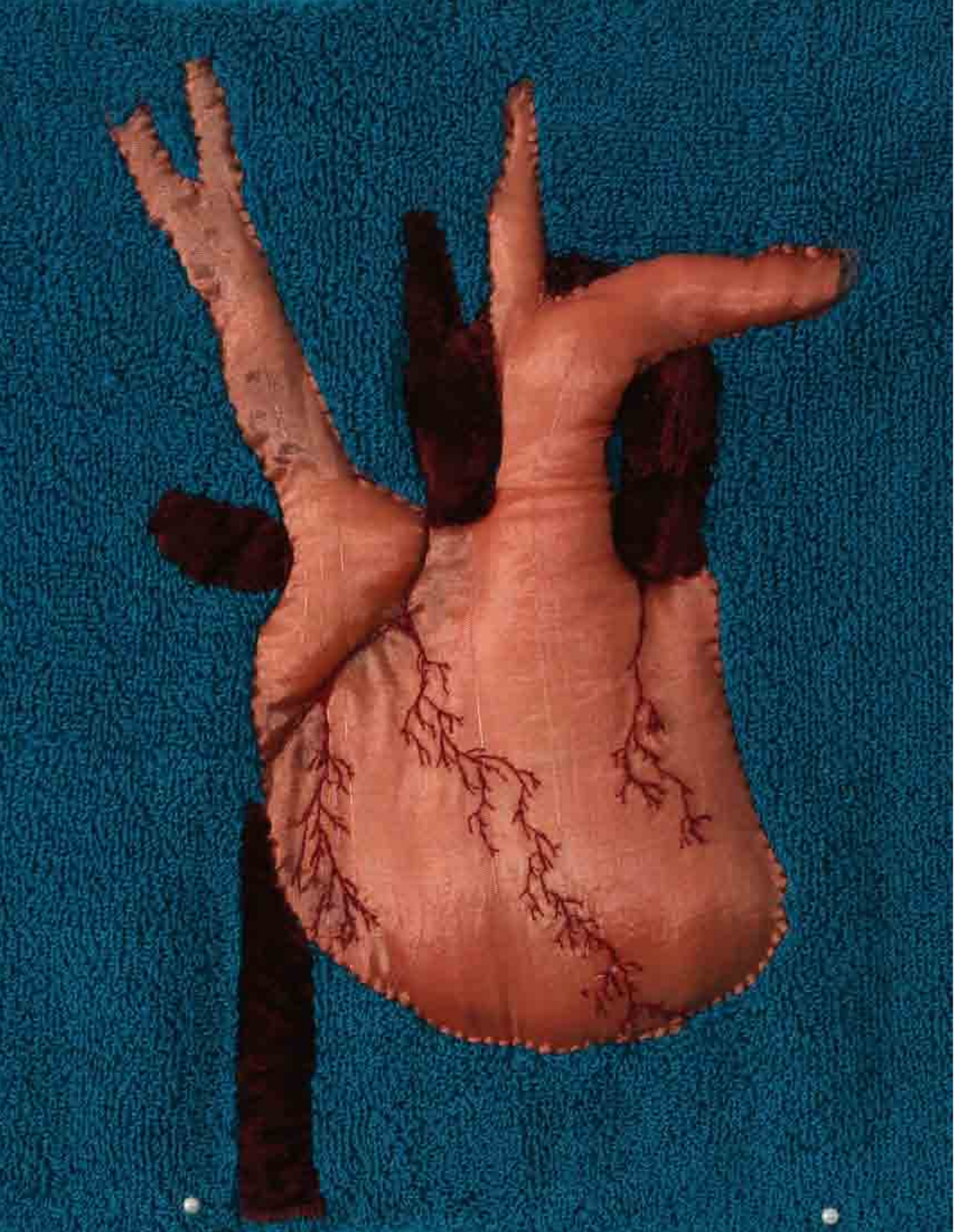

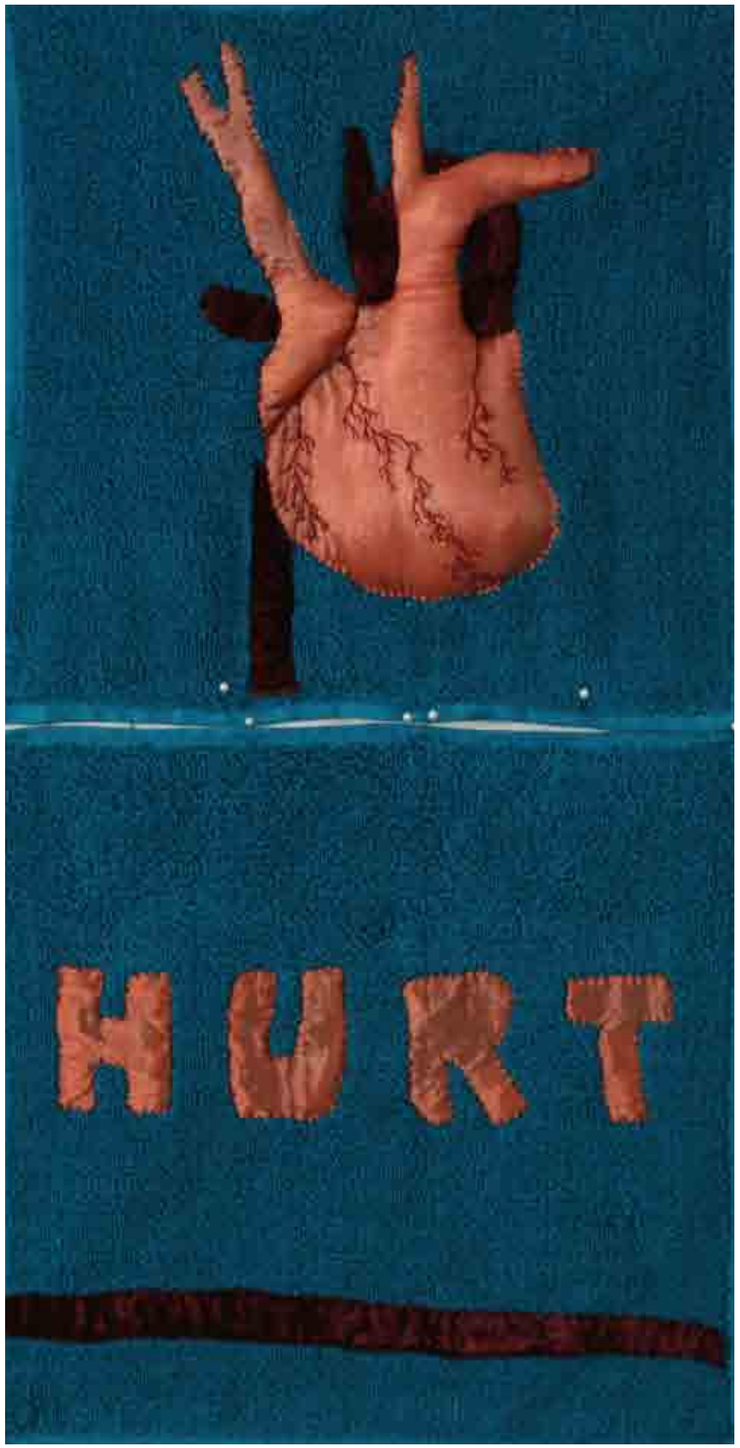
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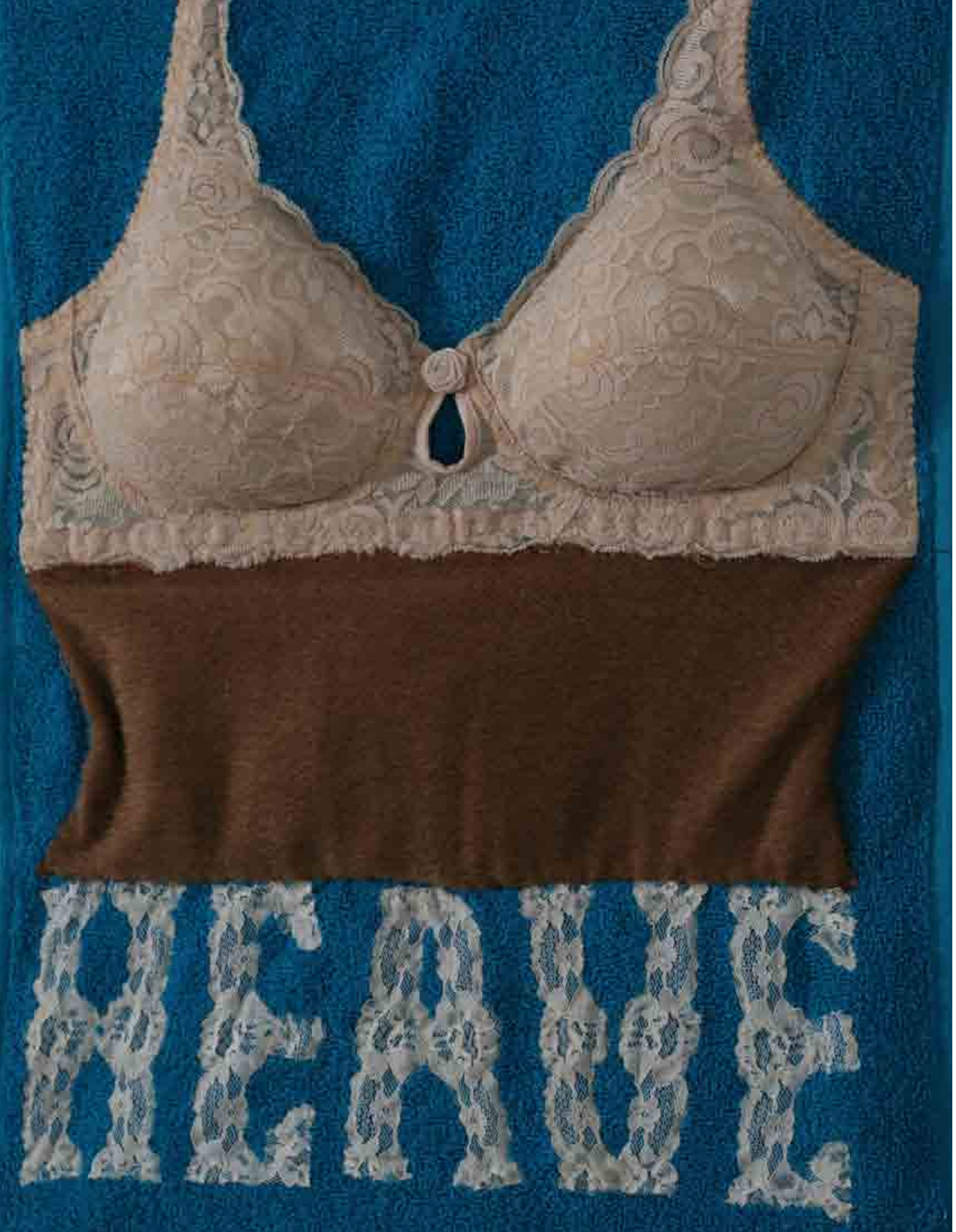
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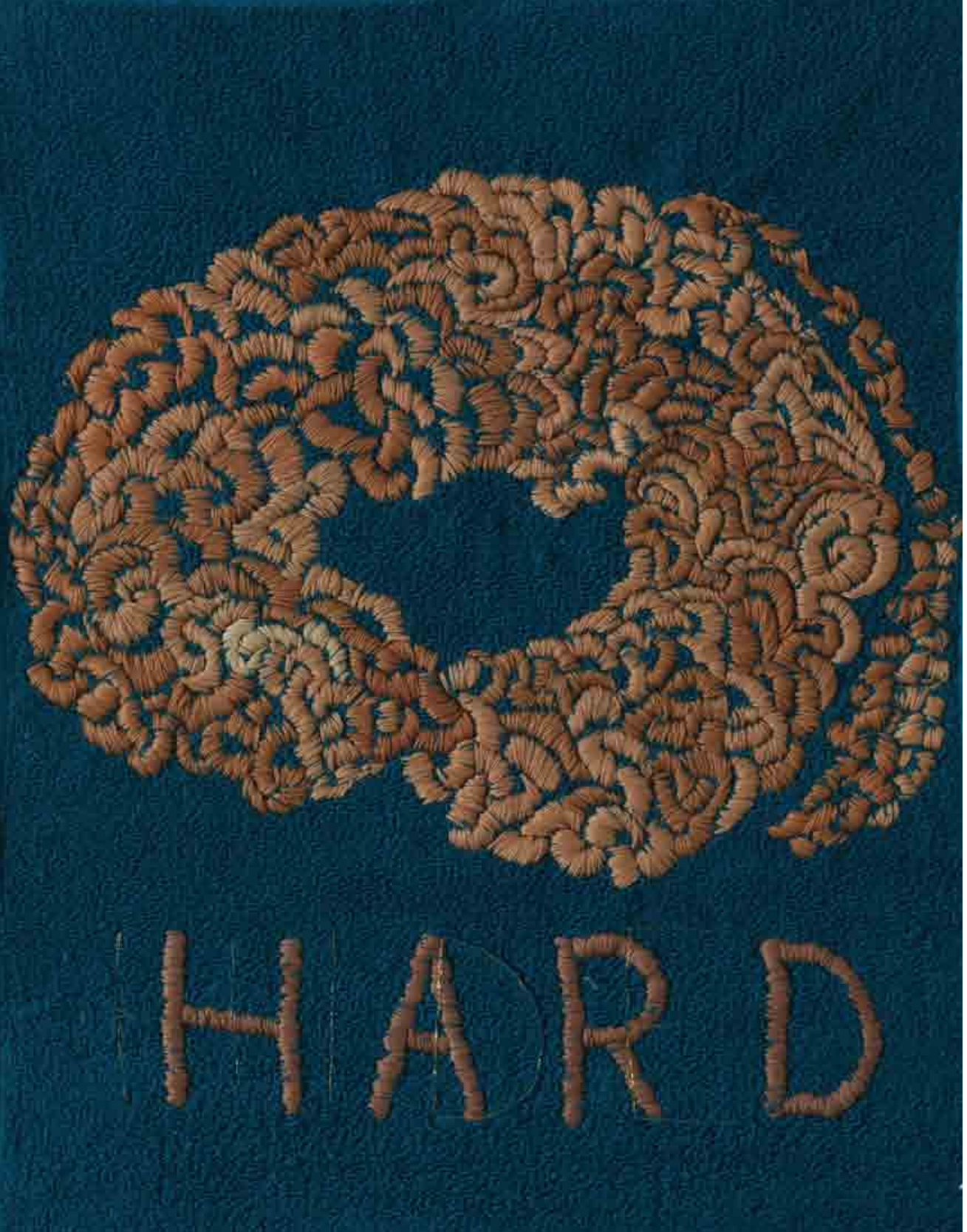
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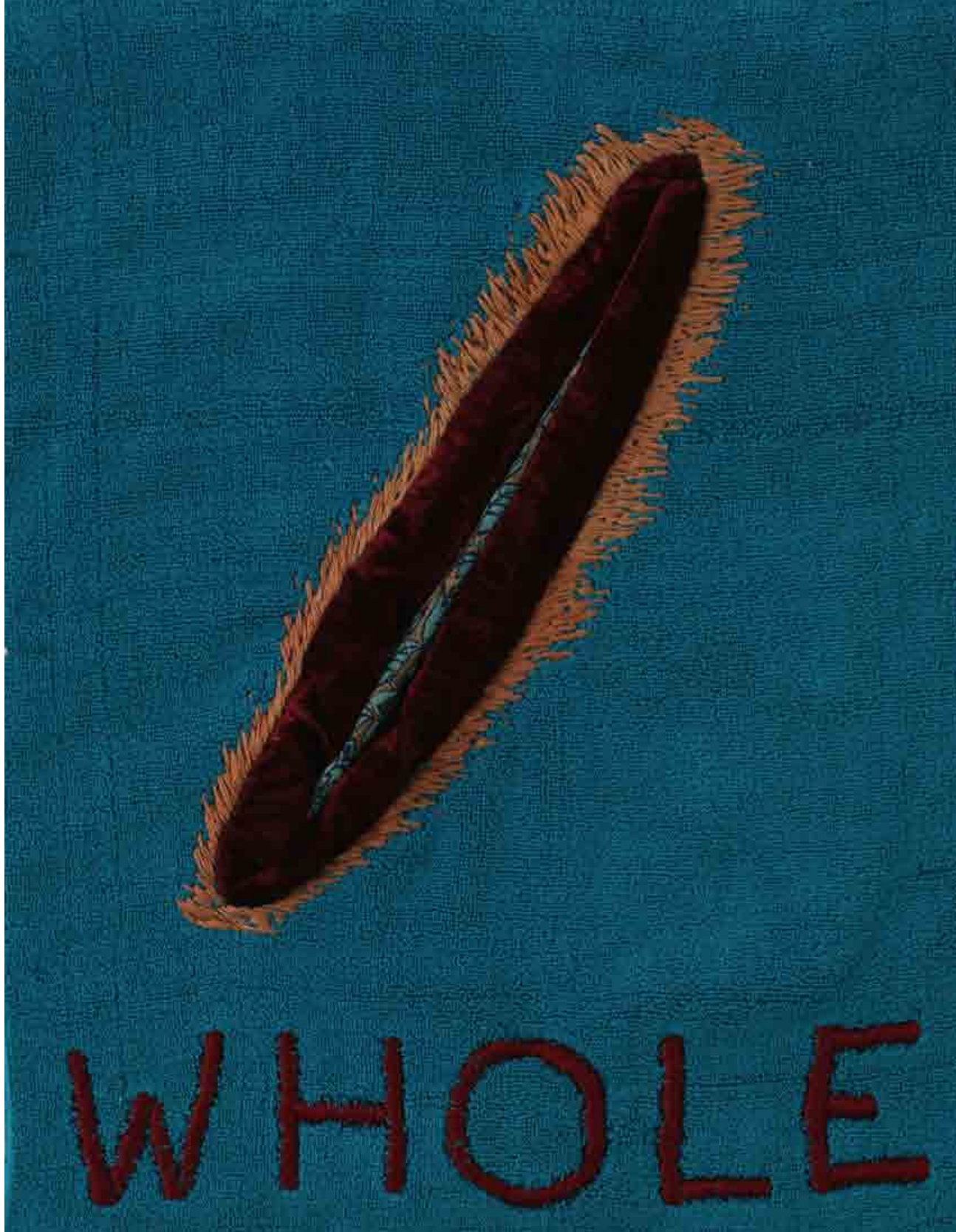
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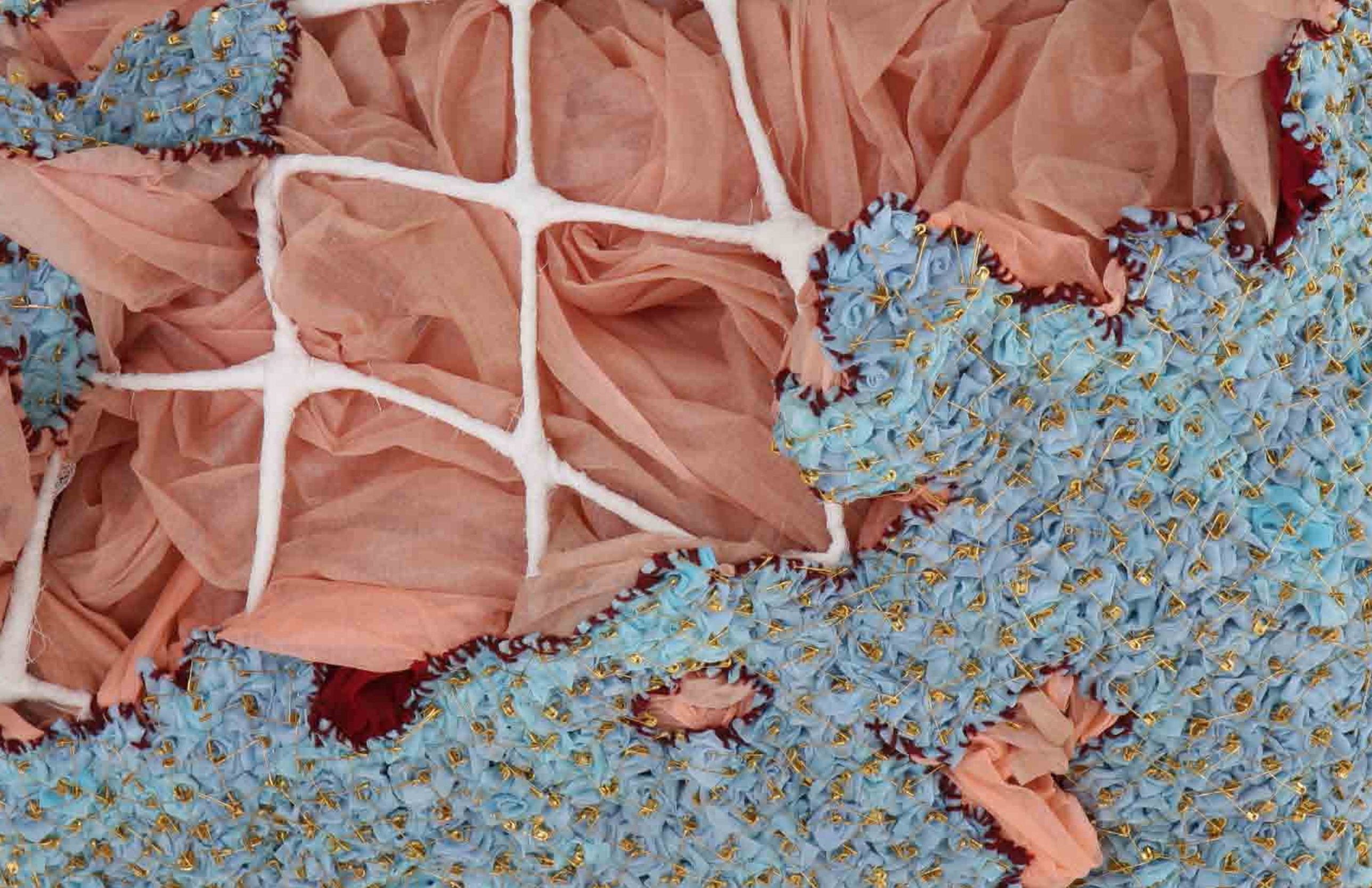
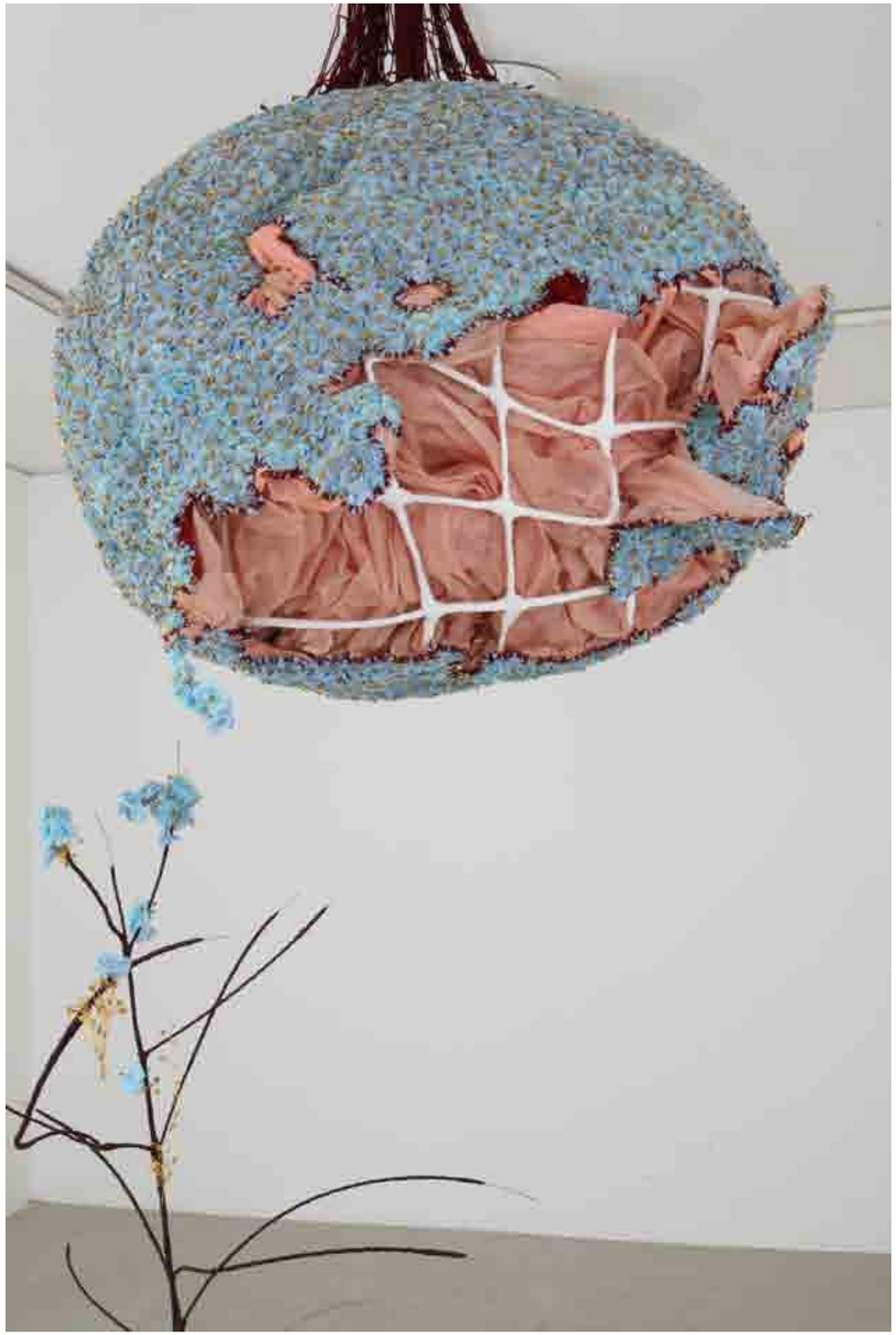
5

Being and Becomings – (K)nights of Slow Mutations
Organza fabric, satin fabric, cotton fabric, velvet fabric, organdie fabric, gauze, galvanized iron wire, safety pins, acrylic stuffing
Dimensions of the work vary when installed
Dimensions of one Pillow: 10" x 24" x 36", 2009

Details pg 66 - 71

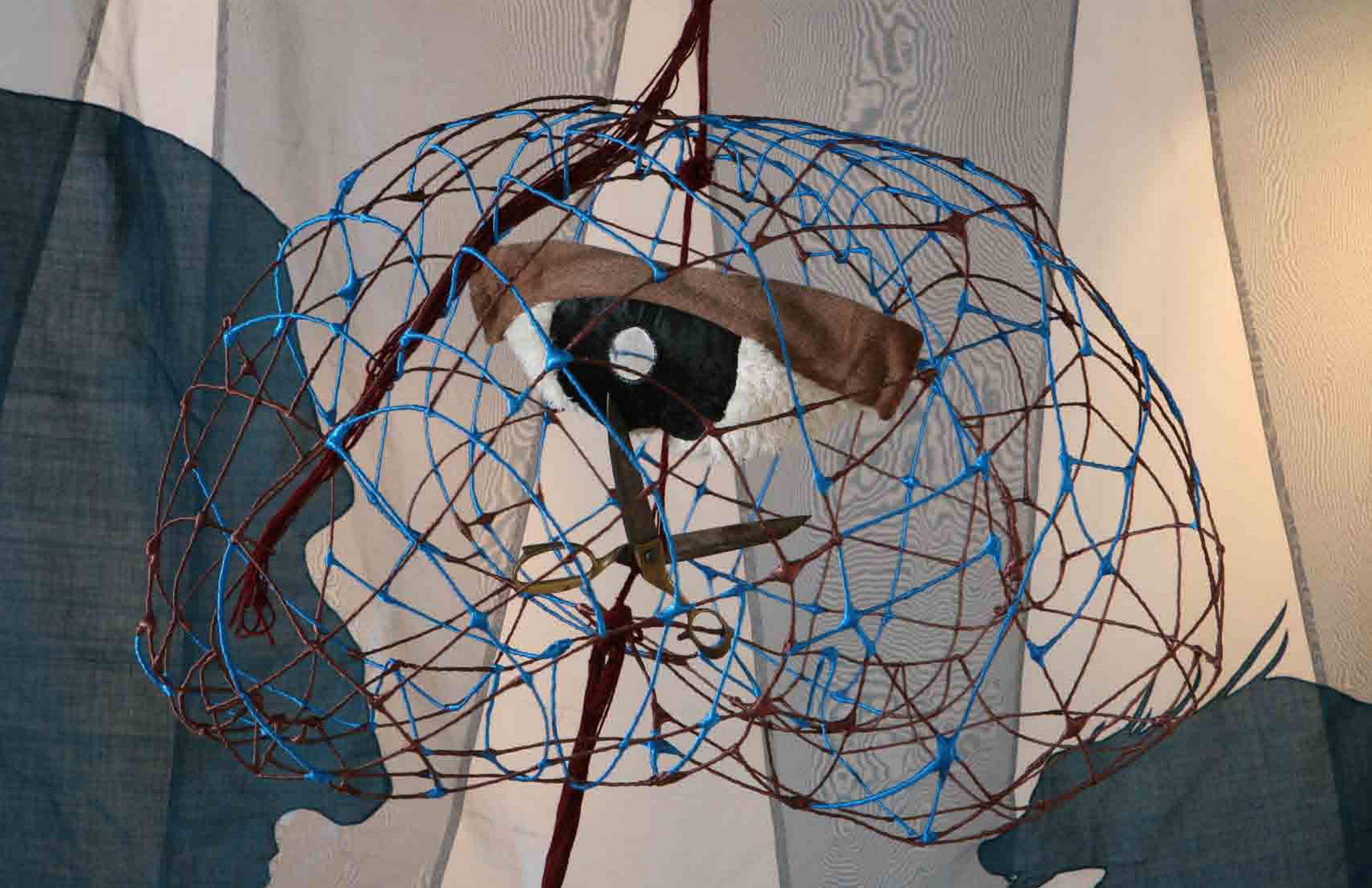




6

Seductive Myths of Lightness (Sightscapes of an Insomniac) I
Organza fabric, cotton fabric, machine embroidered appliquè, galvanized wire armature, satin ribbons, fake fur, hand embroidered mirror, velvet fabric, iron armature
7' x 7' x 7', 2009

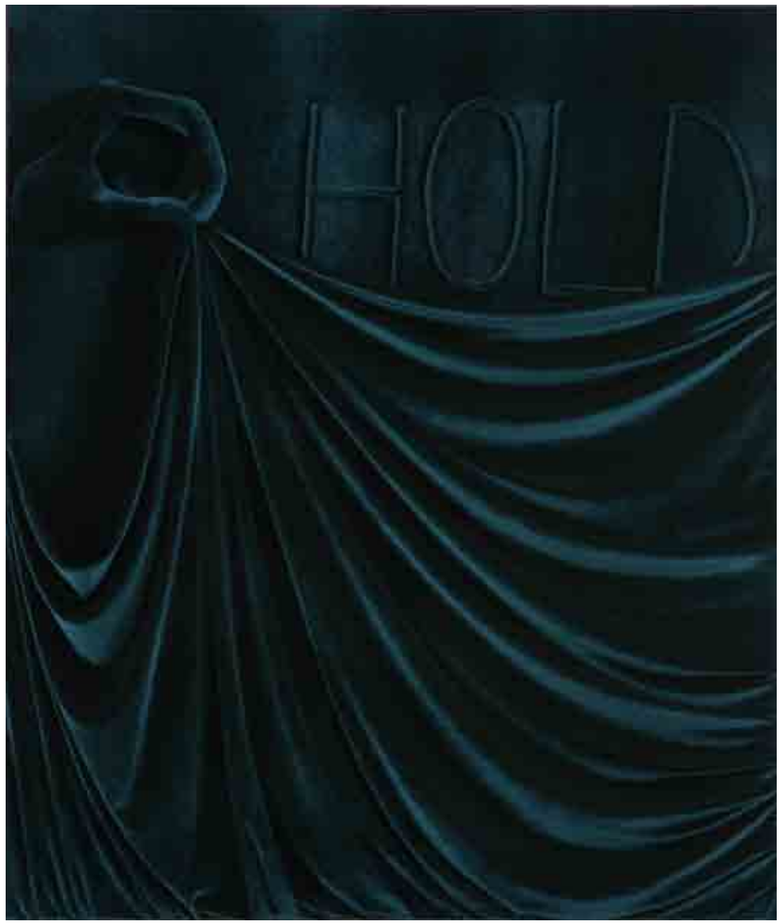
Details pg 74 - 83

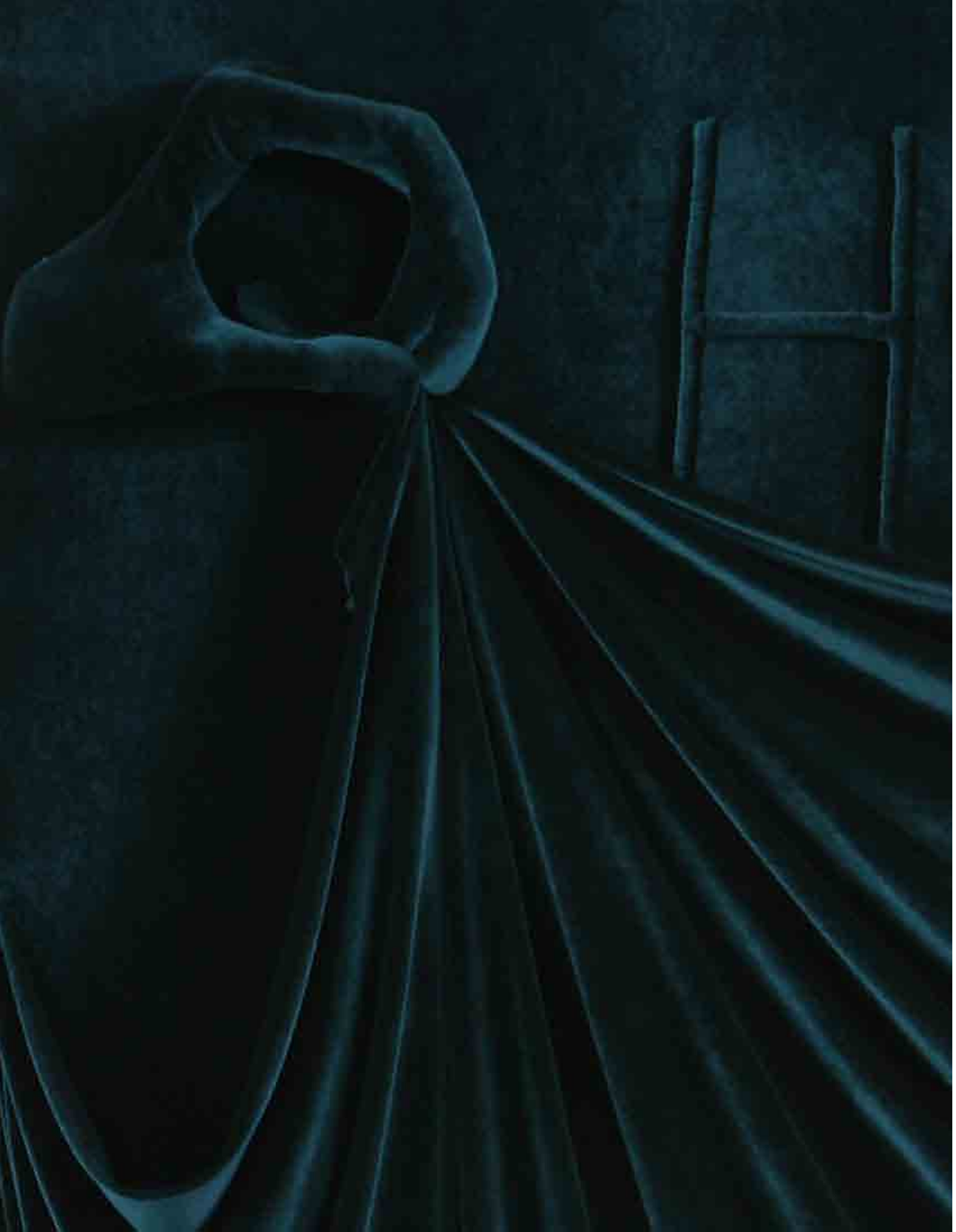


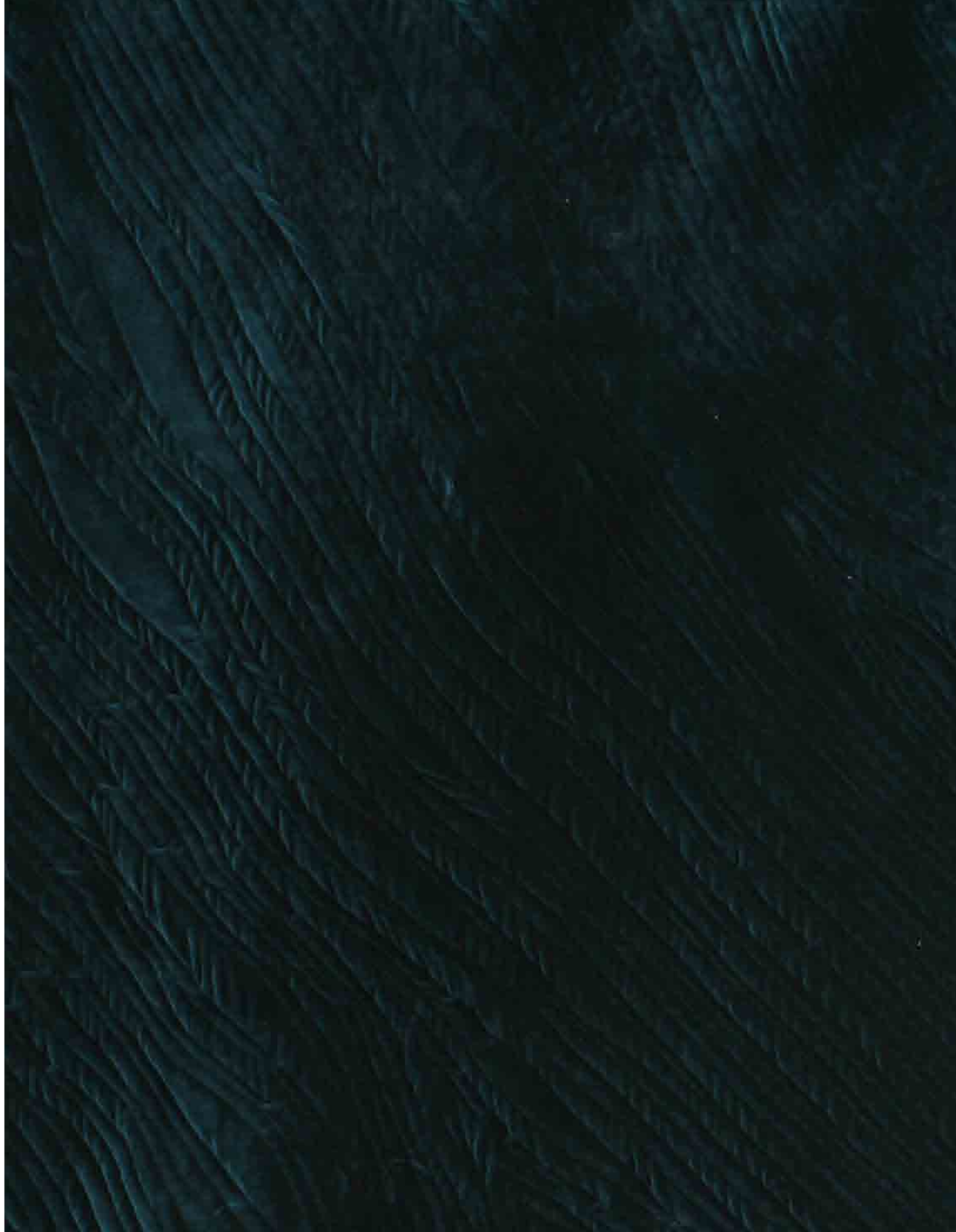
7

Three Studies on Retention (of Memory) (triptych)
Velvet fabric, cotton fabric backing, appliqué technique, galvanized iron armature, gauze and acrylic stuffing; stretched on wooden frames
43" x 36" each, 2008

Details pg 86 - 90



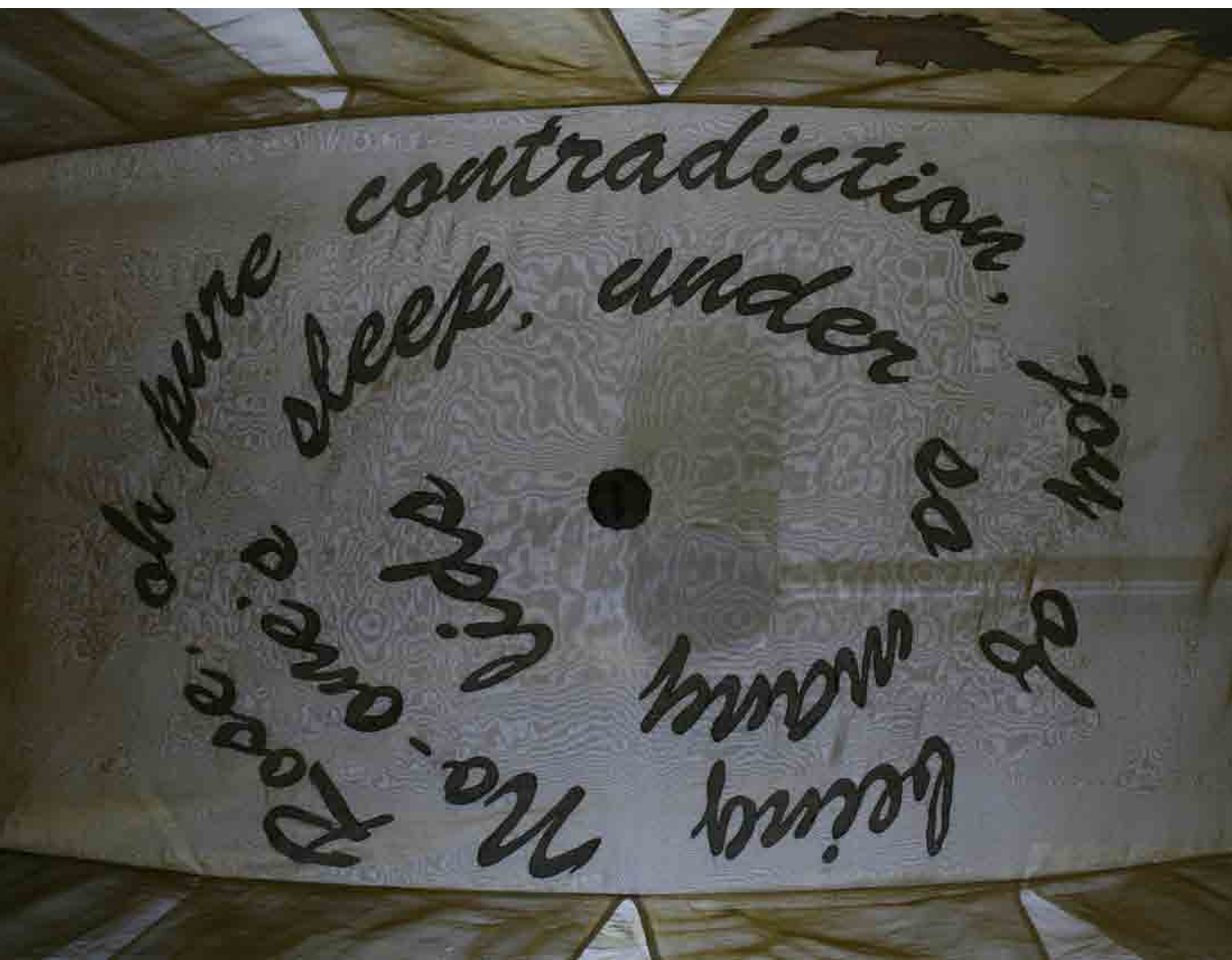




8

Seductive Myths of Lightness (Sightscapes of an Insomniac) II
Organza fabric, cotton fabric, machine embroidered appliquè, galvanized wire armature, patinated copper wire, satin ribbons and satin fabric, fake nylon hair, nylon net fabric, hand embroidered mirror, velvet fabric, gauze fabric, bird feathers, readymade wooden bench
7' x 4' x 7', Dimensions of the bench: 18" x 14" x 59", 2009

Details pg 94 - 103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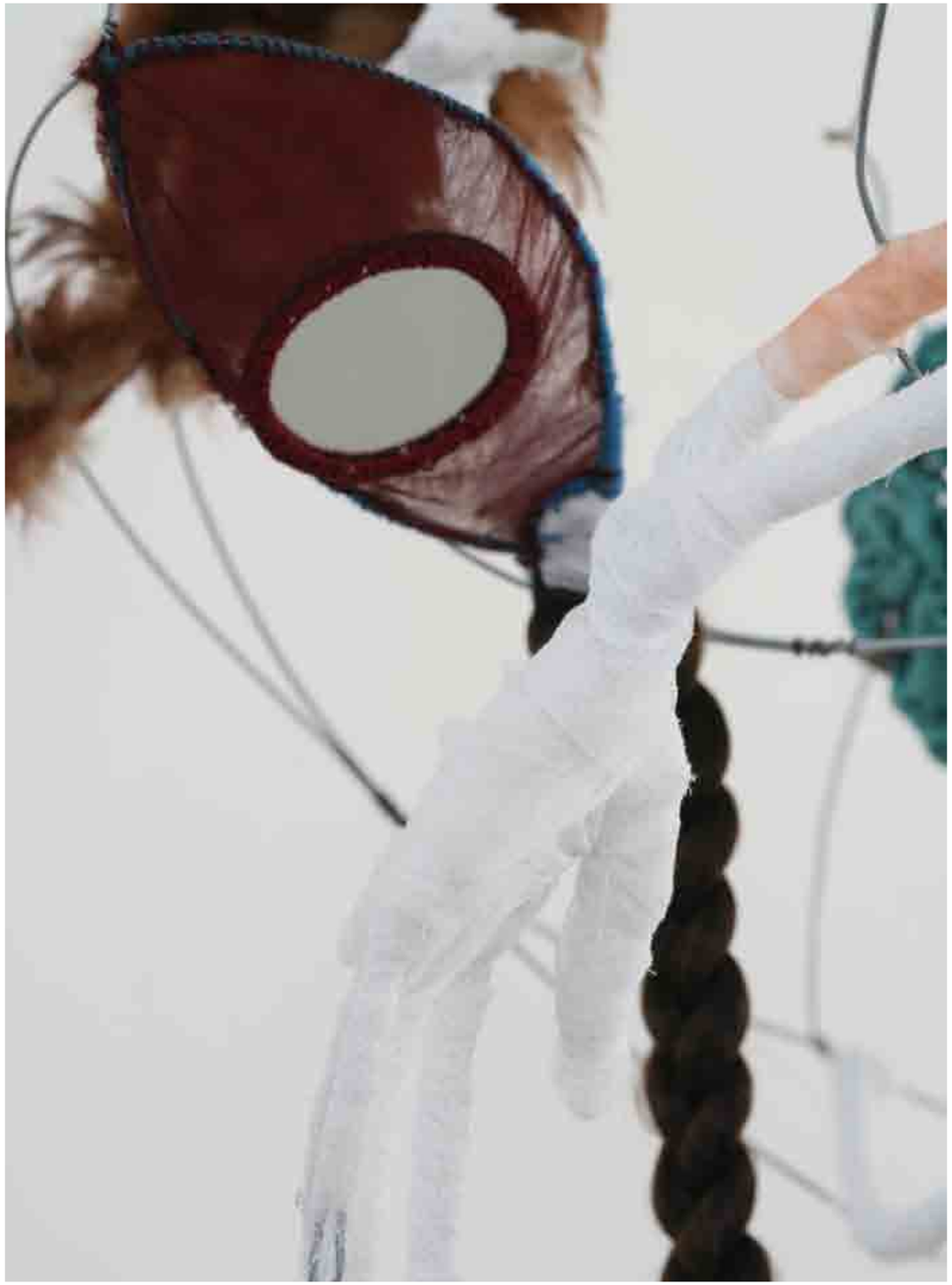
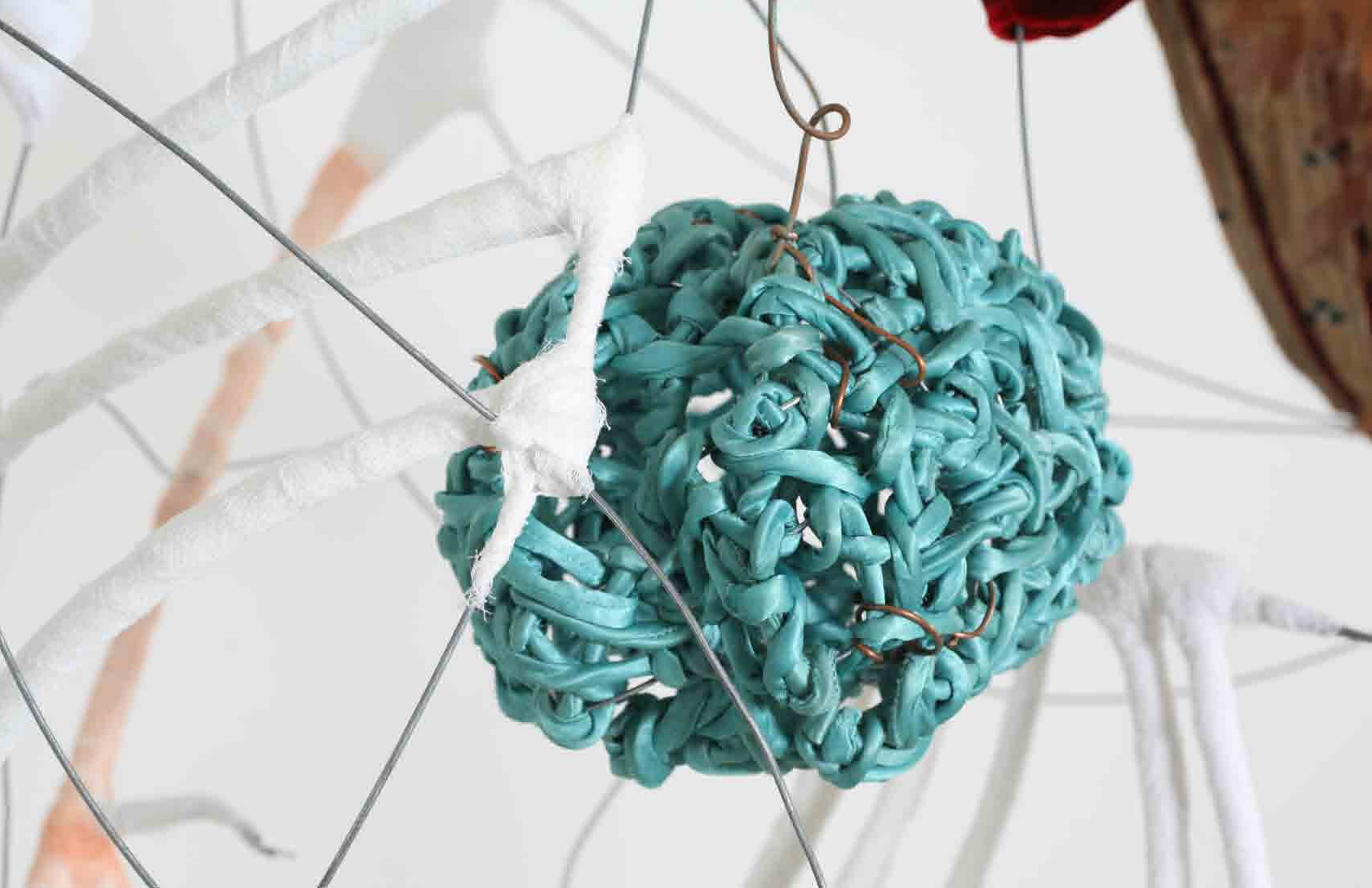
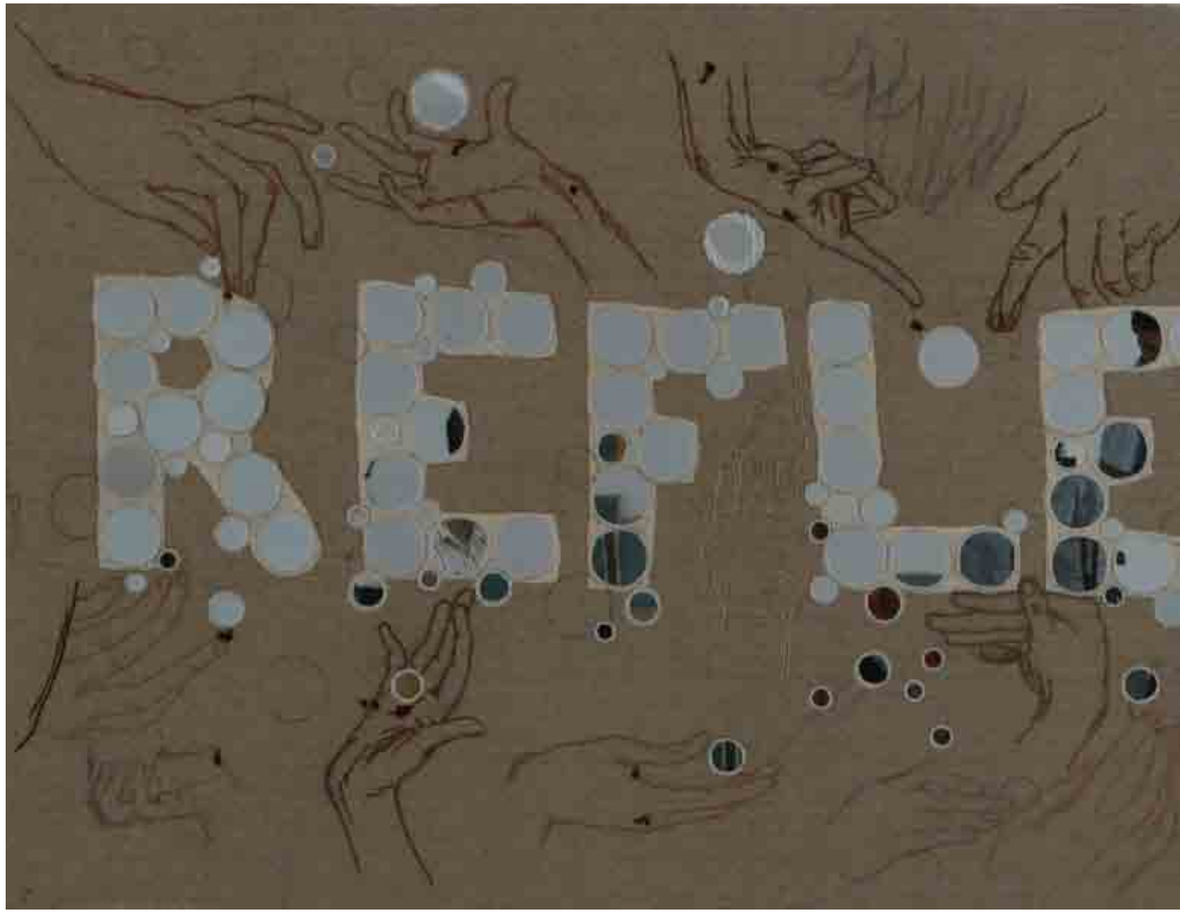




9

Anatomical Construction of Ideas
Moth silk fabric, backing of cotton fabric,
hand embroidery, mirrors, graphite drawings
10' x 4', 2009

Details pg 106 - 111



RAKHI PESWANI

Date of Birth 14th October 1977

Qualifications

2003 Qualified the National Eligibility Test for Lectureship and Junior Research Fellowship under the University Grants Commission
2001-2003 MFA (Sculpture), M.S. University, Baroda
1996-2000 BFA (Painting), M.S. University, Baroda

Exhibition Participation

2009 *Analytical Engine*, a group show Curated by Heidi Fitchner. At Bose Pacia, Kolkata, India
2008 Participated at Art Asia Miami, with the Guild Art Gallery, Miami, Florida
2008 *The Ego, The Persona, The Shadow, and the Old Man or was it The Great Mother?, a* group show curated by Ombretta Agro at The Guild New York
2008 *Parables of the Thread,* a group show curated by Jayaram Poduval at the Loft, Mumbai, India
2008 *Through a Glass, Darkly; Reflections on the Self Portrait*, a group show at the Guild Art Gallery
2008 *Filament*, a group show commemorating 5 years of Peers Residency at Khoj, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, India
2008 Participated in the Hong Kong Art Fair with Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA), Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, India
2008 *Inner Vision*, a group show curated by Subbalakshmi Shulka, at the Guild Art Gallery, New York
2007 Solo show titled *Sonnet for Silent Machines,* at Jehangir Nicholson Gallery and the Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai, India
2007 *Beyond Images*, a group show at Faculty of Fine Arts, M S University, Baroda, Gujarat, India
2006 Solo show of recent works at the Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Mumbai, India
2006 Participated in the open day exhibition with an installation for the project *Real Memories, Imaginary Places*, an ongoing project, at Cittadellarte, Biella, Italy
2006 *Panchmarhi*, a group show at ABS Lanxess, Baroda, India
2004 *Salient Liaison*, at the State Gallery of Fine Arts, Department of Culture, Hyderabad, India
2001 *Potters in Peril*, at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, India
1999 Group show on *Still Life* at Sonnet Lumiere, Mumbai, India
1998 Gujarat State Lalit Kala Exhibition, Ravishankar Raval Bhavan, Ahmedabad, India

Awards and Scholarships

2007 Emerging Artist Award by Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA), Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, India
2006 Inlaks Scholarship for the UNIDEE in residence at Cittadellarte, Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, Italy
2003 National Merit Scholarship from the Ministry of Culture, HRD, Govt.of India

Seminar Participation

2008 Presented a visual essay titled *Hands between the Eyes and the Mind: Some Reflections on the hand made in craft practices in the seminar Visual Culture: Mapping the terrain*, at Hyderabad Central University under UGC DSA, Hyderabad, India. March 2008

Projects

2008 Illustrated a book titled *Chakkuprantham, The Sack Clothman*, by Jayashree Kalathil. Under the stories project with Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, sponsored by Sir Ratan Tata Trust, Parag Inititative
2007 Won the design competition for an entry in the project *Cubes in Motion*, an ongoing traveling design project collaborating local entrepreneurship and craftsmanship from Biella, at Cittadellarte, Italy
2006 *Real Memories, Imaginary Places*, a project in collaboration with Cittadellarte for Botto Giuseppe textile industry, Valle Mosso, Italy
2004 *Salient Liaison*, a self curated, collaborative exhibition project with Shaila Nambiar, Textile Designer based in Hyderabad. Funded by the Department of Culture, Govt. of Andhra Pradesh, The French Embassy in India and Alliance Françoise de Hyderabad, India

Residency Invitation

2007 Artists' residency at Sanskriti Kendra, Sanskrithi Pratishthan, New Delhi, India
2006 UNIDEE in residency, at Cittadellarte, Fondazione Pistoletto, Italy
2003 *PEERS-2003*, residency invitation from KHOJ, New Delhi, India

Camps

2005 Attended the yearly art camp at Panchmarhi, Madhya Pradesh, India

Teaching Experience

2009 Visiting faculty at Governement College of Fine Arts, Trissur, University of Calicut
2009 Visiting Faculty at Raja Ravi Verma College of Fine Art, Mavelikara, University of Kerala
2007 Worked as a Part - time Project Fellow in the Visual Culture initiative with Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad, India
2004 Conducted a workshop on *The dialectics of material in the making of terracotta sculpture* for post graduate students of sculpture discipline at S.N. School, Hyderabad Central University. Currently Working as a Guest Faculty at S.N. School of Fine Arts, Performing Arts and Communication
, Hyderabad Central University, Hyderabad, India