

SILENT SCREAM

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By

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Silent Scream is dedicated to those who are new to America, struggling to overcome their inability to express themselves in the English language.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF PLATES.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	2
SILENT SCREAM.....	3
THE NOTION OF BEAUTY AND PHILOSOPHY OF SILENT SCREAM...	7
THE EXHIBITION.....	9
CONCLUSION.....	14
PLATES.....	15
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	25

LIST OF PLATES

Plate 1. Red Mittens, 36"h x 42"w

Plate 2. The Exhibition View

Plate 3. Untitled #1, 80"h x 70"w (Total 37 canvases)

Plate 4. Detail of Untitled #1

Plate 5. Untitled #2, 48"h x 182"w (Total 6 canvases)

Plate 6. Detail of Untitled #2

Plate 7. Untitled #3, 12"h x 60"w (Photographic Documentation)

Plate 8. Detail of Untitled #3

Plate 9. Untitled #4, 40"h x 5"w x 3"d (Fiber Sculpture)

Plate 10. Detail of Untitled #4

MATERIALS:

Plate 1. oil, carpet glue and oil pastel on canvas

Plate 3. acrylic, stickers, paper, pins, resin and plaster on canvas

Plate 5. acrylic, ink, charcoal pencil, oil pastel, rice paper stickers and plaster on canvas

Plate 7. c-print and plexiglass

Plate 9. abaca, pin, cornstarch and paper mache

When I look at myself, I am a hand inside a mitten

In Korean, the word for mitten translates as 'mute glove.'

Like the hand in the mitten

My ability to express myself is hidden.

병어리장갑 속의 나 자신을 본다.

우리가 말 못하는 사람을 병어리라 부르듯

내 자신의 표현능력도 병어리장갑 속에 숨어있는

속가락 같다.

INTRODUCTION

Silent Scream is a series of works of art that explores the issue of immigrant identity. Living in America and learning a complex new language as a non-native speaker forms the basis of this thesis. The exhibition attempts to capture the emotions of a foreigner living in another country. The pieces are intended to convey imperfectness and the inability to completely emerge within another culture. To represent the foreigners' frustration and passion of overcoming difficulties in a new language the work also deals with obsessive labor of handling materials.

Aesthetically the work draws on the idea of *wabi-sabi* in Zen Buddhism which constitutes beauty through imperfection. It also expresses simplicity, inherent to the concept of *wabi-sabi*.

SILENT SCREAM

Many foreign students have said that communicating in English is the hardest thing to overcome when living in America. For immigrant adult students from non-English speaking countries, this is especially true. Most foreign students have studied English for many years before leaving to study here in the United States. Still the transition is difficult for them, and they tend to associate with those whom they can converse with most easily, peers from their native land. Sometimes, these students remove the glove of language inability only in a class setting.

Spoken English is very difficult for Korean people. English grammar differs greatly from Korean grammar. Sentence structure is not similar. In Korean, the object precedes the verb, while in English the verb comes after the subject. However, the hardest part of speaking English is the pronunciation of words. Language depends upon the abilities of phonology, syntax and semantics. The sounds of V, F, R, Z and X are not in the Korean language. Also, the ways of asking questions and responding to them are different. This is pragmatics, the ability to use language for the purpose of communication. "Can you pass the salt?" is a request for salt, not a request for information about one's ability to pass the salt. In order to understand a speaker's intention people use an intuitive mechanism. To get the finer distinction, pragmatics, and not phonology, syntax or semantics, is required. Because of these and other cultural difficulties, many foreign students remain silent during class discussions and public meetings to avoid being embarrassed. This obstacle is the core issue of

this thesis exhibition, "Silent Scream." "Silent Scream" captures the anxiety and frustration that come from the inability to express one's own thoughts and ideas clearly without being perplexing and misleading. These experiences provide great inspiration for my paintings.

In a way, my paintings are a representation of the "sublime." Edmund Burke described "sublime" as the contradiction of the beautiful and the unpleasant. Burke depicted this kind of "sublime" fear and anxiety in a letter he wrote to a friend:

No one perhaps has seen such a flood here as we have now.... All our Cellars are drowned not as before for that was but a trifle to this, for now the water comes up to the first floor of the House threatening us every minute with rising a great deal higher[,] the Consequence of which would infallibly be the fall of the house.

It gives me pleasure to see nature in those great tho' terrible Scenes, it fills the mind with grand ideas, and turns the Soul in upon herself. This... forced some reflections on me.... I considered how little man is yet in his own mind how great!¹

Burke considered flooding of the building to be beautiful. Despite the damage, he saw the inherent beauty and power of nature. This was a "sublime" moment for him.

One of my first sublime moments came in 1998. I went to an exhibition featuring the works of contemporary artist, Sophie Calle. The artist exhibited photographs showcasing people who were born blind. Calle placed a statement revealing the individual person's notion of beauty next to each portrait. This artwork was controversial, both tragic and inspiring. Some critics argued that the

¹ Stephen K. White, Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics p. 31

artist took advantage of disabled people. However, for me, it was a watershed moment. I could not stop crying when I gazed upon the images and came to the realization that art can touch the heart of the viewer. Calle's artwork made me examine my own personal history, even parts that I did not want to remember or reveal.

The memory of objects from my past became the subject matter for the artwork in my thesis exhibition. The hands depicted in the paintings are a metaphor for living in another country as an immigrant. The hardest obstacle that I had to overcome in America was talking in English. I have always felt like a mute even though speaking was normally not a problem for me. Often, I distanced myself from others due to fear and discomfort of communicating in English.

The subject matter of hands comes from an earlier exploration of a pair of red mittens. In Korean, mittens are called *bung-uh-lee-gang-gab*, which means mute gloves. Mittens are called mute gloves because each finger loses its ability to express itself fully inside the mitten. Others cannot observe the specific gestures of the fingers. Red mittens (plate 1) have great sentimental value because they were my first present from my father. Since he was sick for a long time, I did not receive any gifts from him. Thus, I valued the mittens immensely and had planned to wear them to school the next day to show them off. However that night, our house burnt to the ground. The memory of those mittens was contained in the first mittens painting.

Looking at the red-mittens painting, I realized that those mittens were actually a representation of me, a person who cannot talk. When I look at myself, I am like a hand inside a mitten. I have my own language, but in English I can only partly express myself, like a hand in a mitten. Sometimes, I feel dumb and mute like the individual fingers in the mitten.

THE NOTION OF BEAUTY AND PHILOSOPHY OF SILENT SCREAM

Simplicity is central to my concept of beauty. It provides a sense of nothingness and emptiness. It conveys the feeling of what I want to show, that living in America sometimes makes me feel empty. Although I am a Christian, most Asian people and I grew up under the influence of Zen Buddhism. The major concept of Zen Buddhism is “Nothingness,” where everything comes from and returns to nothingness.

Nothingness and simplicity are expressed in *wabi-sabi*, a Zen concept of beauty. Zen artists use the notion of *wabi-sabi* as a method to evoke a feeling of “emptiness”. The visual qualities of *wabi-sabi* are asymmetry, irregularity, intimacy, unpretentiousness, earthiness, murkiness and simplicity. At the core of *wabi-sabi* is simplicity. “Nothingness is the ultimate simplicity.”² “Simplicity is not so simple,”³ because this idea provides a sense of curiosity which fosters the imagination.

I feel more comfortable with simple forms of architecture, clothes, and furniture. My appreciation of simplicity emerged from my ancestry and educational background. Ancient Koreans lived in simple “L” and “ㄷ” shaped houses. Foreigners called the Koreans “white robe people.” This was due to the fact that ancient Koreans commonly wore white robes and this clothing represented pure blood Koreans. My first art teacher and my father were

² Leonard Koren, Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers p. 41

³ *ibid*

calligraphers. Therefore for me, the simplicity and directness of the individual line has remained a subconscious drawing approach.

During most of my high school and college years in Korea, I was educated in the techniques and methodology of western drawing and painting. These techniques required the use of arbitrary colors in my paintings and thousands of layers of cross-hatching within the drawings. At that time, I appreciated the complexity of such compositional works.

When I studied graphic design at the University of Hawai'i, I realized the difficulty of producing works that avoided complexity. Graphic design often requires a simple and concise form rather than a complex form. This led to my appreciation of simplicity. Simplicity provides a sense of resonance, emptiness, muteness, mystery and tranquility. Therefore, I have used simplicity as a primary visual aspect of my painting.

THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition (plate 2) is composed of four works. These consist of a photographic installation, two mixed media paintings, and a fiber sculpture. The major motif of the work is sign language gestures using the basic forms of hands and mittens. These are personal symbols based on my experiences in America. The work in plate 3 is a combination of 37 mixed media canvases. Images of hands cover the 22 paintings that represent each year that I lived in Korea. The other 15 canvases show images of mittens representing the years of living in America. Together, these 37 canvases create the shape of a hand. The elongated and exaggerated form of the hands and arms within the paintings symbolizes the process of reaching towards a never-ending goal similar to mastering English. Paper collage, pins and stickers comprise the materials used in this work. The technique was inspired by Neo-Expressionism, which is characterized by intense subjectivity of feeling and an aggressively raw handling of materials.⁴ Since the content of my painting entails the difficulties of communication, I used pages from Korean and English dictionaries for the collage. The feeling of pain that I endure when I am trying to communicate is conveyed in the use of the pins (plate 4). The red stickers, shown like blood flowing through veins, represent my life dominated by English. My native language is Korean, yet English is spoken the majority of the time. Like red blood cells in a hand, one cannot survive without using English. The color red also symbolizes the emotion and fear that I experienced when I lost my mittens.

⁴Oxford Dictionary of Art, 2nd Edition, p. 394.

The subtle yellowish white background provides a sense of tranquility and the aura of Korean ancestors. To contrast the simple form of the hands and convey the feelings of emptiness and sadness the texture on the surface is emphasized.

Plate 5 illustrates a piece composed of six canvases that use sign language to spell the word scream. As I worked with images of the hand, I thought about sign language as a metaphor for being mute, as well as deaf and blind. My difficulty in speaking English has led me to empathize with others who have similar problems. This has encompassed not only international students, but also those who suddenly became mute or deaf early in life and have struggled to cope with this situation. The work tried to convey the contradictory feelings of desperation, anguish, and fulfillment of the learning process. Each canvas in this series has a large image of a hand depicting a letter of the alphabet through sign language.

In each painting, pencil drawings of hands (plate 6) surround the large hand image. They represent the idea of practicing sign language similar to how the gesture drawings are studies for the larger hand form. To create depth and space within the composition, multiple images of the hands overlap one another. Also, different line weights are used to create a more interesting surface. Covering and uncovering the hands with paint generates a sense of push and pull. The materials of this series of paintings include Korean traditional rice paper with Korean characters, English alphabet stickers, oil sticks, acrylic paint, ink, and plaster which are used to enhance the texture of the surface.

The hardest thing to accomplish in this piece was to convey the paradoxical concepts of scream and muteness. Two possibilities of depicting this concept came to mind. One plan was to make the hand cover the majority of the picture plane, emphasizing the notion of the scream, while the other idea was to depict the notion of muteness by accentuating the background whereby the hand plays a smaller role in the composition. I chose the latter one because when an object occupies most of the negative space, the image becomes too graphic. The feeling of emptiness and muteness would have been lost. I wanted to show the juxtaposition of the feeling of the scream with the muteness of silence. The black background represents the inside of a mitten, which is as dark as an underground cave. The six canvases have the same height but differ in their widths. The motive for the irregular sizes is to create a sense of asymmetry and imperfection that is part of the philosophy of *wabi-sabi*.

Plate 7, a self-portrait, incorporates photographic documentation. Since difficulty of language and communication is one of the main elements of this thesis, this artwork reveals the efforts and sufferings being endured by non-native speakers to improve their fluency in a new language. The pronunciation of English words is the biggest problem for non-native speakers. We often wonder what will allow us to speak more fluently and acceptably. Is our ability to speak related to the brain, the length of the tongue, or diet? Koreans, often connote butter with the English language. For them, butter represents western cultures. They ask, "Did you eat butter?" It has the connotative meaning, "You can speak

English well.” Compared to Korean words, English sounds seem well modulated and lubricated.

There are many people who undergo surgery to change part of their anatomy to allow better pronunciation of English. One of the popular procedures involves bizarre surgery performed to elongate the tongue. As discussed in an article in the Los Angeles Times, “It is a simple procedure: just a snip in a membrane and the tongue is supposedly longer, more flexible and, some South Koreans believe, better able to pronounce such notorious English tongue-teasers as ‘rice’ without it sounding like ‘lice.’”⁵ Besides the extreme measure of having surgery, acupuncture has been used on the tongue as a means of improving fluency in English, of developing communication skills, and providing a higher intelligence quotient.⁶ The intention of this artwork was to recreate the pain and the efforts of many who will endure almost anything to pursue better speech. Acupuncture for better pronunciation was applied using three needles administered on three different areas. They were placed on the tongue, the chin, and the center of the throat. Photos documented the entire procedure. Images that emphasize the agony and pain of acupuncture were selected for this work. A piece of plexiglass with tiny holes drilled into it (plate 8) that form six different symbols of pronunciation was placed in front of the photos. This idea was inspired by the Braille system, which is used as a means for the blind to read. When light illuminates the glass, the holes create dots on the surface of the photos. This is meant to symbolize the pins of the acupuncture. I directed the

⁵ Barbara Demick, “Snip of the Tongue and English is Yours!” *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 2002

⁶ BBC Reporter, “Acupuncture and Autism,” *BBC World Service*, March 1, 2001

photographer to capture the right composition and expression while also being the subject matter of the artwork. Other artists have used themselves as creator and actor, specifically Cindy Sherman whose photographs, "Untitled Film Stills," are all self-portraits in which she appears in disguise enacting a drama, particulars of which are withheld. Unlike me, Sherman uses "art not to reveal the artist's true self, but to show the self as an imaginary construct. There is no real Cindy Sherman in these photographs."⁷

The work illustrated in plate 9 consists of a pair mittens suspended from the ceiling. These three-dimensional mittens are sculpted from fabric and are created to support the multi-dimensional image of my artist's statement. The two mittens are tied together with a string to remain always as a pair. Each mitten is embedded with countless pins to reveal the torment and agony inside them (plate 10). These pair of hanging mittens and the artist's statement combines to form an installation. The dynamics of the shadows cast by the ever changing light and motion create secondary images that complement the primary objects. The artist's statement was glued to the wall with letter stamps. Each letter was positioned carefully and methodically to transmit not only the literal meaning but also the concepts of *wabi-sabi*. The statement was purposely installed on the end wall to induce the visitors' own interpretations of the other artworks first.

⁷Crimp, Douglas, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," p. 138

CONCLUSION

Discovering and exploring new materials and techniques are key to this exhibition. Developing techniques that provide meaningful to simple images requires complex and delicate planning. To a layperson the creation of an image of the hand appears simple and effortless. However, it is just the opposite. This correlates to how a native speaker cannot understand the difficulties of speaking a foreign language. The exorbitant amount of time needed to complete this work was similar to the time spent learning English. Many hours were needed to place the excessive number of pins into the canvas.

The concept of imperfectness and irregularity inherent in *wabi-sabi* was applied to the way of tracing the hands and arms. In addition, the irregularity of the canvases sprang forth from this notion. The beauty and idealism of the “imperfect” is emphasized to reveal both the aesthetic quality and the philosophy of this exhibition. Imperfection and simplicity convey the various anxieties, sadness and frustration experienced by generations of newcomers. The goal of this exhibition is to encourage people to realize their own sublime emotions, which will inspire awe through the “Silent Scream.”



Plate 1



Plate 2

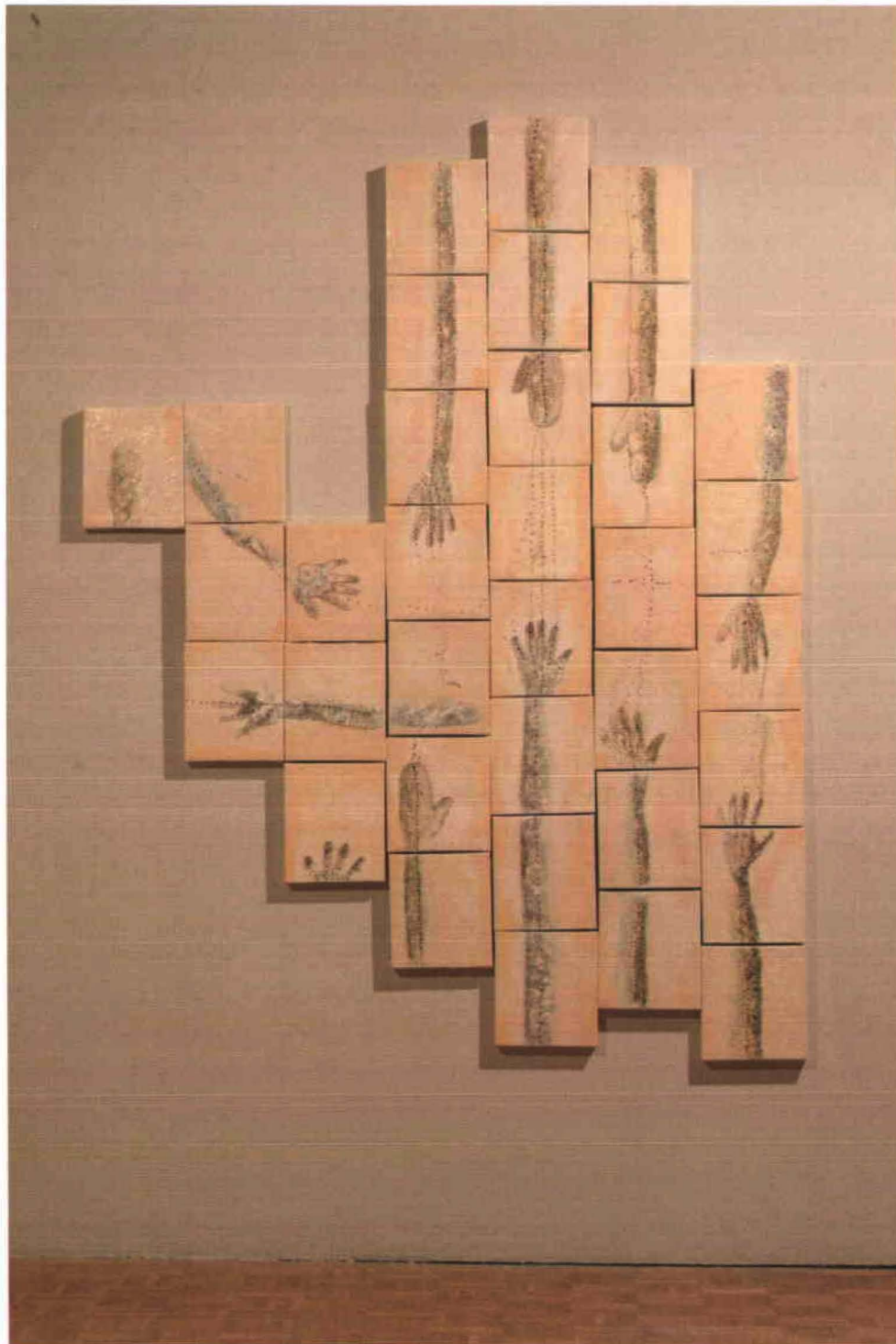


Plate 3



Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7



Plate 8

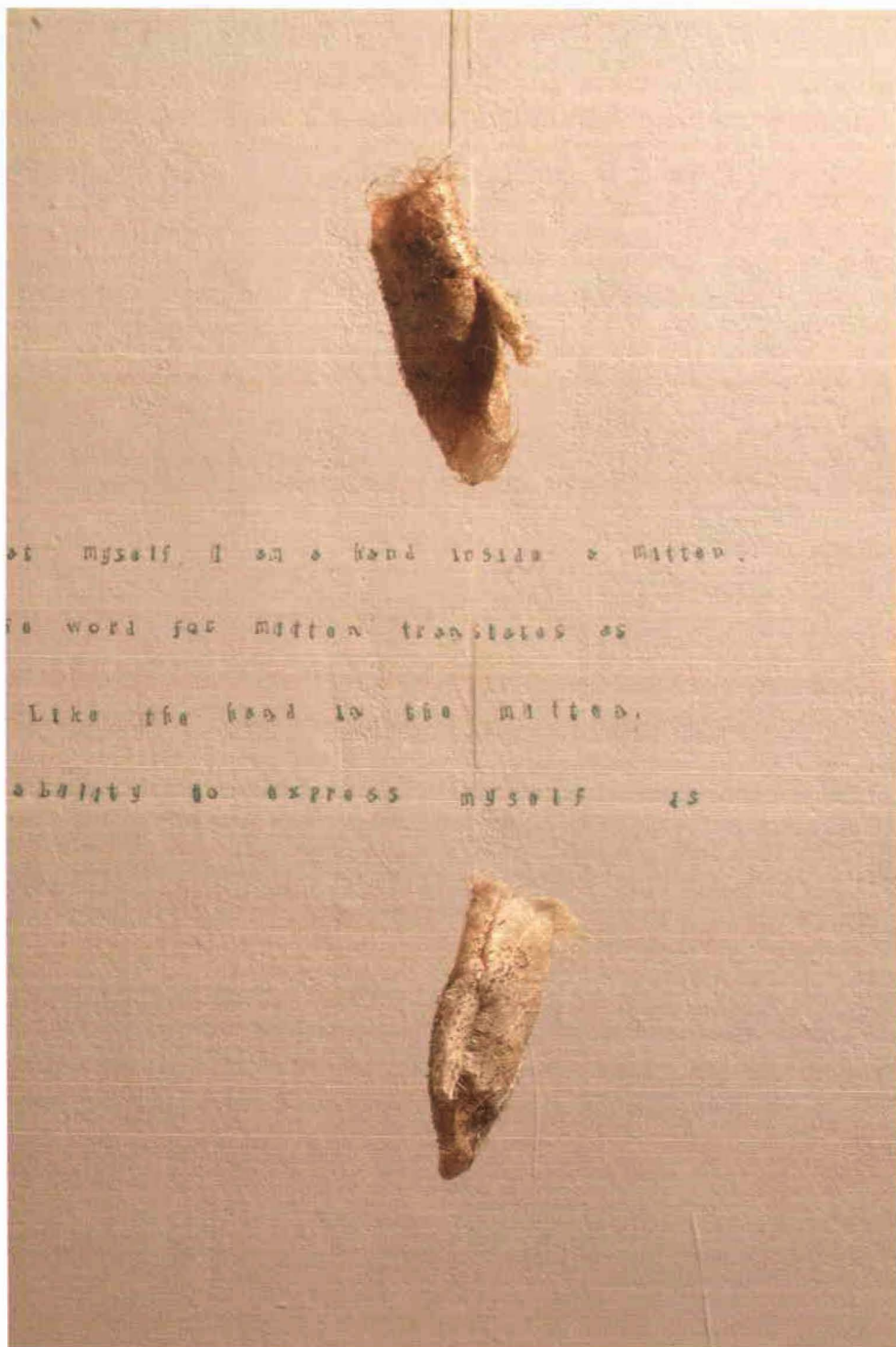


Plate 9



Plate 10

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