

THESIS

DRAWING ON IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

DRAWING ON IDENTITY

The focus of my work is to express aspects and constructs of identity through employing a physical drawing line. I view identity as a fragmented conglomerate influenced by one's personal experiences and interactions with social expectations. Through an analytical process of observation, I investigate my own identity by compulsively examining myself from the perspective of others and simultaneously considering my inner self. As the individual cannot be understood without her relationship to the many, my process highlights the roles that I play in relation to the collective of society. I take into account the many variations of social constructs, gender roles, and stereotypes that are imposed upon my identity, and question their impact upon my inner self. The result of this practice manifests itself in the form of art works made of many parts. Each work displays an accumulation of physical pieces that unite to emphasize the architecture of my identity.

My art works tend to have an open-ended question or statement that propels their initial formation. They continuously grow, multiply, and accumulate to become drawings in space. By removing the traditional tools of drawing, the immediacy of the process commonly associated with drawing is increased with materials such as wire and thread. Through this method, there is a greater degree of tangible interaction by the

artist with the work. I am no longer separated from the line by the tip of a pencil, but physically manipulating the movement of the line by hand. My anxious nature of looking inwards and outwards is recorded in each bend of wire and every stitch of thread. While these materials work harmoniously with my process, they also lend themselves in support of the conceptual aspect of the work.

As I cannot escape the social construct of my gender, it must be noted that my work derives from an innately female perspective. Many of the questions that I pose towards social constructs revolve around the expectations of women's roles. With the use of wire and fibers, I am able to portray the complexity of contradictions that exists within my gender and myself. Wire functions as a strong building material, but is also durable, fragile, and may be manipulated to fit a specific mold. In this manner, the wire relates to current expectations of women both in the home and in the social sphere. Often viewed as having a delicate sensibility, embroidery echoes a long standing tradition of women's work and craft. However, the complexity of this technique can be emphasized and amplified when united with the physical drawing line. While I do not intentionally endeavor to compose a feminist statement in my work, an aspect of feminism remains in the process of self-discovery.

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Initial Overview

The discipline of contemporary drawing is focused on methods of looking and responding throughout the handling of conceptual, material, and formal issues. As the concept creates an arena for discussion in the work, materials and formal elements, such as wire and line, provide voices for the conversation. In traditional approaches to drawing, artists are asked to become observational medians between the three-dimensional world and the flat plane. The role of the artist, in this respect, then becomes that of a visual translator simultaneously moving between two distinct realms. Perspective and viewpoint constantly shift both physically and conceptually in each varying manner of looking. It is then fitting that the observational process of drawing is echoed in my conceptual language as well as in my use of formal drawing elements. As an excavator of fundamental formal elements and drawing processes, I utilize line and mark-making as tools to uncover and extract specific aspects of my identity (Fig. 1-11). Conceptually, my method of looking moves between the social and personal realms, society and the self, which are deeply intertwined and potentially non-divisible. It is never a still gaze but a manner of observation that is constantly in motion. Close surveillance of personal social interactions propels my curiosity and questions regarding the many roles involved in the multiplicity of my identity. Formally, my gaze is a traveler between the flat plane and the three-dimensional world as I investigate the physical drawn line and tangible mark-making. While my work is heavily invested in the formal elements of drawing, I have moved beyond paper and now focus on a line with mass and solidity. As I continue to explore the possibilities of the drawing line, my approach

to looking is influenced by a variety of materials and continuously alters between flatness and space. My artistic process also demonstrates a similar observational movement by shifting between multiple physical pieces and perspectives. I focus on accumulation, repetition, evaluation and reevaluation to investigate identity's multiple fragmentary viewpoints. The dichotomy of looking allows me to create a discussion that transpires both within myself and among my viewers. It is a conversation that is initiated by personal experiences and is then compared to the larger collective of society. The result of this method produces work that is both autobiographical and socially relevant.

Stereotypes, Gender Roles, and Feminism

The main conceptual aspects of the work revolve around ideas of social constructs and isolation that contribute to my identity. It is an autobiographical discussion that analyzes the characteristics of my inner self in relation to the social realm. Identity is a collective mass of experiences and influences that remain continuously in flux. Therefore, the discussion never ceases between inner and outer realms, endlessly growing and changing throughout a lifetime. It is the contemplation of the inner self that moves one to a space of isolation. While identity is affected by outside influences, aspects of the inner self operate as a fluid core of analysis. It is both isolated deep within the individual and exposed to the outside world through the filter of the mind. As one cannot be understood without considering its relationship to the many, I also compulsively consider myself in relation to others. Each social encounter

affects the growth of identity, and ultimately influences my inner self. These notions of identity appear in the development of my work through addressing specific stereotypes, gender roles, and social expectations that often take the form of works of many parts. I continuously question the purpose of social constructs, the need to fit into them, and their eventual impact on my inner self. In regards to social constructs, Luce Irigaray states, "The environment causes me to be like everyone else, to do as they do, to find solidarity with them rather than to affirm my singularity."¹ It is in the space of self-contemplation and evaluation that isolation lingers and the individual evolves. However, the inner self is also perpetually intertwined with the influences of one's surroundings. For this reason, it can be difficult to unravel the individual from environment, for both have a mutually dependent relationship. Our current society seems to display a battle between the reverence of the individual and demand of social expectations. Therefore, I am constantly navigating the minefield of social interaction by always trying to determine the appropriate amount of individual to display and social role to fulfill.

My initial inspiration comes from life experience, often problematic moments that need further resolution after the fact. The moments that I find most disconcerting are those involving social interaction in which I frequently evaluate the perception of myself. The duality of my identity is apparent in this examination of looking simultaneously inside and outside myself, acting as both surveyor and surveyed. It is a heightened awareness of perception that is acutely scrutinized in the isolated space of

¹ Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 39.

the mind. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger elaborates on the idea of a duality of self that is specific to women:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. . . Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.²

Berger's description hints at a sense of "otherness" in a male dominated context that has been exposed by many female-artists throughout Modernism, Postmodernism, and in our contemporary paradigm. It places women within a minority, apart from the mainstream, and puts focus on differences between genders. In this case, the exposed differences cast a negative light on the female gender by expressing incompetency and positioning women as objects.³ The notion of being "other" initiates many of my concerns regarding social constructs. However, it is not a constant worry, but repeatedly instigated through social interaction in which my "otherness" feels exposed. While women are not the only people to indulge in self reflection, it seems that their roles are habitually interrogated as society and mass media incessantly formulate expectations of them. Even as men face similar social expectations, the rapid evolution of women's roles during the past century has placed a spotlight on female gender roles. It is then no great revelation that I find myself constantly questioning which social construct I must conform to at any given time and evaluating my performance. It becomes an acceptable routine to compulsively analyze each gesture and word spoken in order to form an educated opinion of myself in the eyes of others.

² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 46-47.

³ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2002), 361-383.

My compulsive anxiety surrounding the image of myself has led to the investigation of gender roles and stereotypes in my work. Gender roles and stereotypes are generalized associations of our own construction, propelled by organizational skills of the mind, and perpetuated by the collective of society.⁴ They represent the constrictive boxes of social identity that I feel compelled to conform to in different scenarios. The stereotype of the 1950s American suburban housewife frequently appears throughout my work due to its ties with my mother's upbringing and questions revolving around my own role as an adult woman. It is a significant example of society's ability to place an individual into a strictly constructed role. As many individuals make up the collective of society, the perpetuation and enforcement of stereotypes continues through a cyclical sequence. The individual refuses to abolish the stereotype in fears of rejection by the group, and will at times even support the stereotype in order to receive praise.⁵ It is a system that requires acceptance from the individual as one attempts to survive within society. While my mother has suffered from the syndrome of longing to be the archetypal housewife, her desires have also impacted my adult life. She has continued the cycle of perpetuating the stereotype by placing her values upon me and providing guidance from the specific viewpoint of a little relevant gender role. However, there still exists many parallels between the 1950's housewife and contemporary views on women's roles. The present-day woman is encouraged with independence and education, given almost as many opportunities as the opposite sex,

⁴ Mark Schaller and Charles Stangor, "Stereotypes as Individual and Collective Representations," in *Stereotypes and Stereotyping*, ed. C. Neil Macrae, Charles Stangor, and Miles Hewstone (New York: The Guilford Press, 1996), 6-10.

⁵ *Ibid*, 14.

and expected to be a modern day super woman. It is a distinct shift from the days when women were expected to "devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children" in search of true feminine fulfillment.⁶ In contemporary society, women are not only required to be career oriented self-sustaining individuals, but are also still expected to maintain a home, find a husband, and bear children. While certain aspects of the 1950's housewife stereotype remain relevant today, it is based on white middle class women who could afford not to work. It does not address the expectations and conflicts that working class women have faced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although the restrictions of the 1950's housewife stereotype are no longer applicable, specific expectations regarding women in the home still exist. In my own experience, this has created an identity that is conflicted and overwhelmed.

Stereotypes and gender roles are addressed throughout the imagery utilized in my work, often in the form of a silhouette. The silhouette is a simplified rendition of a unique form that echoes the generalized categorization of the mind, which leads to the inevitable development of stereotypes. My work expresses a relative connection to the stereotype of the housewife as described by Betty Friedan's analysis in *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan portrays a woman who is aware of the social expectations placed upon her, struggles with the acceptance of and rebellion against those expectations, and eternally questions "Who am I?". As I analyze my own experiences, I also acknowledge accepted social constructs and question their required conformity. The motivation for the use of stereotypes is frequently inspired by my conversations with

⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), 16.

others, often men. My experience with the opposite sex has confirmed the existence of a variety of viewpoints regarding women's roles, but has also demonstrated the persistence of lingering expectations associated with the housewife stereotype. These experiences have further increased my interrogation of the self and gender roles. In *His Ideal Woman*, I specifically focus on the stereotypes of a man's expectations of a woman in a relationship (Fig. 1, 2). This work expresses my interpretation of society's stereotype of a man's ideal woman as well as my own personal experiences. Glorified by mass media and propagated through humor, the contemporary man's ideal woman is often discussed as both a homemaker and a sexual deviant. She is a woman whose only concern is the happiness of her mate, and finds equal enjoyment in washing dishes and exploring a vast sexual appetite. *His Ideal Woman*, features silhouettes taken from images of 1950s American suburban housewives and women from pornographic magazines. The pornographic images of women create a balanced contrast with those of the housewives. While the housewives reflect the compulsion of a woman looking at herself, the porn stars are "the expression of a woman responding with calculated charm to the man whom she imagines looking at her."⁷ Women have a particular role in art history by frequently being portrayed in the position of object. The gaze is often directed by and for the male viewer, perpetuated by mass media images. However, the "one who looks and the one who is looked upon cannot be substituted for each other."⁸ The woman requires the gaze of the male to make a comparative analysis of herself

⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 55.

⁸ Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 40

among their differences. "They look at each other between each other."⁹ The two opposing roles, of housewife and porn star, show one aspect of the fragmentation of identity. It is fragmented by the individual attempting to conform to multiple roles, and by the public realm through imposing varying expectations. The multiple figures in *His Ideal Woman* shift through space in clusters of wire and line. They suggest a single woman spinning in place, altering her pose and task. As the housewife figures scrub the floor, hunch over a vacuum, and cook a meal, the porn stars are ready and waiting to provide sexual service. The figures are hopelessly intertwined with each other and entangled by a sinew-like web. There is no escape for these separate aspects of one's identity. The frustration of their entanglement and my disturbance of this stereotype are felt in the figures as they approach the wall. One housewife threateningly holds a rolling pin, and another hides an axe within the folds of her skirt. The final figure appears to be tearing at the hairs upon her head as she falls into the abyss of the wall.

The manner in which I approach the investigation of the fragmented and socially constructed self is most reminiscent of Annette Messenger's earlier album work. As Messenger appropriates magazine images of children or newspaper clippings of marriage announcements, she questions the forum and discussion held within prescribed gender roles. Messenger utilizes these images as evidence of a thorough investigation of her likes and dislikes, hopes and fears. The pieces that comprise her identity are carefully sorted and considered in a manner that seems almost maternal. Messenger gently begins her examination of self with benign routine, but is eventually seized by a melee

⁹ Ibid, 40.

of frustration. This irritation arises from an apparent absurdity in the confines of social constructs. Messenger occasionally appears to be a captive prisoner held among the restraints of stereotypes and gender roles. While she cannot completely conform to the expectations of society, she can also not deny the impact that they have on her. Some of Annette Messenger's earlier album works seem to manifest her frustration in a method of clear retaliation. Her retribution and irritation is evident in works, such as *Children with Their Eyes Scratched Out*, in which Messenger comments on the expectations of motherhood (Fig. 12). In this work, the artist collects magazine images of children and literally marks out their eyes. For Messenger, this act is a response to the pressures that she felt to become a mother. By removing the gaze of the mass media images of children, Messenger disrupts the illusion of a presumed expectation. She refuses the role of motherhood by denying the gaze of the children.¹⁰ Her frustration is clearly released into the work and the acknowledgement of her fears becomes present as well. Messenger concurrently addresses a fear held by her inner self, society's attempted control of her identity, and provides a significant response. She produces a loaded social commentary that comes from a genuine and personal space. However, the social realm is unavoidable in the exploration of identity, as one cannot exist without it. Therefore, it is significant to note that even the most intimate journey of one's inner self may often produce results that are greatly relevant to the public sphere.

My method of internal investigation often leads to unforeseen realizations in the final result of the work. In the process of art making, I am uncovering an entanglement

¹⁰ Catherine Grenier, *Annette Messenger* (France: Flammarion, 2001), 54.

of clichés, stereotypes, and contrasting perceptions. An initial question or subject of curiosity initially guides the direction of the work, but there are often unexpected insights that appear throughout this activity. The presence of feminism has erupted as a point of controversy in my recent body of work. As I began to unintentionally or subconsciously include aspects of feminism in my work, it became irreversibly entangled in my artistic discourse. While there is much debate and many opposing views regarding a specific definition of contemporary feminism, my work has linked to it through addressing women's roles. In a recent symposium presented by The Feminist Art Project, artist Joan Semmel commented, “We’re trying to find out who we are by making art.” Semmel explained that she became aware of the political tool of feminism in her work, but did not intentionally set out to make a feminist statement at the beginning of her career. For Joan Semmel, the journey of art making came from an investigation within and happened to coincide with feminist issues of the 1970s.¹¹ The nature of feminism in my work is similar to Semmel’s experience in the sense that it has emerged through the evolution of the work rather than being the target of discussion. As I am put in the position to elaborate on this “nature”, I find myself in the process of defining it, knowing that a definition in itself may be contrary to the fluidity of contemporary feminist discourse. While Joan Semmel embraced her role as a feminist artist, Louise Bourgeois continuously denied the existence of feminist content in her work. In regards to her work, Bourgeois states, “There is no feminist esthetic. Absolutely not! There is a psychological content. But it is not because I am a woman

¹¹ Joan Semmel, “The Erotics of Feminism” (roundtable discussion presented at The Feminist Art Project symposium, New York City, New York, February 12, 2011).

that I work the way I do. It is because of the experiences I have gone through.”¹² In other words, Bourgeois did not work with phallic forms to make a feminist statement, but the form of the phallus was evoked through addressing her father’s infidelity (Fig. 13). My process of self-discovery in the work occurs in a parallel manner to Bourgeois’ investigation of experience in that I also habitually look back to a parental figure, my mother. While I acknowledge that elements of feminism arise in my work, it originates from a space of self-reflection, and eventually leads to a consideration of the social realm. It is an acknowledgement of my awareness of being a woman, and how gender affects perspective and the impact of social constructs. Therefore, the statement produced in the work is perceived as part of a feminist discourse. The use of the female form in my work appears as a representation of self in an autobiographical narrative. The stereotypes and gender roles that I address are instigated by a specific moment in my life. In the present, I face a crossroads of choices and inevitable changes. As a result, I look back to my past, my mother and her past, to make informed decisions regarding my future. It is a near future that is laden with uncertainties that fuel my queries. Much of feminism has been concerned with women’s roles and equality. As such, it is appropriate that elements, which may be considered feminist, appear in my work as I question my own role as an adult career-oriented woman. It is possible to embrace aspects of feminism as I address a compulsive need to analyze myself through my experiences of being a woman. However, it is difficult to accept feminism as a label for my work as much of my practice revolves around challenging and rebelling against

¹² Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, ed., *Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 199), 220.

labels and stereotypes. To proclaim the work as “feminist” allows for many other aspects within it to be stripped away. Since the function of labels and stereotypes is to categorize and simplify, other important issues are lost in the process of labeling. My work not only addresses women’s roles, but also discusses a human condition. It is heavily invested in a human desire to be understood and accepted that is experienced by people of both sexes. I utilize the visual language of art as a method to speak to a broad audience in an effort to create a dialog that addresses contemporary society and enhances self-reflection.

Drawing in Space

In most artistic disciplines, there is no need to conceive of a definition for a particular medium, for such definitions have their own long-standing traditions. However, drawing continues to reinvent itself in the contemporary art world, and requires its artists to have a clear understanding of their application of it. My own work reflects this need to creatively define and employ drawing. It relies specifically on the fundamental formal aspects of line and mark making, yet lacks any precise parameters as to how these formal elements may be utilized. Line may be interpreted by manipulating wire and thread, and marks may appear as hooks or springs. This also brings the format of the work into question. Whereas drawing is traditionally a two-dimensional discipline, my definition of it allows for exploration in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional formats.

At times, I may consider the importance of the wall as part of the work, and at other moments it simply acts as a playground for shadows to interact with the piece. Both of these methods occur simultaneously in *Forever Young, Ill-mannered, and Unrealized* (Fig. 7, 8). It is a physical drawing that utilizes the presence of the wall as object and surface. The wall becomes an object as the wire appears to shift in and out of its surface, secretly describing its depth and mass. However, the shadows projected on the surface of the wall seem to play an equally important role as their linear quality becomes part of the drawing. The wire used to create the drawing also generates a parallel interpretation. It is a physical object that may be held; yet, it is utilized in a way that describes flat figures. In many of my works, there seems to be a play of image and object, three dimensions and two dimensions.

Even when a pencil drawing is reinterpreted into three-dimensions, it can still maintain the formal elements that originally appeared on the flat plane. My use of silhouettes most directly correlates to this translation from “drawing” to “sculpture”. The silhouette is a flattened image of a figure that describes a recognizable form through shape. Historically, the silhouette has been called a “shade” or “profile”. It was not until the eighteenth century that the word “silhouette” became synonymous with this increasingly popular art form. In fact, the roots of the silhouette can be traced back to Paleolithic times and found on ancient Greek and Etruscan pottery. It was the ancient Greeks that often spoke of the human spirit as a shade in the afterlife.¹³ The idea of the shadow being linked to the personal identity of an individual gives the

¹³ Emma Rutherford, *Silhouette*, (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2009), 8-13.

silhouette a particular uniqueness. It has the ability to simultaneously capture the essence of a specific individual and to disregard distinctive characteristics. In other words, it is created as a portrait of one person, but results in an image that could possibly be identified as many people. My work utilizes the formal quality of the silhouette as a flat shape, and also connects to some of its conceptual history. Just as a silhouette artist from the Victorian era may have traced the silhouette of his client's shadow, I am also drawn to tracing the exterior edges of figures with line. While the product of such a practice leads to a simplified flattened shape, I am captivated by the information caught in the contour. It provides a sufficient amount of information to visually understand the form, but leaves room for the imagination to wander. Reducing the figure to such bare essentials gives the formal qualities of line and use of negative or positive shape an importance in the final work that is equal to the concept. The silhouette continuously shifts between a shape or line that constructs the composition and a figure with the potential of narrative. It can act as either as an abstract shape in which the viewer imposes her own imagination, or an identifiable figure that directs a story. In both *His Ideal Woman* and *Forever Young, Ill-mannered, and Unrealized*, formal qualities and narratives play equal roles. The silhouettes of the figures define the layers of shape and line that the viewer first notices. However, the action or pose of the silhouettes adds a narrative that is uncovered upon closer inspection.

Wire and thread are the materials that have dominated the majority of my recent work. My initial interest in them developed from the ease in which they could become a physical drawing line. After many years of exploring line and mark-making

through graphite and charcoal, wire and thread presented an entirely new world of possibilities. There seemed to be a closer relationship between the artist and the line with these materials. Drawing, as all art, is often seen as artifice, and a similar synthetic quality exists in the traditionally drawn line for it does not exist without the paper or the graphite. For the artist to manipulate this type of line, other tools must be employed to erase and redraw the line, to make it bend and curve into a desired form. However, the materials of wire and thread are lines that already exist in the physical world. With these materials, there is no need to spend time manifesting an artificial line. The tools of synthetic creation are no longer required when working with wire, for the artist's bare hands can bend and shape the material at will. Wire records every impression of the artist's hands, every release of thought and feeling into the work. Thread functions as a mark that pierces and ties a surface with tension and pressure from the artist's grasp. These drawing materials eliminate the mediators between the line and the artist by allowing the artist to physically interact with the line and the mark. In this manner, I not only spend time exploring the possibilities of my materials, but also am able to dedicate a portion of my attention to working with formal qualities.

The properties of wire and thread also have a strong relationship to the conceptual issues of my work. Both of these materials correlate with my vision of the architecture and assemblage of identity. Wire can represent the strength of an individual's core, but also describes the malleability of identity. As wire may be bent and manipulated, one's identity is also influenced by the touch of the social realm. In *Forever Young, Ill-mannered, and Unrealized*, the wire assists in supporting the concept

of the effects and impact from the roles of victim and victimizer (Fig.7, 8). This work portrays the figures of young girls often in conflict with one another. Throughout most of the piece, the role of the victimizer is played by a girl with a bow in her hair. She hits, kicks, pushes, and pulls the hair of the other girls that she comes in contact with. At some point, the roles reverse and the girls who were once the victim become a hoard of victimizers. This work discusses the cycle of violence, both physical and emotional, that many others and I have experienced as children. This cycle lingers into adulthood and its effects can be felt throughout a lifetime. The wire is used to create anonymous silhouettes that act as characters in a cyclical narrative and figures that are easily relatable. It reinforces the idea of identity as impressionable and pliable. The wire's strength holds the form of the figures and the impact of experiences. Its malleability allows for influences to take hold and change the course of one's development. Wire is also an industrial building material, and seems appropriate when describing the coiling construction of my identity. This is most noticeable in my work entitled *Under Construction* that specifically focuses on the architecture of identity (Fig. 5, 6). Since one's self is constantly in flux, I envision its development to occur in a coiled manner. All of one's influences and experiences are bound together in the coil, and each layer directly affects the one beneath it. For these reasons, I specifically chose to create wire springs for the physical mark that would construct this work. The springs are bound together in architectural units that increase in scale as they float upwards in space through a coiling motion. There are brief moments of specific influences in *Under Construction* that are highlighted by embroidered ellipses. The amount of embroideries

also increases as the larger coil of the work grows further from the ground. It is the materials of wire and thread in this work that greatly support the concept. The wire assists in the feeling of construction and architecture, and the mark of embroidery captures individual experiences.

Fibers materials also relate to many of the conceptual issues in my work. I am most drawn to thread and embroidery floss that can be employed as a physical line, but purposefully utilize their connection to craft and femininity as well. As I continue uncovering the many facets of my identity, it is difficult to escape the fact that my perspective originates from a female viewpoint. As Luce Irigaray states, "Cultivating perception means being attentive to the qualities both of what is perceived and of the one who perceives."¹⁴ Therefore, I must recognize that my work develops from an awareness that is explicitly affected by gender representations. Many of the aspects of my identity that are under constant scrutiny revolve around the roles that I play as an adult woman. With these notions in mind, I intentionally utilize the history of women's craft traditions in my work. Different forms of sewing and embroidery are long-standing traditions passed down through generations from mother to daughter. My own mother spent countless hours instructing me in the refinements of needle and thread. Fibers work persisted in crafts specifically associated with women due to the quiet and contained nature of many of its methods. It did not require women to delve into the public realm, but situated them within the confinements of the home.¹⁵ These attributes worked harmoniously alongside the expected social roles of women prior to

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 41.

¹⁵ Madlyn Milner Kahr, "Women as Artists and 'Women's Art,'" *Woman's Art Journal* 3 (1982 – 1983): 28.

the first wave of feminism. Working in socially accepted art forms such as painting and sculpture, women in the early twentieth century faced an uphill battle to be recognized as legitimate and noteworthy artists.¹⁶ Utilizing materials that were associated with the virtuous homemaker of the Victorian era would have only slowed the progress of the female artisans' credibility. While women have struggled to achieve an equal appreciation to men in the world of art, the materials associated with women's work also have continued to wrestle with preconceived historic notions. Aiding in the elevation of fiber materials, feminist artists of the 1970s utilized stitch and embroidery in their work. They employed women's craft media to create a discussion regarding the separation of male and female, work and home, public and private.¹⁷ The still-existing stigma surrounding fibers materials succeed in supporting some of the conceptual aspects of my work. As I question prescribed gender roles in my adult life, the use of thread and embroidery assist my conceptual dialogue in discussing stereotypes. These materials have their own stereotypes as well as generalizations concerning the women that have used them. In my work, the use of thread and embroidery evokes the virtuous silent woman, the 1950's American suburban housewife, and my own mother. The material enables my investigation to not only consider my present situation, but to also recall the recent and past history of gender roles and social constructs.

The reasoning behind my choice of thread and embroidery are reminiscent of works by Ghada Amer. Amer also chooses to use embroidery in her work due to its connections with gender roles and women's craft traditions. She is most well known for

¹⁶ Ibid, 29.

¹⁷ Laura Auricchio, "Works in Translation: Ghada Amer's Hybrid Pleasures," *Art Journal* 60 (2001): 27.

her stitched canvas paintings depicting images of masturbating women. As in some of my own work, her figures are traced directly from pornography magazines. The figures are embroidered onto the surface of the canvas amid layers of paint and brushstrokes (Fig. 14). As Amer utilizes the act of sewing in her work, she begins to describe the complexity surrounding women's work. "Women are domesticated and dominated by being pushed to sew (and not paint, for example); yet women reverse this power relation by infusing their work with their own desire and aim, *sewing with love*."¹⁸

While women could have succumbed to the pressures and implications of perpetuating the rejection of craft among high art, artists, such as Ghada Amer, have embraced their adoration of fiber materials to elevate it beyond mere tradition. As in my own experience, many artists who use fibers often recount fond childhood memories of being taught to sew or knit, often by one's mother. The link between fibers, a continuation of tradition, and an artist's past experience further enhances the conceptual nature of the work. These materials allow the artist to incorporate an aspect of their own identity, and to utilize elements of the history of fiber crafts. In Amer's works, embroidery is used to reclaim an aspect of feminine identity that is often misinterpreted. She is critical of stereotypical feminist views in which women attempt to present themselves more like men. Ghada Amer believes that women should "use their bodies as vehicles of pleasure and instruments of power."¹⁹ Her awareness of the multiplicity of identity and views on women's roles are apparent on her canvases in the layered imagery of women engaged in sexual acts. Amer's use of materials continues to

¹⁸Orna Guralnik, "Love Has No End: Ghada Amer," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 11 (2010): 106.

¹⁹Laura Auricchio, "Works in Translation: Ghada Amer's Hybrid Pleasures," *Art Journal* 60 (2001): 36.

support her rebellion against preconceived notions of women in art and in life. Her application of the embroidery is reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist paintings.²⁰ By embroidering in the male dominated style of Abstract Expressionism, Ghada Amer questions women's roles in art and the view of needlework as craft. A similar dichotomy may be found in my own work with the materials of wire and thread. While thread recalls a sense of femininity and women's work, wire evokes a hardness that is not often associated with women. As in Ghada Amer's work, the materials allow my work to persist in a continuous dialogue regarding social constructs and identity.

While personal experiences prompt a visual dialogue, my interaction with materials manifests an in depth discussion. My fingertips often feel as if they have their own method of sight. It is a type of sight that combines both touch and vision, and allows for a particular type of understanding of the material. As I hold a piece of wire, I not only feel the bending metal, but my hands also see the formation of the line. I often equate this method of looking to a phenomenon experienced by those without sight, to simultaneously feel and see an object by one's fingertips. Investigating materials with my hands marks the beginning of an exploration that continues throughout the development of the work. During the course of this process, I become familiar with the interaction of materials and forms, and discover new possibilities or limitations. My method of materials experimentation is akin to Louise Bourgeois' mode of medium investigation. Bourgeois states, "The medium is always a matter of makeshift solutions. That is, you try everything, you use every material around, and usually they repulse you.

²⁰ Laura Auricchio, "Works in Translation: Ghada Amer's Hybrid Pleasures," *Art Journal* 60 (2001): 35.

Finally, you get one that will work for you.”²¹ This method is a persistent search by touch that eventually leads to a material that can be deemed appropriate for the work. I approach each material with a hazy vision of a particular line or shape, and allow my vision to evolve as experiments succeed and fail. If I am searching for a soft and vulnerable line, an assortment of threads and yarns may be spread across the manufacturing line of my work table. Each of the threads and yarns must be scrupulously investigated by my hands before its inclusion in the work is determined. The final decision is based both on a personal fondness, or pure joy of holding and working with the material, as well as its relationship to my concept. Part of my process is permitting the materials to participate in the conceptual discussion of the work. The medium used by an artist brings the work into existence. As such, materials play a role that is equal to the concerns of formal qualities and imagery. Ultimately the material determines the aesthetic of the final work through the guidance of the artist.

Dialogue & Accumulation

The process of creating artworks acts as a sort of discussion. It is a discussion that is at first internal with myself, and later external with the viewer. In the beginning, the conversation is consumed with competing thoughts and worries that seem to argue with one another. The dialogue is an internal argument in which the self plays dual roles as both supporter and cynic. As the discussion progresses, a resolution and acceptance develops within the self. It is the type of resolution that reflects the process

²¹ Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, ed., *Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 199), 142.

of enduring a situation rather than emerging a victor. There is a comical element in the ridiculousness of obsessing over a single social encounter; yet there is also a great frustration and anger with the inability to cease a compulsion that comes from deep within. The temporary resolution with the self is often reflected in the work by a successful cohesion of many parts working together, as well as an overall feeling that is both playful and uneasy. The discussion that occurs within myself is released into the work and is posed as an inquisitive dialogue to the viewer. Since social constructs and exchanges are the origin of the work, at some point the conversation must be exposed to the social realm and include the viewer. While many of the thoughts processed throughout the development of the work are uniquely personal, they still swim within a common pool of ideas that others may relate to. These thoughts are the anxious fears of the unknown opinions of others, the worries that arise from self-reflection, and an isolated frustration that cannot be put into words.

The discussion between inner and outer realms that is involved in the development of my work also relates to my role as an artist. My artistic practice is an isolated experience, a conversation that I have with myself. It requires a vast amount of time alone to quietly consider the many components involved in creating a successful artwork. The conceptual elements are extracted from a place deep within and are painstakingly sorted. Research is completed in support of the concept and materials are scrupulously explored. After a seemingly endless period in isolation, the work is finally completed when viewed by an audience. The artist who was once the surveyor must become the surveyed. Therefore, my artistic practice and the development of my work

follow the same path towards a similar outcome, to be investigated by the public sphere. Other artists such as Annette Messenger seem to follow a similar process. Messenger sorts through the components of her individual identity in attempts to create a dialog between the private and public worlds. She acts as an "archeologist sorting through the fruits of her excavations, everything has to be taken into account, as everything comprises part of a whole that can be localized but not totally encompassed."²² While Messenger begins her process through an isolated internal exploration, the finished works always result in a conversation with the social realm. Her initial findings include ideas, feelings, and self-realizations that are uniquely personal; yet, they often share a broader relationship with the public. Although she may reflect on her own feelings regarding marriage and children, Messenger is able to successfully open up a far-reaching discussion under the guise of gender roles.

The other aspect that frequently monopolizes my practice is a compulsion that is both meticulous and repetitive. I am meticulous in the rendering of each line, shape, and interweaving of forms. Each element in my work is painstakingly evaluated, reevaluated, and analyzed in relation to the whole. This type of approach may be termed detail-oriented, but it is also a habitual component of my identity. Rather than making a conscious choice to obsessively investigate miniscule elements of a work, I embrace an innate urge to repeatedly revisit particular aspects until the need subsides. The results of this manner of working are artworks that appear careful and decisive. The final products often seem to have a great deal of attention paid to surface and placement of

²² Catherine Grenier, *Annette Messenger*, (France: Flammarion, 2001), 58.

forms. The other characteristic that arises from my compulsive process is an impulse to become consumed with a specific form. The outcome of this fixation appears in the work through the repetition of forms, shapes, and structures. In *Under Construction*, I was fascinated with the shape of a spiral and explored it in three-dimensions through the use of coils (Fig. 5, 6). The continuous twisting nature of the spiral became further captivating by elongating and compacting coils, varying size, and physically overlapping them. These coils appeared to have a structure that is similar to the architecture of identity. They remain constantly in motion and multiply to become one individual component among a collective. As I continued to repeat the form of the coil, they began to compose architectural units reminiscent of organic forms. These structures suggest both man-made constructions, such as small cityscapes, and biological organisms. Therefore, the coiled units echo the “nature vs. nurture” debate of the development of identity, as well as the battle and reconciliation between inner self and social expectations. My compulsion based process allowed for the production of a mass amount of coils that aid the work in generating a sense of growth. The fixation with this form also continued in the installation of the final work. The final format recalled the spiral in the placement of the individual units that appeared to form a much larger coil in space.

In working through a process of compulsion and repetition, my artworks often result in compositions made of many parts or components. Whether it is a recurrence of a singular form or a technical action that is continuously repeated, my works seem to evolve from something that is done over and over again. The multiplicity that occurs in

the work is reverberated in the very nature of looking that fuels my conceptual development. I not only analyze specific social interactions, but also become consumed by my examination of them. The mode of sight that occurs in this type of analysis is a nearly obsessive gaze that cannot release its grip. It thrives on the awkwardness felt in a particular moment, and uses this as an excuse for continued investigation time and time again. The unrelenting process of evaluation and reevaluation is released into the artwork not only through repetition but also by creating many similar parts. As the repetition of form can be related to the recurrence of a singular thought, the use of many parts can be understood as the entirety of an event viewed from slightly different perspectives. My process of analyzing a particular social interaction does not focus on only one thought from one viewpoint. It may obsess over a specific moment or statement, but it is surrounded by many thoughts and observations from multiple viewpoints. I do not simply wonder if something that I said was appropriate; but consider all the ways in which my speech may or may not have been suitable and how the spectators involved may have perceived it. If a particular comment is spoken to me, I not only evaluate the statement; but also the speaker, my response, and the possible viewpoints of others. This method of analysis is an observation that occurs on many levels that delve deep beneath the surface, produces a thorough examination, and often inspires other investigations.

The many parts that compose my artworks reflect my many levels of observation and consideration. This is apparent in both my earlier work, such as *The Reconstruction after Hurricane Heritage*, and in the more recent work of *His Ideal Woman*. They exhibit

a systematic gathering of information regarding a certain situation or thought that is compiled in one work. *The Reconstruction after Hurricane Heritage* recalls my quickly evolving fascination with family relations and the impact of parental figures on children (Fig. 10, 11). In the wake of hurricane Katrina and rapidly moving chaos of life changes, I became more aware of connections with family members. This work represents my initial leap into the investigation of identity by exploring my mother's impact on the decision-making skills that I utilize in my adult life. I looked at the reasons behind my choices; and, explored my mother's influence, her choices, and the family who may have affected her. It was not merely an observation of my mother's influence, but an investigation of the culmination of generations of familial relations that resulted in my mother's viewpoints. As a result, the work became a collective of many shapes that accumulated to form silhouettes of children. They were literally fragmented in a mass of pieces that merged to produce the larger body of the work. The silhouettes themselves piled on top of and behind each other in a gathered manner of assemblage. A similar type of fragmentation also appears in the more current work of *His Ideal Woman* that splits the household role of a woman into a maid and porn star. Each figure is rendered as a simplified flat wire line drawing and merges into clusters of female poses. The division and multiplicity of parts is apparent in the use of many various figures to generate one work, and it is also noticeable in the shifting planes of the figures. Each flat image is placed at varying angles creating a sense of distinct planes in space. The figures physically cut through space, and generate a playful movement in looking between a three-dimensional collaboration and individual flat images.

The part of my artistic process that focuses on accumulation and repetition is reminiscent of Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama's creative methods. Kusama is known for her tendency to obsessively accumulate patterns and images to generate her work. While her compulsive methods appear to be a by-product of hallucinations from mental illness, they are also propelled by an innate compulsion of the mind. It is a practice that is instinctual, unavoidable, and addresses an exploration of inner self and social constructs. Whether she creates nets of dots across a canvas or covers a chair with phallic protrusions, it is clear that Kusama's obsessive nature plays a major role in her artistic process (Fig. 15, 16). Yayoi Kusama confronts her anxieties and fears in a manner that becomes therapeutic for the artist.²³ She refuses to deny the repetitive patterns that cover her vision, and finds a sense of control by utilizing them in her work. By repeatedly employing a frightening hallucinatory design, she is able to make conscious choices regarding its appearance on a canvas. It is not a method of complete domination, but places the artist in a position of management over an otherwise fearful experience. The other benefit that Kusama embraces from her illness is an ability to commit to an intense amount of physical labor in her work. Her "powers of concentration permit [her] to produce work at a prodigious rate," and allow for a tremendously in depth investigation of her subject matter.²⁴ As a pattern or shape is rendered over and over again, it becomes better understood, accepted, and requires less fear and intimidation. Spending a great amount of time physically involved with the

²³ Laura Hoptman et al., *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1998), 15.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 15.

work allows Kusama to consistently release her anxiety rather than trying to contain it. As Kusama finds a sense of control over obsessive mental processes in her work, I also use my artistic practice as a means to dominate my anxieties. The laborious nature of my work embraces my compulsion, and permits a detailed excavation. In works such as *Under Construction* and *Hooked*, the physical commitment required to produce a mass amount of springs or hooks becomes a healing process and release of anxiety (Fig. 3-6).

Results

As I continue an investigation of identity through my work, the complexity of the subject matter persistently increases and clarity seems to become less attainable. Fully understanding identity through its interwoven and chaotic multiplicity appears to have a direct relationship to the Sublime. It is awe-inspiring, beyond the realm of human comprehension, and at certain points should be simply accepted rather than questioned. To attempt to know the entire expanse of one's identity is to become consumed by abstraction, rather than to be aware of the experiences that create it. It is true that particular moments in life cause us to carefully evaluate and reconsider a particular path. Therefore, one may feel compelled toward greater self-analysis at certain times than at others. The continuous desire to uncover specific aspects of my inner self in relation to the public sphere has set my practice on a course toward addressing significant issues within society. With each investigation, more questions are raised and my interest in social constructs becomes further intensified. While autobiography will always be present in my work, I find that my attention is now being

drawn to the social realm outside of myself. Since my creative process often follows a parallel path to conceptual concerns, an interest in broadening my materials and techniques has begun to develop. It is a desire to once again step outside of familiar things, explore new terrain, and relate my findings back to previously discovered knowledge. As identity continuously grows and remains in flux, my artistic practice will also always be compelled to maintain an inclination towards the unfamiliar and experimental in order to cultivate myself as an artist.



Fig. 1, *His Ideal Woman*, 2010, Dark annealed steel wire, 72 in. x 90 in. x 77 in.

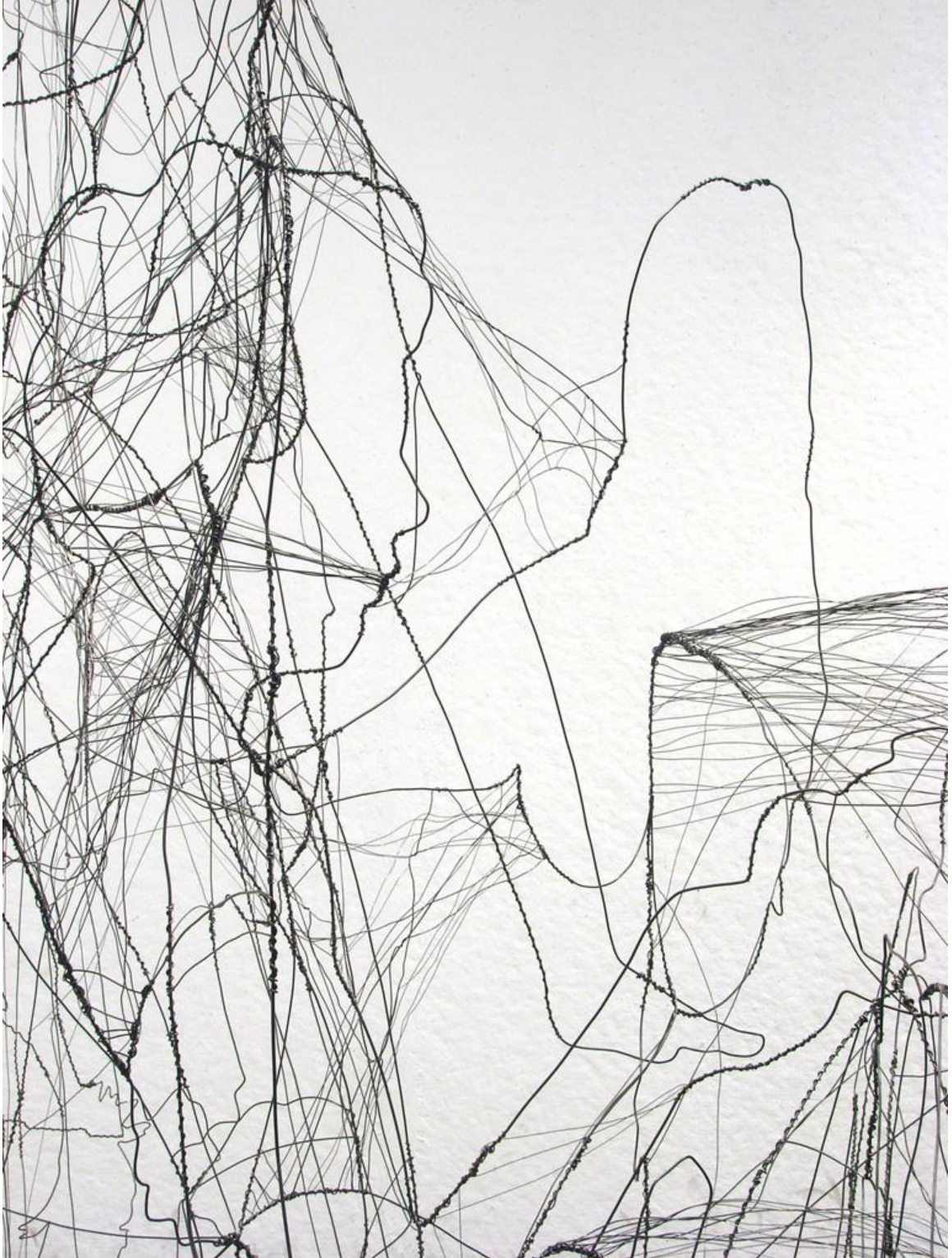


Fig. 2, *His Ideal Woman* Detail, 2010, Dark annealed steel wire, 72 in. x 90 in. x 77 in.



Fig. 3, *Hooked*, 2010, Dark annealed steel wire, crochet string, embroidery floss, 88 in. x 60 in. x 12 in.

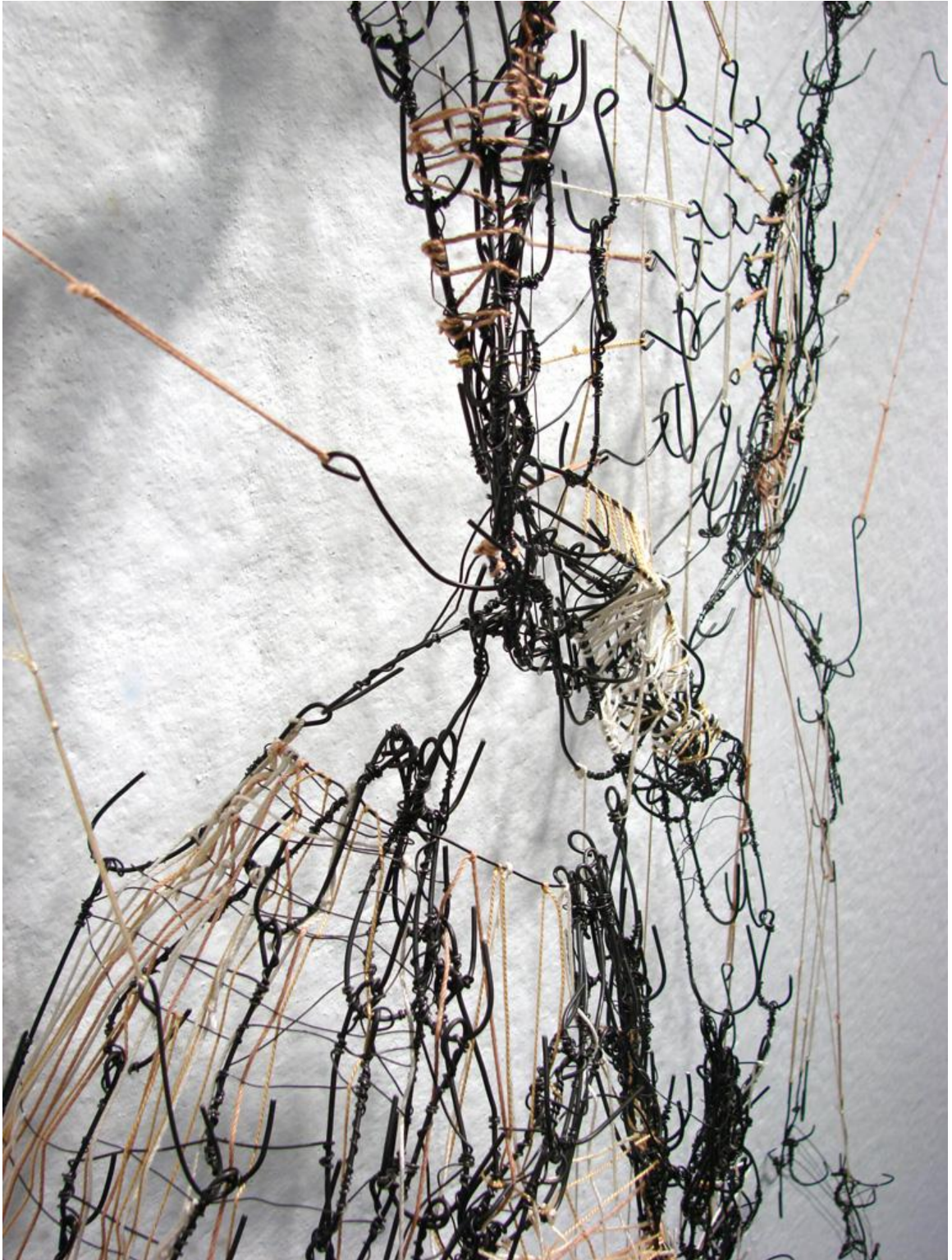


Fig. 4, *Hooked Detail*, 2010, Dark annealed steel wire, crochet string, embroidery floss, 88 in. x 60 in. x 12 in.



Fig.5, *Under Construction*, 2010, Dark annealed steel wire, metallic embroidery floss, photo transfers, fabric, 48 in. x 108 in. x 84 in. (site specific, dimensions variable).



Fig.6, *Under Construction Detail*, 2010, Dark annealed steel wire, metallic embroidery floss, photo transfers, fabric, 48 in. x 108 in. x 84 in. (site specific, dimensions variable).



Fig.7, *Forever Young, Ill-mannered, and Unrealized*, 2010, Dark annealed steel wire, 96 in. x 240 in. x 6 in.



Fig.8, *Forever Young, Ill-mannered, and Unrealized* Detail, 2010, Dark annealed steel wire, 96 in. x 240 in. x 6 in.

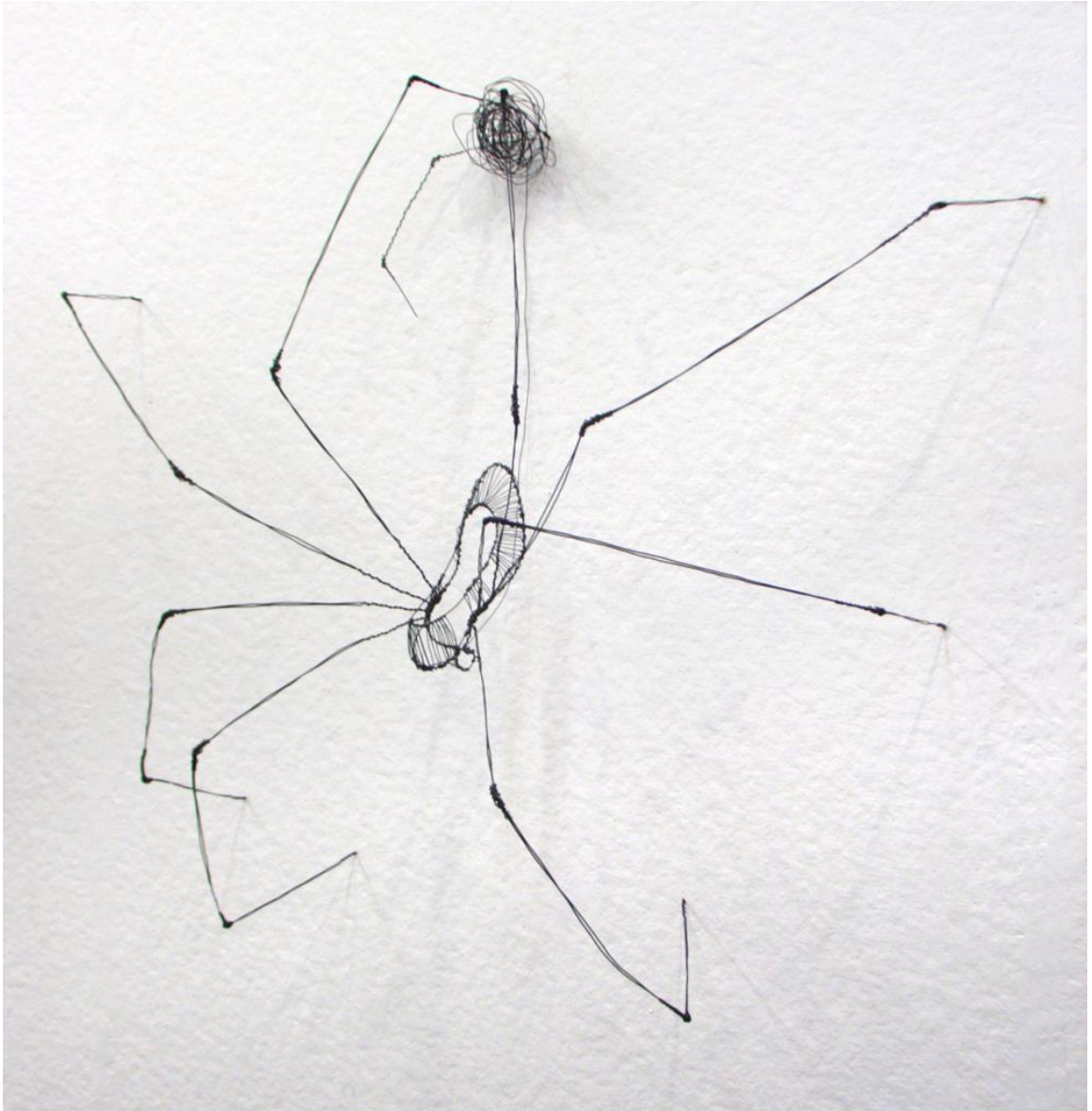


Fig. 9, *High Heeled Fear*, Dark annealed steel wire, 2010, 37 in. x 45 in. x 12 in.

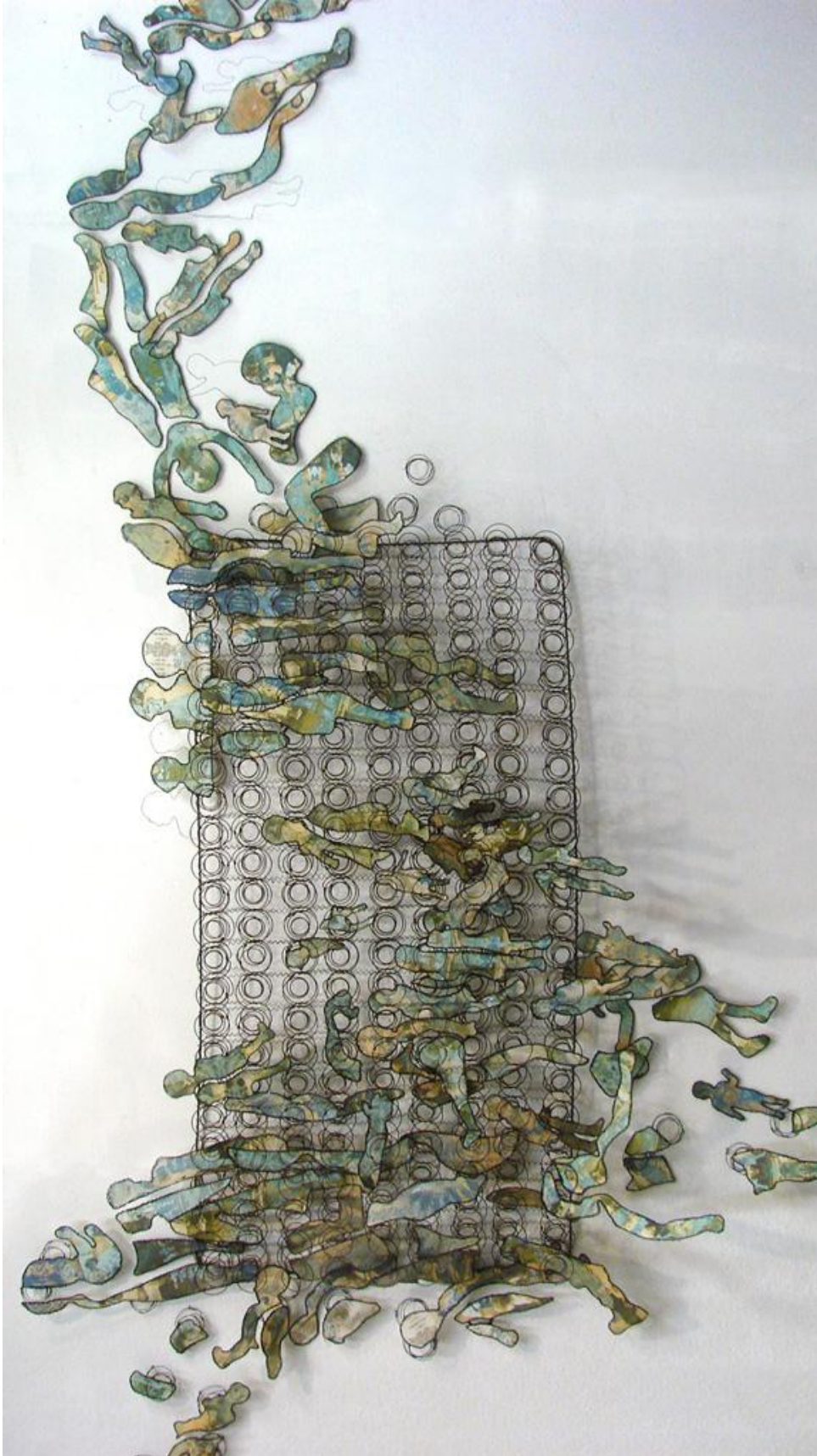


Fig. 10, *The Reconstruction after Hurricane Heritage*, 2009, Metal box spring, wire, inkjet prints on fabric, 96 in. x 180 in. x 6 in.



Fig. 11, *The Reconstruction after Hurricane Heritage Detail*, 2009, Metal box spring, wire, inkjet prints on fabric, 96 in. x 180 in. x 6 in.



Fig. 12, Annette Messager, *Children with Their Eyes Scratched Out*, 1971-72, drawings and gelatin silver-prints, 110 in. x 35 in., Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.



Fig. 13, Louise Bourgeois, *Little Girl*, 1968, Latex over plaster, 23 ½ in. x 11 in. x 7 ½ in., The Museum of Modern Art.



Fig.14, Ghada Amer, *Johanna's Grid*, 1999, Acrylic, embroidery, and gel medium on canvas, 720 in. x 864 in., Exhibited at Deitch Projects, Spring 2000.

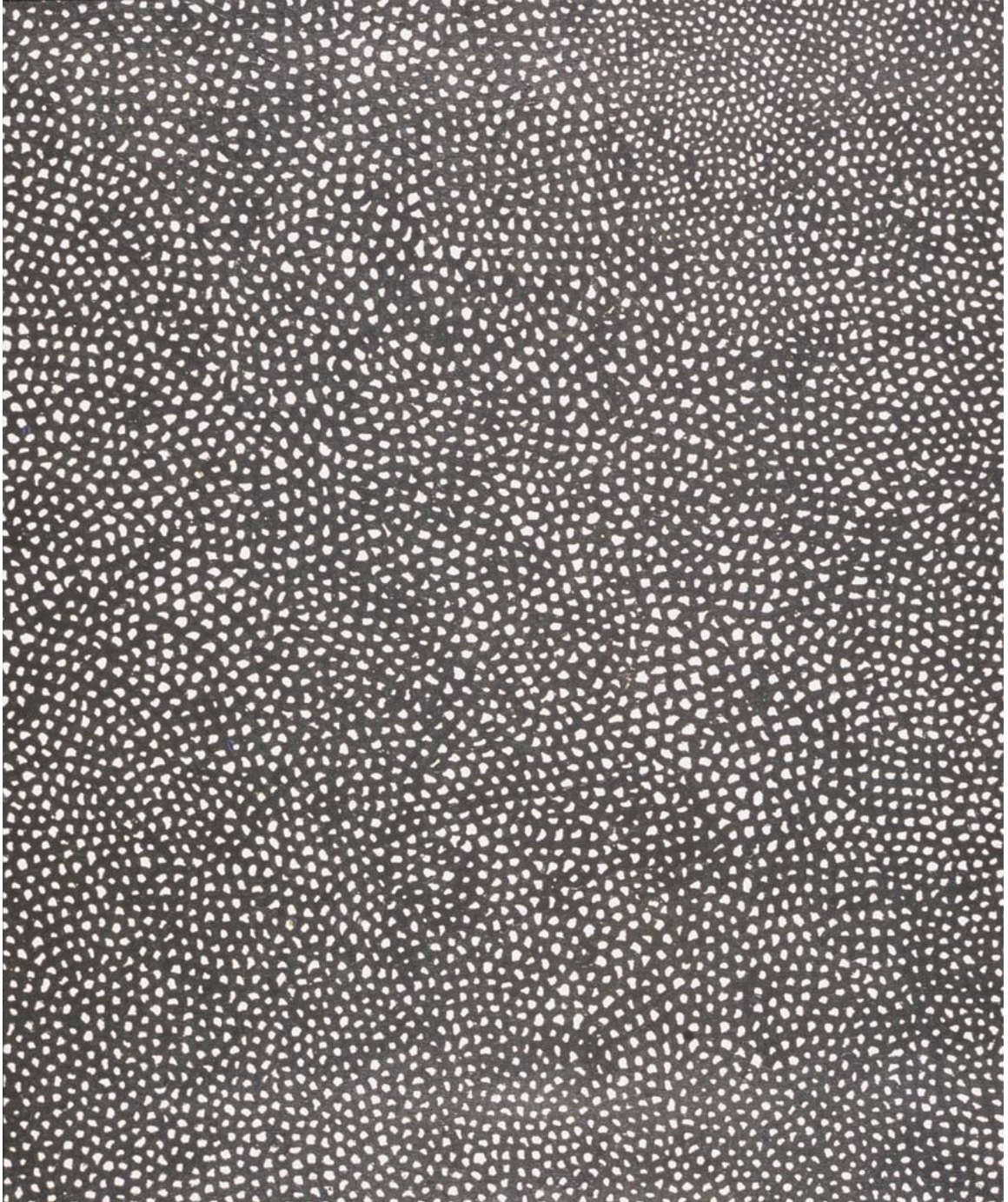


Fig. 15, Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Nets: det.*, 1966, Oil on canvas, 52 ½ in. x 50 ½ in., Japan.



Fig. 16, Yayoi Kusama, *Accumulation #1*, 1962, Mixed media, 37 in. x 39 in. x 43 in., Exhibited at Paula Cooper Gallery, Spring 1996.

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