

Body Doubles: Appearances/Disappearances of the Body in Recent Work

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DESCRIPTION

The installations create physical and imaginary spaces with bead curtains, fashioned by hand from various papers folded onto paper clips.

While pieces in earlier installations worked with found materials carrying a dual reference to the exotic and to the everyday (flight safety cards, travel posters of Mecca, calendars depicting Hindu deities and Japanese scenery), more recent work contemplates the abstraction/disappearance of the body in 'found' images of the human form, either scanned into digital files from postcards and coins, or derived from 'celebrity shrines' on the internet.

Images on the curtains appear and disappear according to distance, viewing angle, and other circumstances. But they are not the whole story. In the process of making out the images, the viewing subject may become sidetracked by the strands of beads themselves, interacting bodily with them through their sounds, sways, and shadows. More than this, the beads invite touching, examination, strumming, walking through, and (in the case of the cylinders) entering.

Images of the body, reconstituted into the surfaces of the beads in the new work, serve to intensify and render even more explicit the relation between the body of the object and the body of the thinking/feeling subject.

In their facture, the installations employ paper clips, four-color-process printing, and pale blue photocopy paper – products of mechanization and marketing, the throwaway stuff of the office – in operations that celebrate slowness and the social webs that form around objects made by hand.

In the case of the posters and calendars, the printing was done by others. In more recent, digitally-derived work, images are manipulated and scaled using the computer, then plotted onto

11" by 17" sheets of bond photocopy paper or 36" rolls of matte plastic film.

While the pieces themselves can be large (as much as twelve feet high by twenty-four feet long) each bead retains the scale of the paper clip. Accordingly, thousands of them are involved in each piece – as many as sixty thousand in some installations. As the speed of handiwork rapidly approaches its limits, the hours required to produce these materials cannot be reduced beyond a certain point, introducing a necessary slowness that the work celebrates.

ORIGINS

This work had its beginnings in a trip I took to China about seven years ago, where, in a remote farming village in the north, I was struck by the beautiful beaded curtains in the doorways of all the shops. Rather than the store-bought versions one usually sees, made of plastic, bamboo, or tape, these were fashioned by hand from candy wrappers and cigarette cartons, folded onto paper clips.

I went into one of the shops and asked the woman there if she would show me how to make them. Even though we could only understand each other through gestures, she gamely demonstrated for me. We smiled and bowed to each other, and then I left.

A few moments later, a block down the street, I heard a shout behind me. It was the woman from the shop. She ran up, slightly out of breath, and handed me a fistful of strands from her doorway. I was touched then by her generosity toward a complete stranger. But now I also know that she gave me a full day of someone's labor. It was a few years before I had a sense of how to make something of this craft/technology she had taught me.

TRAVEL WRITING

The first exhibition of this work, *Travel Writing*, took the form of a one-man show in the Georgia Tech gallery in the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center in November 2000.

One encountered the first piece – *Volare (for Felix)* – suspended at the threshold between the lobby and the gallery, encouraging the visitor to go through it in order to enter the space. The beads in *Volare* were made from flight safety cards up to door height. Above them, for about two feet, a mesh of pale blue photocopy paper beads gathered the hundred disparate strands into four equal panels (like a large Japanese noren). One hundred chains of ‘unclad’ paper clips connected the panels to the ceiling.

From a distance, the beads of *Volare* appeared as a single grayish field, flecked with pale bits of color, through which one could see the piece on the opposite wall, with a moiré effect emerging between the two pieces. As one came close enough to the piece to touch it – and to move through it – one could make out fragments of the little cartoon images of flight safety instructions – seat belts, oxygen masks, exit doors, rafts, and so on – placebos of emergency procedures.

Entering the space of the piece itself, one’s experience of it thickened to include the interaction of the strands with one’s clothing, the measure with one’s fingers of individual beads, the delicate clicking sound of the strands in motion. One’s vision became simultaneously blurred – registering a blizzard of peripheral information – and focused – allowing the eyes to construct one’s own set of narratives in the accumulation of details.

Less than an inch thick when left to itself, *Volare* would take on for the moment the depth of the person ‘caught up’ in it, and would continue to sway for a little while after, until it calmed back into its own inertia. This experience of passage was elaborated upon by many visitors to the gallery, some of whom took their time examining the individual beads (for imagery and/or facture), while others would strum their hands through the strands, provoking intricate interactions of sound and shadow. Over the course of the exhibition, the gallery was rented for several events: church services, Christmas parties, weddings. I heard from a guest at one of the weddings that the bride chose to pass through *Volare* to begin her bridal march.

The next piece, *Bismillah*, took twenty feet of the long wall of the gallery, just opposite the entry. The 320 strands of *Bismillah* were pinned directly to the wall with metal pushpins.

Straight on, from across the room, the piece presented itself as a craft version of a stripe painting by Bridget Riley. As one approached on the oblique, however, one could make out eight panelized pictures. While they remained ‘fuzzy’, the evidence of a black cube prominent in some clued the visitor to what the

images must be: the Ka’aba at Mecca. As one moved closer, one could see that the tesserae that formed these images, rather than providing the univalent information of a pixel, were themselves small fragmentary pictures – details.

Even closer inspection would reveal the tiny dots of the four-color printing process.

Bismillah was in fact fabricated from thirty-two travel posters of Mecca, brought back from Karachi, where one could see identical versions in the private rooms of the élite as those plastered on the walls of truck stops. The same images hang in Pakistani restaurants here in America.

I have long been fascinated with these posters. In part because they index a trip I am unlikely to take in the flesh. In part because they document the space of a pilgrimage, in anticipation of the event, and after, which for the Muslim believer must be the ultimate journey in this life. But also because they ‘domesticate’ the remote, the ‘other worldly’, bringing it into direct contact with daily life.

As in *Volare*, which worked to extend the space of threshold and foreground the visitor’s experience of entry and passage, the aerosols of color and pattern in *Bismillah* worked to delay immediate consumption of the images, to give the visitor time to ‘reconstruct’ the experience of that distant place within the space of the gallery. Threading these posters into a curtain of beads dematerialized the ‘master narrative’ of their imagery, atomizing the story we already know, in order to allow us to examine the details, to focus for a moment on the stories we don’t know.

The posters in *Bismillah* were organized so that close-up images of the Ka’aba were interwoven among more standard panoramic images of the complex, spread thinly and evenly through the piece, and shifted off-register from the panoramic panels. As they comprised only twenty-five percent of the beads, their effect on the overall composition was scarcely discernible, other than for the subtle shifts they generated in the color fields of the primary images.

But, close up to the piece, the visitor could appreciate details at vastly different scales. In many of the beads, for example, the believers appeared as crowds, each individual reduced to a small, textural element. In a different context one might not even recognize them as people; they could possibly be read as roof tiles, or candy. In others, a believer could be three beads tall – one bead focused on the head, bowed; the next on the exposed arm, pressed against the white-sheeted torso; the next on the foot, bare on the white marble pavement.

The remaining pieces, *Double Baby Krishna* and *Ganesh*, hung in a smaller room off the main space. These two were created

out of calendars, adorned with the eponymous Hindu deities, bought at an Indian grocery store in Atlanta.

Calendars are by their nature ephemeral, their obsolescence a given. The one from last year is rarely saved. In the book shops, this year's calendars were for sale at half price by mid-January. Yet the quasi-Cartesian array of dates – annotated with equinoxes and solstices of the sun, phases of the moon, and with holidays, state and religious – overlaid sometimes with personal inscriptions of birthdays, anniversaries, and appointments at the dentist – this grid of numbers we associate with our days indexes other grids of years past and years to come.

For some reason, calendars are usually accompanied by pictures, sometimes referred to pejoratively as 'calendar art', in the mistaken notion that the formulaic is also automatically cliché. Whether lifeguards, kittens, or greatest hits from a museum's collection, the visuals are oddly comforting – this year's model conforming to an already familiar type. The message of continuity is reinforced, of course, when the subject matter is of nature scenes – and even more so when religious themes enter the picture. Registers shift again for immigrant communities, where calendars from the home country conjoin knowledge of distant space with knowledge of past and future.

The posters of Double Baby *Krishna* and *Ganesh* were printed in Delhi and imported to Atlanta, indexing an 'authentic' cultural relation to time and distance. But one can now find also American-made versions, printed with the name of an Indian pickle company based in New Jersey. While the imagery is familiar, the feeling tone is completely different. The inks and paper are harder, shinier, more machined. The colors are more 'accurate', the images crisper, redolent of their luxuriously industrialized provenance. What drew me so profoundly to the hand-made beaded curtains I saw in China – the ones that inspired this work – were the colors, patterns, and textures of the papers: cigarette and candy wrappers that implicated a completely different world from the one I inhabit.

In fact, when I was beginning this work I had almost no interest in the imagery at all. Instead I hoped to create abstract color worlds and feeling tones by virtue of the inks and papers themselves: the air-conditioned vinyl interior evoked in the pastel cartoons of flight safety cards, the arid geometry of Mecca's desert skies, the soft vegetal blur of lotus blossoms and sweetmeats. It was only in response to a logistical problem, how to maintain a proper balance of color from one bead to the next, that I was led to consider putting the beads back together in same order I had derived them.

Because the cutting and folding of the paper around the paper clip exposes only one quarter of the image to view (half is tucked into the interior of the bead; the other quarter is on the reverse) I did not expect more than a ghost of the original picture to persist. But, through the strongly heiratic postures of

the deities, the images retained their legibility. By interweaving strands from four versions of the image (in *Ganesh*) – or four of the same image (in *Krishna*) – I could achieve a synoptic effect from the dense aggregations of lushly rendered details.

SEVEN VIEWS OF TWELVE MONTHS, FORMATS A AND B

The next installation, exhibited in the inaugural show of Spiller Vincenty Gallery in Jacksonville, Florida, in October/November 2001, continued the work with calendars, this time depicting rural Japanese scenes purchased in bulk at the night market in Tokyo, combined with origami and chiyagami papers and with flyers of cinema schedules handed out in the Tokyo subways.

This installation involved two pieces: *Seven Views of Twelve Months, format A* and *Seven Views of Twelve Months, format B*. The first one, *format A*, marked the threshold as a free-hanging plane composed of seven panels – each depicting one of the pages of the calendar. *Format B*, while using a parallel series of calendar scenes was horizontal in character, flowing in a band around three walls of the gallery space.

BODY DOUBLES

This most recent work – *Abacus 2002* and the *O Brad* series, part of the show *Gone Tomorrow: a Series of Ephemeral Installations*, curated by Helena Reckitt at the Atlanta Contemporary in September/October 2002 – is the first time I have combined the use of the computer with handiwork. And the first time I have worked with images of the body. The move to images of the body came, in part, as a response to the tragic events of 11 September, and the massive loss of innocent lives directly related to it – both in the States and abroad.

Deriving images of the body from the internet speaks to a lack of access to it. The absent body can not be reconstituted by beads – only its traces. The image is disappearing even in its reappearance. In this sense the making of beads that depict an absent, untouchable body relates directly in my mind to funeral rituals that involve washing the body of the departed in preparation for burial. When the corpses of the dead are shredded and atomized beyond recognition, the ritual act of mourning, in all of its futility, becomes even more poignant, and more urgent.

Abacus 2002 uses Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of the Vitruvian man as it appears on the new Italian Euro. Scanned into a digital file, the image was enlarged until the man approximated life size, and plotted onto matte plastic film. There wasn't room to hang all of it in the last show, but the full piece is about 12 feet high and 24 feet long. Depending upon viewing angle,

distance, and the lighting, the image of the man emerges clearly from the fabric of the piece. At a slight turn of the head, however, he dissolves into the matrix of beads and shadows.

In the *Abacus* piece only half of the strands are of the image (hence the logic for doubling the image of the coin along the wall). Another twenty-five percent of the strands are of blue photocopy paper and printed polka dots, strung in a recurring 8-5-3 pattern. The polka dots come from an image of a Hindu temple hanging, which, according to some accounts, were put up in the doorways of the temples by the attending priests to facilitate collection of the milk and clarified butter which would be thrown at the image of the deity as tribute. This particular hanging was faded indigo, painted in silver leaf with coin-sized dots.

The remaining quarter of strands are 'ghosts' – that is, their positions are left empty. Since the piece floats about an inch and a half outboard from the painted surface of the wall, and is lit from multiple sources, the translucent and pale blue beads cast multiple, dappled shadows onto the wall, which at times seem as corporal as the 'real' beads. In addition, as one moves laterally in front of the piece the offset between the beads and their shadows creates a moire effect of depth and movement, inducing a series of indeterminacies concerning the actual location and solidity of the wall's surface.

O Brad, cool and *O Brad, warm* employ an image found on an internet 'celebrity shrine', taken to Greek statuary scale, a little larger than life size, and plotted onto 11" by 17" bond photocopy paper. The internet image was manipulated in the manner of a Warhol celebrity silkscreen, with cool highlights and warm shadows.

The pieces in this series are hung in two cylinders, 3 feet in diameter and 12 feet high, 144 strands each, which can be entered. The multiplied image of Brad is suspended so that his eye level is just above the average viewer's. And the strands of the cylinder end where the internet image is cropped, just above the knees. The eight images of Brad take up the lower half of the cylinders. Above them the strands are made from the light blue paper.

The upcoming show in Florida, *Body Doubles*, will feature both of these, together with a set of pieces in production now, *How to Disappear Completely, I, II, III, and IV*, comprised of eight 12-foot high cylinders, deployed in two rows, four feet apart on center, so that one can walk between them, and explore them as a fragment of a hypostyle, or else as a grove.

Four of the cylinders are made completely from the blue paper. The other four reconstitute the image of Christ as depicted in the Shroud of Turin, scanned into a digital file from a tourist poster, manipulated, and plotted onto 11" by 17" sheets of photocopy paper.

Through the computer, the image is rescaled to the actual size of the Shroud, and displays both the back and the front of the body. Each side appears twice in each cylinder: Since the shroud reflects the front and back across the axis of the top of the head, the back of the body will float upside-down on the front of the cylinder, and ditto the front of the body on the back.

TEXTILE ART

In the bead pieces, continuity with technique-derived forms of the past can be read in the persistence of textile imagery in one's apprehension of the work – curtain, carpet, weaving, skein – imagery of facture as strong, and as recognizable, as the imagery of the printed matter employed as raw materials. Although the beads are made from paper and metal, and, with very few exceptions, are linked only vertically (what kind of textile has warp but no woof?), the work participates readily in an historical association with textiles.

First, the pieces are allied with enclosure by virtue of their disposition against the walls of the gallery space, across the threshold, and in cylinders.

Second, in an analog to textiles, they present themselves as cladding. By their willingness to reconstitute the surface, they effectively dematerialize the substance of the wall. Cladding is critical to an understanding of the iconography of *Bismillah*, as well, since the Ka'aba itself is an ancient stone structure draped in black cloth, and pilgrims wear only lengths of unsewn cloth.

In *Bismillah* the strands were hung in a three-to-one pattern, in order to promote a spatial perception of the surface as a rippling curtain. In addition, every eighth bead in each strand was black. While not physically linked, their visual alignment suggested a series of black 'threads' running horizontally through the piece.

Third, as the basic unit of manufacture, the bead references Semper's knot. It is the avatar of the joint: The wire of the paper clip bends back upon itself, as does the slip of paper. The folds of one slip onto and interlock with the folds of the other. And they are held together by their mutual dependence. This is not to suggest that the two materials are equal. In fact, they operate quite differently.

The metal paper clip comes preassembled. Its dimensions are set, and it is already bent into position. The paper must be cut and folded to accommodate the clip. The paper clip can also retain its shape, and link to other clips, in a way that the paper cannot. In this sense the clip may be understood to perform structurally, whereas the paper must be considered almost ornamental, as cladding. At this scale, too, the cladding privileges surface.

LABOR

A large part of the pleasure in work done by hand is that one can see clearly the evidence of one's labor. Like a Persian carpet, it becomes a record of the time and energy invested.

Making these beads required no great skill or effort. But they did take time. And there was really no way to speed it up. (Slowness was, in fact, one of the attractions.) Once I had a general idea of the size and configuration of the pieces, however, and a sense of the amount of time it would take for each strand (about an hour), I did the math and realized that it would not be possible for me to make them by myself in the time allotted. I would need help.

Labor had always been an important component in the conceptual apparatus of the work. But, by enlisting the volunteer efforts of friends to make the work with me, it acquired an entirely different dimension. For one thing, it took the pieces further in the direction of craft, in the sense of a series of 'unauthored' artifacts. In the work of so many hands it

would be difficult to identify a single signature. Since the work was its own recompense, labor had value according to the amount of time spent, rather than according to whose time it was (as though one person's time were really worth more than another's).

For another, the time we spent together making the beads – talking, eating, and listening to music – was rewarding in itself, and I felt it began to affect the work in a manner described by Benjamin in 'The Storyteller'. For him, storytelling was much more than a way to pass time. In concert with the work of the hands, it was a reciprocal craft, working in tandem to render a densely textured, graspable comprehension of the world.

Such craft could imbue artifacts with tactile experience – what Ruskin called "the correspondence of workmanship with thought". According to Benjamin, the most useful and satisfying stories are 'crafted', and combine "the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to residents of a place."