

Melanie Lacy Kusters: *Migration*

4 October – 20 December 2007

Opening Celebration: Thursday, October 25, 2007 5:30 -7

The Clayman Institute for Gender Research's Art at the Institute Program opens its 2007-08 season with the work of San Francisco-based artist Melanie Lacy Kusters. A recent graduate of California College of the Arts (MFA, 2007), and 2006 recipient of a San Francisco Foundation Murphy Fellowship, Lacy Kusters has transformed the walls of Serra House with her meandering pillow constructions which crawl up the walls and around the banister, defying any firm distinction between two and three dimensions. Whimsical and playful at the same time that they are unsettling and provocative, Lacy Kusters's constructions seek to uncover the buried histories in everyday objects and spaces, asking us to reflect on our own intimate relationships to the spaces in which we live, work, and pass through.

The basis for Lacy Kusters's work in *Migration* is a series of hand-made pillows sewn with the assistance of close friends and family members. Calling on a long history of collaborative textile work – most commonly associated with the tradition of the quilting or sewing circle – Lacy Kusters both draws on and disrupts expectations associated with the craft tradition. Though it is not unusual to see a quilt hanging on the wall, (quilts have long been representatives of otherwise forgotten examples of women's art work) pillows, like other more intimate forms of bedding, are commonly kept hidden, a testimony to their associations with the private, the bodily and the intimate. Merging a traditional legacy of feminine craftwork with a more feminist inflected examination of the body, Lacy Kusters's work draws on these legacies in multiple ways. Sewing the pillows together in a manner not dissimilar to the way quilters attach sections together to create a patchwork, Lacy Kusters draws on the bulging materiality of the pillows to create layered constructions which recall, among other things, bodily forms.

The relationship between bodies and pillows in Lacy Kusters's work takes additional form in the embroidered images that appear on a handful of pillows hidden throughout the series. Trained as a photographer, Lacy Kusters draws on techniques inspired by photography – most specifically photography's ability to capture fleeting moments in time – and marries this interest with another, more under acknowledged, aspect of the ephemeral. Interested in the nearly invisible way that bodies leave traces of their presence in the spaces they move through, as when a hair clings to a pillow, or skin cells combine to form dust, Lacy Kusters embraces this residue, which would otherwise be swept away. These traces become another document of personal history, with Kusters using her own hair as the thread that forms the loosely outlined embroidered images. Though the use of hair as material in art is not without precedent – Lacy Kusters's work finds parallels here with work by well-known artists like Janine Antoni, Doris Salcedo and Gu Wenda – the delicate use of it, and the intimate relationship to memory and space which it is called upon to stand witness to, lends it particular resonance. Lacy Kusters's work asks us to remember that, if the spaces we move through make an impression on us; we, in turn, make an impression on them.

A quick glance throughout the exhibition may initially lead the viewer to associate Lacy Kusters's work with a tradition of serialized, even repetitive form most commonly associated with American Minimalism. Though the muted colors and only slight variations of form from one object to the next do find some precedent in this history, there is also a buried narrative hidden within them, one which the artist calls on the attentive viewer to piece together.

Indeed, a careful examination of the work reveals that hints of the history of a dysfunctional family are buried – almost literally - in the faint embroidered images interspersed in the masses of pillows. A lone razor blade is carefully stitched into one; the outlines of a U-haul van, perhaps suggesting a family upended by moving or pulled apart by distance, is embedded in another. Still other pillows show the outlines of groups of people posing for family photographs, their faceless presences pointing simultaneously to their familiarity and their unknowability. The images follow a fill-in-the-blank logic that allows each of us to see in them some aspect of our own history, yet, at the same time, retain the impossibility of truly knowing the experiences that both cement and scar the memories of another family. Formed with the artist's own hair, these images speak to the way memory, personal history and experience becomes literally embedded in the body. Their function is not dissimilar to DNA, as the source code that both intimately ties us to our families and distinguishes us from them. Like an aged photograph, then, Lacy Kusters's work gives us hints of a narrative that is both familiar and foreign to us, asking us to use our imaginations to piece together a story of which we possess only pieces. A fragment from Leo Tolstoy's famous opening to *Anna Karenina* – “Happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” – seems an appropriate epigraph to this work.

One interpretation of the body of work on view in *Migration*, then, might describe it as a sort of indirect self portrait - one more attuned to the trace histories, memories and the layers of influences that make up a person's identity, than to a concern for physical likeness.

Representations of the female body have long been a problem for feminist artists, who resist the idea of perpetuating a long history of representing the female body as an object to be looked at. By relocating the space of identity to the more intimate scale of the bodily trace and, at the same time, the more substantial register of furniture and architecture, Lacy Kusters asks us to rethink our common assumptions about identity. In doing so, she constructs an alternative system for visualizing the self.

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