

APPROPRIATE DISRUPTIONS

by

Lorie Ann Hoffman

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Gesine Janzen

Approved for the School of Art

Vaughan Judge

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April 2011

## LIST OF IMAGES

Images	Page
1. Repository, Muses, Wonder Woman (Installation View).....	8
2. Rebellion, Repression, Stories, Wonder Woman (Installation View).....	8
3. Revolution, Generations, Plastic Army Enemy (Installation View).....	9
4. Repository, Hope Chest, Muses (Installation View) .....	9
5. Repository, Muses, Stories, Realization (Installation View).....	10
6. Stories, Rebellion, Stories, Repression, Revolution (Installation View).....	10
7. Repository, 2011, 44” x44” Silkscreen on Birch Panel .....	11
8. Revolution, 2011, 44” x44” Silkscreen on Birch Panel.....	12
9. Repression, 2011, 44” x44” Silkscreen on Birch Panel.....	13
10. Rebellion, 2011, 44” x44” Silkscreen on Birch Panel .....	14
11. Realization, 2011, 44” x44” Silkscreen on Birch Panel .....	15
12. Muses, 2011, 72” x 174” Silkscreen on Paper.....	16
13. Muses (Detail - Ann) 72” x 42” .....	17
14. Muses (Detail - April) 72” x 42” .....	18
15. Muses (Detail - Robin) 72” x 42” .....	19
16. Army Enemy, 2010, 72” x 146” Silkscreen and Acrylic on Paper.....	20
17. Plastic Army Enemy (Detail - Dark Blue) 72” x 42” .....	21
18. Plastic Army Enemy (Detail - Silver) 72” x 42” .....	22
19. Plastic Army Enemy (Detail - Light Blue) 72” x 42” .....	23

## LIST OF IMAGES – CONTINUED

Images	Page
20. Generations, 2010, 70” x 34” Silkscreen on Paper .....	24
21. Hope Chest, 2010, 24” x 24” Gold Leaf and Silkscreen on Cedar Panel .....	25
22. Stories, 2001, 42” x 42” Silkscreen on Paper, Cedar Bound Book .....	26
23. Stories Book 1 9”x 9” x 1” Cedar Bound Book, Silkscreened Pages.....	27
24. Stories Book 2, 6” x 6” x 1” Cedar Bound Book, Silkscreened Pages.....	27
25. Stories (Detail) .....	28
26. Wonder Women, 2011, 30” x 58” Silkscreen on Birch Panel .....	29
27. Title Wall, Cut Vinyl .....	30
28. Stories, Book 2, Revolution (Installation View).....	31
29. Stories, Book 1, Realization, Rebellion, Repression (Installation View).....	31

## ABSTRACT

Art is a vehicle for me to better understand the many feminist movements, and to clear and navigate a path through this body of social thought. Making art is my way of negotiating the feminist thought and theories that I was born into. We all come into culture mid-stream, and I have come of age during a time when shelves of books have been written about women and gender roles, but I as an individual need to find my own way of wading through all these complex, and sometimes contradictory thoughts, and deciding what they mean to me. What is relevant to me? What is not? My opinions are fluid, and sometimes my thoughts about a subject have a great degree of variation. Sometimes I contradict myself. We are all complex beings capable of holding conflicting beliefs about the world around us. The question I'm exploring is a question of who am I as an individual navigating a world of thought that I didn't know was already in place.

Women today cannot, and should not, be thrown into categories. Am I third wave, am I forth wave? What does it matter? I'm a complex individual made up of contradictory ideas, and so are the other women I know. We don't fit into neat little categories. I become enraged when I hear the media ask if feminism is dead. Of course it's not, we're just not as easy to pin-hole. That's how we know that feminism is working, when women can no longer be seen as a faceless-sub-class, but instead as individuals who have legitimate disagreements on the details.

The stories of everyday lives, the struggles and triumphs, is the focus of my feminism. This is where women are powerful, not in statistics or facts, but in the individual truth of our lives. Every story contains its own truths, and has common ground with the others. One of the most significant ways we connect to, and empathize with, others is through shared and common narratives.

As I sit and write this paper in a coffee shop on a Saturday morning seven women, their ages differing by about a forty year range, fill the table next to me. I cannot help but overhear their conversation. Their chat moves in and out, sometimes the group pulls together on one topic and sometimes they break up into small sidebars with two or three people. Right now a conversation about how someone's six-year-old got sick at school and the school didn't even think about calling the father has transformed into a heated discussion about the need for on-site daycare at work. These women have not come here to form a political party or to organize a protest. They may not identify themselves as feminists, but this group is the beating heart of feminism. They come for empathy, and to share their stories, and through these acts they are coming to a consensus. The accumulation of these meetings - the eventual agreement and further discussions with other friends, will eventually become the beginnings of change. Through the sharing of my story, and my experiences I strive to make a connection with the viewer. I intend my work to be a catalyst for discussion, and a place for the viewer to relate and impose their own narrative.

The stories of everyday lives, the struggles and triumphs, is the focus of my feminism. When we start the conversation with the big political issues that divide us, we lose the human element and the complicated and contradictory lives we lead become condensed to statistics and numbers. For me, the power is contained within the narratives, not the statistics. When women gather together to talk about their lives, the troubles they face, issues with men in their lives, harassment at work, we can connect and see repeating motifs. Ideas of change come out of these meetings as we find common ground.



This is where women are powerful, not in statistics or facts, but in the individual truth of our lives. Every story contains its own truths, and has common ground with the others. One of the most significant ways we connect to, and empathize with, others is through shared and common narratives.

Throughout my life, many of my political views have been formed by these conversations. My childhood best friend Robin, featured in my piece *Muses*, a triptych of influential women in my life, was one of the first people to challenge my conservative upbringing. Her homosexual uncle was dying of AIDS. This was 1993 and even my 6th grade self had heard about the AIDS epidemic on the news. My first reaction was that he had deserved it. Obviously, as I told Robin, God was punishing him for being gay. Then Robin did something incredible. Instead of getting mad at me and storming off, as could be expected of any 11 year old, she sat down and told me his story. His life had been hard, he struggled to fit in, eventually divorced from his wife, and he lost a lover and friend to the disease that was now taking him. Also, she told me about his kindness toward her, how he was her favorite relative, and someone she could always go to with her problems. This changed me. I learned to see him as a person, not some statistic I heard on the news. By living his life through his story, as told to me by his niece, I very briefly got to live his experiences.

The afore-mentioned talk with Robin prompted a fundamental change in my personal belief system. I became aware of politics and many of the inequalities around me. I questioned my parent's rigid conservative viewpoints. I was young and, unfortunately, exchanged one set of absolute truths for another. Although Robin helped spark a fire of

change with me, it was the thousands of smaller unremembered conversations in my life that truly helped me to evolve my viewpoints, and realize that truth is not in the extreme ends of the spectrum, but in the subtle and changing middle. This is how I now view feminism as well.

Many women's issues have no right or wrong point of view. There is no longer a codified rally cry as there was in the second wave<sup>1</sup>. Yes, we still have political hurdles to jump (the proposed Equal Rights Amendment comes to mind) but for us girls raised in a world with Title IX and sexual harassment laws, the hard line is harder to find. Our mothers got some of the forward movement they were fighting for, but now women need to decide for themselves what works and what doesn't. There is a wide range of possible viewpoints and modern feminists span the full gamut of beliefs. I believe the key to a contemporary feminist debate should center around both the individual desires of women while at the same time continuing the fight for the collective rights of women. Individuals within the upcoming generation will need to decide for themselves what it means to be a woman, and whether or not they will follow a hard party line or choose instead to make a shift and create their own personal feminism.

The modern heroes are the ones who speak truth with their own stories. *Muses* enshrines three of the most influential women in my life; Robin, my childhood friend who stood next to me through my struggles with abuse, and whose hand I held as she experienced her own coming-out story, Ann, who helped the fractured person who dragged

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<sup>1</sup> The First wave of Feminism occurred during the 1850's - 1950's. The Second wave happened around 1960 - the end of the 1980's. The current wave of feminism, the third wave, started in the 1990's and continues today.

herself to college to become an unbound source of female sexuality and power, and April, who has been my equal and friend who shared the stories she lived through, and has become a symbol of feminism to me. Each embodies an empowering energy that has been vitally important in shaping the person I am today.

As a contemporary feminist, I think we, as a society, are moving away from the line in the sand and are embracing a more nuanced and personal view of issues. Accordingly, subtlety and measured subversiveness, have become important themes in my work. By stepping back from the extremes of an issue and giving a softer, less direct message, my work can encourage measured dialogs, instead of trying to fuel a rally cry. Some of the most influential conversations I have had recently, are about my own family and the quiet strength of the women who have always been around me.

My grandmother, Elsie, was a tough woman. Her husband died after they had given birth to their fourth child. Living in rural North Dakota in the 1950s with only an 8th grade education, four children, and no husband was a recipe for tragedy. Elsie kept it together, and she did what she needed to do in order to keep her family alive. She got a job as a cook for the school, but her pay as a woman was meager. Finally, as her children were starting to starve from undernourishment (my mother's body ate her reproductive organs during this time, leading to my adoption in 1982), she took advantage of one of the only doors open to her. She married a wealthy man whom she did not love. She cooked his meals, shared his bed, and took care of him until the day he died. When we buried him, she did not cry. Her children returned to good health, and Elsie insisted that all her children, especially her daughters, went to college. My mother, Alice, earned two

masters degrees: in Business Administration and Education.

Alice's husband, my father, was less interested in school than my mother. Knowing that her husband's career would have more potential than hers ever would, Alice was fairly liberal in helping with his studies and assignments, and ensured his degree was completed. Despite her academic success Alice has always felt that her education has held her back. We lived in rural Montana, and her two masters degrees made many possible employers turn her down as "too educated," due to their own insecurities or fear that she would demand more pay. As a result, she spent her life in part-time jobs and found more success when she left her education off her résumé. She also found life in her marriage easier when she downplayed her education, and to her two daughters has always espoused two core contradictory principles; pursue education for yourself, but don't ever tell anyone, especially our men. My mother lives in constant fear that my partner will wake up one morning and realize that I am more educated than he is, and after having that realization he will promptly leave me.

My feminine familial influences affect me indirectly and almost quietly, yet persistently. The slow piecing-together of a family's past falling together is like a scree slope beneath a cliff. Age brings me a realization that these huge personalities in my life, my caregivers and Christmas present providers were full people with their own lives and stories.

The hide/reveal relationship in my work echoes the back and forth that is often associated with communication. My desire is that viewers of work will take the time necessary to explore the meaning and potential narratives. The relationship between the im-

age and the viewer is something I try to play with in my work. I am interested in the different ways that the viewer can read and translate abstract information. Abstraction allows me to disrupt the viewer's ability to read the image clearly or overtly, and creates an experience of exploring, searching, and finding capitalizing on the viewer's desire and expectation to obtain and understand the image.

An image is made up of more than what we see on the surface. Layers are always there, out of sight but doing their job. We often take for granted how seamlessly they work together to create the results for which we are searching. My work encourages the viewer to explore the elements that are usually unseen. The deconstructionist element of my work parallels my approach to social views of women. By breaking down the elements within theories I can simplify and fragment the message. By repeating this method with the style of my work I am able to question the societal views we have been born into.

Employing a strategy involving half-tone permits another form of abstraction. As a way to convey information, the halftone printing process is closely married to media and the mass produced image. This printing process is used when a full tonal range is needed, but limited inks are available, such as in a newspaper or magazine. Using half-tone allows me to access the desire to see; viewers are familiar with this process and what it's used for so they know that an image is being represented.

Half-tone inverts the normal viewing experience. In an actual environment, if a viewer would like more information or would like to see detail, he or she would move closer and examine the image from a shorter viewing distance. With halftone one is not

allowed that further investigation. If the viewer moves forward, they receive less information. More information can only be obtained by moving back and trusting your brain to pull the pieces of abstract shapes together to form a viewable image.

At the end of my course of study, my work, at the very minimum, allows me to more fully explore, comprehend, and expand upon the complex relationship between women and image, and women's control of their own representation. Art is a vehicle for me to better understand the many feminist movements, and to clear and navigate a path through this body of social thought. Making art is my way of negotiating the feminist thought and theories that I was born into. We all come into culture mid-stream, and I have come of age during a time when shelves of books have been written about women and gender roles, but I as an individual need to find my own way of wading through all these complex, and sometimes contradictory thoughts, and deciding what they mean to me. What is relevant to me? What is not? My opinions are fluid, and sometimes my thoughts about a subject have a great degree of variation. Sometimes I contradict myself. We are all complex beings capable of holding conflicting beliefs about the world around us. The question I'm exploring is a question of who am I as an individual navigating a world of thought that I didn't know was already in place.

I no longer think that there is an absolute truth to feminism. For me there is no single correct line of thought. There is simply the experience of individuals, combining to build a critical mass, or sometimes just passing down lessons learned. The important part is the conversation. That is what has the power to disrupt the course of your life.



Installation View - Image 1



Installation View - Image 2



Installation View - Image 3



Installation View - Image 4





Installation View - Image 5



Installation View - Image 6



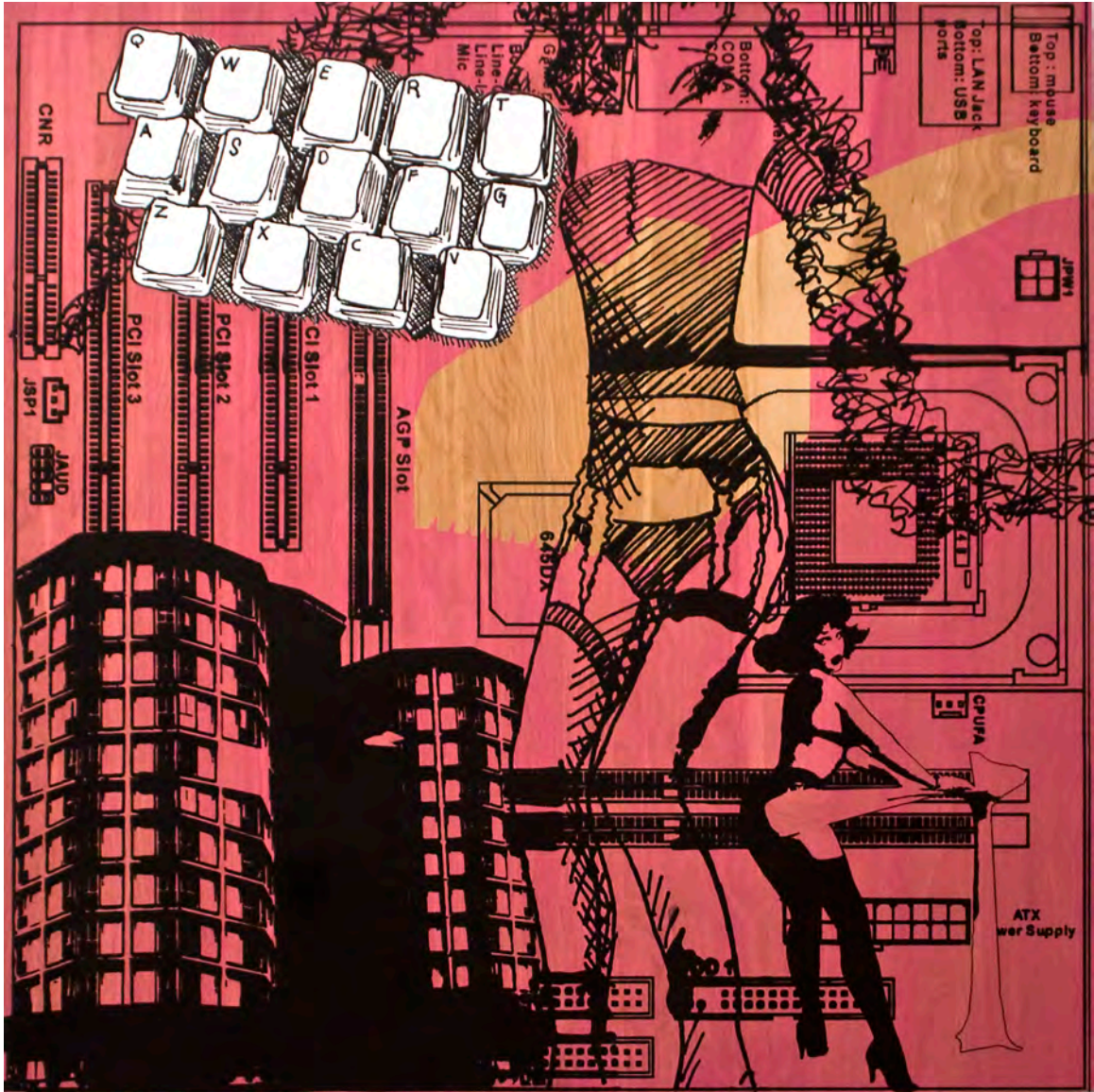
Repository - Image 7



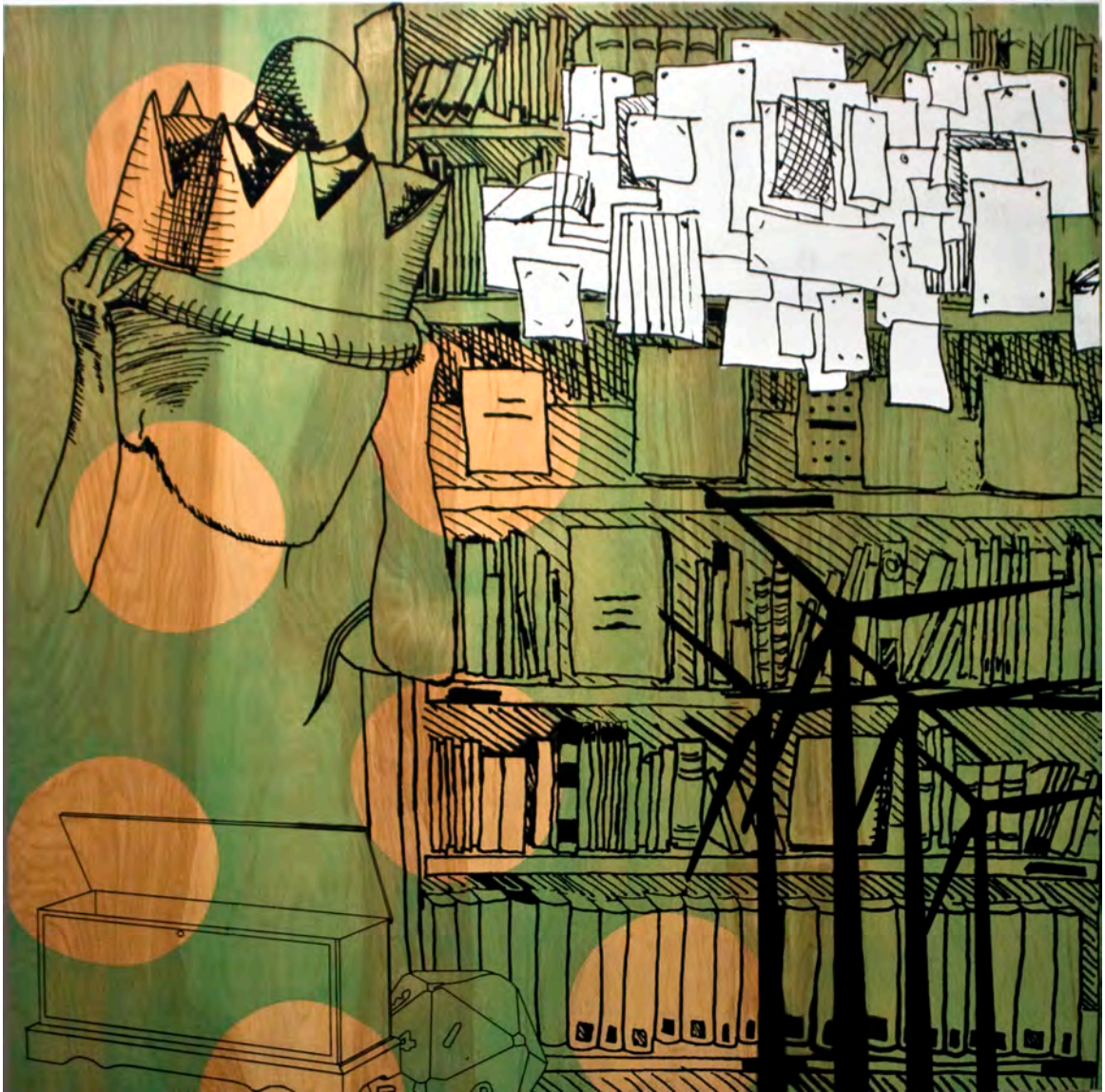
Revolution - Image 8



Repression - Image 9



Rebellion - Image 10



Realization - Image 11



Muses - Image 12



Muses (Detail Ann) - Image 13





Muses (Detail - April) - Image 14



Muses (Detail - Robin) - Image 15



Plastic Army Enemy - Image 16



Plastic Army Enemy (Detail - Dark Blue) - Image 17



Plastic Army Enemy (Detail - Sliver) - Image 18



Plastic Army Enemy (Detail - Light Blue) - Image 19

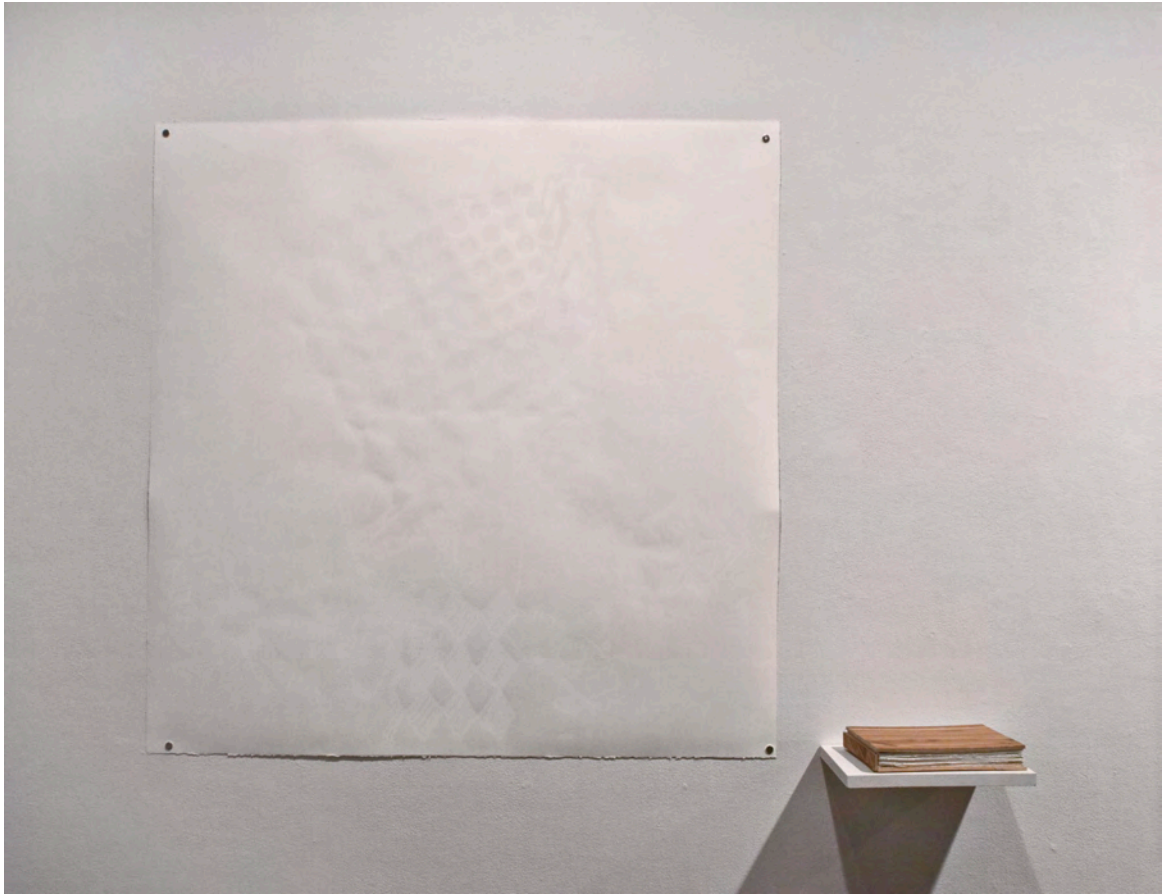


Generations - Image 20



Hope Chest - Image 21





Stories - Image 22



Stories Book 1 - Image 23



Stories Book 2 - Image 24



Stories (Detail) - Image 25



Wonder Women - Image 26



Title Wall - Image 27



Installation View - Image 28



Installation View - Image 29