



# ART PAPERS

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## TIMED RELEASE ROCHESTER, NY

In the installation *Timed Release*, Heidi Kumao explores people's use of creative outlets to ease the constrictions of physical captivity [Visual Studies Workshop; November 6, 2009—January 18, 2010]. This narrative thread connects three distinct video-sculptures consisting of a glass container on a pedestal placed between a projector and a large projection surface. Each glass receptacle holds a related artifact positioned to interrupt the projection, cast a shadow onto the wall, and capture other images, providing a multi-layered visual experience. In addition, each of these "image theaters" enlists a visual style unique to its story while corresponding audio tracks add another sensory level to the work.

*Transplant*, 2009, the most substantial of the three pieces, uncovers the story of the interned Japanese Americans of World War II who, in a bold act of defiance, created elaborate gardens in the camps. Documentary images reveal the campaign of fingerprinting and the ensuing train transport, against the constant backdrop of snow-capped California peaks. In the soundtrack, a military official explains that internment was an unsavory but necessary measure. Then, the swish of a broom and the light sounds of Japanese music accompany an image of a broom sweeping the desert dust, obliterating family portraits—and the lives—of the interned. But overlaid on still photographs of the camps are silhouettes of figures clearing, planting, and harvesting in the dust around the human transplants while a seedling sprouts on an ID tag in the bell jar—testaments to ingenuity and the drive to create beauty and life in an inhospitable environment.

Kumao found inspiration for *Correspondence*, 2008, in American hostage Terry Anderson, who kept a journal hidden in his underclothes during his captivity in Iran, and Nelson Mandela, who wrote letters from prison. In this piece, a bell jar contains a square, open envelope. On the wall, its shadow is multiplied into a line of houses as a searchlight scans the landscape, which includes a guard tower. Furthering the sense of surveillance and tension, the bell jar's shadow is lit and electrified like a

Tesla coil. We hear a drum beat. Barking dogs lunge, and a human hand interrogates with aggressive gestures, while in the jar an animated man intermittently cowers and draws fantasy egresses of windows and doors. The hand eventually obliterates the scene, but the man's wavy, imperfect lines extend out the window, suggesting that writing can offer an escape route.

*Tether*, 2009, references Jean-Dominique Bauby, the Editor of ELLE who suffered from Locked-In Syndrome. The video loop starts with a blue sky and a man's tie on the bell jar, which then fills with blood, the swirling liquid turning into dry dust, evoking lifelessness much as in *Transplant*. Medical probes invade the jar and the mechanical, rhythmic sounds of a breathing machine increase. Letters skim the images as words are transcribed by the silhouette of a nurse, the text affixing to the screen, representing the method Bauby used to write his memoir, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*: by blinking one letter at a time. "I saw the face of a man who seemed to have emerged from a vat of formaldehyde," the text reads. "It was mine." This piece is jarring in its raw, personal nature and in the knowledge that we are reading the words of someone who was never able to escape his confinement.

By making large projections and diverse smaller screens convey equally significant information, Kumao privileges the details of her subjects' emotional lives. She also creates a multivalent reality that requires us to navigate the space and the images. While escape might be only in the imagination and solace merely temporary, Kumao reminds us of the power, even transcendence, of self-expression.

—Karen vanMeenen

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Heidi Kumao, *Correspondence*, 2008, bell jar, envelope, metal table, wood table, video projector, DVD player, DVD, overall dimensions: 64 x 54 x 109 inches (courtesy of the artist)