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Surviving Confinement: Video Sculpture by Heidi Kumao

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What forces, intentional or accidental, but certainly not of our own choosing, oppress us? In an age when human trafficking is rampant, when citizens are detained simply by virtue of the Middle Eastern origin of their name, when ubiquitous surveillance makes many people feel as if they're perpetually under a microscope, the common delusion that we inhabit a world of relative freedom is too easily used to disregard or belittle those who struggle to maintain a semblance of sanity and dignity when they are imprisoned. In *Surviving Confinement: Video Sculpture*, held at the Ceres Gallery in New York City, Heidi Kumao explored these issues, and posed the more important question: How do such victims endure their constraint? This contemplative exhibition consisted of three videos, each of which addressed the ways in which people struggle to retain their humanity when they are held against their will.

In *Swallowed Whole* (2014), Kumao resurrects the vertical frame roll Joan Jonas effectively showed to be so disruptive in her 1972 work *Vertical Roll*. Kumao's title suggests being utterly engulfed, and here the roll mimics the violent nature of the accident that broke her back in 2011 and subsequently monopolized her life. The resulting fracture and the delicacy of one's body are alluded to by spine-like arrangements of ice-cubes and pills, each of which viscerally crack and shatter, as her vertebrae must have done. The isolation that occurred after the initial "novelty" of her hospitalization subsided and visitors no longer checked in, is insinuated by thick sheets of ice under which the artist appears to be trapped, while life "above"—outside the confines of her recovery—goes on without her. Muffled sounds of laughter, the tracks of sleds being pulled across the opaque surface, and the antiseptically yellowed tiles of a hospital ceiling all underscore the artist's entrapment, flat on her back and alone, as she claws at the underside for some human contact. Most haunting, aside from her resolve to escape, is the stoic and final image of her floating atop her own solitary iceberg, staring into the future like the survivor of some arctic shipwreck—one who knows not when she will be rescued, but only that she made it out alive.

In *Egress* (2014), Kumao creates a paean to those women who have pursued the intellectual pleasures and rewards of reading illicit novels under totalitarian governments, as described by Azar Nafisi in her book *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). A modern library, with its Persian iwans, is the setting for the constant public shakedowns female Iranians must undergo. Although Kumao's veiled women are black silhouettes, a form that could be considered played-out post-Kara Walker, they are effective here, as the void suggests both the universality of the oppressed female, and the emptiness of a life prescribed by others' beliefs about what a woman is and should be. Here Kumao's skillful use of illusionistic depth—not only her incorporation of a stack of books as a three-dimensional element upon which she



Egress (2014) by Heidi Kumao

projects ever-changing elements—but also her ability to create exquisite collage-like layers upon the video's surface, is at its most exceptional. In one of the closing images, when the soot-filled urban sky opens and gives way as if it were a doorway to another world—this one a cerulean heaven where women are truly free—Kumao's black figure transforms into a butterfly. Sadly, the big hand of government comes down and pins it to the wall, transforming this thinking woman into a pretty specimen lying inertly under glass.

The final video also powerfully utilizes the metaphor of patriarchal and technology-obsessed cultures to constrain and monitor its subject-citizens. *Transplant* (2010) is a lovely but melancholy tribute to the thousands of Japanese Americans interned by their own government during World War II. Here Kumao intertwines radio propaganda and images from the Library of Congress with a broom that erases the faces of these innocent citizens to underscore our desire to "sweep" this part of history under the rug. In the installation, Kumao also exploited an actual bell jar placed upon a soldered steel table to transform the images projected upon it. Inside the jar hung a classification tag—which became another screen—at one moment featuring a Japanese American child wearing an ID tag of similar size, and at another becoming a narrow field for an American flag, restrained and cut off, much like this child's democratic freedoms. As Kumao's initially ominous narrative turns hopeful—with smiling families tending to the fruitful gardens they manage to bring forth from the desert gravel surrounding their barrack lodgings—the tag shows a tender plant shoot, gradually sprouting. The action of pushing and/or pulling a tool in order to move dirt, which earlier in the video was insinuated by the path of the broom, is now shown to be the very same motion that these captives use to rake barren soil into fertile ground. Here, hope springs eternal. Like the artist herself, like the readers of *Lolita* in Iran, these oppressed citizens are determined to endure, and Kumao does a superlative job of making visual poetry out of their struggle to survive.

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