

THESIS

CONSTRUCTION AND CONSTRICTION

Submitted by  
Charla Y. Gaglio  
Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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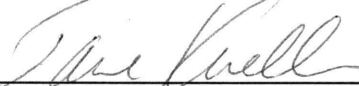
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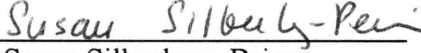
CHARLA Y. GAGLIO  
entitled *Construction and Constriction*


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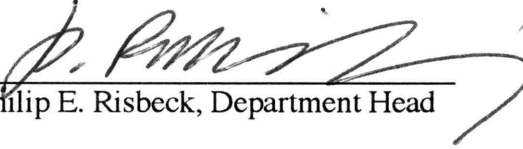
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Patrick Fahey

  
Jane Kneller

  
Susan Silberberg-Peirce

  
Thomas R. Lundberg, Advisor

  
Philip E. Risbeck, Department Head

## Abstract of Thesis

### *Construction and Constriction* Reflections on the Female Figure through Cloth

“A long history of the cloth’s utility reminds us that a fabric takes on traces of human existence while at the same time it remains separate from it. In the Christian tradition the traces become transformed into an image - and into a myth” (Kuryluk 23)

“The body is a highly contested site - its flesh is both the recipient and the source of desire, lust and hatred. As a pawn of technology, it is sacred and sacrificial, bearing the politics of society and state. The body is our common bond, yet it separates us in its public display identity, race and gender” (Ewing 324).

Utilizing the skin and psychological associations of layered cloth, coupled with the “highly contested site” of flesh and body as subject matter, the pieces that are a part of *Construction and Constriction* represent an exploration of isolated and fragmented interior landscapes. While not literal diagrams of arteries and bone, these works are instead an examination of moments; thoughts and feelings rendered through time-intensive processes, utilizing the female figure as the simultaneous site and embodiment of canvas and vessel, decorative surface and interior reflection. Their format appears familiar: icon-like images with gilt edges. These female forms, however, with their averted gazes, shorn heads and folded or twisting bodies, are involved in their own inner workings, leaving viewers to discover or decide what they can or will as “outsiders” to the imagery depicted.

Cut, reassembled, and often bearing involved workings of improbable stitched tattoos and sutures, these figures remain whole; encased within dissolving spaces and bodies. As a photograph captures or creates a momentary glimpse of a real or imagined event, the techniques used in these pieces visually suspend and create these dissolving figures and spaces. First woven and stitched in place, the subjects of these works are further fixed in their pixilated environments by gold and copper leafing. This gilding process gives the work abrupt edges, while projecting it into another time period. The resulting images are intended to be self-contained but not self-conscious, familiar but not comfortable, nude but not exposed.

These pieces are meant to speak to physical, social and spiritual dualities: hard versus soft, measured time versus momentary glimpses, interior vision versus exterior view. They are the result of technical investigations and readings that began with several seemingly unrelated interests including cloth/body metaphors, transparency, layering, vestments, perceptions of the female figure, photography, tattooing and ritual scarification. Studying the work and writing of artists who addressed various combinations of these topics in their own work was critical to developing the pieces that are a part of *Construction and Constriction*.

With the discovery of the work of fiber artist Ewa Kuryluk, for example, research began into cloth/body metaphors in late medieval art. Her use of cloth to suggest figural “mood,” line, and historic references such as the Veil of Veronica served as an important starting point, as did her writings on the subject of cloth/body metaphor and its relationship to the female body and the body of Christ in medieval art. In her article, “Metaphysics of Cloth,” Kuryluk writes:

“The Christian metaphysics of cloth is derived from the Incarnation, which since early Christianity has been interpreted in terms of Mary “clothing” Jesus in her skin and flesh. The idea established a synonymity between garments and the body and climaxed in the vision of 13th and 14th century mystics who viewed cloth as the material, female envelope hiding and revealing male divinity. Between the High Middle Ages and the High Renaissance the interplay of textiles was used as background and substance for pictorial programs presenting Christ’s life as a sequence of being clothed and undressed, destruction of cloth and restoration of cloth, with good people providing the Incarnate God with garments and the evil ones destroying his clothing and skin. Thus the Holy Virgin puts the child in swaddling cloth and knits for her son a seamless tunic - a second skin; the Roman soldiers strip Jesus of his garments before the Crucifixion, divide them into four parts, cast lots for his tunic - and injure his skin; taken down from the cross, Christ’s naked and wounded corpse is wrapped in linen by Joseph of Arimathea ... The Christian obsession with the mortal covers of skin and cloth defines the character of the Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection scenes in which both the fabric and the epidermis are conceived as symbolic canvases or pages marked or



transformed by divinity into the icons and texts of the of the incarnate Word”  
(Kuryluk 81).

From reading Kuryluk and other like-minded writers such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Michael Camille, grew an interest, and later an awareness, of the real and symbolic associations of skin and cloth to the body. Through their work, it became clear that the medium of cloth was and continues to be used to express cultural interpretations of the cycles and transformations experienced throughout the course of a lifetime, and in anticipation of what may follow.

A natural outgrowth of Kuryluk’s interpretations of historic and Biblical uses of cloth was an interest in vestments. Heavily embroidered chasubles offered new considerations of scale and narrative for the pieces included in *Construction and Constriction*. The use of embroidery on these garments also revealed another way to not only embellish the cloth surface but to create new opaque and transparent layers.

Fiber artists Lenore Tawney and Marna Goldstein-Brauner were also important sources of insight into the many natures of cloth. Tawney’s fiber investigations of transparency first offered new ways of considering space in the three dimensional work that preceded *Construction and Constriction*. As later work “flattened” dimensionally, Tawney’s influence continued in terms of relating to the inherent qualities of cloth and fiber for their own sake. An interest in the layering of multiple processes came from examinations of the obsessive working of the cloth surface by Goldstein-Brauner. Using multiple techniques including screen printing, dye, discharge, resist, embroidery and beading, her work speaks of time passage through the distressing and reworking of cloth and the use of medieval and Renaissance imagery such as the rose, the artichoke, and Michelangelo’s *David*.

Photography also served as inspiration through the work of George Woodman, Jerry Uelsmann and Ruth Bernhard. Woodman’s use of the female figure as architectural element offered a literal view of the juxtaposition of the interior and exterior self. Specifically his works *Nina in the Met*, 1991 (Woodman 40), *Corridor at Calci with Figure*, 1992 (69), and *Back with Carved Panel*, 1993, (56) all address the female figure in the context of architecture. The figures, corridors and plaster work are present

simultaneously, revealing the architecture as spiritual being and the body as timeless structure.

Jerry Uelsmann uses layered photographic imagery to produce a surreal deconstructing of the body. Two of his untitled pieces from 1982 and 1989 (Uelsmann 24, 37) layer the female figure with seascapes and rock formations. The suggestion of time passage and endurance through the use of crumbling stone were important in learning to balance the “whole” versus cut and reconstructed areas of the body found in *Construction and Constriction*.

Perhaps the most influential in the making of *Construction and Constriction* of the three photographers mentioned is the work of Ruth Bernhard. Her interest is in the sculptural qualities of the female figure. Relying on light and shadow to portray the body’s position and weight in space, her work focuses on “... the nude with the aim of revitalizing a classical standard of beauty, one based on the appreciation of the female form as part of a unified humanity” (Bernhard 1). In a book of her photographs entitled, *Ruth Bernhard: The Eternal Body*, she states:

“If I have chosen the female form in particular, it is because beauty has been debased and exploited in our sensual twentieth century. We seem to have a need to turn innocent nature into evil ugliness by the twist of the mind. Women have been the target of much that is sordid and cheap ... ” (6).

It is this approach to the female figure as beautiful rather than as exploited or exploiting that also made consideration of Bernhard’s work important in the making of *Construction and Constriction*. Her approach to the turning of the figure in space allowed for an appreciation of the form *before* thinking of it as female, rather than having it looked at *because* it was female. This led to a focus on adapting figures for *Construction and Constriction* that were turned away from the viewer; not out of shyness, but out of indifference. They are not “playing” to the viewer’s gaze. Instead they, like the viewer in a sense, are looking inward at themselves. This quality of figural positioning and Bernhard’s “losing” of edges to light also inspired an interest to “let go” of some of the edges in this series as well. Use of this selective melding of image and ground allowed for more varied visual entry into the works. A better understanding and play of inner and outer compositional edges was

additionally achieved by studying Bernhard's photographs.

While considering cloth and its relationship to skin, the ideas of tattoos and scarification also began to surface as areas of interest. The body-as-canvas was familiar through study of the Nuba people of Sudan, where "the body becomes both the medium and the message" (Brain 43) in elaborate uses of body painting that celebrate the (male) body for its own sake. For other peoples, such as the Aboriginal Australians and the Trobriand Islanders, body painting deals with the powers of ritual, dreams and magic. As embroidery became a part of the images used in *Construction and Constriction*, however, more permanent forms of body decoration revealed themselves as the skin equivalent of this process. As tattooing instruments pierce and transform the skin through the addition of a new, superimposed narrative, the embroiderer's needle transforms cloth, giving it new meaning layered onto the already potent associations with cloth to which the new "marks" are stitched. Traditional tattooing and scarification, like that found among the Maori and Nuba (female) peoples, is representative of a change in status or biological role. The Japanese tattooing tradition of *Irezumi*, while ornamental today, began as a indicator of rank. These ideas of transition more closely identified with both the technique and intent of the work.

Physically, what began and has remained central to the work leading to and including those in *Construction and Constriction*, is the layering of alternately opaque and transparent materials and techniques, and working the surface of the cloth. These elements have seen a variety of incarnations. Screen printing on transparent layered fabrics of varying depths, sizes and juxtapositions gave way to more compressed versions that incorporated opaque cloths. Then the transparent fabric was deleted completely, with the screen printing being enhanced by additional painting of the opaque cloth surface. The screens allowed for working with multiples of the same image, as well as the possibility to somewhat obsessively rework a particular motif. The multiple screened and painted opaque cloths were then cut into warp and weft grids and reassembled. Transparency then resurfaced in the form of dyeing the cloths. This was followed by further embellishment of the fabric surface in the form of embroidery and gold leaf. Embroidery allowed for another way of creating transparent versus opaque effects, with gold leaf adding the

dual considerations of hard versus soft, and the historic referencing of icons with their use of gold as metaphor for light and spirit.

A result of this process of technical investigations has been a broadening of definitions of specific techniques. Screen printing, for example, with its inherent potential for rigidity through focus on edges, can be softened through design alterations, and size and manipulation of the squeegees and brushes used to force dye or pigment through the screen. Dyeing also can take on a painterly quality, allowing for innumerable surface variations that can mimic the irregularities of skin. Also, while these pieces are not woven in the formal sense of being produced using yarns or other materials on a loom, choices of color relationships, structural considerations, and composition -- regardless of sketches -- are by necessity only fully realized one row or shed at a time in a manner similar to the weaving process. The historically decorative process of embroidery brought this quality, along with that of the stitched or pierced surface, into odd proximity with skin references; mimicking the surface cutting, piercing, and layering of color on skin that is tattooing. Gold leaf, traditionally associated with hard surfaces, has been adapted as an embellishment for cloth, bringing to fabric its spiritual associations and historic references.

The pieces included in *Construction and Constriction* represent a personal synthesis of these visual and theoretical perspectives and technical investigations. With each step in this process, including several spectacular failures, new perceptions have evolved and continue to move the work forward. Titles and a brief description of each of the pieces included in *Construction and Constriction* follow:

*Ascension* (January 1998, 45" x 50", dye and pigment on screened & woven cotton - Fig. 1). The oldest and largest of the pieces in the group, it depicts a horizontal female figure in a dreaming state, as if rolling over in sleep. Her head is turned away from the viewer and is the point farthest from the picture plane. It is a transitional work that brings the large scale of previous undertakings together with a more sensitive approach to color layering. Where pigment was solely relied upon as the color source in previous works, *Ascension* was the first to incorporate the transparent effects achieved with dye to create richer and more subtle color variations. Also adding depth to the piece is the use of separately dyed supplemental warp and weft pieces of fabric. With its shape reminiscent

of a Gothic arch or window, it is mounted on rusted metal to further enhance the sense of time passage.

*Elementals* (April 1998, each panel 18" x 36", dye and pigment on screened & woven cotton - Fig. 2). Their name referencing individual representations of air, earth and fire, the three pieces of this triptych are a "next step" in allowing for flexibility in the tabby and twill weave structures more closely adhered to in earlier work. As with *Ascension*, these pieces are Gothic window-shaped and mounted on rusted steel. The center panel, however, is inverted, suggesting a vessel shape that holds the earth element. Therefore, while fire and air rise up visually, the middle element of earth is contained. The figures in these pieces have turned their backs on the viewer. They are disengaged from the viewer's gaze. The body posture of these figures is also closed off and tight, while at the same time color and weave structure break the images down, partially dissolving them into the background.

*Regenesis* (September 1998, 14" x 16", dye, pigment, embroidery, gold leaf on screened & woven cotton Fig. - 3). This piece depicts a state of renewal; a choice toward change and beginning again. It is a literal change in approach to this series that involved a reduction in scale and the incorporation of new techniques. *Regenesis* is also the first piece in which embroidery and gold leaf are used. Where in previous pieces the entire figure, in addition to the ground, was cut into warp and weft-like strips and then reassembled, this work has a small section of cloth left "intact." Located on the figure's shoulder, it is now almost entirely covered by the embroidered motif. Originally, this uncut area was included only for its pragmatic benefit of providing a flat surface upon which to stitch. It soon became apparent that it also offered a visual "breathing space" or break from the pixilated effect caused by the reweaving. The floral imagery is representative both of a static tattoo and a beginning of growth.

*Samson: Recast* (October 1998, 14" x 18", dye, pigment, embroidery, gold leaf on screened & woven cotton - Fig. 4). In this work, the Hebrew hero is recast as female, wedged between two pillar-like shapes, at the time prior to bringing down the temple of the Philistines. Architecture is suggested by vertical areas on either side of the figure. These are separated texturally by using acrylic matte medium to "harden" the pillars' surface

relative to that of the figure's skin. Motion or a prelude to action is suggested by the turning of the torso. The floral motif is meant to suggest the possibilities for growth from change.

*Snake Murmurs* (November 1998, 14" x 17", dye, discharge, pigment, embroidery, copper leaf on screened & woven hemp/linen - Fig. 5). The composition of this piece began with considerations of the Eve myth and the use of woman as the embodiment of evil. In the imagery, the snake originates from the female figure, with its head coming to rest near her ear. Her body is turned from the light source/copper leafing. The intent of the piece is not as an indictment of women, but rather a depiction of the idea that evil begins and ends with the choices of the individual. As technical investigation, this piece is the first to "let go" of several edges. As a result, the piece is discovered a step at a time, with more detail becoming visible the closer one gets to the work.

*Cocks and Other Inner Demons* (December 1998, 14" x 16", dye, pigment, embroidery, gold leaf on screened and woven linen - Fig. 6). This piece was created from an odd mix of William Morris prints and *Irezumi* body tattoos. The cock is a rework of a Morris wallpaper motif, with its application to the body referencing the intricate imagery associated with *Irezumi*. The full-body embroidery heightens the dream/nightmare quality of the dark, bound figure that is emerging from the space. Technically, this was the first piece in the series to be cut in diagonal warp and weft.

*Transmutation* (January 1999, 17" x 23", dye, pigment, embroidery, rusted steel strips, gold leaf on screened & woven cotton - Fig. 7). As medieval alchemists believed in the transformation of base metals into gold and silver, the piece is about the transition from one place to another, and how an individual can also exist simultaneously in various experiences through memory. Incorporating both rusted metal and gold leaf, the piece is architectural as well, with an interior/exterior space defined by a light source and a window shape.

*Cardium Tracings* (February 1999, 19" x 22", dye, discharge, pigment, embroidery, gold leaf on screened & woven linen - Fig. 8). Closed around its contents like the shell after which it is named, this work considers the true location of the heart. As the physical heart pumps blood throughout the body and thereby interacts with the whole, the

spiritual center is not confined. In several areas within the work, skin surface and interior space are ambiguously defined in order to make both present at the same time.

These pieces, as parts of *Construction and Constriction*, represent an ongoing consideration of cloth as metaphor for skin and body, and canvas for inner self. They are intended to reflect a variety of transitional states; in-between-moments from one existence to another as in the architecture of *Transmutation* or the dreamscape of *Ascension*. Some represent actions about to occur as in the case of *Samson: Recast*. Others are consequences of actions taken. Meant to be simultaneously surface and interior, decorative and uneasy, they are all windows open to partial scenes; fragmented views of a familiar but ambiguous iconography.

Charla Y. Gaglio  
Department of Art  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, CO 80523  
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Fig. - 1 *Ascension*  
January 1998  
Dye and pigment on screened & woven cotton.  
45" x 50"





Fig. - 2 *Elementals*  
April 1998  
Dye and pigment on screened & woven cotton.  
Each panel, 18" x 36"



Fig. - 3 *Regenesis*  
September 1998  
Dye, pigment, embroidery, gold leaf on screened & woven cotton.  
14" x 16"





Fig. - 4 *Samson: Recast*  
October 1998  
Dye, pigment, embroidery, gold leaf on screened & woven cotton.  
14" x 18"





Fig. - 5 *Snake Murmurs*  
November 1998  
Discharge, pigment, embroidery, copper leaf on screened & woven  
hemp/linen.  
14" x 17"





Fig. - 6 *Cocks and Other Inner Demons*  
December 1998  
Dye, pigment, embroidery, gold leaf on screened and woven linen.  
14" x 16"

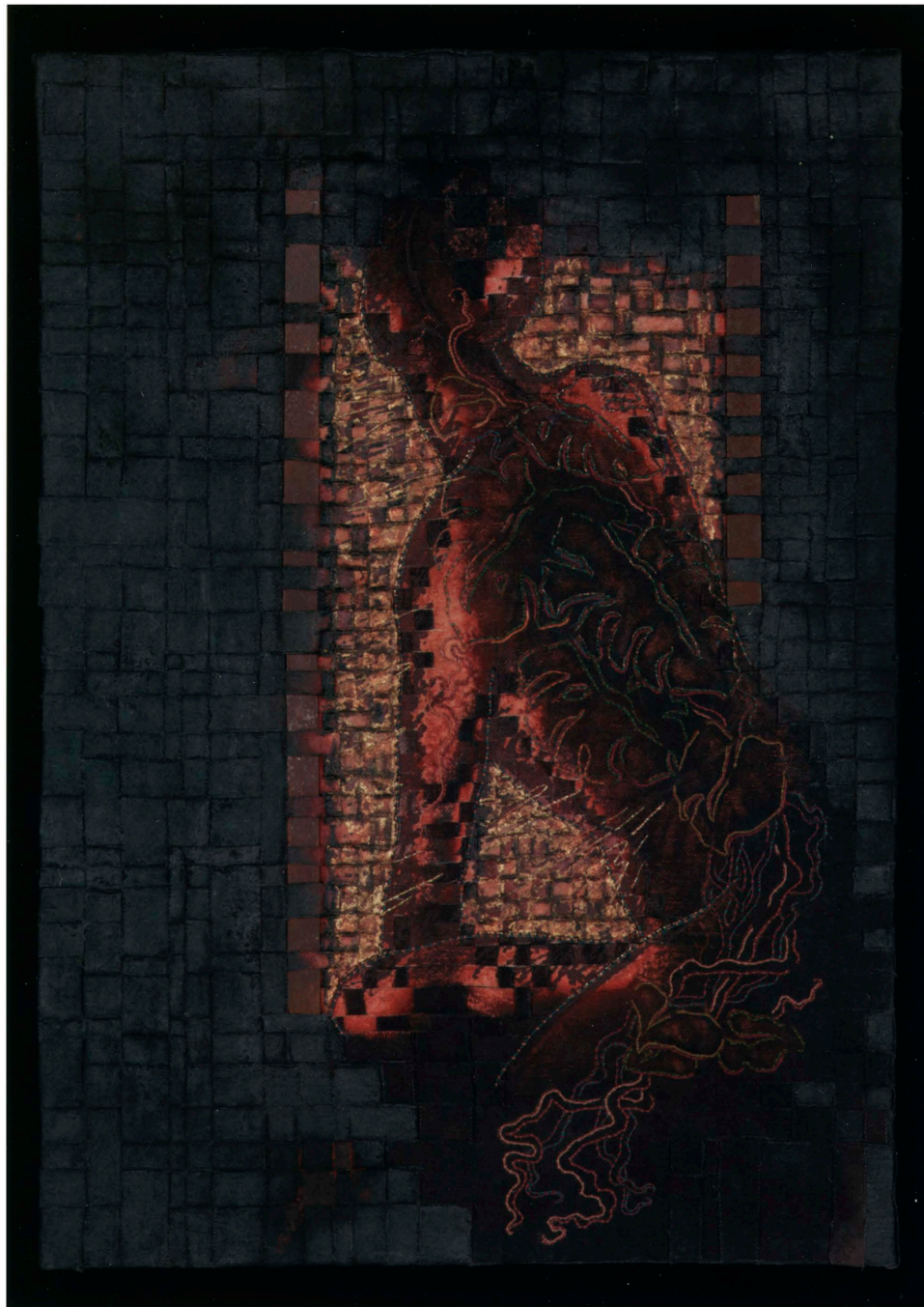


Fig. - 7 *Transmutation*  
January 1999  
Dye, pigment, embroidery, rusted steel strips, gold leaf on screened  
& woven cotton.  
17" x 23"



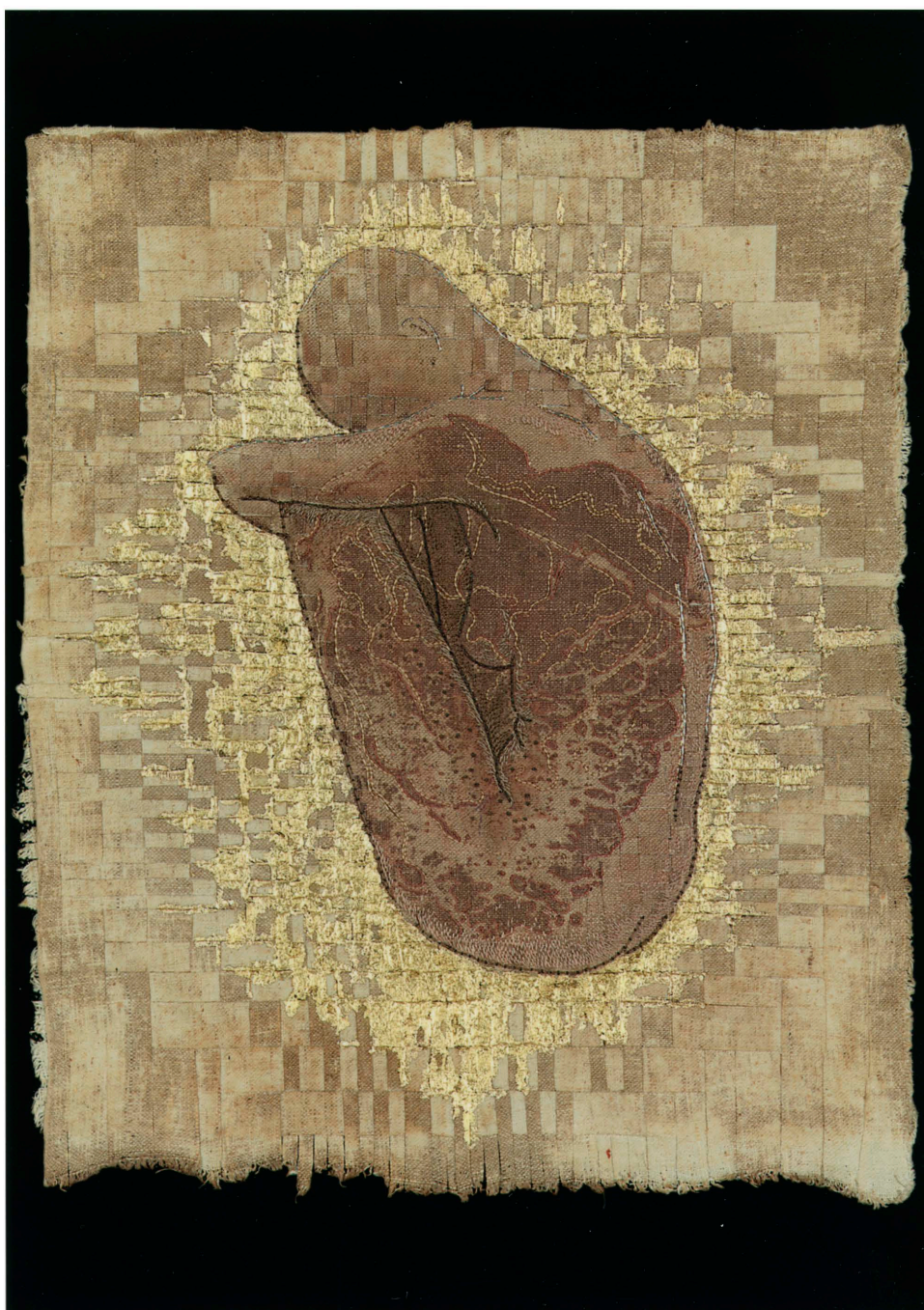


Fig. - 8 *Cardium Tracings*  
February 1999  
Dye, discharge, pigment, embroidery, gold leaf on screened &  
woven linen.  
19" x 22"

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