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Khwaam Jam : Memory

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KHWAAM JAM: MEMORY

A THESIS

by

KEITH L. CRANE

Under the Direction of Junco Sato Pollack

ABSTRACT

Khwaam Jam is an introspective installation of works that explore the perceptions of identity based on memory. Created through the exploration of my past and present, the works of *Khwaam Jam* utilize the principles and techniques of textile design and production while involving mixed media and new materials in a site-specific installation. This installation is intended to represent my memory on a large scale. The hanging pieces are the focal point of the exhibition and are the physical manifestation of my perception of the categorization and storage of my memories. Memories are the vessels through which we create our identity. An individual's identity is not only created from the personal experiences of the individual, but also from the experiences of those linked to the individual, whether on an intimate or social level. This overlap

of memories is what connects us and helps create both individual and social identities through a series of shared memories.

INDEX WORDS: Memory, Identity, Introspective, Catalogue, Mixed media, Object and material culture, Human relationship

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother. You have been the inspiration for this body of work, as well as my life, and will continue to do so for years to come.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give special thanks to my committee, Professors Junco Sato Pollack, Carol LeBaron, and Constance Thalken, for their guidance in producing this work as well as their patience with my journey. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their continued support through the years. Finally I would like to give special thanks to my students and classmates, you are the people that I never stop learning from.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
CHAPTER	
1. CATALOGUED EXPERIENCES	2
2. INTERSECTIONS	7
3. MOTHER	10
4. CONCLUSION	15
BIBLIOGRAPHY	16
CD IMAGES	17

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: First Tile Layer	3
Figure 2: Balloon and Baby (detail)	6
Figure 3: Butterfly (detail)	8
Figure 4: Netted Layer	9
Figure 5: Mother, Series of Three (detail)	11
Figure 6: Mother, Series of Seven (detail)	14

Memory is history recorded in our brain, memory is a painter; it paints pictures of the past and of the day.

- Grandma Moses

The body of work I have created during my studies at Georgia State University is based on the exploration and perception of my personal identity in congruence with the memories of both my past, and the past of those with whom I am closely linked. Much of the inspiration to develop this installation is rooted in the work of contemporary artists Annette Messager and Robert Weingarten. Both artists work closely with photographic images and explore the dimensions of an individual's identity through the elements of their past and present experiences. Memories are the vessels through which we create our identity. As intelligent beings we collect and catalog our experiences and hide them away in the recesses of our minds for use at a later time; this is how we learn and ultimately grow and flourish. A culmination of our experiences linked to our memories create a working whole, our identity, and our uniqueness.

In his essay, *Art of Memory: The Loss of History*, William Oleander offers that memories are basically one's chosen perception of their life experiences. Although it is easy to think that one's identity is based only upon the experiences of that particular individual, I have found that one's identity is not only created from the personal experiences of the individual, but also from the experiences of those linked to the individual, whether on an intimate or social level. This overlap of memories is what connects us and helps create both individual and social identities through a series of shared memories.

1. CATALOGUED EXPERIENCES

My work installed in the gallery at Georgia State University consists of a series of seven layers, each suspended from the ceiling and stretching to the floor, and a series of physically distorted photographs of my mother hung in a single, horizontal, eye level line around the gallery. The first, third, fifth and seventh layers are composed of numerous resin tiles that have been linked together using black nylon string. The tiles range in size from the basic unit of 1.5" x 1.5" x .75" to the larger size of 4.5" x 4.5" x .75" with different variations in between. In each tile I have cast an object or group of objects that hold particular resonance to whomever it was that donated it. In the beginning of my exploration I only cast objects that I collected or created, but as I learned more about what makes up my own memories I expanded the source of the objects to everyone and anyone who has had some influence in my life, whether it be positive or negative. In doing so, I have received many objects from family members, friends, classmates, students and teachers; all of whom help create my memories and in turn, my identity. Through this larger source of memories and experiences I believe I have created a more diverse and accurate representation of my memories and the connection I share with those around me.

The first layer is the smallest tile layer and is composed of memories that have been with me the longest (fig. 1). These memories have created the foundation of who I am as a person and therefore hold more resonance to my experience. A little above center is the image of my mother in her twenties. The photograph is black and white and is seen throughout the

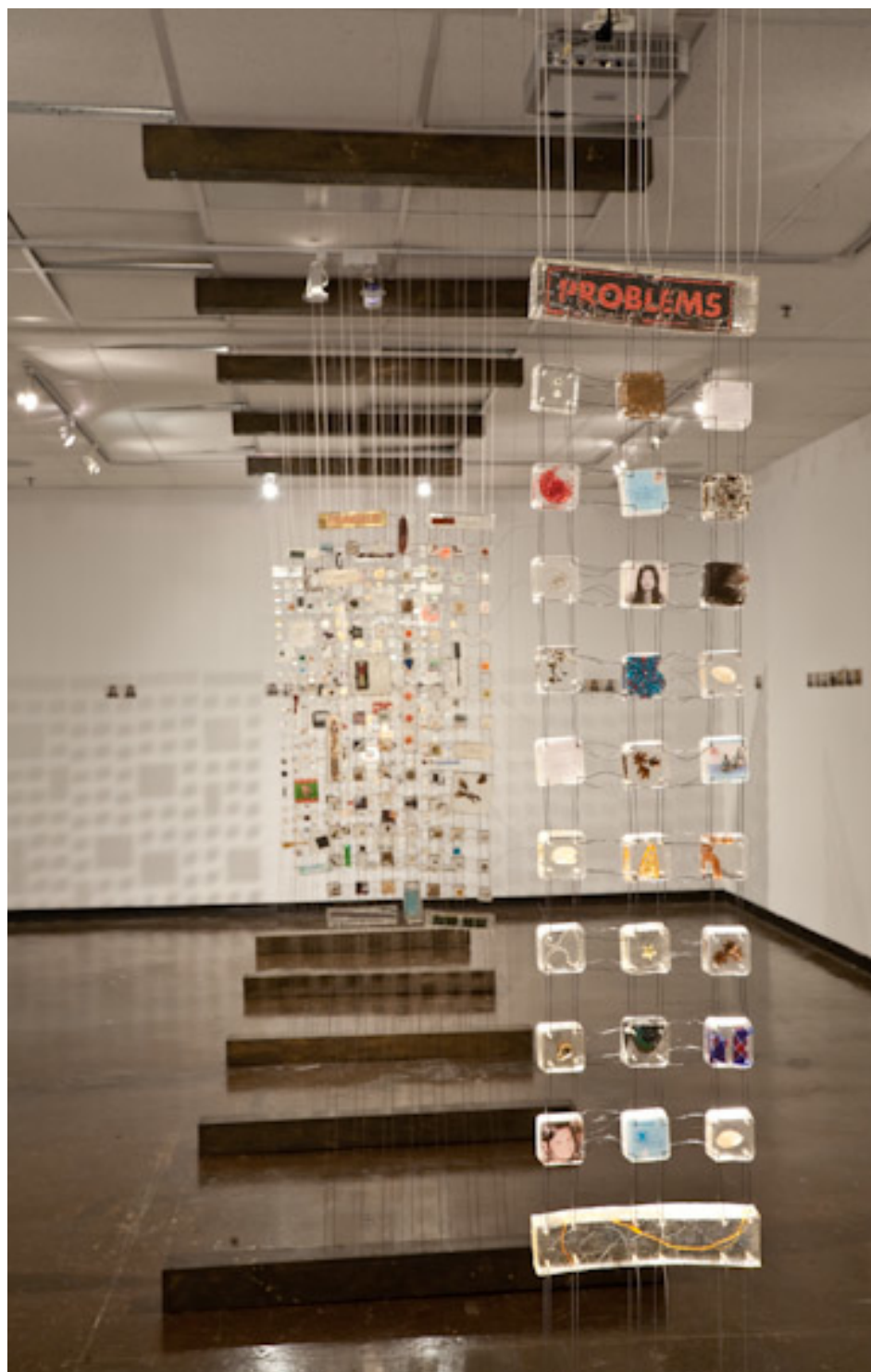


Fig. 1. Keith Crane, First Tile Layer. Found object and resin, 2009

installation, appearing in many of the layers and repeated on the wall. This image serves as the impetus for the works presented. My mother passed away when I was 17 and the years prior left our relationship somewhat rocky. No matter what I do or where I go, this damaged relationship stays with me and influences both my actions and thoughts.

The third, fifth, and seventh layers each gradually get larger representing the growth of the set of experiences and memories. The first layer represents my birth and childhood and the seventh layer represents my time at Georgia State University with the layers in between being the memories and experiences I had en route.

Unlike the first layer, these layers contain a few of the objects that I collected, but consist largely of objects that were donated from friends, students, classmates and teachers. As such, the objects in the larger layers become more numerous and varied as the experiences of all individuals involved start to collect and grow into something that has a life of its own. Building on the idea developed by Robert Weingarten in his show *The Portrait Unbound*, I have chosen to ask those people that donated objects to me to only donate objects that have special meaning to them. Weingarten collected photographs of places, objects and events that had some special significance to the life of his subjects and the combined them into a composite portrait that visually represented each subject's personal identity.

My goal was to collect found objects that would represent each of the individuals donating said objects, and then to combine those objects into a three dimensional abstract representation of myself. The question now was how could such a small and simple object represent the emotional and mental attachment we attribute with it? The answer to this question is found within each person. After struggling with the task of trying to simplify my life

experiences into a group of objects that I could hold in one hand, the answer seemed obvious. Each of the objects was simply meaningless junk. The plastic pendant before me was just plastic and the coin a worthless piece of metal. The real value in these objects was the memory that each invoked, and the experiences attached to those memories.

After reaching a realization about the power of these objects I was then confronted with the problem of how to portray their importance to an audience. Alone or together these objects as they were still represented no real illusion of value. Forging through, I began casting each object into the geometric molds and encasing them in resin. The secondary problem fixed itself. By suspending the object in resin it gave the impression of value and undeniable beauty. As I pulled the objects from the molds each item was given new life. The transparent medium engulfing the worthless objects let light flow through and allowed you see the object from a range of angles while still preventing you from actually touching the actual object. The meaningless trinkets that previously sat in a pile on my worktable were now heightened in value, much like any object is when one is told they cannot touch it but only look at it.

On a closer inspection of these layers a narrative begins to take place among the groupings of tiles (fig. 2). In this image the predominant figures are of a ceramic baby face and the tattered remains of three balloons. The balloons are obviously not inflated, as is evident from their form, but the tattered remains suggest that at one time they were. The juxtaposition of the un-inflated balloon form and the tattered remains of a possible popped balloon fight to make sense on their own, but when coupled with the somewhat disturbing image of a crying infant, the tension created by the inconsistency of logic seems to find its place.

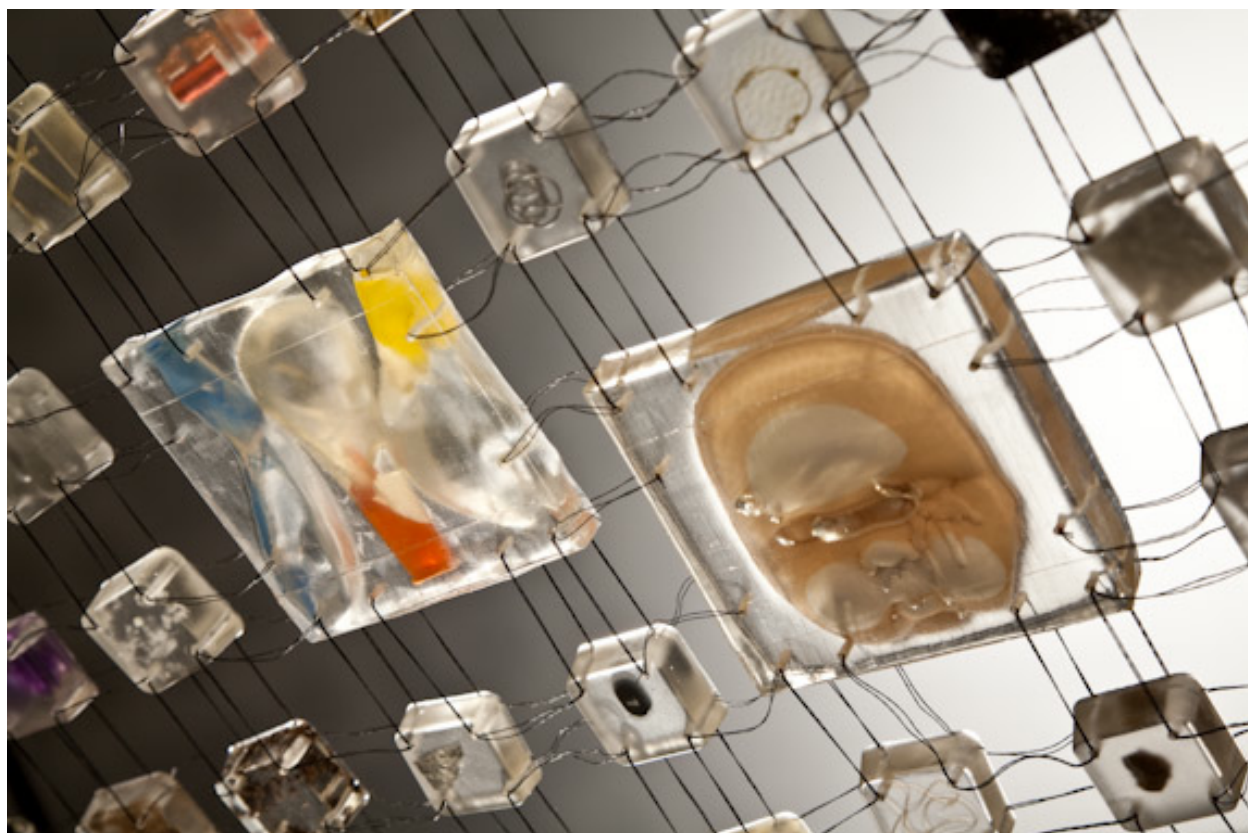


Fig. 2. Keith Crane, Balloon and Baby (detail). Found object and resin, 2009

In another grouping of tiles we can see a commentary on emotional stability and a conceptual representation of fear and anxiety (fig. 3). In this detail there is a tile that holds a flashcard. On one side the flashcard states “*anxiety : fear*”, while also allowing the light to show the ghost figure of the German translation found on the back. Below this tile is another tile that holds the fragile broken remains of a butterfly. The image of the butterfly with its wings torn and misplaced, one floating off to the corner of the tile as if it had been cast away into water and its pieces slowly separating from one another, represents how I feel when I am confronted with these emotions. Although the same person did not donate these objects and the relationships we see were not intended, they are nonetheless a valid connection of how one person’s memories and experiences can complement and even influence the memories and experiences of another. These layers can essentially grow as immense as space will allow, because as we progress and experience new things, they are all assessed, cataloged and the shared with the other experiences we have collected throughout our lives.

2. INTERSECTIONS

In between the layers of linked tiles there are layers of impromptu netting created with the same black nylon string used to link the resin tiles together (fig. 4). These layers represent the same idea of collectiveness and shared memories as the tile layers, but in a much more ethereal fashion. The netted layers were assembled on spot during the installation and act as both a compositional break in the space shared by the tile layers and a metaphorical



Fig. 3. Keith Crane, Butterfly (detail). Found Object and Resin. 2009

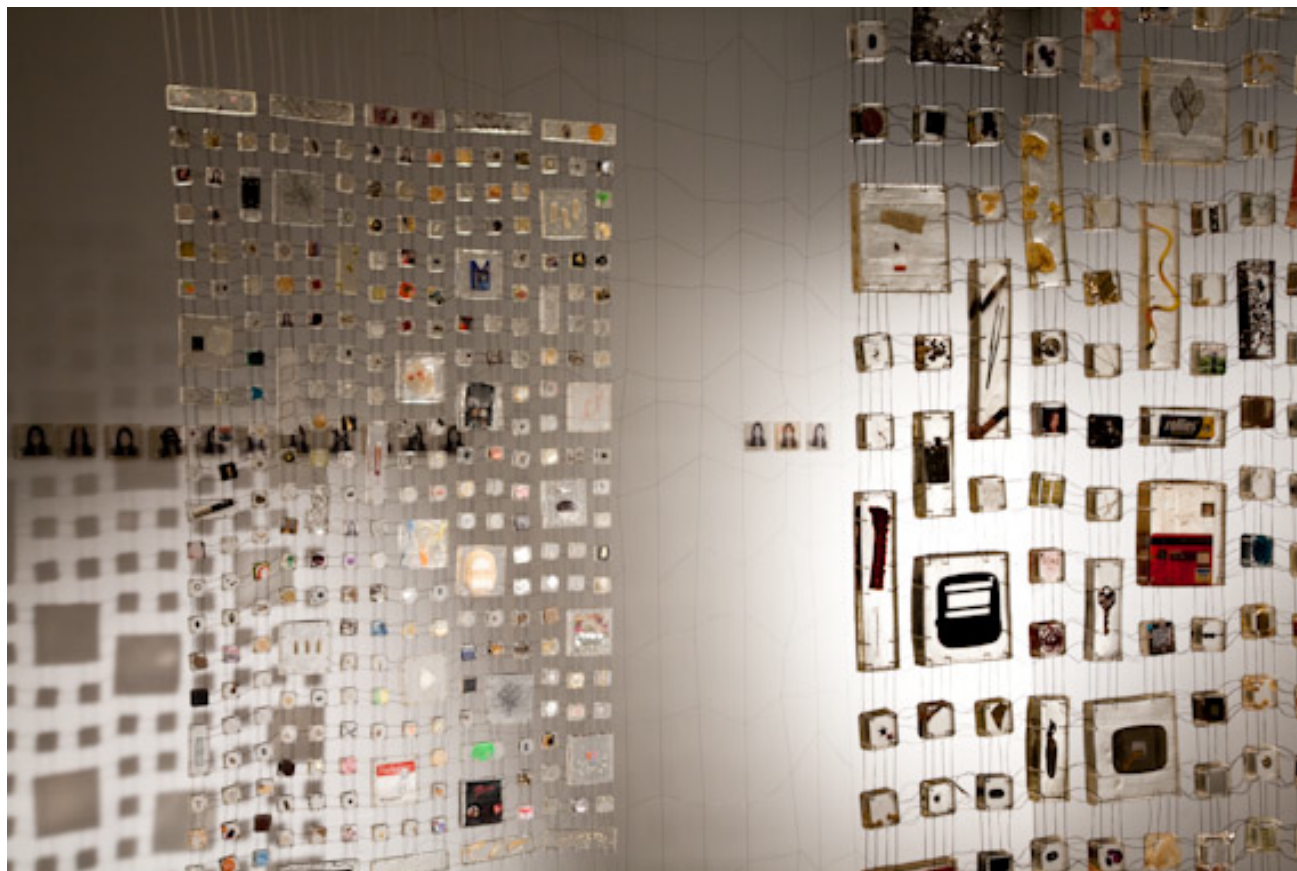


Fig. 4. Keith Crane, Netted Layer. Black Nylon String, 2009

representation of how our memories interact with each other. The netted layers show a merging and overlap of memories, just as the tile layers do, with the emphasis on the areas of intersection between each string. Each string in essence represents a path. The paths are symbolic of individuals, families, learning institutions, peer groups and even cultural groups. As two strings approach contact with one another the paths are separate, but once they intersect, they overlap onto each other and intertwine, taking or leaving whatever impressions they might, and then move on their way. What is left by the interaction is a knot. This knot is the physical representation of the intangible mixing of ideas and influences of the two parties. The layers of netting also gradually increase in size as you progress to the back of the gallery working in unison with the growth of the tile layers.

I chose to incorporate these netted layers and the metaphorical value they encase both for visual beauty and compositional interest. The black nylon string is practically invisible as the viewer walks through the installation. While the viewer is experiencing the linked tile layers from all angles the black nylon disappears and reappears according to position and the amount of light the strings reflect, thus emphasizing the concept of overlap and shared experience.

3. MOTHER

Along the wall in a single, eye level, horizontal line there are sporadic groupings of other cast tiles. These tiles all share the same black and white photograph of my mother that I mentioned previously. Each tile is physically distorted in some way with all the violent attention placed on the face, with the eyes and mouth holding the most importance (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Keith Crane, Mother, Series of Three (detail). Photograph, tape and resin, 2009

In this series entitled *Mother*, I have drawn on much inspiration from the artist Annette Messenger. In particular, I have focused on the two works of Messenger's entitled *Children with Their Eyes Scratched Out* and *The Voluntary Tortures*. In *Children with Their Eyes Scratched Out*, Messenger physically scratches the eyes out of photographs of random children, thus symbolically showing the children as dead. This piece exposes a very hidden and private act and thus reveals a young woman's secret revolt against what society declares should be the most important of things to a woman. The viewer is confronted with the artist's expression of her rejection of motherhood. By scratching out the eyes of the children she is refusing to be looked at by a child and therefore refusing to be looked at as a mother. In *The Voluntary Tortures*, Messenger moved from a young women's rejection against the idea of children to a young woman's rejection to the idea of how she should look based on society's biases. This work is made of numerous photographs of women performing beauty treatments on themselves. Ranging from facial creams to surgical procedures to uncomfortable fashions the idea and desire of human perfectibility is portrayed in a rather disturbing way.

Like Messenger, I have taken the photographic image of mother and physically changed the appearance through careful and violent means. I focused on the face to stress the idea of identity and the subsequent loss of one's identity. A major part in identifying one's self is looking outside one's person and indentifying with others who share similar characteristics or thoughts. Many times this is done through race or culture. My mother was from Thailand and my father from the United States of America. Coming from a multiracial family I had two

groups with whom I could relate. During her lifetime my mother experienced a huge change in cultural group beginning with her life in the rural areas of Thailand, and ending with the faster paced lifestyle of America. In between these two times of transition and change in her life, her identity too must have been challenged or questioned. To address this issue in my own life, I have chosen to represent my mother's image with her face covered up, blurred out, smudged, or even removed all together. The tiles are grouped in random collections with some being singular and others in groups ranging from two to seven (fig. 6).

All of the tiles in the *Mother* series stand as singular units and can be grouped as seen fit. I felt that this approach, as opposed to linking them like the hanging pieces are, was much more effective in portraying the longing and sadness the image invokes. To increase this effect I placed these tiles along the walls with no direct light focused on them. All of the light is focused on the hanging tiles and netted layers creating an experience of light and reflection in the center of the room with faded shadows and misty edges. The tiles with my mother's picture are kept out of the direct focal point and thus relate to the way I keep these memories with me. Although these memories are kept hidden with me, the link to Thailand I share with my mother and my family will always be prevalent in my life, which is where the title of my show *Kwhaam Jam: Memory* is derived.



Fig. 6. Keith Crane, Mother, Series of Seven (detail). Photograph, marker and resin

4. CONCLUSION

My installation represents the collection of memories and experiences that make up my identity to date. Each tile represents a singular memory and may seem small and insignificant, but when combined with other memories of my own as well as the collection of memories that were donated, the seemingly small unimportant memories create a huge array of experiences and intersections I share with friends, family, and you. As this body of work progresses I see no limits to where it can reach. This show is strongly rooted in mixed media and I would like to further explore and incorporate more sculptural aspects into the construction and display of further pieces. The body of work presented for my thesis requirements is only a small beginning to the large and ever growing mass of compiled memories I collect through my life's journey. As this piece grows and begin to encompass the newer areas of my life I do see it venturing outdoors into the public arena. The concept of individuals intersecting and taking and leaving influence from one another is what has shaped our past and current societies and will be what helps bring change to the future. This body of work will continue to grow as I do and I am sure will educate and inspire along the way.

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CD IMAGES

KHAAM JAM: MEMORY

1. Kwhaam Jam. Gallery Perspective View (back). Mixed Media, 2009
2. Kwhaam Jam. Gallery Perspective View (front). Mixed Media, 2009
3. Kwhaam Jam. Large Tile Layer Detail. Mixed Media, 2009
4. Kwhaam Jam. Tile Detail (Pill Bag). Mixed Media, 2009
5. Kwhaam Jam. Tile Detail (Balloon and Baby). Mixed Media, 2009
6. Kwhaam Jam. Tile Detail (Butterfly). Mixed Media, 2009
7. Kwhaam Jam. Tile Detail (Broken Ring). Mixed Media, 2009
8. Kwhaam Jam. Tile Detail (Buddha Pendant). Mixed Media, 2009

MOTHER

9. Mother. Series of Three (Detail). Photograph, tape and resin, 2009
10. Mother. Series of Two (Detail). Photograph, marker and resin, 2009
11. Mother. Series of Seven (Detail). Photograph, marker, tape and resin, 2009