



TONI HAMEL *The lingering*

Front cover: *Homemaking* 2013
Back cover: *The obvious child* 2013

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Toni Hamel: *The lingering*

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The Robert McLaughlin Gallery

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THE ROBERT MCLAUGHLIN GALLERY is committed to sharing, exploring and engaging with our communities in the continuing story of modern and contemporary art. We are pleased to present the work of Toni Hamel, a resident of Oshawa, an artist deeply rooted in Durham's artistic community, in her first solo exhibition.

While *The lingering* is a highly personal exhibition to the artist, it simultaneously explores universally shared themes such as gender issues. Hamel's delicate and spare work interrupts our familiar ease with domestic imagery and alludes to darker societal and cultural undercurrents that have entrapped and impacted the female experience for thousands of years.

I wish to thank the artist for her beautifully nuanced and thought-provoking body of work. I would also like to congratulate exhibition curator Sonya Jones for her insightful essay that helps situate Hamel's work within the broader context of feminist issues and societal mores.

Finally, I would like to thank the City of Oshawa, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts for their continued support and assistance.

Gabrielle Peacock,
Chief Executive Officer



THE WEIGHT ON MY SHOULDERS

 *Handley*



Opposite: *The weight on my shoulders* (detail) 2013
Above: *Alternatives* (detail) 2013

THE LINGERING

*“For women
have sat indoors
all these millions of years,
so that by this time
the very walls
are permeated
by their creative force,
which has, indeed,
so overcharged the capacity
of bricks & mortar
that it must need
harness itself
to pens & brushes
and business and politics.”*
-Virginia Woolf

“For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must need harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics.”ⁱ

In her speech about women and fiction, *A Room of One's Own*, presented in 1928, Virginia Woolf stressed the need for all women to have a room or sanctuary, away from domestic roles and duties, in which to be creative. The quote above conjures images of women, confined and stifled throughout the ages, ready to burst unless their creativity is put to paper or canvas. The ‘room’ for which Woolf advocated was not meant as simply an additional interior household space, but worked as a symbol for women’s larger issues such as independence and freedom. Suffering from depression, Woolf’s fictional work was influenced by her own personal struggles and experiences as a woman. So too, is Toni Hamel’s work. Hamel views the process of art-making as an empowering, cathartic tool that enables her to tackle darker issues, concerns and questions that exist either from her own personal struggles with depression or from those life experiences that have “left a deep and indelible mark onto her psyche.”ⁱⁱ Although her work is infused with autobiographical notes, it tackles themes that are experienced universally such as gender roles, self-image, identity and self-acceptance. Inspired by the banality and confinement of domestic life, Hamel explains that *The lingering* “investigates women’s aspirations and in particular our quest for freedom from cultural, religious, societal, familial and psychological expectations and restrictions, whether deliberate or unintentional, real or perceived.”ⁱⁱⁱ This body of work, imbued with symbolism, irony and satire, is an illustrated commentary not only on Hamel’s own life, but of the shared experiences of women everywhere.



The constellation (detail) 2013

Hamel's subjects in *The lingering* are explored in a monochromatic and delicate way through drawing, mixed media, sculpture, and installation. Her drawings, for which she is best known, have a vintage quality that renders the subjects timeless. She incorporates, into her work, vintage found objects that represent the passage of time, and materials traditionally associated with women's crafts such as embroidery, sewing, or watercolour. Each media that appears in a work was specifically selected to add further layers of meaning to the overall composition. Text and words also play an important role in Hamel's practice. She utilizes the prominently displayed titles as a means to pose questions, and play with the viewer's expectations. Hamel takes inspiration from many textual sources, and says that at times "a simple string of words (from a book, a poem or my own writings) might be for me stimulating enough to allow my mind to flow particularly freely to conceive interesting associations."^{iv} Other times a visual image might be the initial inspiration, stirring in her an emotional reaction that she then associates with text. In turn, the relationship between the created images and the words is open-ended, enabling the viewer to interpret and shape their own meanings. Hamel, an atheist, often references religion in her work, including the use of titles with religious connotations such as *The exodus*, *The ascending*, *Our daily bread*, and *In the name of the mother*. Hamel's intentional use of religious subjects in her texts and images reflects the role religion has played in the discrimination of women throughout the ages. When these titles are juxtaposed with the visuals, they conjure up different meanings for each viewer depending on their personal experiences and belief systems. In the end, no matter where the inspiration for her visuals or text comes from, Hamel is doing exactly what she wants her viewers to do—expressing personal experiences through her artwork.



Our daily bread (detail) 2012



The pursuit of happiness 2012

Growing up in a conservative Roman Catholic household in Southern Italy, where patriarchy still runs deep, Hamel's father was the "typical 'padre-padrone' (father owner)," believing that women are chattels or domestic slaves, whose sole role in life is to serve their man (first their father, then their husband).²⁰ This experience is alluded to in *The pursuit of happiness* which portrays a group of young women and one man fishing out of the same hole in the floor, patiently waiting for something to bite. The man, presumably the father figure, is fishing for a husband for these women—referencing the expression 'there are plenty of fish in the sea.' Although seeming to be active in the process, the women are all connected to the same string and catch the same fish—their fate the same outcome. This mentality towards women may seem foreign in the 21st century western hemisphere but Hamel explains that it is still alive and flourishing. In fact, this week in the United States (May, 2013), a group of Fox News contributors (all male) expressed the opinion that women being the dominant figure in a household is anti-science and is in turn contributing to the deterioration of society's moral fibre. This was in response to a poll showing that women are the breadwinners in 40% of American households. These comments, of course, have been widely denounced and criticized but demonstrate that while women have fought long and hard to be accepted as equal to men, the ingrained historical and social perceptions that women are the lesser sex still exists. Informed by her personal experiences dealing with gender issues, Hamel's work explores her continued struggle in coming to terms with her socially conceived identity as a woman.





For centuries, women’s identities were defined by their domestic roles as wife and mother. Even today, with as much freedom as is afforded to women, many still expect that marriage and children be part of the equation. This expectation, and Hamel’s experience as a youth in Southern Italy, is reminiscent of the ideology of 18th century French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, who believed that “women should evaluate their personal worth by their ability to raise their children and care for their families.”^{vi} Rousseau played a key role in the advocacy of women’s duties within the home in 18th century French society. He also wrote passionately about the natural dominant role men play, similar to the sentiments of the 21st century Fox News male contributors. Hamel deals with feeling bound and defined by domestic roles and expectations in her work *The exodus*. Occupying an entire room, one thousand paper cranes fly out of six little houses resembling hen cages, swarming together and soaring above. In Japanese culture, a thousand paper cranes are presented to newlywed couples, symbolizing a thousand years of prosperity, happiness and health. Hopes and dreams are high when entering a marriage, but sometimes when reality sets in—domestic duties, finances, expectations, conflict and at times abuse—discontent begins. The paper cranes escape the confines of the houses, and fly free from their cages. Not only are the hopes and wishes of a happy domestic existence figuratively flying out the window, but for Hamel, it is about gaining freedom from the confines of societal identities like husband/wife and mother/father.

Although Hamel is happily married and has a daughter, she, like many women, sought more from life. This issue plagued the 1950s and 60s housewife, a phenomenon that Betty Friedan referred to as “the problem that has no name”:

Each suburban wife struggles with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—‘Is this all?’^{vii}

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-Betty Friedan

Society told women to find contentment and satisfaction through domestic duties done in the name of caring for their families. Similar to Rousseau’s philosophy in the 18th century, motherhood and domesticity were being praised as a higher calling. The notion of desiring more for oneself was deemed selfish, though despite that view many women have silently wanted more for generations. Hamel explains this feeling: “Even today, surrounded by the love of my dear husband and daughter sometimes I feel that something is amiss... There is still so much work I need to do, and so little time ahead.”^{viii} Like *The exodus*, Hamel further epitomizes the restlessness acquainted with domestic identities in her drawings. The timeless figures in these works, along with her realist depictions, make them appear like snapshots of the past—reminiscent of Friedan’s 1950 and 60s suburban housewives. The discontented and exasperated sighs of homemakers echo off the paper in *The house of sighs*, which depicts open mouths exiting the chimney of a house and floating above. In *Secrets*, a woman stitches another woman’s mouth shut, forcing the dissatisfaction with familial life and domestic duties to remain unspoken.

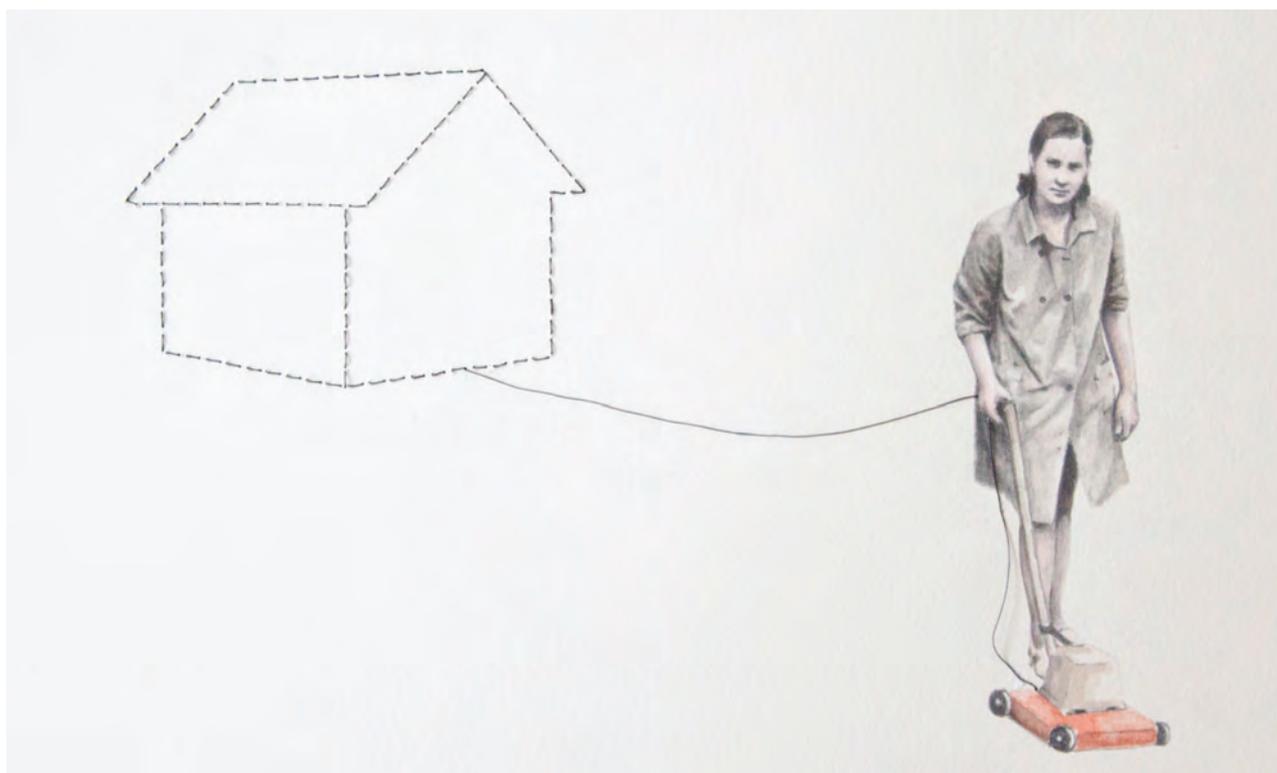
Opposite: *The house of sighs*
(detail) 2013





As much as the ideologies of Rousseau and the epidemic of the restless housewives that Friedan writes about might seem archaic to the modern woman living comfortably in the West, women around the world, like Hamel, have experienced and are still experiencing this first hand today. For Hamel, the struggle then moves beyond the question “Is this all?” to a more active investigation of the deeper issues affecting women, such as self-esteem, self-respect, and personal identity.

In almost all of her drawings, the women depicted are confined in some way—whether peering out a window or a locked door as in *Merchant of dreams* and *We stand on guard for thee*, or tied down by their domestic activities in *Attachments*, *Homemaking* or *Departures*. In *Attachments*, the woman is attached to the home by the cord of her electric lawn mower—a leash that only extends so far. In sharp contrast, the men that appear in *Merchant of dreams* and *We stand on guard for thee* stand freely outside, acting as suitors or protectors while the women are depicted inside. In *Merchant of dreams*, a man carrying a selection of birds attached to strings holds out his hand to show the woman peering out the window one of the birds he is offering. Hamel is once again using birds to symbolize freedom, hope, and wishes, all of which are being offered “for sale” by a man to a walled-in woman. The symbol of freedom being proposed to the woman, the birds, comes at a price.



Attachments (detail) 2013



We stand on guard for thee (detail)
2013



The theme of flight appears once again in the installation *The ascending*, however this time the freedom being sought is not necessarily from socially constructed gender roles but from psychological constraints. Suspended in the air is a weathered vintage chair, wings attached. The winged chair is tethered by rope to ceramic feet sitting on top of a metal box with the inscription “The Ascending.” Hamel’s use of found objects carry the imprint of their past owners and express the passing of time. The empty chair unsuccessfully attempts to ascend but it is weighed down by the metal box that the feet stand firmly on. The metal box represents emotional baggage that weighs heavily on a person. For Hamel, the baggage can be interpreted in many ways—personal responsibilities, obligations, guilt, fears, doubts or clinical depression. These emotions can linger within, causing internal turmoil, unhappiness and despair. Similar to the paper cranes escaping in *The exodus*, this work embodies the need to escape from all psychological entrapments, either real or imagined, deliberate or unintentional. While Hamel believes that this ascension is impossible, that no one can truly escape from oneself, the viewer is left feeling hopeful in their desire to symbolically cut the rope and watch the chair soar above.



Opposite: *The ascending*
(study, detail) 2013
Above: *The ascending* (detail) 2013

“...this work embodies the need to escape from all psychological entrapments, either real or imagined, deliberate or unintentional.”



The ascending (detail) 2013

In Hamel's installation pieces *Our daily bread* and *The improvement*, it is as though her drawings have come to life. They maintain her monochromatic and delicate approach but are life size, flowing off the wall to inhabit our world, incorporating three-dimensional sculptures and found objects. Seeing the work escape the confines of the 2-dimensional barrier of the canvas on which they are drawn forces the viewer to not just look at the work but to experience it. The familiar objects give personality to the subjects making them more relatable. *The improvement* consists of a drawing on canvas of a woman with long dark wavy hair cascading off the canvas onto an ironing board, an emblem of domesticity. One hand holds the iron while the other presses and holds her hair in place. Using an iron to straighten one's hair was common practice prior to the invention of the flat iron. In the 1960s, straight hair was seen as more fashionable, leaving girls with curly hair going to radical lengths to get the much desired look. Feminist author Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*, notes how, despite women's liberation that authors like Betty Friedan helped establish, women are still held back by the pressures to adhere to societal standards of beauty. She writes, "as women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it wanted to carry on its work of social control."^{ix} The woman in *The improvement* appears to be middle aged—an age when women are fighting against time and nature to maintain youthful looks. She is attempting to improve her appearance to look young and desirable so as to obtain approval and acceptance from herself and from others. As Wolf says, "in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers."^x To Hamel, beauty is just another form of bondage that women must free themselves from.



The improvement (detail) 2012

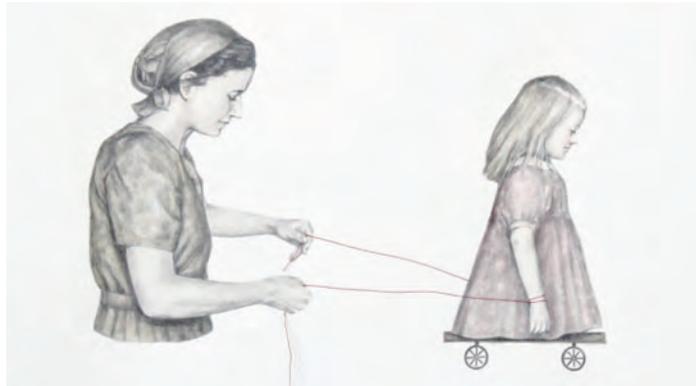


“as women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it wanted to carry on its work of social control.”

-Naomi Wolf

The improvement 2013

While the woman in *The improvement* works to improve her own appearance, a group of women in *Vanitas* work together to enhance the beauty of a male peacock's feathers. Renowned for its feathers, the male peacock uses its stunning tail to attract female counterparts. The male peacock is generally viewed as superior, which Hamel is acquainting to society's position on men in general. By depicting women placing jewel embellishments on the already beautiful male peacock feathers, Hamel takes the work beyond the concept of beauty and comments on the lengths women will go to please men. Hamel believes that until women stop complying with roles of servitude to men, they will never truly discover their potential. These women are creating beauty not for themselves but for the men they serve. Rather than expressing their creative force to serve men, they must do so for themselves.



Left: *The lesson* (detail) 2013
Opposite: *Vanitas* (detail) 2012

“By depicting women placing jewel embellishments on the already beautiful male peacock feathers, Hamel takes the work beyond the concept of beauty...”



For Hamel, “lingering’ refers to all that is entrapped and idled within the individual and collective psyche.” Refreshingly, Hamel is very open about her own personal struggles as a woman and her work gives voice to the turmoil that can be associated with depression and the daily domestic grind. Viewers can respond to the personal expression in her work, opening a dialogue about shared experiences and meanings. Although seemingly critical of the domestic life, Hamel’s artwork is making peace with the conflict between her creative impulse and her domestic obligations—proving that her roles as wife, mother, and artist can co-exist. To go back to Woolf’s ‘room’, Hamel’s ‘room’ exists within her artistic practice, which allows her to work through her emotions freely in a creative way. While we all have commitments, Hamel reminds us that “the only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own.”^{xxi}

“the only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own.”

-Betty Friedan



Left: *Sticks and stones have built my home* (detail) 2013
Opposite: *In the name of the mother* (detail) 2013





*These are all reminders of the road that I've travelled
keepsakes to show me how my life has unraveled,
And when eyes tear up and the heart seeks console,
when I feel me as half and not at all as a whole,
I revisit this vault that contains where I've been
to understand what I have lost and relive what I've seen.*

*-Toni Hamel, passage from *Postcards from within*, 2013*

FOOTNOTES

ⁱVirginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, (New York: Random House, 2012), 75.

ⁱⁱToni Hamel, Artist Statement and Biography, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱToni Hamel, Artist Statement, 2013.

^{iv}Email from Toni Hamel to the author, April 22, 2013.

^vToni Hamel, Artist Statement and Biography, 2013.

^{vi}Jennifer Popiel, *Rousseau's Daughters: Domesticity, Education, and Autonomy in Modern France*, (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2008), 8.

^{vii}Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1974), 15.

^{viii}Toni Hamel, Artist Statement and Biography, 2013.

^{ix}Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 10.

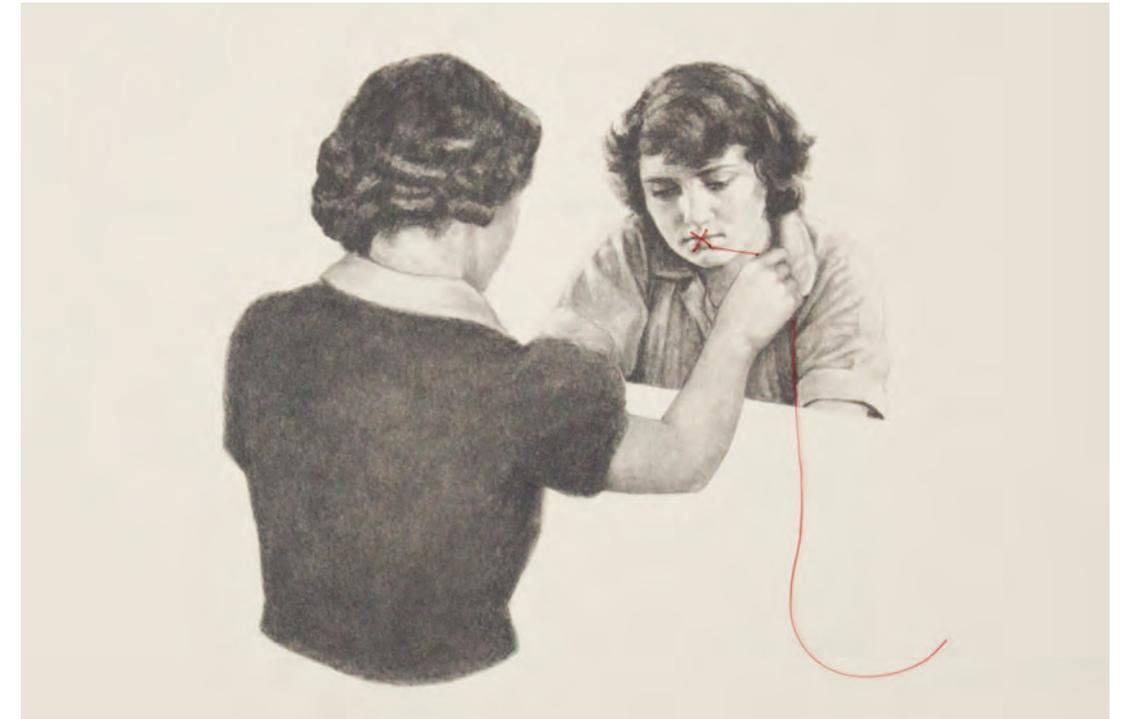
^x*Ibid*, 10.

^{xi}Toni Hamel, Artist Statement, 2012.

^{xii}Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 344.



The unearthing (detail) 2013



BIOGRAPHY

Both a Canadian and an Italian citizen, Toni Hamel holds a BFA from the Academy of Fine Arts in Lecce (Italy), a post-graduate Certificate in Computer Graphics from Sheridan College in Oakville (Ontario, Canada), and the Golden Key Award from the University of Toronto (Ontario, Canada) where she attended the Specialist Programme in Psychology.

After a successful career as a graphic designer and University of Toronto instructor, since 2007 Hamel has focused exclusively on her art practice. Her work has been exhibited across Ontario at galleries including Latcham Gallery (Stouffville), John B. Aird Gallery (Toronto), Station Gallery (Whitby), and the Art Gallery of Peterborough.

Secrets (detail) 2013

List of Works

DRAWINGS

Alternatives 2013
graphite, watercolour on paper
40.6 x 50.8 cm

Attachments 2013
graphite, watercolour, thread on paper
40.6 x 50.8 cm

Departures 2013
graphite, watercolour on paper
40.6 x 50.8 cm

Homemaking 2013
graphite, watercolour, thread on paper
50.8 x 50.8 cm

In the name of the mother 2013
graphite on paper
50.8 x 68.6

Merchant of dreams 2013
graphite, watercolour on paper
40.6 x 50.8 cm

On our way to the market 2013
graphite, watercolour on paper
40.6 x 50.8 cm

Secrets 2013
graphite, thread on paper
50.8 x 50.8 cm

Sticks and stones have built my home 2013
graphite, watercolour on paper
50.8 x 50.8 cm

The ascending, study 2013
graphite, watercolour, thread on paper
55.9 x 76.2 cm

The constellation 2013
graphite, watercolour, acrylic jewels on paper
50.8 x 68.6 cm

The gifted child study 2013
graphite, watercolour on paper
127 x 177.8 cm

The house of sighs 2013
graphite, watercolour, thread on paper
55.9 x 76.2 cm

The lesson 2013
graphite, watercolour on paper
40.6 x 50.8 cm

The obvious child 2013
graphite, watercolour on paper
127 x 177.8 cm

The pursuit of happiness 2012
graphite, watercolour, thread, hook on paper
50.8 x 68.6 cm

The unearthing 2013
graphite, watercolour on paper
50.8 x 68.6 cm

The weight on my shoulders 2013
graphite, watercolour, thread on paper
55.9 x 76.2 cm

Vanitas 2012
graphite, watercolour, acrylic jewels on paper
50.8 x 68.6 cm

We stand on guard for thee 2013
graphite, watercolour on paper
40.6 x 50.8 cm

Wish I were my alter ego 2013
graphite, watercolour on paper
40.6 x 50.8 cm

INSTALLATIONS

Our daily bread 2012
Das clay, canvas, graphite, plaster, oils, knife
various dimensions

The ascending 2012
Das clay, twine, acrylic paint, chair, metal box
various dimensions

The exodus 2012/13
1200 origami paper cranes, pulley, rope, wood,
twine, papier-mâché, nylon line
various dimensions

The improvement 2012
Das clay, canvas, graphite, died twine, iron and ironing board
various dimensions

SCULPTURES

The gifted child 2013
Das clay, harness
50.8 x 43.2 x 24.1 cm

The obvious child 2013
Das clay, rubber gloves
48.3 x 27.9 x 24.1 cm



Opposite: *Wish I were my alter ego*
(detail) 2013
Above: *On our way to the market*
(detail) 2013

