

**Heidi Kumao**  
**Real**  
**and**  
**Imagined**



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# James R. Hugunin

104 Avenida Frijoles, Santa Fe, NM 87507 USA  
www.uturn.org • Jim@uturn.org • 708-714-2406 (cell)  
Professor Emeritus, Art History, Theory, and Criticism  
The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

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To whom it may concern:

Although the theory and criticism of photography has been my main activity over some forty years, I do keep a sharp look out for work in other media. My most recent delight has been to see new artworks by Michigan artist Heidi Kumao.

Your art institution may find her work of interest, too. I have know her since the 1990s when she attended The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and have always found her work unusual, political, surprising. Her newest work even more so. I think this body of work would be of interest to the Santa Fe Art Community, as she's never shown here before.

There is an exhibition catalogue out on her newer works, *Heidi Kumao: Real and Imagined* (2020) from The Stamps Gallery in Michigan. I've taken excerpts of text and images from this catalogue, making a pdf file compilation to host on my U-Turn Art E-zine website: <https://www.uturn.org/KumaoCatalogue.pdf>

Her website URL is: <https://www.heidikumao.net>

There is also a well-illustrated article pertaining to her recent exhibition online at:

<https://stamps.umich.edu/news/stamps-gallery-to-celebrate-real-and-imagined-latest-work-by-heidi-kumao>

I hope you might like to schedule a show of this body of work in your future exhibition plans, giving people here a chance to delight in her creative vision.

Sincerely,

James R. Hugunin



Gray Blob

- Imagine a conversation between two entities: One resembles an awkwardly shaped gray blob, and the other is a stack of vibrant colors; each one is “sitting” on a chair facing the other against a stark white backdrop. Intentionally minimal and intricate, the labor-intensive composition is created of fabric cutouts, industrial felt, and wool stitching mounted to wood. It captures an awkward and untenable interaction between two parties with humor and conviction. In her solo exhibition *Real and Imagined*, Heidi Kumao gives physical form to the uncomfortable dynamics underlying seemingly ordinary conversations and relationships from an intersectional feminist perspective. Using everyday objects such as chairs, ladders, spotlights, and amplifiers, Kumao develops a visual vocabulary for the intangible and complex form of abuse known as gaslighting that perpetuates systemic bias and oppression along the lines of gender, race, and aging. Weaving in her own experiences as an Asian American woman, artist, and educator, Kumao creates playful and poetic visual narratives in fabric and animations that shed light on power imbalances and trauma that exist at personal and societal levels.

- In her artist statement, Kumao wrote:  
*“The exhibition is inspired, in part, by the courage, testimony, and experiences of women (like Christine Blasey Ford) who publicly report assault, harassment, or misconduct. The #MeToo movement gave voice to thousands of women to tell their personal stories, but also exposed a hostile backlash meant to silence them. The title, Real and Imagined, is a deliberate contradiction; if one is true, the other must not be. In practice, however, both terms are used to reference a woman’s testimony and determine how it is publicly interpreted. Her account is accepted as truthful by many and simultaneously dismissed as imaginary by the court of public opinion: ‘her memory is wrong,’ ‘she imagined it.’*”

- Deeply influenced and inspired by the courage of those women who speak out against sexual abuse in spite of deep-rooted institutional bias against them, Kumao’s work titled *Whistle Blowers: The Same Complaint* (2020) is dedicated to them. Using thread and string, she creates a compelling scene — on a tall rock sits a large, black, throne-like armchair with a large megaphone in place of the headrest. It appears to be looking down on three small, red armchairs with mini-megaphones strapped to their backrest. Next to these stunted chairs are three red boxes whose lids are flung open. A similar black-colored box with its lid flung open can be seen under the larger chair. Looking closely reveals a heap of megaphone-shaped forms tucked inside the large rock. Kumao implicates the viewer as well as herself as witness to the oppressive power imbalance of patriarchal hegemony. She invites viewers to look closely at the work to see the heap of megaphones, stitched with white thread on white felt. This strategy of close looking disrupts passive viewing and heightens awareness to take action and break the cycle of silencing. As the maker, Kumao implicates herself as one who is also part of “the system.” She creates an intentionally minimal image that disrupts passive viewing and takes action by creating a visual language that translates difficult and often polarized narratives of oppression into meaningful and poetic encounters that advocate for respect, equity, and justice.

- The significance and urgency of Kumao’s series *Real and Imagined* cannot be underscored enough. The American nation recently witnessed the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation apologize for the agency’s systemic failure to take action and protect hundreds of female athletes, including some of the nation’s most famous gymnasts, for years, even though they filed numerous complaints against their team doctor Larry Nassar for abusing them. Nassar was finally convicted in 2018 and sentenced to 175 years at the Michigan State Prison. Kumao’s work unsettles and calls out the institutional culture of gaslighting that has been normalized to maintain the status quo.

- Comprising forty new fabric works and video animations, *Real and Imagined* is a quintessential oeuvre that was developed in the age of the coronavirus pandemic. Although Kumao started work on the series during a fellowship months prior to the pandemic, she developed momentum and kept working in the isolation of her studio as COVID-19 ravaged cities nationally and across the world, radically transforming everyday lives and routines. The result was an expansive and nuanced visual language with string, thread, yarn, and industrial felt that examined and confronted the deep roots of systemic discrimination, inequity, and corruption along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality. “The pandemic is a portal ...”<sup>1</sup> suggested Arundhati Roy, in her brilliant article with the same phrase as its title. “We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred ... Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”<sup>2</sup>

- As the Black Lives Matter and Stop AAPI Hate protests surged and gained momentum with diverse populations building solidarity across the US and around the globe to imagine a new world from intersectional feminist perspectives, Kumao added her own critique of the failing patriarchal, racist models and built solidarity with the movements outside, one stitch at a time. She retold the stories of known and unknown victims of sexual and psychological abuse, layering them with her own subjectivity and values. With *Real and Imagined*, Kumao inserts the “victims” agency into these visual narratives and proposes the role of an artist as a whistleblower — the one who ruptures established models to begin envisioning anew.

1: Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic is a Portal”, April 3, 2020, *Financial Times*: <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5c8-74cb-11ea-95fc-fcd274e920ca>

2: Ibid

## Lynn Love

●  
*I'd like to turn to process and materials in your work. Fabric now dominates, in the form of wall hangings, and you're using fabric in your animations, too. You credit quilting as a recent, extracurricular pursuit that led you here. Could you talk about that?*

## Heidi Kumao

●  
I'm not surprised that I've ended up on fabric. I've schlepped my grandmother's sewing machine with me from city to city for years. It's a Singer from the 1920s, called a Featherweight. Quilters like them because of the high quality of the stitch.

A few years ago, I went to an open house at the maker space in Ann Arbor. A woman was demonstrating free-motion sewing and asked if I wanted to try it. Basically, you run your fabric under the needle like wood through a band saw; you "draw" with thread. I loved it! I soon joined the Ann Arbor Modern Quilt Guild, began watching a lot of YouTube videos about quilting and enrolled in workshops.

Early on, I would draw people on fabric — like a cartoon, two stick people, or two heads, talking to one another. Instead of words, doodles and shapes came out of their mouths. It was less about what they were saying, and more about what they were doing in relation to one another, and how the emotional tenor of the conversation was playing out.

I also spent a lot of time experimenting with materials, figuring out what fabric to work with. I tried sewing on canvas, because I thought I'd make big thread compositions and hang them like paintings. The canvas idea didn't work, so then I tried drawing on cotton — and that looked and felt a bit flimsy. I researched wool, and really liked its tactile qualities and how it takes thread. I visited a manufacturer outside of Detroit that produces wool felt in huge rolls and beautiful colors — used by architects and commercial fabricators. But that wool is so expensive. A friend told me about Mood Fabrics in New York City where the young fashion designers on *Project Runway* go to buy fabric.

## Remains

2020

Fabric cutout, stitching on  
industrial felt, mounted to wood  
20.5 x 21 x 1 in.  
(51.43 x 53.34 x 2.54 cm)

**Curriculum vitae** (abbreviated)

**Heidi Kumao**

August 2023

1601 Pontiac Trail  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48105  
734.417-4739 (mobile)  
hkumao@umich.edu  
www.heidikumao.net

**EDUCATION**

M.F.A., Photography Department, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1991  
B.A., Art Studio and B.S., Chemistry with Honors, University of California, Davis, 1988  
Chemistry Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1985-86

**SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

- 2025 Ceres Gallery, New York City
- 2021 Ceres Gallery, New York City
- 2020 Stamps Gallery, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI
- 2016 Lane Hall Gallery, Institute for Research on Women & Gender and Women's Studies, Univ. of Michigan
- 2014 Ceres Gallery, New York City, "Surviving Confinement"
- 2009 Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, New York
- 2008 Urban Institute of Contemporary Art, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- 2005 Mott Community College Art Gallery, Flint, Michigan
- 2004 Safety-Kleen Gallery, Elgin Community College, Elgin, Illinois
- 2001 Three Rivers Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA  
Exhibition during the International Sculpture Conference
- 1999 Museu da Imagem e do Som (MIS), São Paulo, Brazil (Museum of Image and Sound) Traveling solo exhibition of cinema machines w/ illustrated catalog
- 1999 Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires, Argentina  
Traveling solo exhibition of cinema machines w/ illustrated catalog
- 1999 Lisa Sette Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona
- 1998 Centro Cultural Light, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
Traveling solo exhibition of cinema machines w/ illustrated catalog
- 1998 Center for the Arts, Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco, CA
- 1998 Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, Spain

**SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

- 2023 Everson Museum, "Light Work 50th Anniversary Exhibition", Syracuse, NY  
Visions Museum of Textile Art, "Interpretations 2023," San Diego, CA  
College of Health Sciences, "Viral Integration," Irvine, CA  
Faculty exhibition, Stamps Gallery, Ann Arbor, MI  
"Mending the Net", Detroit Fiber Club, The Convent, Detroit, MI  
"Lightwork 50th Anniversary Print Sale," Syracuse, NY & online
- 2022 Ceres Gallery, NYC, "Women's Voices: A New Day"
- 2021 Emery Community Arts Center, University of Maine at Farmington,

- "Reimagining the Real"
- 2020 Ceres Gallery, NYC, "The Way Things Are Now"
- 2019 Artscape, "Animations on the Big Screen", Baltimore, MD  
Shapiro Library, "Bookmarks: Speculating the Futures of the Book and Library",  
University of Michigan  
Barickuda Gallery, "Kindred," Ann Arbor
- 2018 Palazzo Delle Esposizioni, Rome, Italy, "Human+ The Future of Our Species,"  
(touring exhibition w/catalog)  
Atkinson Gallery, Santa Barbara City College, CA, "Herself: Girlhood in Stop  
Motion Film"
- 2017 ArtScience Museum, Singapore, "Human+ The Future of Our Species"  
Ann Arbor Art Center, "Whipstitch: The State of Contemporary Textiles"
- 2016 CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, NY, 13th Biennial Art Auction
- 2015 CCCB: Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, "Humans + The  
Future of Our Species"  
James Cook University, School of Creative Arts and Pinnacles  
Gallery "7th Screengrab, International Media Arts Award Exhibition,"  
Townsville, Queensland, Australia  
Ukrainian Museum of Modern Art, "Convergence: The Poetic Dialog Project,"  
Chicago  
Czong Institute for Contemporary Art (CICA), South Korea,  
"Across Voices: New Media Art," (catalog)  
Praxis Gallery, Buenos Aires, Architecture Biennial, collaboration  
w/G.Libedinsky
- 2014 Lesley Heller Workspace, NYC, "Enticing Luminosity," curated by Olive Ayhens  
El Museo Cultural de Santa Fe, "Currents 2014: Santa Fe International  
New Media Festival"  
Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, "DLECTRICITY: Nuit Blanche Detroit"  
Renmin University, "Displacements," Beijing, China  
CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, NY, 12th Biennial Art Auction  
Slusser Gallery, Ann Arbor, MI, "Constellations: Lines and Pictures," Faculty  
exhibition

### **SELECTED FILM FESTIVALS & SCREENINGS**

- 2023 The New Museum of Networked Art, "Vacations in the Subconscious,"  
Alphabet Art Center, Koln, Germany
- 2019 Artscape, "Animations on the Big Screen", Baltimore, MD
- 2017 Experiments in Cinema, Albuquerque, NM
- 2016 Alchemy Film and Moving Image Festival, Hawick, Scotland  
Athens International Film + Video Festival, Athens, Ohio  
Canada International Film Festival, Vancouver, B.C.  
Vienna Independent Shorts, Austria  
Oxford Film Festival, Oxford, Mississippi

- Another Experiment by Women Film Festival, Anthology Film Archives, NYC  
 Big Muddy Film Festival, Illinois  
 Lyon International Film Festival, France  
 The Portland Oregon Women’s Film Festival  
 Pittsburgh Independent Film Festival, PA
- 2015 53rd Ann Arbor Film Festival, Ann Arbor, MI  
 Black Maria Film Festival, 34th Annual Festival Tour –Feb. – Nov. 2015  
 Female Eye Film Festival, Toronto, June 2015  
 Filmfest Dresden: International Short Film Festival, Germany  
 Atlanta Film Festival, Georgia  
 Montreal International Animation Festival, Quebec  
 Blow-Up: Chicago International Arthouse Film Festival  
 Chicago International Reel Shorts Film Festival  
 Video Art & Experimental Film Festival, New York City  
 International Short Film Festival 20min|max, Ingolstadt, Germany  
 13th Festival Int’l Signes de Nuit, Lisboa, Portugal & Sarrbrücken, Germany  
 Athens Animfest 2015, Athens, Greece  
 Doctober Film Festival, Bellingham, WA  
 FONLAD Festival – Digital Art Festival Coimbra, Portugal (via CologneOFF –  
 Cologne Int’l Videoart Festival)  
 Tricky Women International Animation Filmfestival, Vienna, Austria,  
 48th World-Fest Houston International Film and Video Festival  
 Mostra de Curtmetratges Dr.Mabuse XIV, Barcelona, Spain  
 TallyShorts Film Festival, Tallahassee, Florida  
 Humboldt Film Festival, Humboldt, California

## **AWARDS and HONORS**

- 2023 Midwest Book Awards, 2023 Gold Award, Art Category for “Heidi Kumao: Real  
 and Imagined”  
 Nautilus Book Awards, Silver Award, Photography and Art Category for  
 “Heidi Kumao: Real and Imagined”
- 2016 Big Muddy Film Festival, Best Experimental Short, IL  
 Oxford Film Festival, Special Jury Mention, Experimental Film category,  
 Oxford, MS
- 2015 Black Maria Film Festival, Jury’s Choice Award – 1st Prize, New Jersey  
 Female Eye Film Festival, Best Experimental Film, Toronto  
 Humboldt International Film Festival, Best Experimental Film, Humboldt, CA  
 Blow-Up: Chicago Int’l Arthouse Film Festival, Special Jury Award:  
 Outstanding Montage  
 World-Fest Houston, Silver Remi Award, Independent Short Subject,  
 Animation category  
 Stamps School of Art & Design, R.D. Richards Memorial Faculty Award
- 2014 Seoul International Extreme-Short Image & Film Festival, Best Experimental  
 Film  
 Videoholica 2014, Bronze Videoholica award, Varna, Bulgaria
- 2010 Artprize 2010: Fountain Street Church, “Best of Show” prize, Grand Rapids, MI

- 2008 Governor's Award for Arts and Culture for Michigan Innovative Artist
- 2006 The National Academy, New York City Malvina Hoffmann Award for Finest Sculpture (The 181st Annual)
- 1991 The Print Club, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art Purchase Prize

## **SELECTED ARTISTS' RESIDENCIES**

- Moulin à Nef International Residency, Auvillar, France, 2023
- Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Amherst, VA, 2022, 2019, 2018,
- Willapa Bay Artist Residency, Oysterville, WA, 2017
- Leighton Artists' Colony, Banff Arts Centre, Canada, 2017
- Hambidge Creative Residency Program, Rabun Gap, Georgia, 2016
- Brush Creek Artist Residency Program, Saratoga, WY, 2016
- The Arctic Circle 2013 Summer Solstice Expedition, Svalbard, Norway
- Jentel Artist Residency Program, Wyoming, 2013
- Light Work, Artist-in-Residence Program, Syracuse, NY, 2012
- Blue Mountain Art Center, New York, 2011
- MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NH, 2010

## **SELECTED GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS**

- 2022 ADVANCE Program, SUCCEED Grant for faculty, University of Michigan
- 2019-20 Michigan Faculty Fellowship, Hunting Family Faculty Fellow, Institute for the Humanities, University of Michigan
- 2019 Faculty Seed Grant, Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Univ.of Michigan
- 2009 Guggenheim Fellowship in Creative Arts: Video/Audio
- 2002 Grant in Emerging Fields/Robotics Creative Capital Foundation, New York City

## **PUBLICATIONS**

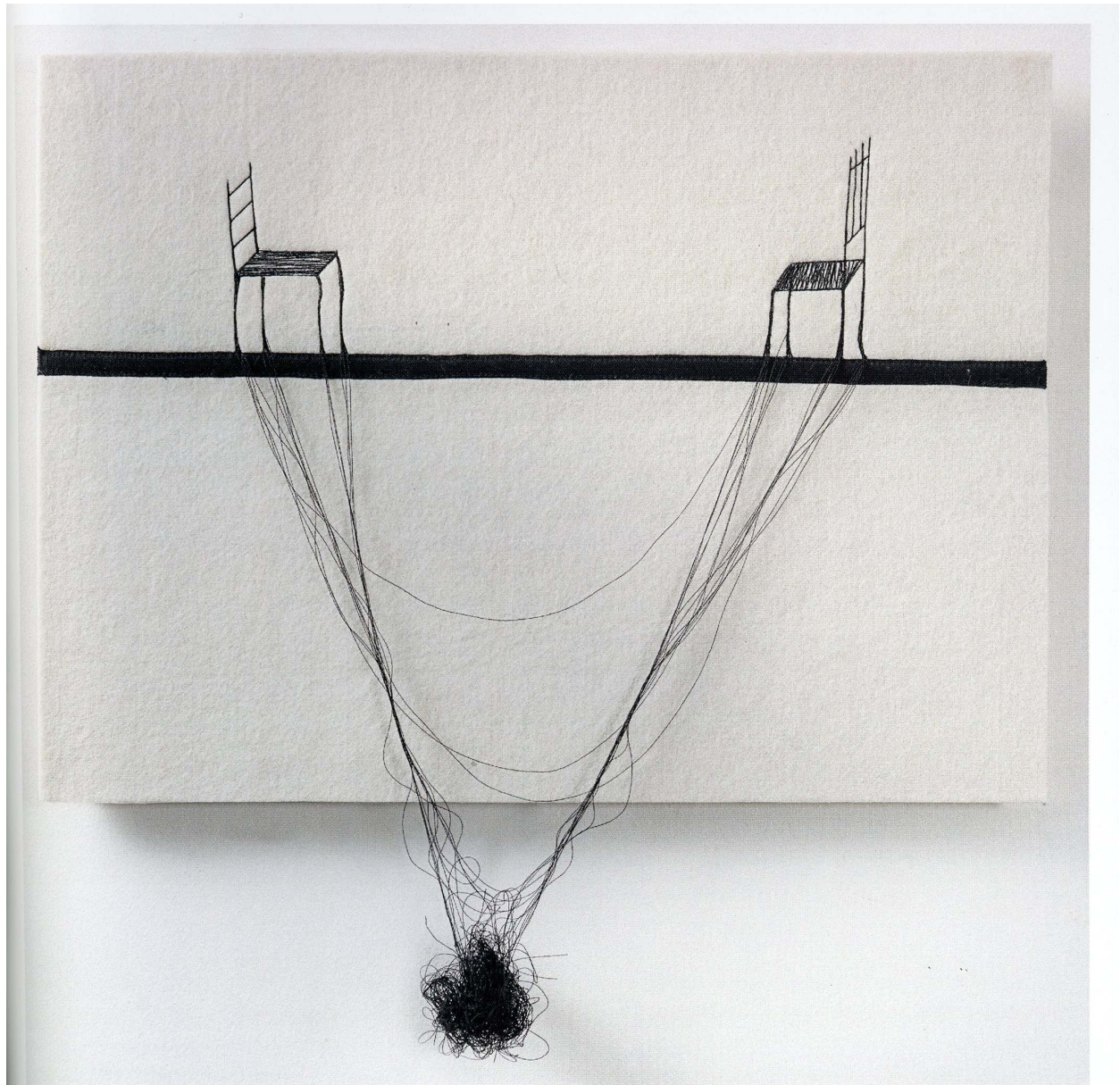
### **Selected Exhibition Publications**

- 2022 *Heidi Kumao: Real and Imagined*, Maize Books (Michigan Publishing), 110 pages, color, paperback. Documents and contextualizes Kumao's 2020 solo exhibition at the University of Michigan's Stamps Gallery. Includes essays, interview and poetry.
- 2017 *Human+: The Future of Our Species*, ArtScience Museum, Singapore
- 2015 *Human+: The Future of Our Species*, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB)
- 2015 *New Media Art 2015: Across Voices*, CICA Museum, Gimpo, Korea
- 2013 *Heads, Shoulders, Genes and Toes*, Judith Rushin, Museum of Fine Arts, Florida State University

### **Publications featuring my work**

- 2023 W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., Cover art for "Sage," poetry book by Marilyn Chin  
*All She Makes Magazine*, Issue 6





**So Below**

2019

Thread, bias tape, stitching  
on industrial felt, mounted to wood

19.75 x 22 x 1 in.

(50.16 x 55.88 x 2.54 cm)



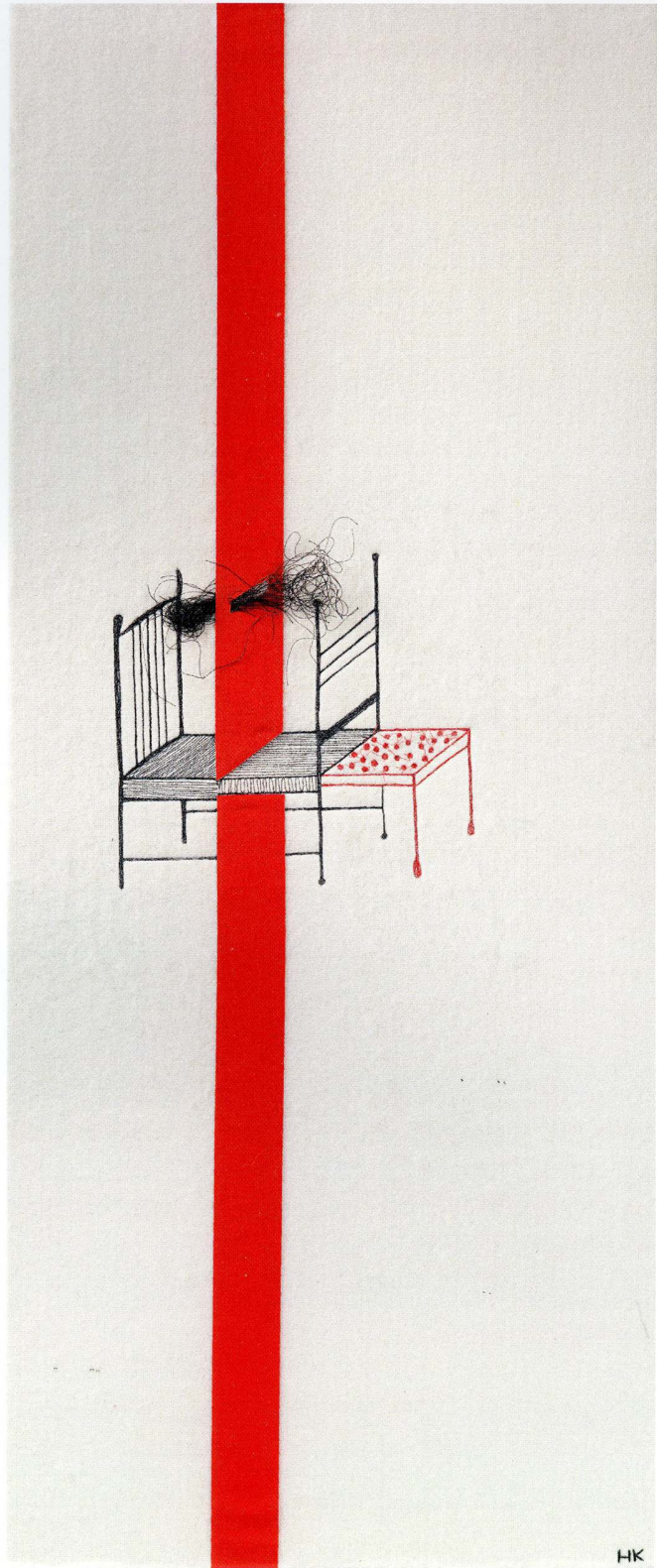
**The Hearing #2 (CBF)**  
2020  
Fabric cutouts, wool,  
stitching on industrial felt  
72 x 39.5 x 0.25 in.  
(182.88 x 100.33 x 0.63 cm)

50 : 51

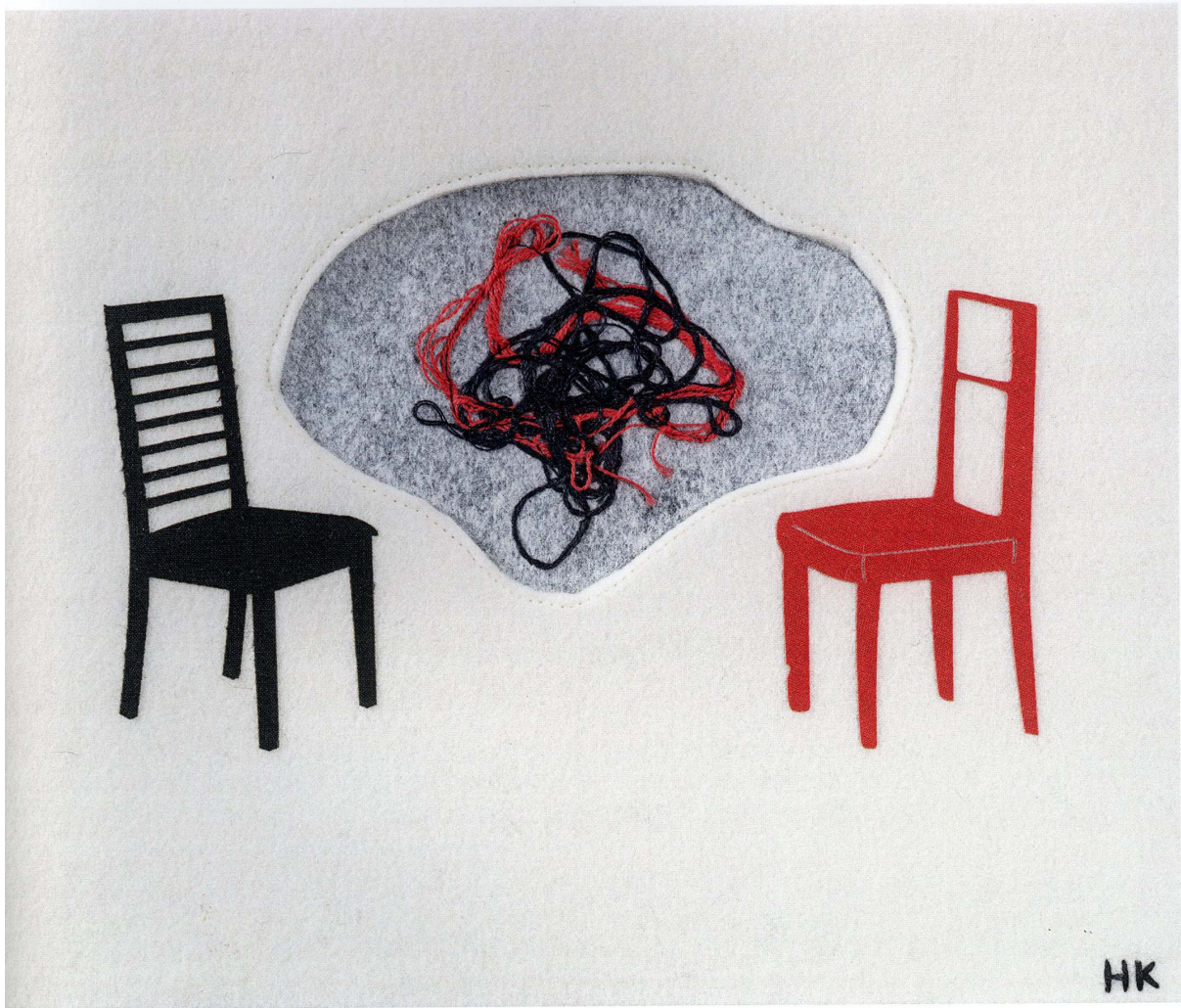
**Ration**

2020

Fabric cutouts, thread, stitching on  
industrial felt, mounted to wood  
35.75 x 14.5 x 1 in.  
(90.80 x 36.83 x 2.54 cm)



HK



**Shared Assumptions**

2020

Fabric cutouts, embroidery floss on  
industrial felt, mounted to wood

8.75 x 10.5 x 1 in.

(22.22 x 26.67 x 2.54 cm)



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Kumao/Real and Imagined