

# Bodies of Evidence

Janice Kerbel & Germaine Koh

The New Gallery  
June 9 - 30, 1995

Perennial; 3 - 4 ft. high, with hollow stems and large ovate leaves.  
Flowers bell-shaped; 1 inch long bright yellow to deep purple, followed  
by glossy berries.

Tess wished to abridge her visit as much as possible; but the young man was pressing, and she consented to accompany him. He conducted her about the lawns, and flower beds, and conservatories; and thence to the fruit-garden and greenhouses, where he asked if she liked strawberries.

'Yes,' said Tess, 'when they come.'

'They are already here.' D'Urberville began gathering specimens from the fruit for her, handing them back to her as he stooped; and, presently, selecting a specially fine quality of the 'British Queen' variety, he stood up and held it by the stem to her mouth.

'No--no!' she said quickly, putting her fingers between his hand and her lips.

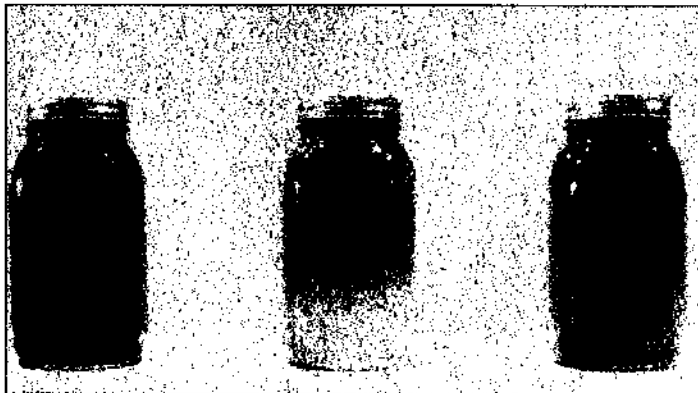
'I would rather take it in my own hands.'

'Nonsense!' he insisted; and in a slight distress she parted her lips and took it in.

-Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

Dilated pupils and blurred vision; hot red skin and dry mouth leading to excitement, disorientation, and hallucinations. Loud heartbeats audible at several feet, accompanied by rapid pulse and respiration. Paralysis of parasympathetic nervous system followed by fever, convulsions, and eventual coma.

Janice Kerbel



Begun on 21 February 1992, Knitwork is generated by my unravelling used garments and re-knitting their entrails into one ever-increasingly-long blanket. As it records the ongoing passage of time and effort, it evolves as an archive of and monument to the artifacts that comprise it. In its details, which register variations of the process and materials, one may trace decisions made. Knitwork pays tribute to labour, particularly piecework, by steadily amassing its products instead of allowing the work to be dispersed and exchanged. Its massiveness is a weighty, recalcitrant, public manifestation of mundane activity, and a measure of commitment. While its accretion of strata of disused goods might recall inexorable geological processes, its limits are human; the work will be finished when I cease. At once excessive and banal, rigorous and formless, sublime and absurd, this work is a practical test of the imagination.

Germaine Koh



## Appropriate Evidence

The title of this exhibition, "Bodies of Evidence," is a response to the interplay between two disparate elements in both Janice Kerbel's *Jams* and Germaine Koh's *Knitwork*: one is the work's tangible relationship to the physical body; the other, its flirtation with aspects of science and taxonomy. This exhibition plays with and explores the idea of evidence, but evidence of what? Like a mystery that slowly becomes unfurled, we attempt to decipher the story behind these works, and anticipate what will happen next. My discoveries are rich and endless, yet my pleasure lies not in the uncovering of "truths," or the solving of a puzzle, but in the invitation to explore. A clue here, a hint there, this is the way that *Jams* and *Knitwork* invite you in and allow you to reveal their meanings, their intricate relationships, and their vulnerability.

I am intrigued by the process shared by both Janice and Germaine; this process involves excessive accumulation, collection, and appropriation of ideas from various spheres of knowledge. These artists develop an intelligent, self-conscious, and empowering approach to materials which have gendered associations. This approach opens up the discursive field of these materials and processes, causing a transformation which exposes and encourages a potential for meaning that echoes far beyond the activities of jam-making and knitting. *Jams* and *Knitwork* are not passive. They are not complicit, or singular, nor are they finished or done with. Their simplicity is deceptive: they are more than you bargained for, and they will surprise you. Transforming these 'everyday' activities into vehicles for subversive thought might seem contradictory to their original function, yet this work reveals jam-making, knitting, and perhaps every kind of domestic activity as flexible and meaningful forms of expression. The potential of these activities is revealed, yet without denying or belittling their role as domestic necessities. Like a tributary of a river, these works owe their source and their continuing existence to the past and future presence of the original activity and use.

I wish to return to my earlier reference of the work's relationship to the body, to science, and the domestic, yet I cannot seem to separate these elements from each other. By fusing together these systems of knowledge, this work affirms that they can no longer exist in opposition. The evidence I uncover lies in the documentation which accompanies the work, as both Janice and Germaine compile, classify, and document information about the work in a taxonomic manner. With *Knitwork*, the individual body (from each garment) becomes reconfigured into the larger whole, yet the presence of each is still felt and known - through the photographic reminders, the written description of the acquiring and re-knitting of each garment, and in the tell-tale bands of colour which randomly interrupt the uniformity of the blanket's surface. *Jams* tells us in calculating terms just how these items will affect our physical body. They establish a conflicting relationship with us - through the domestic references, they remind us of familiarity and use, yet through scientific means they convey threat and unavailability. Here lies the critical difference between the two works which prevents a convenient convergence of thought. Although *Knitwork* retains ties to its original function (it is still a blanket, a useful article), *Jams* strictly denies this use by its life-threatening nature. *Jams* is more aggressive and confrontational; it imposes its presence upon us, yet it intrigues us with its cloying contradictions. So beautiful and seductive, it causes one to 'drop their guard' before it delivers its deadly message. It is perpetually, and by its very nature, unavailable to us as we want it, and in this way, it forces us to accept its terms. We are made uncomfortable by these objects, because they refuse to behave or please us in conventional ways, and if we insist upon their traditional use and meaning, we will suffer the consequences. With *Knitwork*, however, we can take comfort in the fact that it has not isolated itself from us entirely; it is available to us, yet it still challenges our terms of understanding. Blankets, like jams, are meant to be used and enjoyed, yet this "blanket" insists on growing larger than us, demanding our attention. It occupies not only excessive physical space, but an abnormal amount of psychological space.

These two different approaches are complementary; they express the range of possibility not only within meaning, but in the configuration of meaning. Similar to the amalgamation between the scientific and the domestic present in the work, these perspectives do not compete; rather, they inform each other. It is noteworthy that I refer to these works as if they have a life of their own, for they do seem organic: they grow, change, are influenced by their environment and are to some extent independent beings. Yet I cannot neglect to portray the role of the artists in this: although Janice and Germaine have somewhat relinquished their roles as creator (traditionally understood as genius, or all-knowing seer) in their exploration of the potential in the 'everyday,' they still maintain the impetus, if not the authority behind these works. By confounding our desire to comprehend, to eliminate and reduce, the construction of "truth" is resisted, as is the formulation of a solution, and simultaneously, the ability to solve. The oppositional strategies explored in *Jams* and *Knitwork* challenge imposed boundaries between the ways we engage the world, and pursue the dissolution of such limiting categories. Such intervention moves beyond a strictly critical stance, and affirms the possibility of different views.