

**Dialogic Tropes: Pearls and Bodies in *The Burden of 4000 Pearls* (2007-2009)
and *hole/whole* (2009-2011)**

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Abstract

Calgary-based installation artist and printmaker Kim Huynh's projects are profoundly aware of materiality and ways in which it can encourage us to jump out of the ruts and customary ways of categorizing and thinking in late Capitalism. The media that Kim Huynh adopts can range from the extraordinary to the banal, from a vast string of pearls to orange peels. This short interview with Kim Huynh investigates matters that are material and conceptual, incorporated into two projects referencing social injustice and embodied female experiences.

Keywords: Late-capitalism, social injustice, embodied female experience, visual art, materiality

Introduction

Jane McQuitty sets the stage: In 2018, the idea began that I might write about the respected Canadian artist, Kim Huynh's work, in the form of an ongoing email interview. This contribution presents the informative dialogue that emerged from our email conversations. As importantly, the contribution includes some illustrative samples of Kim Huynh's art installations that she has selected to complement the text. I think that although Kim might easily have been an artist of autobiography and identity because of the past influences of living in the Vietnamese Diaspora, there is no easy read of her work via this knowledge, further, Kim can be very reticent about discussing her personal lived experiences. Whatever Kim Huynh's personal life was, it seems to have morphed into a very strong interest in social justice for others in today's world. Like any viewer, I find it easier to know how to begin to understand an installation or exhibition when I know something of the world view of its creator and producer. One of the major things that I've noticed, as I've followed Kim Huynh's portfolio of artwork, is her way of continuing to incorporate striking materialities and tropes from one work into another. So, in the email interview, I decided to focus on Kim Huynh's use of pearl and body in her works created two years apart.

Jane McQuitty continues: Kim, your website documents the installation: *The Burden of 4000 Pearls* (2007-2009) with a key image of an anonymous woman holding a huge bundle of strung pearls against her body (2007, **See Figure 1**). A similar image appears on the invitation card to your print exhibition *hole/whole* at the Artist Proof Gallery entitled *hole/whole* (2009, **See**

Figure 2). What is the relationship of the *hole/whole* exhibition to *The Burden of 4000 Pearls* installation?

Kim Huynh explains: As an installation artist and a fulltime professor at the University of Calgary, I work with each abstract component separately in a studio and allow its larger analytical framework to evolve in writing. Each visual element monopolizes my attention for about two years during a post-production working in the materiality and various sets of ideas. Altogether, getting an art installation to arrive at a matured level can take me many years.

I began *The Burden of 4000 Pearls* by working with a concept of immigrant illusions and dreams and a wish to show how their desires shift as they experience the impacts of the Canadian economy on them. Given the vast space of the old Nickle Galleries (at the U of Calgary) to explore the notion of labor and production, I created a group of workers' hands cast in orange peel. These roughly defined hands formed a simple dotted line of five. By repeating this simple line in offset spacing eight times, I created a gradual elevation of a ladder bringing the viewer's gaze to the upper wall. Being brought up in Vietnam in a family that made its living from Chinese herbal medicine, I understand that orange peel is a universal healing agent both in cooking and medicine. To make sure that each hand can project from the wall, I layer dried thin ribbons of orange around a hand for a week. All together I created some forty fragile hands and used my difficult process to speak about monotony, repetition and human endurance of the workers. I then constructed an oversized image of the globe in pearls on the dark floor. The rows of hands on the wall and the prospect of a bright future on the gallery floor created a duality, but as a whole they express a gap between what is lived and what is hoped for and dreamed of. *The Burden of 4,000 Pearls* was given as a title for this presentation.

The following summer, I extended the pearls' photographs into a series of eighteen lithographs in Chine-Colle. Forging through a cohesive content, I lost most of the photos through a method of cut and paste and unfortunately, ran into a stall in my inspiration. In the third summer, the leftover prints progressed in perforation as a key method. The repeated punching out became a performance that restrained and constrained the nuances of memory which had existed in the picture. This series of eighteen images were showcased at the Artist Proof Gallery with the title *hole/whole*.

I consider *The Burden of 4,000 Pearls* is the main framework which includes *hole/whole*. I, however, never had the opportunity to witness all three visual elements as one extensive presentation.

Jane McQuitty: *The Burden of 4000 Pearls* and the *hole/whole* image might reference non-Western aesthetics and traditions for women, but I am not so familiar with them, if so. What are your thoughts? *The Burden of 4000 Pearls* overt content reminds me of one tradition. It is the 16th and 17th-century official European paintings of high-ranking European brides decked out in pearls. The pearls were secondary 'gifts' to welcome the new bride and her dowry into the husband's family. Though she would have brought a dowry with her to cover the costs of taking her in to the family, when she accepted the jewels, she received a personal debt to her new family, one she would pay off by having children for her husband. Bronzino's *Eleanor of Toledo and Her Son* (1545, **See Figure 3**) shows both the pearls gifted to her by the Medici family and her 'payment in full' in the form of the second healthy son who is at her side.

Kim Huynh: My attraction to pearls is distributed between thinking about the pearl as a social-capital subject, and contemplating that the pearl as a consumer object in the dynamic working ecology. The pearl still is a precious gem redolent of status and class. The provocation of showing a woman's vulnerable body and the placing of masses of pearls on her body parts in *hole/whole* is a convenient context for shedding light on the history of dowry and marriage in Asia. Perceptions about dowries have not changed much over the last fifty years, and most Asian women receive gold, pearls, and jade as dowry gifts from their husbands' families. I received a jade bracelet when I was twelve, for instance, and only gave it away when I began working in sculpture in Vancouver. While the pearl holds a timeless beauty recognized over centuries by many societies, the nuances of the dowry tradition fixate women on marriage in male-dominated structures. In my mother's generation, a dowry was a measure of the worthiness of the future bride; and the bride, in return, was expected to bring male off-spring, harmony, and prosperity to her husband's family.

When these eighteen prints were situated next to a staircase of hands and an oversized image of a globe made from pearls on a dark floor, they referenced my concerns for women within the broader framework of man and man. The globe of pearls reifies immigrants' desires for wealth, luxury, and the American dream, and the individual pearls become spacers of the gap between the 1% and 99% in globalization. The distribution of wealth through free trade changes the demographics of workers putting exploitation out of sight in Far East markets. What is the impact of globalization on women in the East? The *Burden of 4,000 Pearls* becomes an empty void and a nostalgia of mixed feelings in which the pearl as cultural artifact flickers between what is familiar, what is foreign, and what is uncertain.

Jane McQuitty: You evolved your aesthetic from *The Burden of 4000 Pearls* to *hole/whole*. In the first, the woman holds a bundle of pearls at her chest level. It's a modest photo because of the cropping to just below the neck and just above the navel. She is nude, and the photograph is exploitative, objectifying, and paradoxically protective. In the later work, the same content is nearly unreadable because of punching out, then cutting and pasting over the source image to the effect that it is increasingly still, symbolic and hieratic.

How did you get from one aesthetic to the next? Is there informational value added or subtracted by going from one to the other? Did you ever consider displaying them next to each other?

Kim Huynh: In the process of making *hole/whole*, I applied several artistic conventions like body language and hand marks to signify love and hatred, cause and effect, parts and whole. I hope viewers eventually come to a sense of ambivalence toward the conceptual system that splits the world into the two dimensions of man and nature. The first documentation of photographic images acknowledges the pleasure and fetish of the pearl on the body. Some body-languages are more romantic, revealing love, and care more than other relationships. The second application was to superimpose one of the digits (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9) over these old relationships in sharp mechanic holes. These defective numbers and digits are suggestions of the consumer's unconsciousness. The figures injure some selected bodies by extending beyond the border of the picture. The third application to the same story was the most aggressive invading the bodies and the environment with cutting and pasting in combination with perforation. Repeated forces damaged all bodies and shattered the image while leaving viewers an imprint of the Chinese characters like Rook, Bishop, Knight, Pawn, King to be seen. The gradual military camouflage

leaves viewers with something arresting and foreign images. While viewers might not recognize the meaning of the sharp Chinese character, the confronting graphic is the sole menacing authority remaining in the frame amongst the broken skeletons.

In *hole/whole*, I was aware of the language of advertisements and how much impact they have on the uncritical recourse and the desires associated with the buyer's psychology. The critical aim of erasing a consumer's romantic mindset is a slow pull and push, to frame and reframe the degree of desire, which then transforms into a more truthful realization. The broken dreams, confusion about realities, and memory deterioration in infiltrating these stories, are also a measuring of the viewers self-awareness. Regarding the placement of similar conditions or relationships side by side on a wall, I don't compare or highlight a particular moment.

Jane McQuitty: How do you see Marxism v. Capitalism underlined in *The Burden of 4000 Pearls*?

Kim Huynh: I don't think I should speak about my personal experience of the first four years of Vietnamese communism (1975-1979) in this project. I don't see its significant relationship, nor is it an extension of the conceptual framework and praxis of the artwork, under discussion.

Jane McQuitty: Okay, deal. I agree. I have a feeling that our dialogue so far has been ample. Also, I think it's interesting how the materiality of elements brought into one installation will then suggest new themes for you to explore. Our dialogue on the emergence of hole/whole from *The Burden of 4000 Pearls* gives me an insight into the process of creating your artwork.

Kim Huynh: By re-thinking out loud with you in this dialogue, I also reflect on these three visual elements in a broader context of my researched creations over the last twenty years. I hold a spirit of inquiry in cultural materiality; the same artifact can be understood differently through a context of archaeology and serves as the beginning of a mystery.



Figure 1

Kim Huynh. First Iteration (similar image as Figure 3). 30" x 22".
Photograph from *hole/whole* (2009-2011).

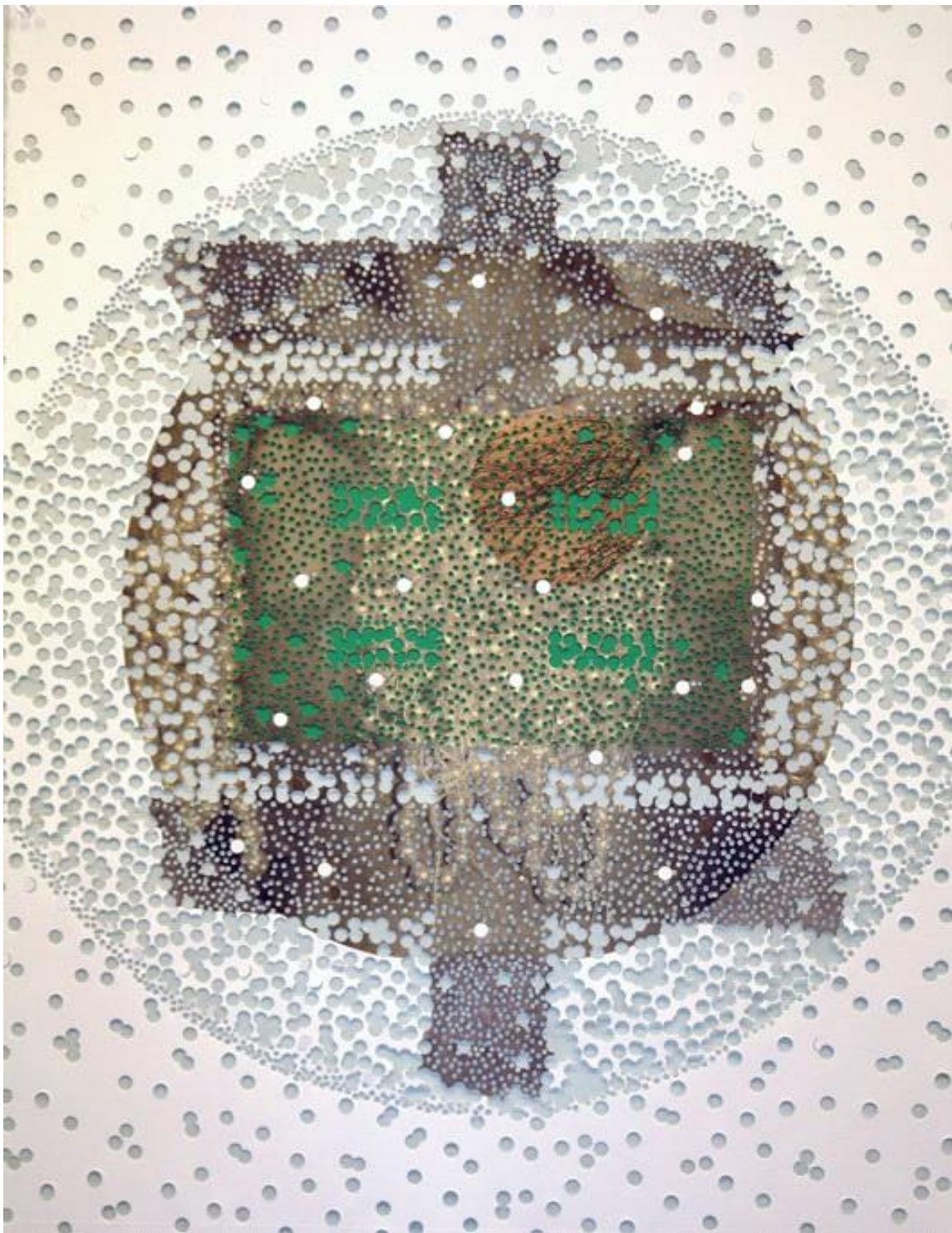


Figure 2

Kim Huynh. Vehicle. Third Iteration (from Photograph Figure 1). Lithograph. 30" x 22".
From *hole/whole* (2009-2011).



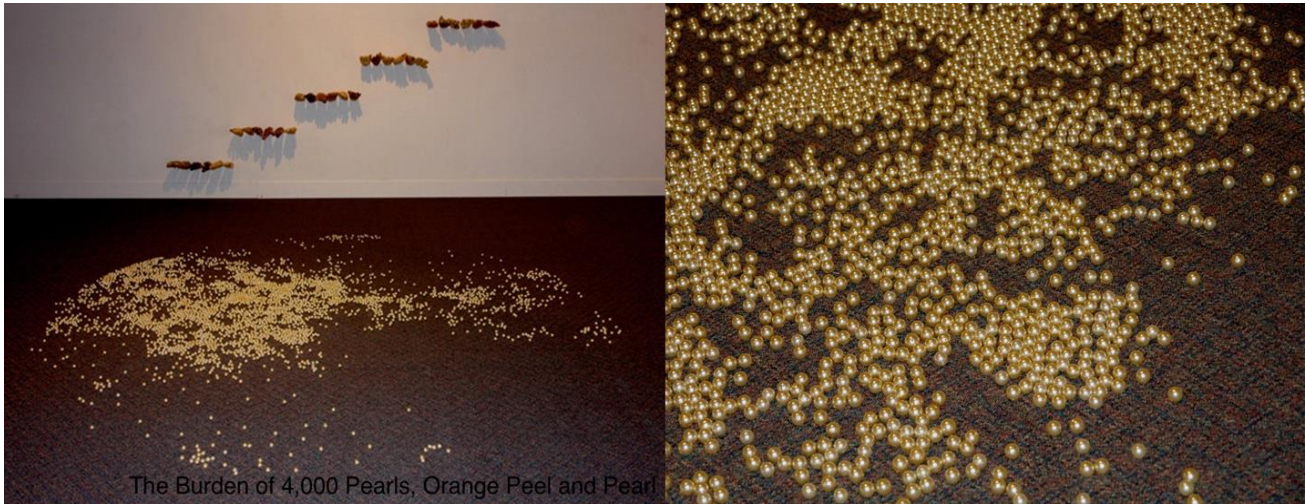
Figure 3
Bronzino. *Eleanor of Toledo and Her Son* (1544-1545). Oil.
(Reprinted with permission).

Selected images from *The Burden of 4,000 Pearls* and *hole/whole*



Left: *Pearls in Frame*. 30" x 22". Kim Huynh. From *hole/whole* (2009-2011).

Right: *Mechanic Holes in Frame*. 30" x 22". Kim Huynh. From *hole/whole* (2009-2011).



Left: *Steps on Wall and Globe on Floor.* Kim Huynh. From *The Burden of 4,000 Pearls* (2007-2009).

Right: *Close View of 9 Ft. Diameter Globe.* Kim Huynh. From *The Burden of 4,000 Pearls* (2007-2009).



Left: *Shadow and Hands.* Orange Peel. Life Size. Kim Huynh. From *The Burden of 4,000 Pearls* (2007-2009).

Center: *Top View of Hands.* Orange Peel. Life Size. Kim Huynh. From *The Burden of 4,000 Pearls* (2007-2009).

Right: *Globe and Steps on Wall* (Installation View). Kim Huynh. From *The Burden of 4,000 Pearls* (2007-2009).

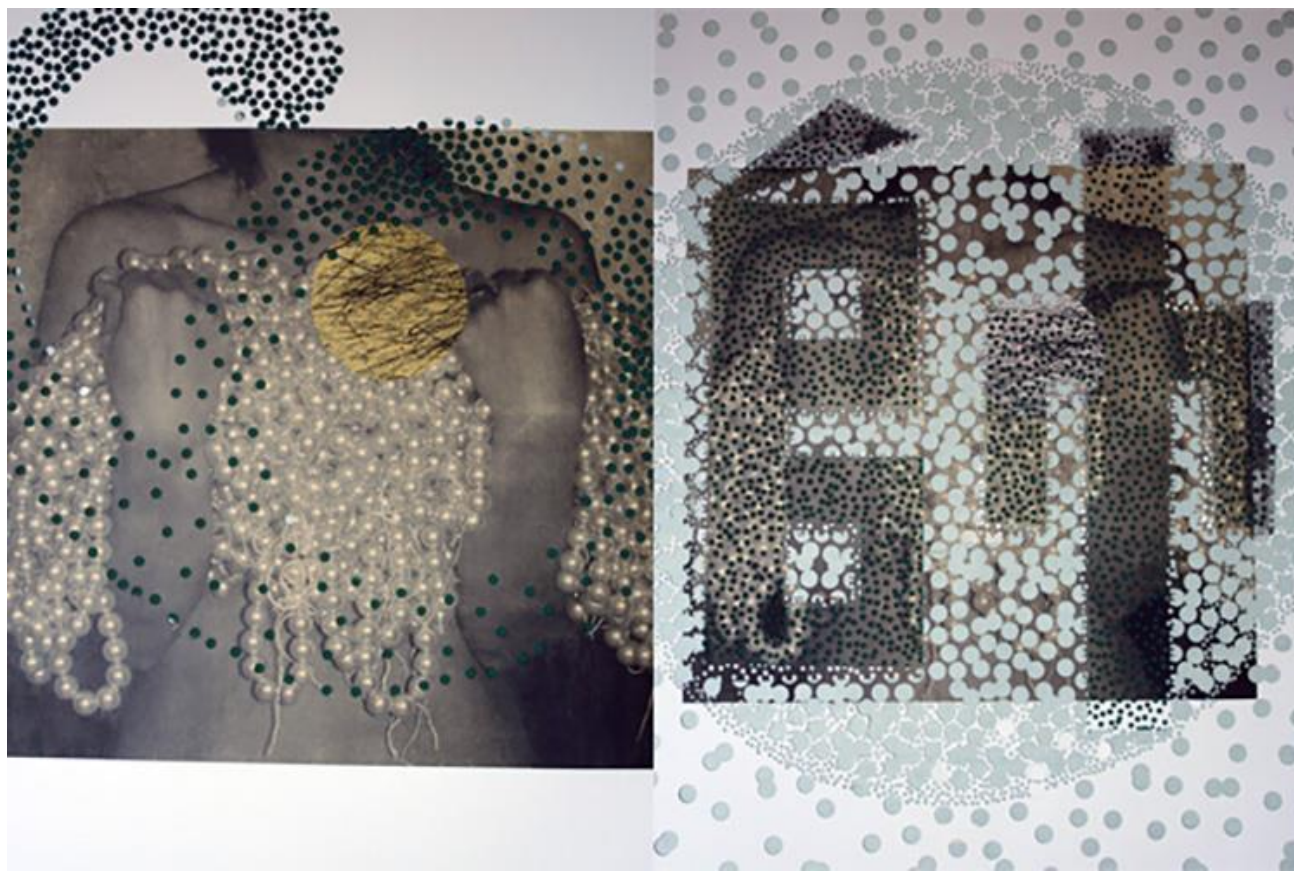


Steps on Wall (Installation View). Orange Peel. Kim Huynh.
From *The Burden of 4,000 Pearls* (2007-2009).



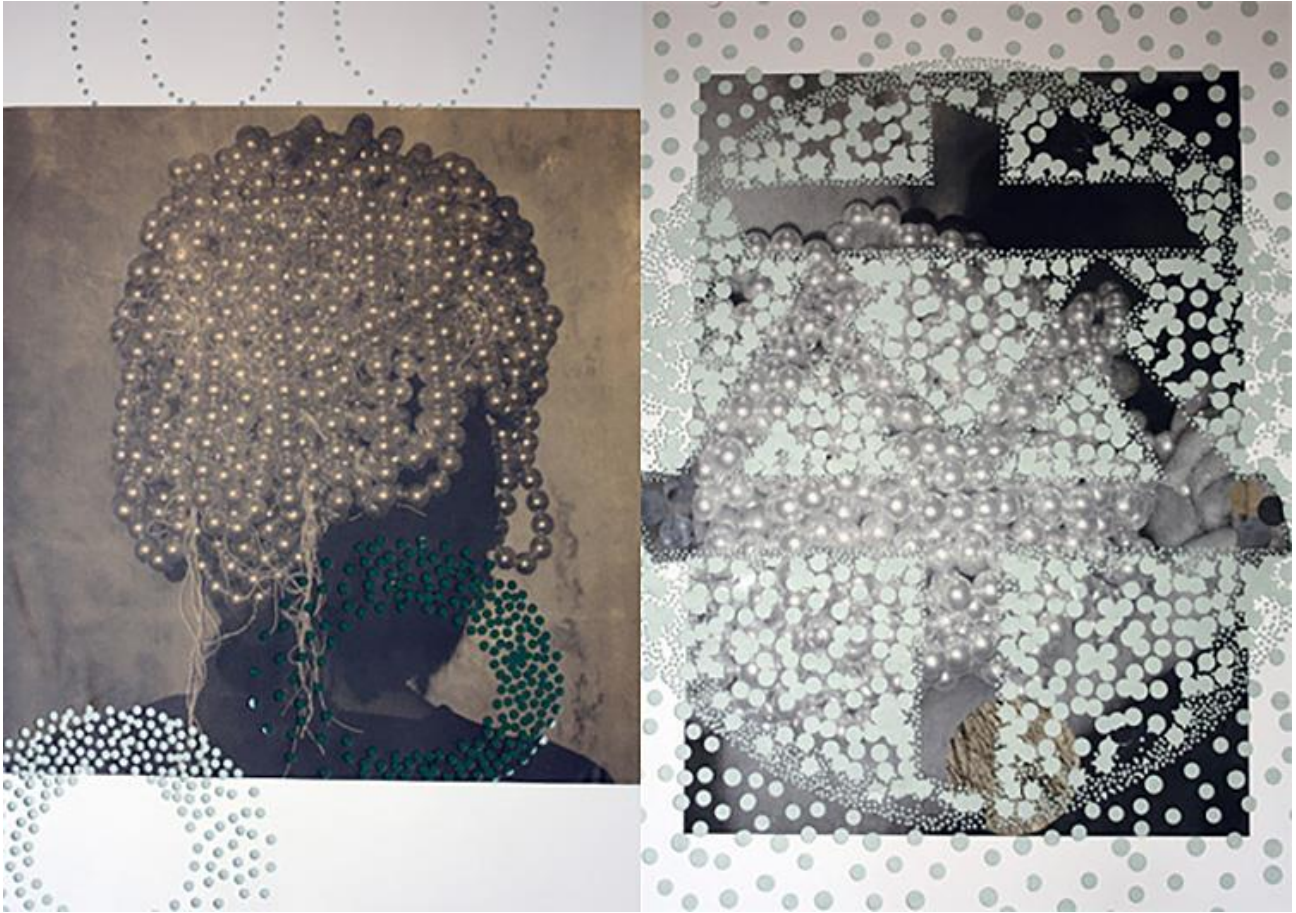
Left: Lithography Chine-Colle. Vehicle. Third Iteration. 30" x 22". Kim Huynh. From *hole/whole* (2009-2011).

Right: Lithography Chine-Colle. Second Iteration. 30" x 22". Kim Huynh. From *hole/whole* (2009-2011).



Left: Lithography Chine-Colle. Second Iteration. 30" x 22". Kim Huynh. From *hole/whole* (2009-2011).

Right: Lithography Chine-Colle. Councillor. Third Iteration. Kim Huynh. 30" x 22". From *hole/whole* (2009-2011).



Left: Lithography Chine-Colle. Second Iteration. 30" x 22". Kim Huynh. From *hole/whole* (2009-2011).

Right: Lithography Chine-Colle. Soldier. Third Iteration. 30" x 22". Kim Huynh. From *hole/whole* (2009-2011).