Like: Lisa Kokin's (fac)simile

Like a bird on the wire
Like a drunk in a midnight choir
I have tried, in my way, to be free.
–Leonard Cohen 1.

Lisa Kokin's most recent body of work takes its viewers back to a place beyond which most of us passed unconsciously, long ago, to the moment when visual language recognition occurs: the 'aha' moment when seeing becomes reading. Everything from the mundane (road signs, instructions, advertising) to the exquisite (poetry, love letters) relies on our immediate, involuntary recognition of text. We can't help it.

What happens, though, when something or someone takes us to that state in which seeing is only seeing, and the word/world becomes unknown, all over again? Like a musical leitmotif, this question frames Kokin's airy, unframed works, floating off the wall on silver pins. These oversized facsimiles of page spreads from books are made principally of thread, sometimes from old linens, and—used here for the first time in her work—zippers. Cut away from the fabric matrix used to attach them to clothes or pillows, small, disembodied chunks of zipper teeth become stand-ins for words, sewn in neat lines on facing pages of faux text. Like Chuck Close's pixelated color portraits, the closer we get, the less meaning we can read. What we need, then, is the big picture; the backstory; the words behind the words.

As is often the case for Kokin, her transformative exploration of a new material began with a chance encounter. At a fabric giveaway hosted by a friend, she found bags of cut-down zippers, the cloth all but removed to prepare them for some still-unknown purpose. Without the textile that defined their function, the zippers became mysterious, suggesting chain, or the cast lead type used in linotype printing. She picked up the bags and brought them home. In time, their use would reveal itself.

2.

Books were a constant part of the landscape of Kokin's childhood. Her parents, self-taught intellectuals who had their own upholstery business, were passionately interested in politics and read widely—theory, fiction, and history. For many years, she

has carried around several boxes of English and Yiddish books that were passed down to her from her maternal grandfather.

Similarly, having grown up in and around her parents' business, machine sewing is as familiar to Kokin as breathing. She uses it to draw, to write, to attach; sometimes, to make an entire piece out of thread alone. For decades, she has explored myriad ways in which these familiar methods and materials (sewing, thread, buttons; book making and books, deconstructed) can be used to open up subjects which are-- as she puts it wryly-- hard to talk about. It is all but impossible, she finds, for people to agree about the rightness or wrongness of certain actions. What is clearly inevitable and necessary to some is just as obviously needless, ignorant and profoundly unnecessary in the eyes of others, particularly in the context of religion and/or nationalism. Sometimes, Kokin asserts, the only way to come at an issue is indirectly; to show and not tell. Among the subjects she examines in Facsimile (at times, using her grandfather's books as source material) are the selling of democracy and her complicated personal relationship to Jewishness and Israel. She had intended to begin using the books physically—dismembering them, as she has other books gathered from recycling facilities and thrift stores—but in the end, found herself unable to take that step. Instead, pages from volumes including Walt Whitman's poems and Oscar Wilde's collected writings became her visual inspirations.

Exasperated by the recent Supreme Court decision allowing unfettered corporate contributions to candidates in elections, Kokin selected three different page spreads-- one from Alexis de Tocqueville's eighteenth-century classic Democracy in America and two others from paperback introductions to American government. Each of these three pieces reproduces the rhythms of the printed words from their respective sources using zipper fragments; in addition, shredded currency has been sewn into the thread matrix that supports the lines of 'words'—serving as a reminder, perhaps, that money permeates everything, including the foundation of government. In each, the parameters—both of the physical stuff of which they are made and of its handling—shift subtly, demonstrating the way in which Kokin resolves ideas both conceptually and through the exploration of process and materials.

Similarly, two other pieces, Compassion and Empathy (both subtitled Cruelties of Prison Life), offer slightly different approaches to difficult content. Each takes a passage from Oscar Wilde's essay-length letter to the editor of the London Daily Chronicle, written a little more than a century ago, pleading for better treatment for children and the mentally ill in England's prisons. Wilde knew firsthand what being jailed was like, having served two years of hard labor for the crime of being publicly gay. By all accounts, the experience broke him; he died, not long after his release, at the age of 46. In Empathy,

can actually read the passage she has chosen. But only phrases here and there are legible. The process of completing the piece requires immersion in water. During this last step, Kokin allowed the letters to distort and twist, collapsing into themselves.

Compassion uses a different strategy. Only a few words and isolated letters have been stitched, in beige and brown, on what appear to be fragments of old table linens. Though these few words are clear, without the connecting text that remains invisible the sense of the whole is lost—though what we can see might be more powerful than

the complete sentences could be. Words like 'sheer terror' and the truncated phrase 'lonely and unfamili' stand out. Nearby, single isolated letters, like tiny muffled voices, invoke the sheer awfulness of putting small children alone in the dark, stinking cells that Wilde describes.

Three pieces in this exhibition reflect on a constellation of issues Kokin has pondered for a lifetime, as the granddaughter of Eastern European Jewish immigrants: Zionism, Palestine and the history of the Jewish people. In Armed Shepherd Tending his Flocks, the illustration of the Israeli herder, gun on his back among his fleecy sheep, is exquisitely rendered in thread. Lines of toothy, metallic zipper fragments fill the rest of the two pages. Kokin has long wrestled with the question of what happens when the oppressed become oppressors—when tolerance, or the lack of it, becomes ideological. In a sense, the zippers, with their suggestion of closed mouths or minds, have a heightened role in some of Kokin's work. In Dislike of the Unlike, for example, extensive annotation and highlighting, rendered in multiple colors of thread over lines of zipper text, explicates why prejudice against the Jews exists historically and continues. Yet all of it- annotation, text, highlighting—is completely asemic, meaning it has no specific semantic content, and consists only of abstract marks, leaving what is described as "a vacuum of meaning which is left for the reader to fill in and interpret.[1]"

3.

The meaning of the word facsimile is—complicated. It is defined as both an exact replica of a printed document and as a copy that is as true to the original source as possible. To further complicate things, hiding within it is the word simile—a figure of speech in which two unlike things are compared to each other, most often by using the word 'like.'

Kokin's sewn pages give us the rhythm of the texts from which she draws (and the accompanying illustrations), but to keep the proportions of line height to page size the same, the scale of these pieces is about 250% of the originals. This shift has several interesting effects. For one thing, the works feel like they are the 'right' size from the

addition, it brings to mind one of Kokin's favorite things: dictionaries, from which she has also made three pieces for this exhibition. Taken as a whole, the big pages in Facsimile might serve as a kind of mourning for our collective loss of massive volumes set on stands—all but replaced, now, with websites: books through which we could page slowly, looking at the pictures and reading definitions for words we didn't even know we wanted to learn, all of us connected together by the thread of shared humanity, curiosity, and compassion.

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asemic_writing See also www.asemic.net, Tim Gaze