

MASAKO TAKAHASHI is an international artist in the truest sense of the word – by birth, attainment and affinity. Born in an internment camp for Japanese Americans in Utah, wanderlust drove her to spend two years traveling during the 1960's through India, Asia, Nepal, Egypt, Lebanon, and Iran. Then she spent a year in Paris. Currently, she divides her time between L.A. and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. "Travel" she says, "has been the biggest influence on my work."

That influence is apparent in her choice of materials and methodology. From the lengths of Indian and Thai silk that form some piece's supports, to handkerchiefs made by cloistered nuns (which the artist embroidered text on), to text-embroidered tablecloths and lingerie, Takahashi synthesizes elements of needlework, language and history into transcultural artifacts. Her work embodies ideas about time, the sacred, mortality, and how we record expressions of emotion: whether her individual pieces present themselves as handcraft, neo-relics, or photos; or whether they fuse these kinds of traditional and contemporary mediums. Lately, Takahashi has been feeding her hair into the computer to produce "Hairskans".

The scripts contained in the "Hair Texts" resemble *runes* or the angular Etruscan alphabet. They're embroidered onto large squares of silk using doubled strands of the artist's hair--an impressive cascade that falls out the backs of her knees. She doesn't yank out her tresses to create this work, but collects what falls out naturally or gets caught in her comb. The lengths of words in the "texts" are determined by the lengths of individual strands.

Hair lore is fascinating, common to all cultures, and, sadly, too vast to discuss here. Shorn or unshorn for religious purposes or in mourning, given in snippets as love tokens, hair's rich symbology constitutes a language in itself.

The "Hair Texts" silk backgrounds, with their thread-y texture and pale, sandy hues call to mind the surfaces of stone slabs or parchment. "I was inspired by visits to the British Museum and the Louvre – the beauty and simplicity of cuneiform, for example. Looking at marks made on stone fragments and stelae inspired the variation of line. "I 'format' the text so it can be 'read' either right to left or left to right," the artist says. "Viewers seem to find the writing vaguely familiar, which I like. I want it to appear as if it could be language from any part of the planet."

By employing an invented script, Takahashi conjures up images of man as alphabet maker, preserver of sacred words, verbal animal, meaning seeker. This is not a concept specific to one culture, but an evocation of our species' deep need to catalog mental contents, leave evidence of our presence on earth. Takahashi's work reminds us that even at the level of pictographs, glyphs and ideograms, Emerson's remark that "Language is fossil poetry" holds true. That truth is part of our follicles and fiber, and perhaps represents the best of what it means to be civilized. The "Hair Texts" strong emotional effects on viewers can be compared to those of the Rosetta Stone, covered with Ptolemy's proclamation in three ancient tongues – both code breaker and maquette for a Tower of Babel. Part stitched sampler, part emblazoned page, Takahashi's "Hair Texts" perpetually translate themselves within each viewer, right before our eyes.