

TOUCH: AN INTRODUCTION

Marjatta Itkonen was born in Finland and immigrated to Canada in 1972. As the mother of four children, for Itkonen, as for many women artists of her generation, the creative impulse has always been balanced against the demands of family life. The artist's ability does not arise from extensive formal training; she has been a maker of things her whole life. Formal training came later in life and occurred sporadically around the realities of a busy domestic schedule. She began her studies at the University College of the Fraser Valley (now the University of the Fraser Valley) in the late 1980s, taking long breaks to care for her family and eventually returning in 2013. These are not the conditions under which art stardom flourish, but they are a reality for many women artists, and the inseparability of life-making and art-making has become the greatest benefit to Itkonen's practice. The artist states that "over time I have become encouraged to pay better attention to, and develop stronger appreciation for, my own life experiences as valid and valuable materials for art that can be shared."

Over the years, the artist has turned her hand to most materials available to her, and she has a natural competence and facility with colour pastel, printmaking, and textile-based media. Itkonen's recent work focuses on the handmade, the domestic sphere, and the persistence of familial relationships across time and space. For her, the singular source of inspiration for her work is her lived experience, particularly as it relates to her home life and the women in her family.

Since 2013 Itkonen has created a series of life-sized sculptures based on her own body. These figures variously represent herself, her mother, and her grandmother.



Lifelike forms that suggest the weight of real flesh are in fact composed of modest materials: paper butchers tape, paper towel, and a homemade paste that the artist makes in her kitchen. Though they recall the mass and volume of classical bronze sculpture, these are not monuments designed to last forever. Like the subjects they represent, these sculptures are marked by their impermanence, and will be altered by time.

Itkonen's extraordinary proficiency with the human form elevates humble subject matter: the comings and goings of everyday life, familiar exchanges between loved ones, and the magnitude of emotional labour that comes with these relationships; what the artist has described as "the confusing emotions of joy and guilt" that characterize so much of family life. Itkonen's sculptures are a quiet exaltation of the ordinary, uncelebrated moments of our lives.

- Laura Schneider, 2017

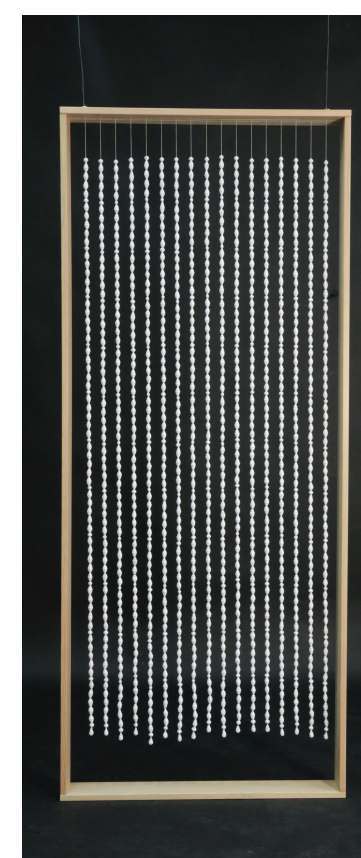
IN TOUCH

"In Touch consists of a wooden doorway with a curtain made of over 1,200 paper beads fashioned from copies of the many letters exchanged between my mother in Finland and myself in Canada, from the 1970s to the early 1990s. Last January, as I looked at those two piles of letters, I thought about the kind of relationship one has through correspondence, over time and distance.

I imagined the whole immigration experience as a permanent state of suspense between departure and arrival, or as a doorway with a thin but tangible curtain through which many aspects of life—especially family relationships, language, and culture—have to be negotiated. While it hinders it also enables, and while it obscures it simultaneously opens up new ways of seeing.

I made copies of the letters, cut the copies into long narrow triangles and rolled these into beads. In the process, I would see bits of words pass by, and recall moments and days in mother's and my life."

- Marjatta Itkonen, 2017



TENDER

"As I thought about this exhibition, a memory of a moment from my childhood persisted in its relevancy to the theme. When I was ten years old I bought my first real-looking baby doll with my own money. I don't quite remember how she looked, or the colour of her clothes, or if she opened and closed her eyes; I just remember the joy of holding her.

Recreating this memory in the paper figure of a young girl became possible when one of my grandchildren volunteered to be the model. That process itself added another layer to the story that still continues.

Even though the doll and the small quilt with its fading patches of colour emphasize the randomness of our memory—how so many things are lost without us being able to prevent it—yet, somehow, the essence of our most meaningful moments remain."

- Marjatta Itkonen, 2017

