

Susannah Bielak

**Artist Statement: Gestures with Flowers and Hands
(2007)**

Project Description

Through intensive graphite and mixed media drawings, *Gestures with flowers and hands* explores the parallel between decorum and euphemism in the orchestrated body language of politicians and the sentiment of flowers. The goal of the project is to highlight and deconstruct nuanced aspects of ceremonialism, including the fragility of routinized gesture.

The handshake drawings are zoomed-in renditions of associated press photographs. These handshakes stand for hundreds of others, mostly superficial gestures over grave matters. In these instances of exchange between bodies representing nation-states, a handshake is most often a perfunctory ritual, a masking of reality through formal means. By leaving the faces and hands blank in these drawings, my intent is to highlight through absence—focusing attention on overlooked gestures. Saturating paper with graphite through repetitive marks and rubbing is an act of slowing down the moment of each exchange—cementing contemplation through the process of my hand.

Artist Statement

Sweaty palms and a downward glance. A wooing gaze and open hand. Arms folded behind the head, legs outstretched. Deception. Courtship. Persuasion. There's a primacy of gesture, a way it carries meaning and sticks.

In *Gestures with hands and flowers*, my focus is on the symbolism of the political handshake. Hands victorious, raised like eagles; hands bowing, barely touching. Men shaking hands like playing footsie. Hands graze, bow, divulge. The handshake can serve as a greeting, an offering, a truce, a false promise. A handshake can be a point of connection or intimacy, an expression of affection, or, at least, a willingness to engage. Whether orchestrated, spontaneous, or mediated; consoling, congratulatory, or confusing, the hands tell a story.

The Camp David Accords, twenty versions of a truce. Reagan and Gorbachev exchanging pens over the arms race. Clinton meeting Democratic lawmakers after the House of Representatives voted to impeach him, hands in improvisational dance. Chirac separating Bush and Putin, they've been shaking hands for too long.

The accompanying centerpiece is dedicated to these handshakes—an arrangement quoting a White House bouquet, with flowers selected for their particular sentiments. The arrangement quotes a White House dinner floral centerpiece, a peripheral ceremonial object. However, this bouquet is about exaggeration and erasure, stripping the flowers of color and life but surrounding them in piercing red, an allusion to the darker undercurrents of political exchange.