

SLACK AND TENSION: A JOURNEY OF THE SPIRIT

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By

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ABSTRACT

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Director: Dr. Seth McCormick

The work for this exhibit is focused on the physical and psychological concepts of slack and tension. When there is tension, in body or mind, there follows a time of slack or rest. This exhibit includes the following sculptural materials: wood, cotton thread, copper rods, and my own blood, suspended in acrylic medium. The exhibition comprises four works, three of which include drawings executed directly on the wall in blood. Each wall piece will use both copper rods and strips of charred wood bound together with cotton thread, creating linear constructions, parallel to the wall surface, that function as graphic overlays of the wall drawings. Each of these three pieces measures about 7 feet by 7 feet. The fourth work features a 2 foot wide by 8 foot long track of imprinted footprints in charcoal, executed on the floor.

The exhibition is meant to offer a personal reflection on spirituality, human experience and the resolution of physical and psychological tension. Artists of reference include Robert Irwin, Richard Long and Eva Hesse.

INTRODUCTION

Slack and Tension: A Journey of the Spirit, is derived from a series of rules which I used to guide the production of the works in this exhibition. I was unsatisfied with my previous work, and I wanted to express where I was personally, spiritually and artistically at the time. I developed a framework within which I could satisfy this need. First, I established a timeline of two days to produce a completed work; then I documented it digitally for purposes of reconstruction and re-installation, and disassembled it. Second, each work had to represent the components mind, body and spirit, which are what I consider to be the three elements of humanity. Lastly, each work had to include evidence of my body in some form or another, as in the works that incorporate blood or imprints of the body (i.e., footprints).

Six studies were created in twelve days, giving way to the body of work included in my thesis exhibition. In the spirit of spontaneity, I chose basic materials available in my studio and installed the six pieces together to create a unified project. The final selection of works was chosen to convey a reconciliation of slack and tension experienced by me both physically and emotionally, and to present evidence of my own incomplete spiritual journey. Additionally, the project is an expression of my physical and spiritual conditions in the moment I created the work.

I also chose specific materials that I believed could serve to represent these three elements. Mind is represented by fibers, wood or stone, natural

materials that have been used to transfer written or graphic spiritual knowledge over the course of human history. Body is represented through blood. Spirit is represented by the reflective qualities of the copper rod.

CONTEXT

Three artists in particular engage with materials, forms, and concepts that are relevant to the work I created for this exhibition. Eva Hesse's work registers the often fleeting presence of beauty, tragedy and perfection, in her conceptual and formal treatment of materials. Formally her work had a physical presence I was drawn to, a preciousness I saw myself engaged with. My use of charred wood, delicately bound with thin cotton string, under the tension of stressed copper rods exhibits a similar preciousness. Her work features shapes, materials, and colors that encourage her audience to engage with it in a contemplative state. It exudes warmth in its dissolution of the Minimalist grid. Like Hesse, I tried to bring an energy to work that speaks of the psyche. My work is equally concerned with "psychological self-insight and self-discussion," as Lucy Lippard says of Hesse's (5). Our choice of materials, however, is vastly different. Whereas she used industrial polymers, fiberglass, and epoxy, I chose materials that were uniquely distinctive to and grounded within my physical body and spiritual experience. The use of blood, historically used in ritual sacrifice, or natural fibers pressed to form paper used as a medium of written history, are both vehicles of spiritual action. I found Hesse's *Compart* reliefs produced in 1966 most closely related to my own work. Here, her work is broken down to the most elemental use of forms and materials. Hesse coiled cord in concentric circles until a point of visual rest was achieved in the centers of the works. Mounted on three or four square Masonite panels hung on the wall, the circles

were cropped in a way to allow the viewer to complete them visually, as a gap of negative space was placed between each panel. I based my wall-hung works on the circle as well, completing one full circle in one of the works. Another wall piece is segmented to suggest the perimeter of the outlined circle, and the third meanders around the wall surface, making contact with the originally drawn circle, and alluding to the underlying structure provided by the circular form. This form is associated with contemplative energy in the calligraphic tradition of the Enso Zen drawings of Japan. These drawings symbolize a moment when the mind is free to let the body and spirit create.

Richard Long bases his work on a personal connection with nature and embodiment, albeit on an epic scale. Long has traveled around the world to places of great natural beauty to create his works, utilizing the natural materials he found at each site and spending several weeks at a time delving into the spiritual connections between nature and man. I was drawn to Long's spontaneity. His pacing and use of the circular form has likewise been a source of formal and spiritual inspiration. Both Long and I share an obsessive need to work alone, discarding outside influences. In the text *Richard Long: Walking in Circles*, Anne Seymour spoke about the solitary manner in which Long works, stating, "Long sets out upon his journey, armed only with a length of string for making circles, pencil, notebook and camera for recording things perceived, map and compass for finding the way, gloves for lifting rocks, a water bottle for making water drawings, and a pair of well worn boots" (Long 39). Although our works are intensely personal, I do not share Long's connection to nature, but

prefer to focus on to the subject of human and personal spiritual growth. On the other hand, I share his interest in themes of permanence and transience. In **Slack and Tension: A Journey of the Spirit**, I sought to reveal the quietness and contemplation from which personal and artistic growth and self-reflection arise. My works are snapshots of an ever-changing spiritual development. They are meant to be impermanent, so neither the viewer nor I can hold on to one particular moment. Finally, where Long finds spontaneity in the landscape, I find my inspiration within the environment of the studio.

Elemental use of materials and form can also be seen in the work of Robert Irwin. In *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing one Sees*. Irwin speaks about times in his studio practice where there were moments of artistic productivity followed by lapses in activity, which mirrors my own relationship to slack and tension. He stated, "...you were looking for what was interesting and what could be. You went through all the possibilities in your head, edited them down, distilled them, and then you make your next gesture." He continues by saying, "...then there was a flurry of activity in which you dealt with that (the next mark). You lapsed into a period in which you tried to decide about what you'd just done" (Weschler 57). I believe Irwin was looking for a way to exhibit spontaneity in his work, despite hours of labor put into his earlier large-scale canvases from the mid to late 1950's. I have tried to exhibit spontaneity in what I believe is a more authentic manner, in the treatment of materials and forms as they have existed historically. Another aspect of Irwin's practice I found relevant is his comparison of spatial relationships in painting to the relationship between vision

and actual physical space. His goal was to avoid “physical contradiction,” because he believed painting needed to follow the rules of real physical laws. I too created rules and parameters, a context intended to foster a sense of truth to the moment of artistic creation. I tried to pare the production of the work down to time-sensitive decisions and barred any other visual or experiential influence outside of my studio. I created rules for generating spontaneity and authenticity.

ELEMENTAL MATERIALS

Based on the original set of rules I established at the outset of the creation of my thesis work, I pared down my materials to what I felt were the most essential. Five were chosen including charred wood, copper rods, cotton string, my blood and acrylic medium. The charred wood and cotton string represented the mind, our written history of spirituality and associated myths. The string was used to bind the copper rods to the charred sticks. Charred wood was used in our oldest recorded spiritual record known to human civilization, the cave paintings of Chauvet. My use of blood contains an obvious reference to the body and to unique personal experience. I had four vacutainers of blood drawn, producing twenty cc's of material. For public safety reasons, as directed by the university, acrylic medium was mixed with the blood. It stabilized the blood and prevented it from becoming airborne. The conductive copper rods, polished to a shine, were my connection with spirit. Their conductivity was important as I believe spirituality involves a consistent movement of energy. The reflective component was valued as I felt the spirit is the reflection of self: we as human beings are a reflection of the infinite spirit. My choice of materials can be understood by this simple equation: mind + body + spirit = unique human experience.

INSTALLATION

The installation is composed of four separate works. All elements of the larger installation were created within a studio space, on a smaller scale and then recreated in the gallery at a scale appropriate to my concept. Three of the pieces are on adjoining walls and one floor piece cuts diagonally through the center of the space.

Have I Come Full Circle?, *My Wandering Spirit*, *My Spirit of Inconsistency* and *My Pace of Resolution* comprise the exhibit **Slack and Tension: A Journey of the Spirit**. Three works placed on the walls were based on a circle with a 6 foot 2 inch diameter that corresponds to my physical height. I created a drawing tool using a section of 1/4 inch dowel rod and hammered a small gauge nail into one end. Then, I dipped the tip of the nail in the acrylic medium/blood mixture and applied a drop to the wall on the penciled outline, extending the material as far as it would go before having to apply another drop of pigment to the tool. I repeated this process over and over until the drawings were complete. Each circle or partial circle (as is the case in one of the works) relates to my assessment of the paths my spiritual journey had taken thus far. I found the process to be both meditative and soothing.

Have I Come Full Circle?

In the first piece, drop by drop I drew with the acrylic/blood mixture until I had created a full circle. Then I added charred wood slivers, two at a time, in a horizontal, overlapping pattern, starting from the widest proportion of the circle

(the diameter), and diminishing in length towards the top and bottom of the circle.. I staggered the seams between the paired wood slivers within the interior space of the circle, a technique found in masonry construction. I felt this method of construction was relevant as it provided visual stability to the form.



Fig 1 *Have I Come Full Circle?* 2013

From the center of the drawn circle, I inserted five lashed copper rods 47 inches in length, the proportion from my heel to my hip socket, until the construction met the floor. I secured the connection with a 10 inch sliver of split wood, covered in the blood and acrylic mixture, creating a tension that would not allow the rod to pull away from the wall.

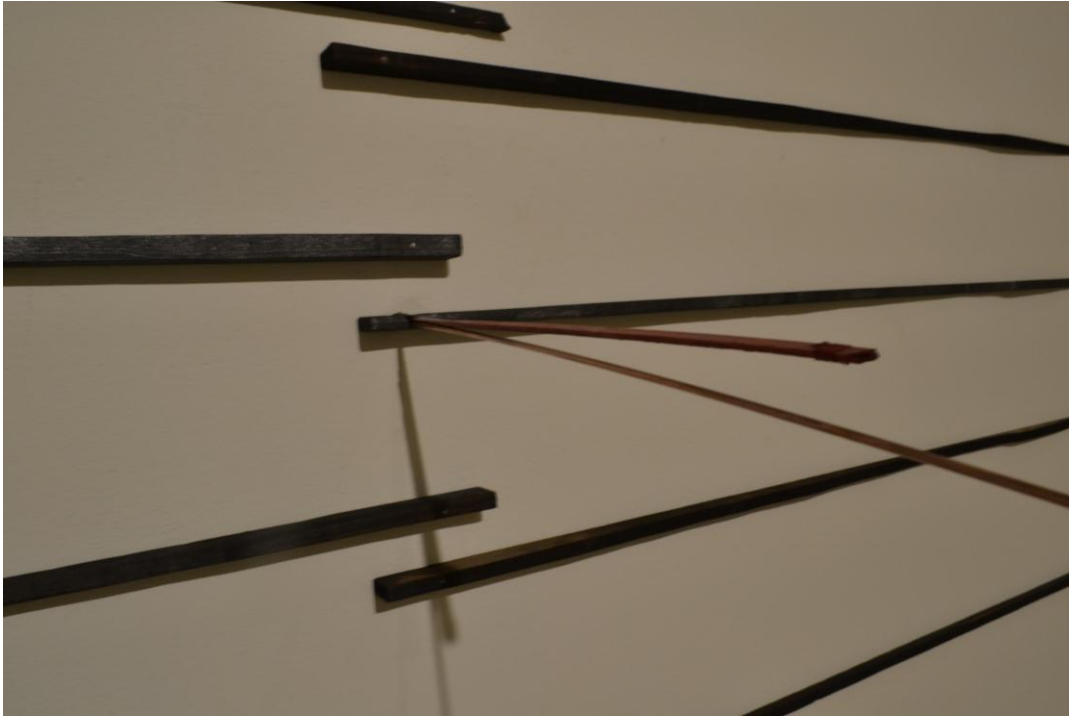


Fig 2 *Have I Come Full Circle?* (detail).

At this point I arranged the rods to suggest the gesture of a kneeling figure, and provided three points of contact to the floor for stability. At each point where a copper rod made contact with the floor, I rested it upon a small piece of charred wood, so that it would not make direct contact with the ground. The tension in the piece makes itself known at these points of contact. Slack is found within a continuous progression of the circle, as this form is in a state of completeness due to its lack of interruption. This individual work is meant to be viewed as a whole, a point of rest and contemplation, in which the spiritual journey is ever in progress. Drawing a connection between the wall and the floor initiates a connection between the body, spirit and practice, as the work's anthropomorphic form suggests someone praying to an altar.

My Wandering Spirit

The second work, based on a circle created in the same manner as the first, is a drawing based on the meander. I associate the form of the meander with my current spiritual journey. It is a process of wandering where experiences may overlap, drawing a memorable connection. The meandering line was unplanned in this work: I allowed the flow of the pencil to carry the line where it needed to go, making reference back to the original traced circle. Where the meandering line crossed itself, I drilled a hole and placed a copper rod in the wall, signifying a spiritual moment. This could also be understood as a moment of *deja vu*. I bound charred wood sticks to the ends of each copper rod, creating a visually flat plan, parallel to the wall. The rods were torqued and bent creating a physical tension I equated with the tension between the practice of spirituality and the written account of this practice, which often are in conflict with one another.

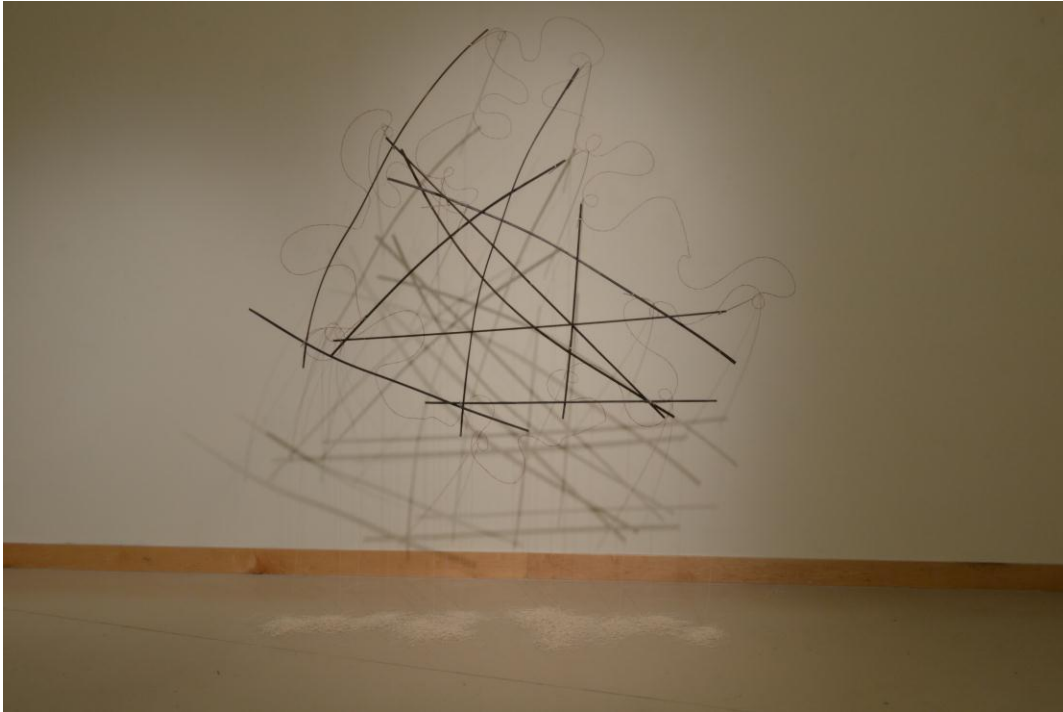


Fig 3 *My Wandering Spirit*. 2013

From each copper rod, I extended cotton string to the floor and piled it. When viewed, the vertical strings look as if they are all connected to the horizontal piles of string below, making it impossible to see where each vertical line ends. The journey of the body in the drawing on the wall becomes the journey of understanding once the moment has passed into memory (i.e., onto the floor in the piled string) and is never recalled honestly from the point of view of the original experience.



Fig 4 *My Wandering Spirit* (detail).

My Spirit of Inconsistency

The third and final wall piece integrates the linear dimension of the copper rods used in the previous works. I repeatedly placed a copper rod on the outer perimeter of the circle and traced one side of the rod. There was no planned number of lines or intersections in this work, but each of the resulting sections cross or overlap other sections. I intuitively placed marked lines until the need to place more ceased. My linear approach in this piece relates to my inconsistent, yet, intensely focused approach to spiritual practice. At points where the drawn lines intersected, I again drilled holes in the wall and placed copper rods, from which points I lashed charred wood sticks, binding the protruding ends of all the

copper rods together. Once drawn and lashed, I laid copper rods on the floor and stenciled their shapes using charcoal. Charcoal became a metaphor for the hazy record of knowledge within my spiritual practice; its use represents exaggerated moments of physical and emotional slack and tension.



Fig 5 *My Spirit of Inconsistency*. 2013

My Pace of Resolution

This work is meant to suggest a time of contemplation, categorization and meditation. Walking or pacing is a practice I typically find myself engaging in when mulling over or coming to terms with past experiences. This is where I typically find meaning in all that I have done or am currently doing to seek answers and understanding. In this piece, I paced until I was unable to keep my mind focused on the sound of charcoal being crushed under my feet. I chose this limit from the perspective of being in the moment. I wanted to work with silence, movement and the exchange of energy. Once the pacing was completed, I

formed the material in such a way as to reflect an organic flow to the paced upon charcoal. The work displays fluidity of movement, where there is no beginning or end, reminiscent of the fluidity displayed in *Have I Come Full Circle?*.



Fig 6 *My Pace of Resolution*. 2013

CONCLUSION

This body of work has been an account of spiritual and material exploration. I distilled my material choices to what I believed to be the most essential, materials which had connections to essential humanity. The use of blood, although it may not be recognizable to the uninformed viewer, was motivated by my desire to inject my humanity and the content of private experience into these works. The use of my blood offers a direct connection to the self, and represents a bodily sacrifice to my work and spiritual practice. This work is a manifestation of my spirit, brought about by a need to resolve personal tension in my life, seeking a place of solace. The work exhibits presence and silence. It is contemplative and formally aware. Through the spontaneity of its process of production, the work offers an authentic account of my artistic research into these themes.

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