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EDGE

ZIMO PAN

THESIS

MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN
METAL AND JEWELRY DESIGN

SCHOOL OF AMERICAN CRAFTS

COLLEGE OF IMAGING ARTS AND SCIENCES

July 26th 2017

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

In the society we live in today, the common saying of “living on the edge” mostly refers to someone who exposes themselves to physical, psychological, environmental or other kinds of dangers in their everyday life. As a result, the person can be under a lot of stress and their mental status sometimes suffers. This thesis, “Edge,” uses seven stages: desire, lost, struggle, noise, balance, life and death, and release, to describe the status when someone is suffering and under stress. This thesis project presents each stage and uses different materials and techniques to create a visual impact for viewers. The reason for using such a wide range of materials and techniques was to make a better connection between the audience and the art pieces allowing them to feel the same mental status as if they were living on the edge. I would like to share my thoughts about getting through suffering, which it is all up to how each person controls their mind and their way of thinking.

Proposal

Stress and depression are feelings that most everyone experiences at some point in their life. Most of us survive, although some do not. Many of us are living on an edge that we might fear falling off of, yet there is a good chance that we will live another day. I am using this moment of psychological dilemma as my thesis subject to think about the relationship between the larger society and individual human beings. What really pushes someone to the edge? What comes into someone's mind when their mind is on the edge? I want to present a different perspective on the psychological stress someone feels when they are living under such conditions, and make the audience start thinking and making connections between their own lives and the artwork. All of the pieces in this thesis project not only present the multiple stages of being "on the edge," but also show the process of suffering and struggling, even at the stage of the release of stress. The psychological feelings, the thought processes and the resolution of emotions are important experiences for everyone. Art is not only about telling and sharing stories, but also sometimes aims to make audiences feel positive about their own lives and this is one of my goals.

Discussion of Sources and Research

When I began researching this topic, the first thing that came to my mind was the Suffering Theory from Buddhism. Referred to as “Dukkha,” this concept is one of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths. In the Maryknoll Interreligious Dialogue Conference proceedings, it states that “according to that tradition, sorrow, pain and death are called Dukkha. It was the Buddha’s insight that all sentient beings are caught in this predicament.” Dukkha includes eight different categories of physical and mental suffering in life: birth, aging, illness, dying, association with the unbeloved, separation from the loved, not getting what is wanted, and five clinging-aggregates. Buddhism aims to provide a peaceful mental status to people who are experiencing such suffering. Our suffering comes from our own desires. As our desire increases, suffering becomes more painful. The way for a Buddhist to release those desires is meditation, which helps individuals to find a balance of both the mental and physical aspects of the body. “No Desire” is the main idea of getting away from suffering. The idea that people are living in such an environment of desire is the main reason for suffering. This Buddhist philosophy inspired me to think about the relationship of suffering and desire, and also the finding of balance through meditation.

From a psychological perspective, social pressure is the main cause that creates most suffering for people nowadays. Living in a society, we are surrounded by other people. The system of our society pushes us to work, to study, to be compared with each other. We needed to make decisions every day, even every hour. The strategies for choosing the right things to do, to avoid bad influences, are taught by the teachers and parents from birth. In “The Enduring Effects of Social Pressure: Tracking

Campaign Experiments Over a Series of Elections,” the author argues that “social pressure communications are designed to encourage adherence to social norms by reminding people of their obligation to abide by these norms and indicating that compliance will be monitored and perhaps disclosed to others.” Making decisions affects our psychological status, and creates social pressure that everyone is suffering from in this society. Social pressure also comes from our family, friends and even strangers. The possibility of studying about someone’s psychological status when being under social pressure from outside influences became of interest to me.

Since we all have problems that cause us to feel discomfort and stress, what should we do to avoid or solve these problems? An Irish movie, *On the Edge*, directed by John Carney in 2001, tells a story of a suicidal man living in a Dublin psychiatric hospital, which is full of people who have lost the will to live and want to commit suicide. The story is all about being under pressure and stress as well as living on the edge of life. It shows how and why people are on the edge and explores how they might be able to survive this life-or-death struggle. The protagonist in the movie is suffering after the death of his father and considers suicide to be the solution.

However, in the end, surviving becomes another option for him. The experience he has in the hospital becomes a valuable memory and lesson of self-discovery for him. This makes me think about losing yourself in suffering. The word “edge” describes this mental moment perfectly. We are living on the edge. We are suffering because of societal pressures. Should we stay on the edge or get off of it? These questions became the main questions that I asked myself all the time when I work on this thesis.

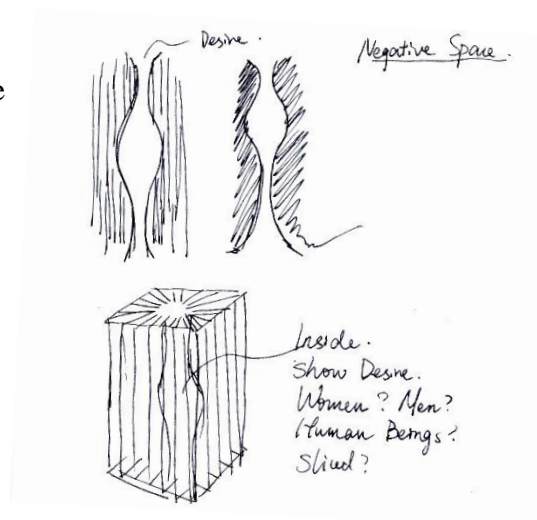
While this research helped me to define my thesis project, as I was exploring more and started to discover what I wanted to present and what would be the best way to present this concept, it became not just a simple topic, but also a journey to rethink my life and the society I live in and ultimately became a journey of self-discovery as well. I started to think about how to present this complicated concept. The idea of making stages for the complicated story seemed the best way to do it. I would like to separate the stories into seven stages, from the reason we end up on the edge to the end of what we feel about when we get released or get off of the edge. I wanted to present such a journey using sculpture and jewelry.

Critical Analysis

All the suffering and the stages of “on the edge” is just a process. I made seven art pieces to represent the seven different stages when people are under pressure and to express the feeling that they are having while being on the edge. Each piece used different materials and offers a unique way of demonstrating the stages. Some of them present the psychological moment, some are about the feeling of the status. I would like to use these forms to describe the feelings and things I see when I am under pressure, and use myself as example for audiences to make connections between their own situation and the artwork.

Desire

The first piece I decided to make is about one’s desire and is titled “Desire.” As I mentioned in the research section, desire is one of the most important reasons we are suffering all the time. I chose to use sexual desire as the main perspective to explore. I used a female reproductive organ to represent the concept of desire. In order for the audience to see the shape clearly, I used clear acrylic as the main material. I put the organ’s shape in a rectangular box and sliced it in the middle, to represent the idea that even if desire is sliced into pieces, one still cannot escape the negative feeling. It also expressed how one would try hard to compress and to pare down their desires in life, yet in the big picture nothing has changed.



When I started to craft the artwork, I first used CAD to create a computer model. I separated each piece into a two-dimensional file and used a laser cutter to cut the acrylic. I numbered each one for me to get the right position. I cut a base with a thicker material so that each slice could be free-standing. However, when I finished cutting and tried to assemble, standing became a problem. Because of the height of the piece, each slice had too small a space to stand. I tried several different approaches to solve the problem, such as adding a middle piece and gluing them on but ultimately, I decided to make a top piece to stabilize the top part as well as the



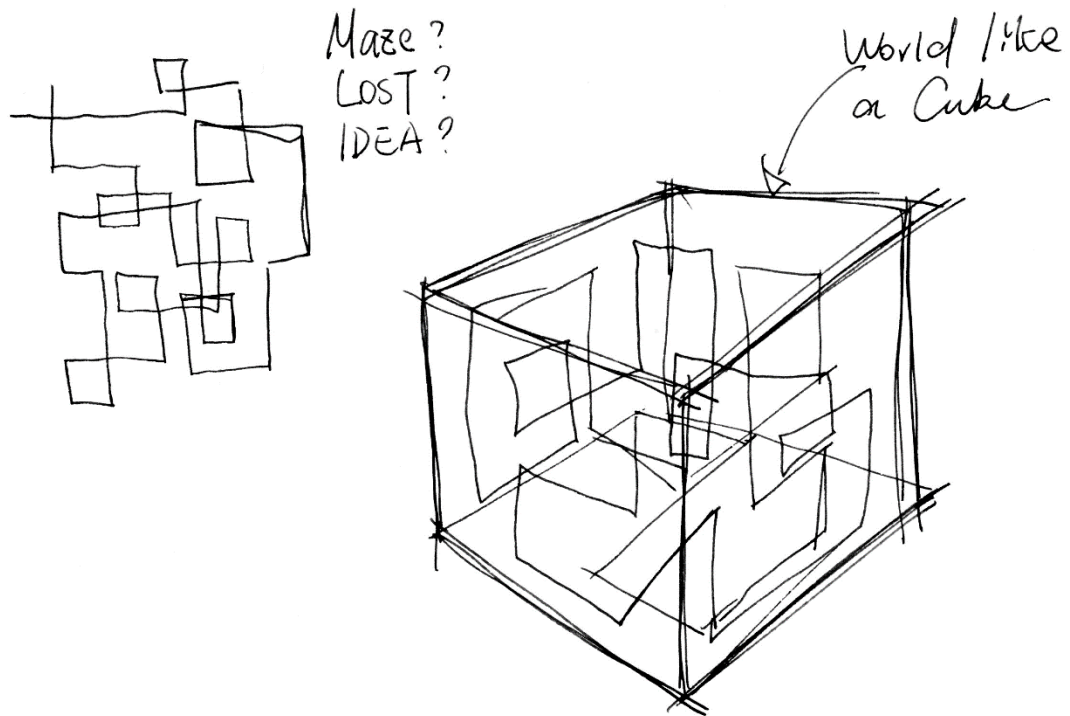
bottom part.

The piece looks beautiful under a direct spot light. Viewers can see the inside shape from all directions. It not only gives a feeling of torture and suffering, but also shows the beauty of desire.



Maze

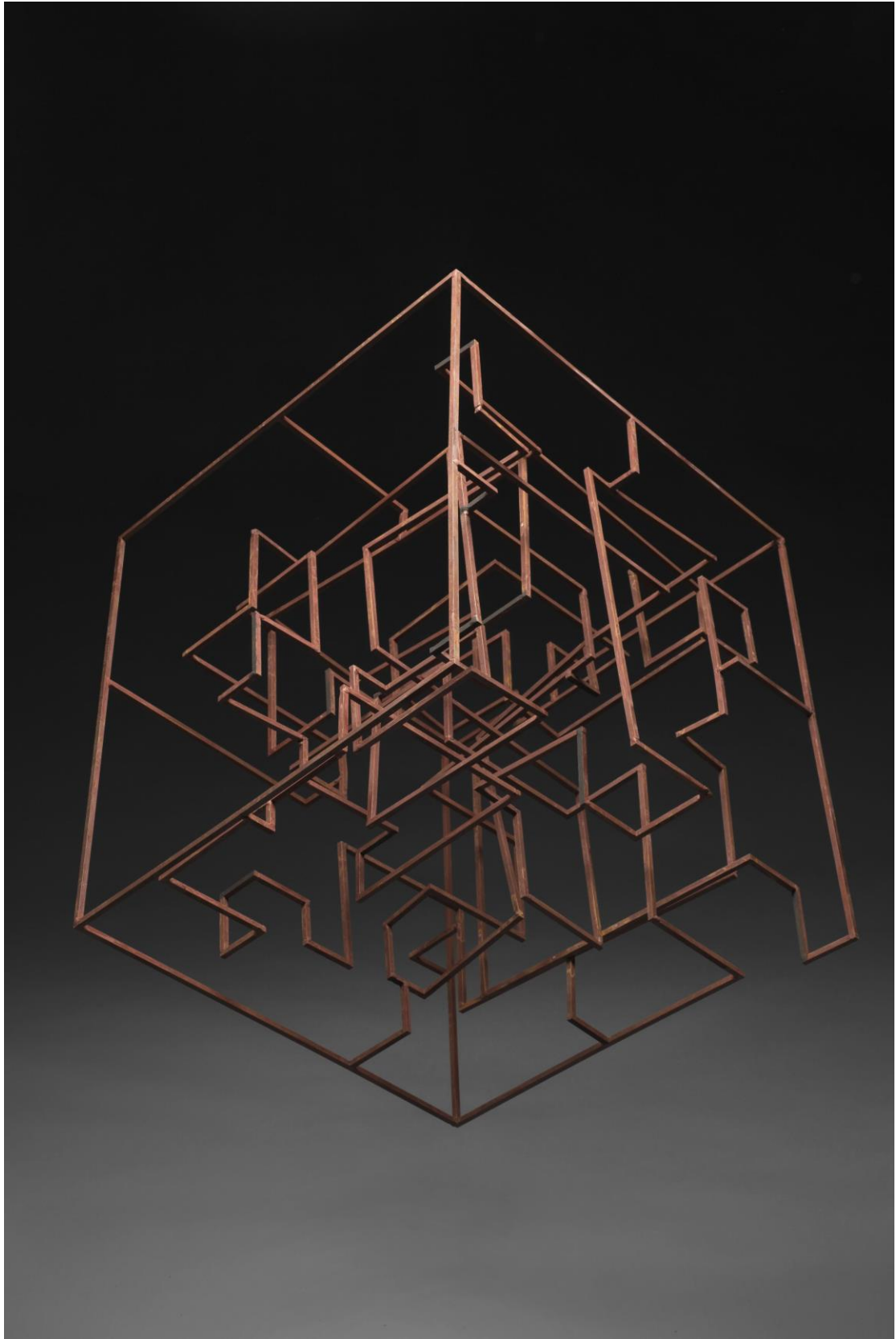
“Maze” is the piece that represents the moments we lose when we are making



choices and thinking about how to escape. People become lost in their own minds. We build walls and blocks for ourselves all the time. How to break the wall and get out of the maze is what we need to learn. Getting lost in the maze might make the suffering increasingly worse.

I used a square shape steel as the main material, since I wanted to show the strong and unbreakable feeling of a maze. The maze is like the mind loop, so I just followed my mind to create the shape. It was not designed and I did not pre-make the

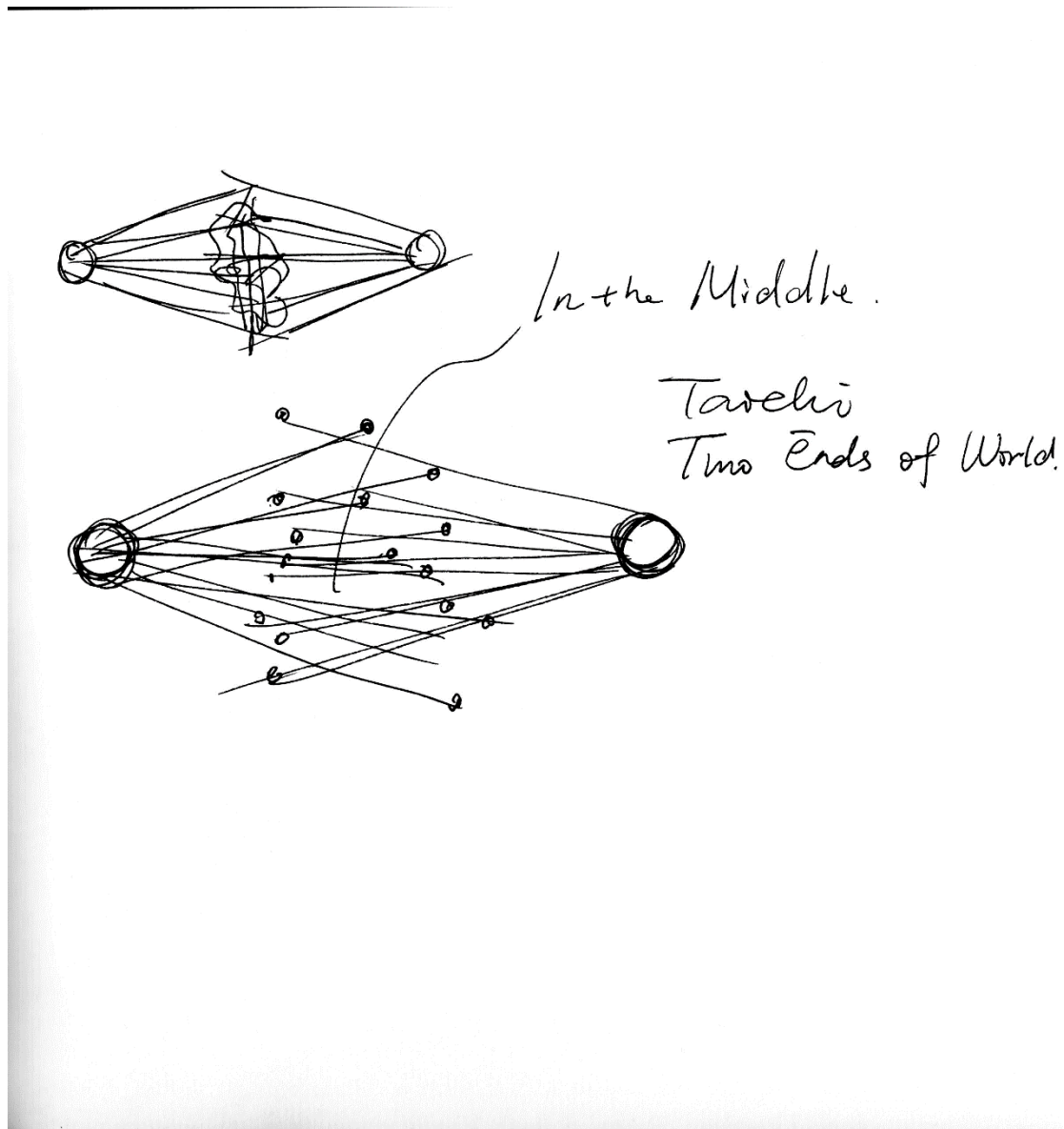
path. The path could be perpendicular to the other, or could be off sometimes. This is just like our life: something goes exactly where we want it to go, and at another time something does not. Each of the fragments is tig welded together with copper solder. I separated them into seven parts and assembled them in the end. After it became one unit, I cleaned up the edges with sanding paper. I put red patina on the surface that is the color of the earth's soil. Like the famous saying from Buddhism, finally life "Dust to dust, return to the earth." The maze is about 35 inches on each side and using clear strings to hang on the roof. The whole piece entices people to look inside and at the same time, to see themselves in it.





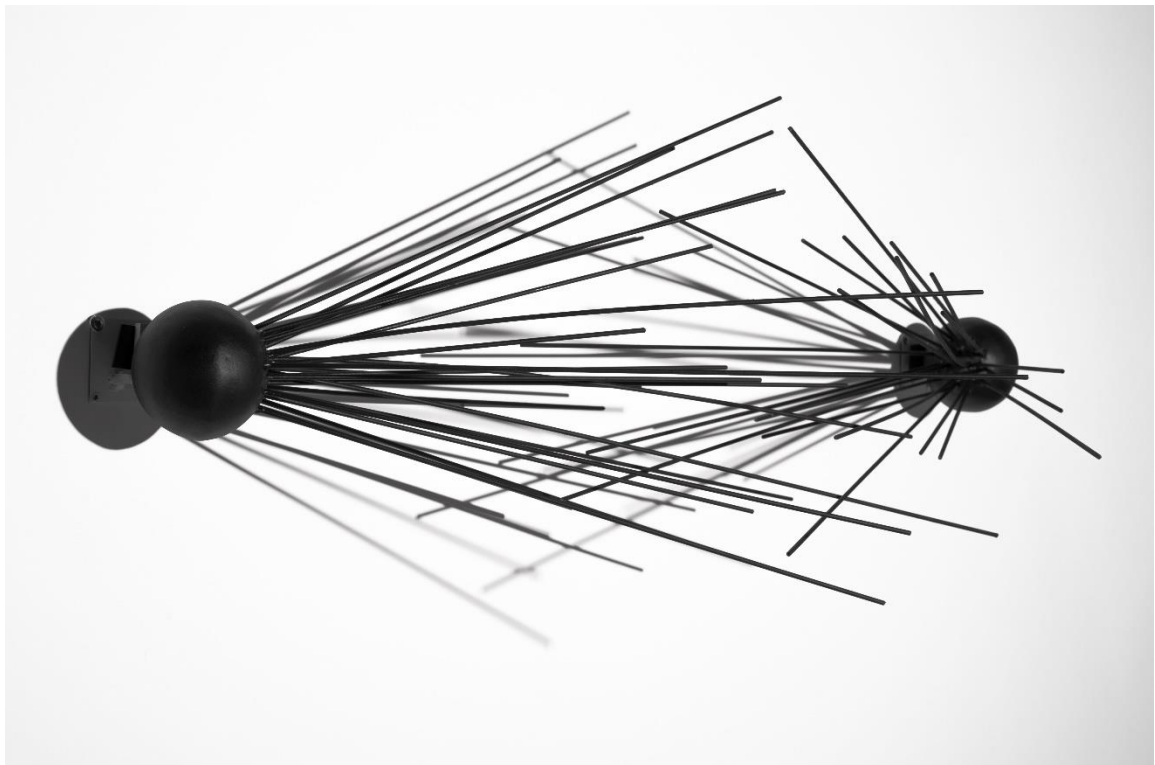
In the Middle

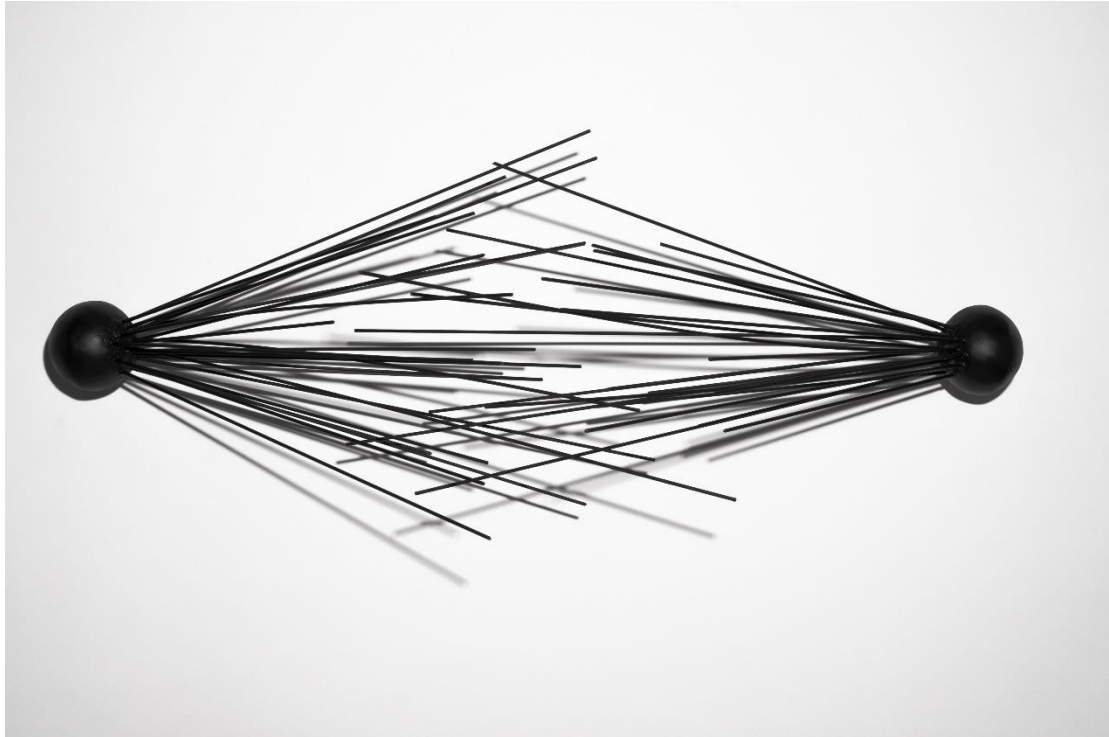
When we have a problem, dilemma or suffering, it's like we are pushed around by these thoughts in our mind. This piece, "In the Middle," describes the moment that all those thoughts are pushing you. The form represents the depressed mental status.



I used copper to make four half-dome shapes by using the raising technique. For me to drill all the holes properly, I drew the circles and lines in advance. I picked a drill bit that is just a little bit bigger than the rods that I was going to be using to fuse

in the hole. After drilling the holes, I used tig welding to fuse each rod into the hole. Then I fused the half domes together. The problem I had for this work was to make two pieces stay on the wall in the right position. I studied the mechanism of hanging and came up with the “ Γ ” shape mechanism to hold the piece on the wall. I first used copper as the material. However, copper is not strong enough for this piece, so I changed to steel instead.





“In the Middle” is a piece that displays the relationship of light and shadow and the depressed feeling of struggling.

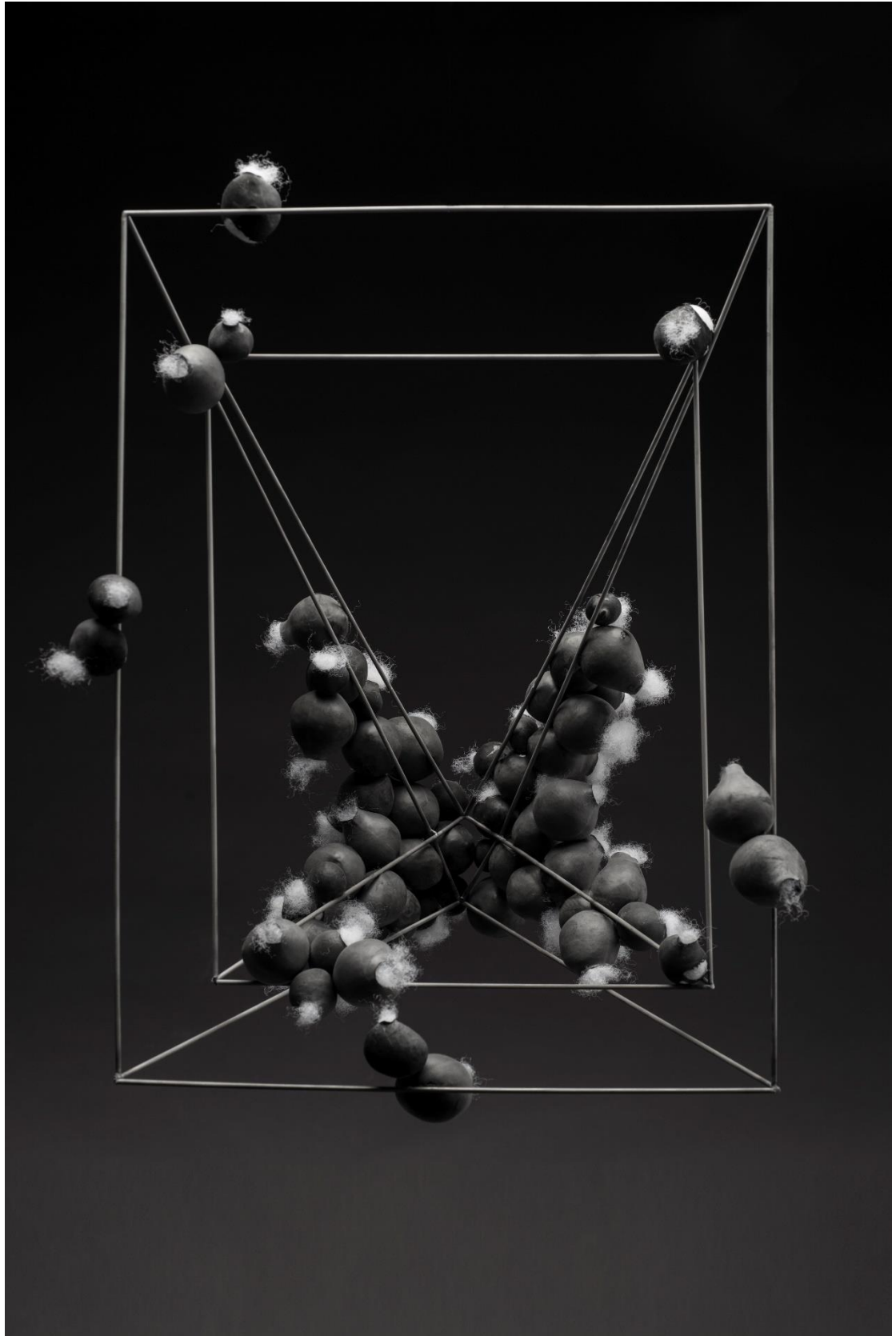
Noise

The thoughts in our head that disturb us just like noise in our head that can never stop. The necklace “Noise” is about that noise and the thoughts in our head that never disappear.

I had been thinking about the material for a long time. Which material and form would be the best to represent the noise? Finally, I decided to use the form of a stereo speaker, since noise is also a kind of sound and I wanted to express the feeling of the noise getting louder and louder in our head. I wanted to use a soft material to present this element rather than a hard metal one. After several trials, mylar became a very good option. I put poly-fil fiber into each balloon to make it round. I cut the opening

part to show the white fiber a little bit. I used thin steel rods as the frame. The problem I had was attaching the steel frame onto a human body as a neckpiece. I needed to make the frame as light as possible, and also strong enough to hold the balloons. I tig welded the frame with steel rods. I put the balloons, which are two different sizes, on the steel frame.

“Noise,” as a jewelry piece in the show, not only presents the concept as a stage of being on the edge, but also shows the status that noise is around our body all the time.

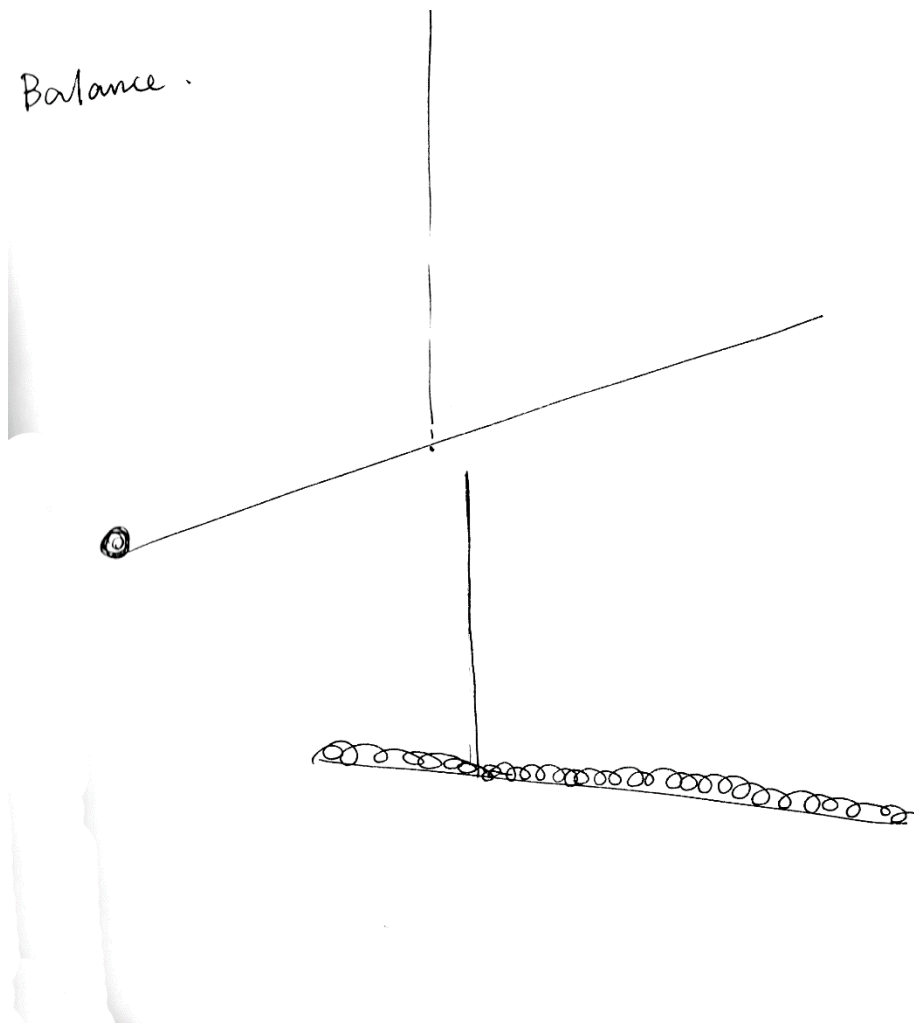




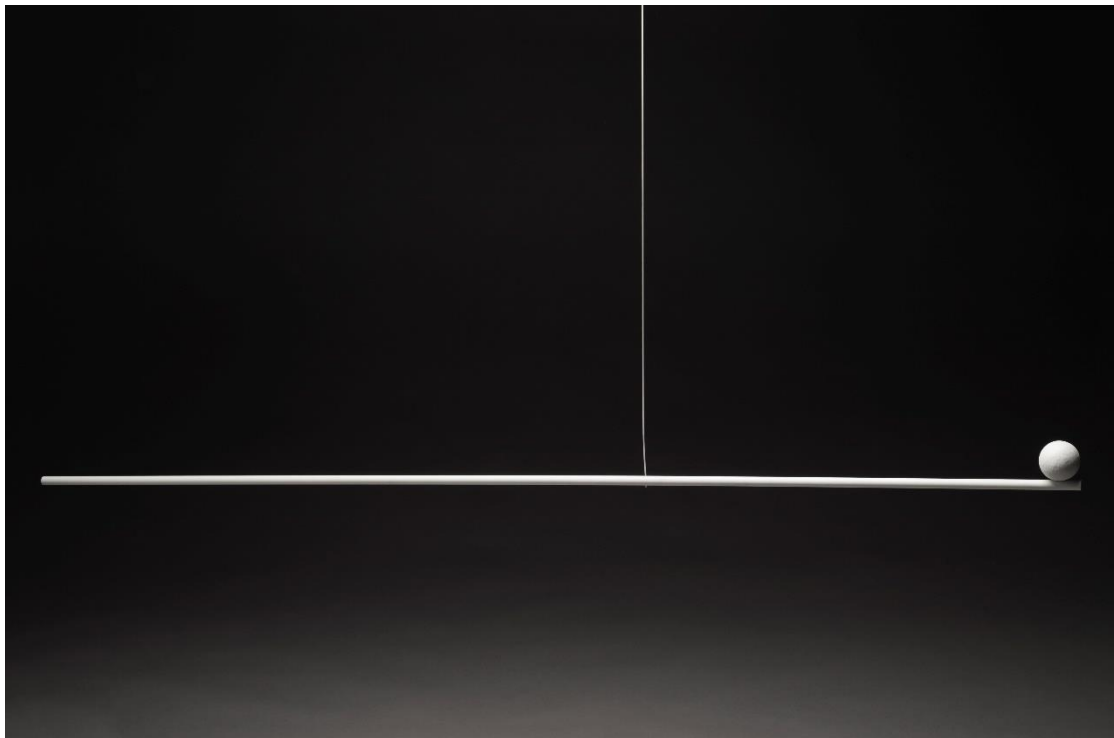
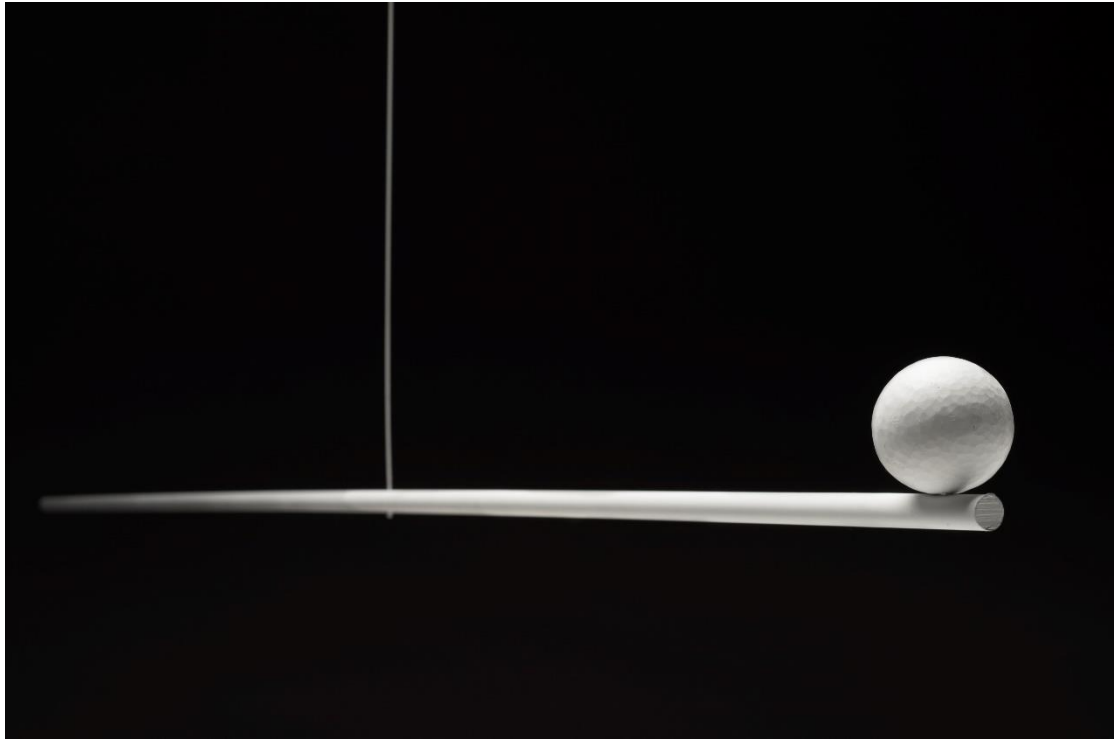
Falling

When we are at the edge, we might find a way out, or we just find the balance to control ourselves. "Falling" is a piece to express the beauty of balance and peacefulness.

The ball of the rod represents the suffering we have. When we can find the point to balance it, it will not fall. I used aluminum as the main material. The rod I used is 5 feet long. I made an aluminum ball with a hammer texture on the surface to present the rough feeling of suffering. I used a screw to connect the ball and rod. I then used a tap and die to make the die in the rod and ball to fit the screw, to connect these two parts. Finally, I used a welding rod to make the hanging hook.



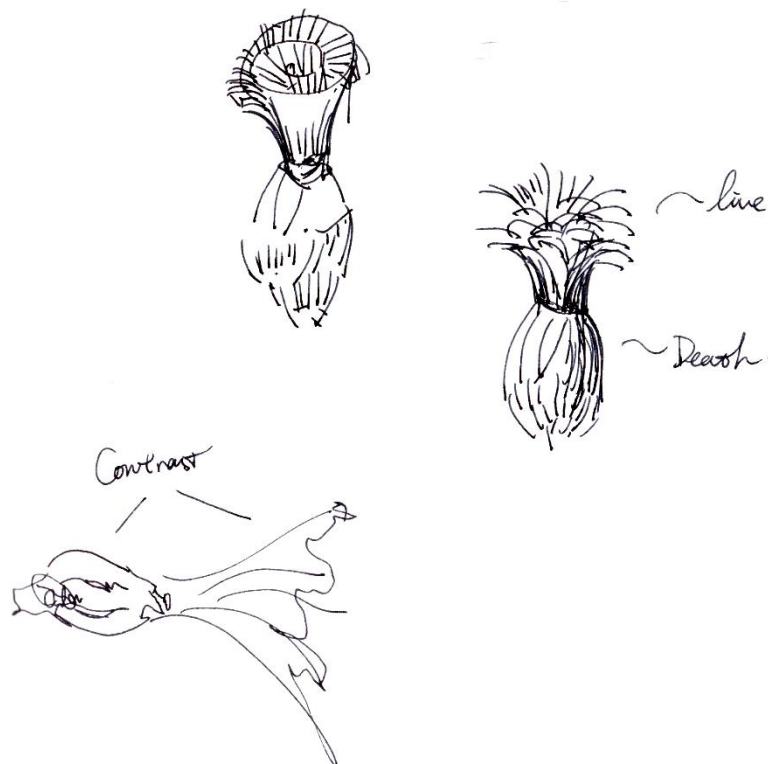
The piece “Falling” is a simple and clean piece. However, the meaning behind it is complicated and strong. How to find the balance of life is the thing we are learning every day.



Death and Life

When we find the balance, death and life are no longer problems for us. Being on the edge is not about a choice of death or living any more. Death and Life could be together as one element. That is the concept of this piece “Death and Life.”

I decided to use organic shapes to represent the organic subject, death and life. I used 50% fine silver and 50% sterling silver as the main materials. After I got the silver sheet, I cut it into a circle shape with an opening. Then I chased the pattern on the surface. I made two of these and rolled one into an open flower and one into a dead flower to present the concept of life and death. I soldered them together and put patina on the end of the dead flower, turning it black.



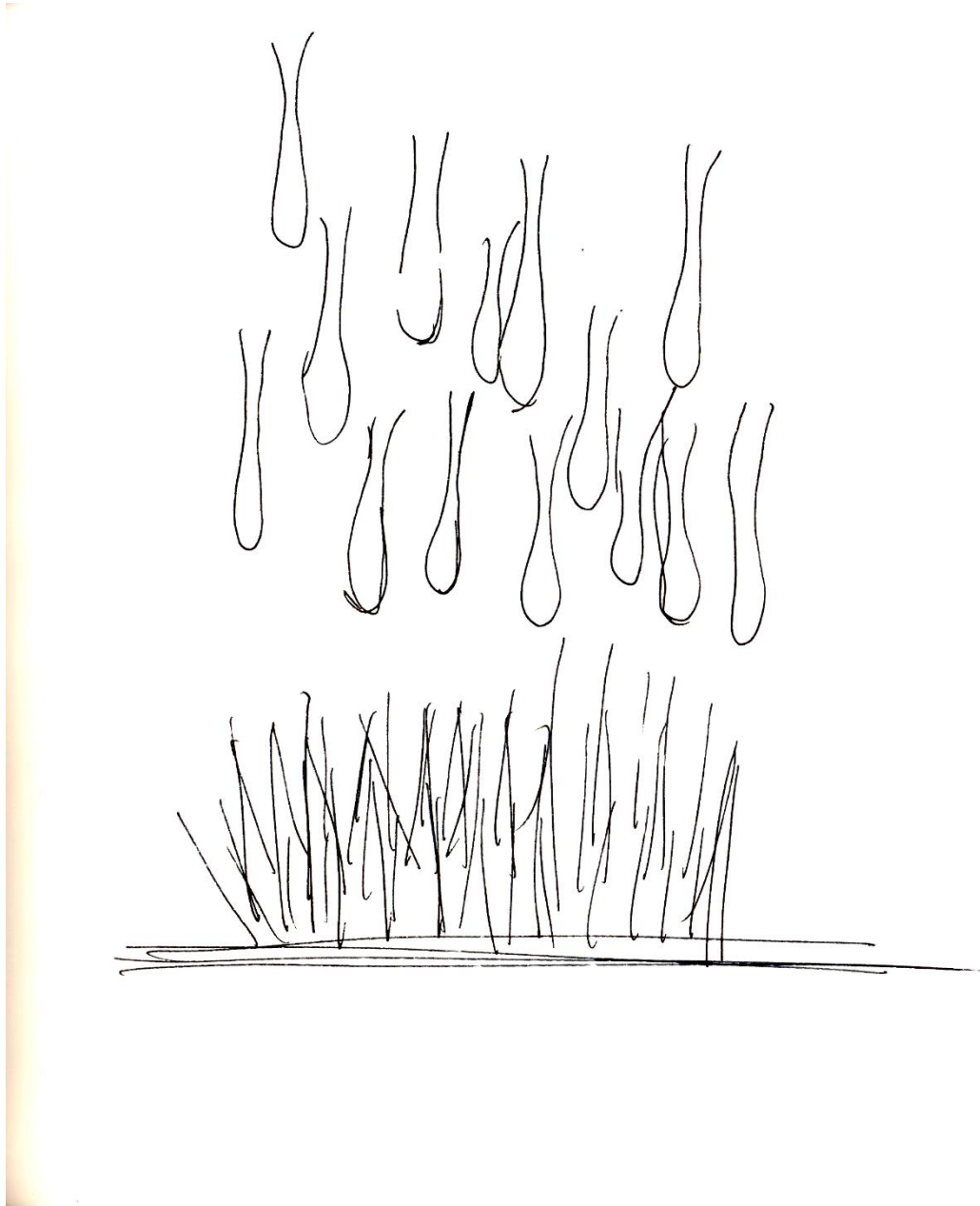
Death and life can exist together peacefully. On the edge is no longer a process of suffering for us at this stage. When the pain is no longer a pain, the solution is not important anymore.





Dancing

“Dancing” is a piece to celebrate the moment we get through the suffering of being on the edge. From pain to happiness is a process.



I used glass, a transparent material, to represent this bright and delightful moment. The top part is hot shop glass with silver caps. The bottom part came from the flame shop by hot sealing each “grass” needle on a frame. I put the bottom part on

a mirror, so the viewer can see the two parts together. The top part is hanging from a metal net.

This is the final stage of the edge, where problems are no longer a problem, but peace reigns instead.







Conclusion

On the edge is not just a moment in life, but a long period of struggling, exploring, problem solving and self-discovery. I used seven stages to present the concept of someone being on the edge. It started by showing that being on the edge is all about the struggling and suffering that one experiences. However, at the end of my artwork, it's about peacefulness and balance. I wanted to use this thesis to show people that no matter what kind of suffering they have now, at the end of the tunnel it will become an important memory that will help you to grow and become a better self.

The thesis process pushed me to my edge as well. I struggled from the beginning and enjoyed the peace at the end. It was a great opportunity to learn about arts and myself. All seven pieces used different materials and different techniques. The study of material gave me a chance to understand that the right material for the right piece is very important in art creation. Another point that I want to mention is that when I was thinking about the meaning of the word "collection," the only knowledge that I had was that collection is a set of artworks that shared and presented the same concept with similar forms. I wanted to try something new in this thesis and think outside of the box and change how the concept of collection existed in my way of thinking, and how pieces can look totally different from each other and still have a connection between each other. This connection to me is both the stages and the story of being on the edge.

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