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(Un)Tethered

by

Morgan Sychtysz

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Fine Art Studio

School of Art
The College of Art and Design

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Thesis Approval

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Abstract

(Un)Tethered is an exploration of my tendency to simultaneously build and deconstruct metaphorical structures throughout my life. This written thesis discusses visual metaphors implemented within the installation and prints, such as line and pattern, which represent my personal idiosyncrasies. These elements are realized as motifs such as step ladders, organic matter, and fibrous materials (crocheted, knotted, frayed, etc.) symbolizing my need for a thoroughly calculated life.

Fibrous materials are ideal for representing my obsessive tendencies as they are continuous and malleable. One strand of torn fabric can be wrapped countless times around the crocheted form beneath, symbolizing a compulsion with organization and order. Step ladders and natural elements such as trees and reeds symbolize literal structures both manmade and organic.

Each of these metaphorical elements come together to build the foundation for the whole piece, which is constructed through an abundance of preparation as well as intuitive happenings during the making. I place an emphasis on allowing the work to adapt throughout the process rather than having preconceived expectations, which contrasts with my usual tendencies towards excessive planning.

Through words I explore my concepts and intentions which evolved throughout the process of creating this series of visual artworks. Viewers and readers experience my attempts to break-free from foundations I myself have built, essentially un-tethering myself from my own impulses.

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Introduction

This thesis explores the strategies I have subconsciously implemented in order to deal with mental obstacles such as stress and anxiety brought on by environmental and psychological pressures. What began as my unobtrusive quirks and habits, have evolved into intentional actions I now take in my fiber sculptures and installation works to showcase my theme of obsession and the related impulse to occupy my hands.

While providing the viewer access to my obsession with maintaining a sense of structure, the fiber sculptures employ (and thus accentuate) traditional fiber crafts such as crocheting, weaving, and wrapping. Although these crafts have long been utilized to create functional items, my goal has been to increase the scale to explore the aesthetics inherent in the craft itself as a means of engaging the audience in my practice. Due to my natural pull towards both literal and figurative structural forms, I have replicated the laborious process involved with the formation of textiles and fiber arts. As an example: a seemingly unsophisticated filament of thread is created by combining many strands of material, which in turn, is compounded to create fabric. What once began as a product of a plant has gone through a series of transformations to become a crocheted form hung from the gallery ceiling. I continue to build on this evolutionary transition by obsessively working and reworking the structures in search of a happy medium between satisfying organization of elements and excessive obsession with control.

Section I. Context

We humans are creatures of habit; for thousands of years on this planet humans have evolved methods to more efficiently live their day to day lives. Growing up, many of our parents and caretakers established routines to keep us on track of our duties needed to nourish our bodies, succeed academically, exist as functional members of society, etc. Regardless of whether the habits taught by adults in a child's life are considered positive, they lay a foundation for how to function within their environment at a young age. This can lead to a need for a sense of control over various elements in our lives, even when this control is inessential. Additionally, excessive planning can lead to an increased amount of stress rather than alleviate the stress it was originally intended to combat. The goal is to find a happy medium in this process and determine just how much proactive planning and action will suffice, a determination that varies from person to person. The environment surrounding any one individual also plays an important role as people adapt to and build upon structures provided by their mentors, teachers, classmates, and so on, essentially creating a web of intermingling systems. Everyone is a strand in the binding network in which they exist.

The aforementioned equation to find a happy medium in life can be applied to the process of creating art. An artist begins with a collection of materials, past experiences, and a skill set that they in turn utilize to create an original work of art or series. This process is not often linear but deviates as the artist pursues the work, changing their approach to making based on new discoveries and understandings. Much of my previous studio practices bypassed this evolution process which subsequently resulted in stagnant works that failed to exemplify

the concepts I contemplated. For this reason, my aim for *(Un)Tethered* was to make spontaneous changes while working and allow myself to experiment throughout the process. I spent hours crocheting, undoing, and re-crocheting the forms until I felt they were complete. I then disrupted the structural forms by cutting the material or adding additional elements. I found this approach to be freeing, as it allowed me to generate innovative work and push back against my tendency to control every aspect of the process.

In this series, I placed an emphasis on allowing the artistic process to remain visible in the final product. When wrapping fabric around a crocheted form, I ensured that the underlying structure remained as visible as the additional materials. In this way, I related to artist Christopher Wool as he has been quoted saying “I want to retain a great deal of both the planning and the unexpected” (Holzwarth). In my practice, the “planning” aspect of the work was the crocheted form. I followed a pattern religiously, counting each stitch in every row to ensure precision in the structure. Once the form had been completed, I entered a stage of observation, allowing it to remain within my visual field as I went on with my other studio work. I took the time to ponder its evolution until I was certain of how I wanted to proceed. Oftentimes, this was a process of adding and subtracting materials simultaneously. The modifications were not thoroughly planned out; I allowed myself to react to what the piece called for, rather than maintaining a preconceived notion of the work.

While working, I considered metaphors for my materials. Each strand of fiber was a line, wrapped around three-dimensional forms created by the crocheted pattern. Strands draped from the form, creating a feeling of gravity pulling on the work, the very fibers which held it

together attempting to drag it down from where it hung. This metaphorical way of thinking allowed me to feel in control of the work, while maintaining the legitimacy and history of the crafts used in its creation.

The importance of line and pattern in my practices continued to grow during the creation of this series. Artist Paul Klee considered line one of the fundamental elements in art, choosing to devote his life to the exploration of it. As someone who requires meaning for every action they take in life, the versatility of the way Klee described line was compelling. In his *Creative Credo*, Klee explains that line is “charged with energy of various kinds” and goes on to literarily describe how lines are created-by taking them for various types of walks (Klee). These include leisurely and purposeful ventures which as described by Klee, create different types of marks on a page. Klee provided me with a model in which I was able to successfully give a line a function. In my work, line could build a structure, stabilize a form, add contrast to a plane, create movement across the page, etc. While the line is a useful compositional tool for many reasons, it is also an element which binds my ideations about structure and the work itself. Everything we do in life is influenced by the framework built by ourselves and those around us. Much of that framework can be broken down into basic elements such as line and pattern. As an example, during my childhood, my parents enforced routines such as planned times for meals, hygienic practices, and bedtimes. Since moving out and being influenced by my partner and other peers, I have adapted the groundwork laid by my family by changing my daily schedule to better fit my current lifestyle. While I no longer have an enforced bedtime, I strive to maintain a regular routine at night to continue to maintain control over my life. I consider

each of these influences from those around me and the subsequent action I take in response to them as strands in the development of my daily patterns.

Section II. Evolution

As I look back on my thesis proposal, I am struck by how vastly my goals have changed in terms of language and general outlook. I maintained the overall concepts, though I considered them in a new perspective. What began as a search to answer the question of why I feel the need to multitask and overachieve daily, evolved into an embrace of my tendencies to repeat actions of the art making process. Rather than attempting to define why I do the things I do and fight my urges to replace the repetitive way I work, I have come to perceive the importance of allowing my intuition to direct the work to where it needs to move next. I now spend the crucial time analyzing the work as it exists in the moment.

In the past I have been resistant to working intuitively. I believed that art was and must be an accurate representation of life, and anything less shows the artist's lack of skill in their craft. For this reason, I considered myself a painter and strove to recreate realistic depictions of objects and scenes I engaged with throughout my daily life. I have now come to see these works as static and strained. Figure 1 shows a piece created for a series of paintings of hands whose gestures I relate to feelings of anxiety and stress. I labored to exactly recreate the information in the reference photos in thin layers of oil paint on canvas and struggled when I failed to portray my ideas regarding the concepts behind the images.

I began to seek out new ways to utilize oil paint in a more purposeful and less constricting way. I sought out painters working in a more stylized and less realistic manner such as Liu Xiaodong. His work, *Grain Rain* from 2008, caught my attention as I was drawn to the artist's treatment of the soil beneath the animal. The broad, general strokes of color interested me as I felt I could implement similar techniques for the fibrous materials I was working with

due to the similar physical characteristics of soil and jute rope. In an interview for a contemporary Chinese art journal titled *Yishu*, Xiaodong explains his reasoning for allowing his paintings to evolve throughout the process:

“If everything about the painting were arranged in advance, it seems the painting already would have been finished at that moment” (Tzu-chin).

This way of thinking helped me to understand that a more intuitive approach allows for a somewhat planned-out composition to exist while placing an emphasis on spontaneity during the painting process. I implemented this method in my practices, which created more active compositions and better represented my attempts to break free from established foundations in the way I worked. Figure 3 exhibits a study in which I experimented with Xiaodong’s loose, general brushstrokes to illustrate a ball of rope. What I responded to most in this process was the viscosity of the paint and the prospects of future experimentation of a new application of paint.

Still somewhat dissatisfied with my attempts to represent my ideas two dimensionally in oil paint, I contemplated alternate media to do so. I had previous experience with various printmaking techniques, though I had yet to be drawn to a particular one in general. This is when I began to collage images and drawings together which allowed me to capitalize on certain aspects of each technique on one picture plane.

While developing these two-dimensional works, I simultaneously developed crocheted sculptures dealing with the same concepts (fig. 2). I began to feel more drawn to the tactility

which exists in the creation of fiber works. I felt as though the process of making these works better represented my ideations about breaking down and simultaneously building up certain structures in my life. With the fibrous materials, I was able to drastically change aspects of the work immediately, whereas in painting I felt constricted by the compositions and techniques with which I was working.

A major turning point for this body of work was when I began to combine my sculptural and two-dimensional works and studio practices. My attempts to do so opened my eyes to the opportunities of installation where two-dimensional and three-dimensional works are arranged in a way in which each enriches the other. This strategy of collage-building allowed me to utilize bits of fibrous materials as a bridge of connection between sculptural forms and flat works. The ropes used to hang *High-Strung* (fig. 5) created a link between the sculpture and the installation piece, *One Has Never Been Enough* (fig. 8), fibrous sculpture, prints on paper, and oil paintings on canvas are all interrelated.

Section III. The Body of Work

As a Whole

A monochromatic color scheme is used throughout the series as a way for the work to partially blend into the space it inhabits, mirroring how I perceive myself in my environment. Much of the time I prefer to fade into the background while in social situations which is yet another habit, I've created for myself. While the color of the work is subtle, the materiality contrasts this quality, attracts attention, and demands to be perceived by gallery goers.

The Sculpture

Tactile interaction with the materials was a crucial aspect of my work. My methods relied primarily on the interplay of my hands and the material, forcing me to address the relationship of the material itself and the structure it constructed.

High-Strung (fig. 5) underwent a series of transformations which I debated up until the final exhibition of the work. The work began as the result of the need I felt to busy my hands and interact with my material. I crocheted a form approximately six by two feet using cotton, marine rope until I ran out of material. Unhappy with the ratio and scale, I unraveled the form and began again, with new insight on the possibilities. Two more times I crocheted and unraveled the form until I was happy with a square shape which I then slumped into different heaps on the floor (figs. 6 and 7). These heaps represented the overlapping flaws I recognized in the work and the way I over-emphasize structure in my life.

I began toying with what the process of the work had begun to mean to me. I pondered why I felt inclined to unravel and re-crochet multiples times, only achieving slight differences with each. I recognized the parallels in this practice and my daily life as I often complete tasks multiple times before feeling satisfied with the results. Wanting the crocheted structure to remain most important to the work, I decided to hang the sculpture at eye level. This allowed me to confront the piece while considering the hours spent on its creation. I began to understand that, while I had exhibited my pull towards structural qualities, I had not allowed myself to react to these qualities and make changes related to the way in which I deal with aspects of my obsessive tendencies every day.

An artist I gained inspiration from during this stage was Sheila Pepe, specifically her large-scale installations of crocheted and knit yarn forms. Her work, *Put Me Down Gently*, was exhibited in a fiber art exhibition at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York. In an interview with Pepe, she describes the ability of this work to morph into different configurations due to its fibrous material qualities, in response to the space and architecture which surrounds it (Interview). This statement opened me up to the possibilities of working with suspended fibrous materials as a means of representing the constant state of flux which exists within my relationship to structure. Taking inspiration from Pepe's work, I began tying strands of shredded fabric onto the sculpture which further accentuated my ideas about overworking and engaged the space in a more active way. The addition of these torn strands created another connection between sculpture, and the installation, *One Has Never Been Enough* (fig. 8).

The Installation

While I continued to be attracted to aesthetics of two-dimensional works, I questioned its ability to illustrate the complex ideologies with which I was dealing. I began to research ways in which I could adapt the paintings and prints to hold important roles to be included in the final body of work. In a published statement on his creative process, Lucian Freud wrote that “the painter must be as concerned with the air surrounding his subject as with that subject itself” (Freud). This led me to consider the role of both my subjects and their environments, both on and beyond the surface of the canvas. I sought out ways to expand beyond the limits of the picture plane through the creation of installation art.

From the beginning, the horizontal crocheted form in *One Has Never Been Enough* (fig. 8) had been projected to be hung on a wall independent from any other work or visual element. Like the evolution of *High-Strung* (fig. 5), this form too, experienced a stage of deconstruction and restoration. It was through this transformation that I recognized the benefit of including sections of discarded materials when presenting the work in its final form. To me, these elements revealed the process of the creation of the work whereas, without their presence, this may have been lost on the viewer.

The chosen material of recycled bed sheets for this sculpture suggests feelings of intimacy as it is arguably one of the fabrics most closely related to intimacy, one which evokes safety and privacy. The natural ropes contrast this feeling with their coarse textures and earthy color and impede on the safety of the space which is suggested by the torn bed sheets. This juxtaposition succeeded in actively constructing more restrictions on the sense of comfort I’d constructed.

Challenging the traditional eye-level placement in a gallery, the two oil paintings in this installation were hung in an unconventional manner. *Rope Study* (fig. 3) hung high above the height of the viewer and *Untitled* (fig. 4) hung around waist level. Surrounding and overlapping these works were crocheted and knotted forms which aimed to engage the entire wall on which the work was exhibited and urged the viewer to consider the space around the subjects as well.

Including balls of unused fibrous materials allowed the viewer to experience the material in its raw, untouched form. I warranted viewers the ability to see the original state of the fibers prior to the strict patterns forced upon them by my hand, leaving me feel exposed and vulnerable. People were able to witness my practices in their most elemental form, without seeing the manipulation of my hands. The strands of these materials traveled through the crocheted forms, directing the viewer's eyes throughout the installation.

The Prints

My approach to printmaking for this series was to produce a variety of visual forms using screen printing, photographic transfers, mono printing, hand-painting, and relief printing, which related to the concepts with which I was dealing. These pieces were, in turn, used to create collaged compositions which illustrated my sentiments towards metaphorical structures. This approach allowed me to first plan out the visual elements to be present in the final works, while allowing me to adapt to the piece throughout the process. The three 22"x30" prints were developed simultaneously, borrowing elements from one to implement in the next, creating a cohesive collection of images, composition, and color palette (figs. 9, 10, 11). This approach to

developing the work was possible due to the physical attributes of the printmaking processes I merged within these works.

A central motif I depicted in these prints was the fibrous materials that I worked with in the development of the three-dimensional pieces. Balls of fiber and crocheted rope structures appeared in the work as my obsession with their aesthetic persisted and laid the foundation for this series. The step ladder represented a symbol of literal structure in which they are used by workers to construct the foundations I find myself surrounded by. The sculpture itself was hung using a step ladder. Natural elements such as trees and reeds reference my roots as someone deeply connected with the environment and symbolize the organism's ability to develop a series of structures on which to thrive.

Conclusion

Through this thesis examination, I have embodied my tendencies to create structure through visual works including sculpture, prints, and installation. Research and hands-on experimentation with a variety of fibrous and textile materials led me to develop a series of works in which I contemplated multiple configurations for the final exhibition. This intuitive approach to art making and display forced me to combat my previous way of working with a predetermined product in mind. I will continue to grapple with my obsession with both literal (ladders) and metaphorical (crocheted fibers) structural forms and search for new ways to both break down these idiosyncrasies as well as build new frameworks in their place. Line and pattern remain metaphors for the foundations I construct to get me through my daily life. My need to constantly occupy my hands is ever-present as I draw this chapter of the work to a close and I will persist in creating visual representations of how I deal with mental obstacles brought on by environmental and psychological pressures.

Illustrations

Figure 1. *Hands I*, oil on canvas, 16"x20", 2021



Figure 2. *Untitled (Yarn Form)*, yarn, 8"x20", 2021



Figure 3. *Rope Study*, oil on board, 8" x 10", 2021



Figure 4. *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 18"x22", 2021



Figure 5. *High-Strung*, recycled fabrics and rope, dimensions vary, 2022



Figure 6. *Heap (View 1)*, cotton rope, dimensions vary, 2022



Figure 7. *Heap (View 2)*, cotton rope, dimensions vary, 2022



Figure 8. *One Has Never Been Enough*, mixed media installation, dimensions vary, 2022



Figure 9. *Untitled I*, monoprint, 18" x 24", 2022



Figure 10. *Untitled II*, monoprint, 18" x 24", 2022



Figure 11. *Untitled III*, monoprint, 18" x 24", 2022



Figure 12. *(Un) Tethered*, Exhibition View, 2022



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