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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Art and Design

School of Art

In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Fine Arts Studio

*Reconstruct*

by

Jenna Deal

Date: 2024

Written under the direction of  
Elizabeth Kronfield, Chief Advisor  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores how construction materials can be used in sculpture, pushing artistic boundaries and challenging traditional perceptions. It examines the potential of materials like mortar, PVC, HVAC duct, carpet, and asphalt roofing, aiming to redefine the relationship between labor, materials, and artistic expression. By breaking free from construction norms and engaging with materials in unexpected ways, the study aims to foster a deeper understanding of the value and creative possibilities inherent in the materials of our built environment.

## Introduction

The first seven years of my life were average. I grew up in rural Pennsylvania with a cookie-cutter middle-class family. My mother was a middle school guidance counselor, my father was the high school physics teacher, and my 9-year-old brother Tyler was my best friend. I remember loving summer because my whole family got to be together since my parents had the summer months off. The summers held space for a new rental property business to take off, as well as numerous side projects to update our home. My parents purchased, fixed up, and maintained multiple rental properties. They taught me the value of hard work and taking pride in construction skills and workmanship. I fondly remember family trips to local hardware stores, which for me was like going to the candy store. Walking through the seemingly sky-scraper tall aisles of Home Depot, I remember wondering what different materials were for. When I didn't know, making up a purpose for those items became an entertaining activity.

My childhood home was a typical 1970s build with strong bones, a ton of wood paneling, an assortment of wall coverings, carpet colors, and textures. Throughout my entire life, our family worked together on updating and renovating both the interior and exterior of the home, making it our own. One extremely formative home renovation project revolved around the spare bedroom in 2007. This room became the catalyst for my desire to create, by fueling endless opportunities and possibilities. This room became Andrew's.

When Andrew was 15 years old my parents brought him in as a foster child. He was 8 years older than me. My mom met Andrew at work; she was his guidance counselor. As the dedicated and committed counselor my mother was, she knew she could help and provide for this child. Out of love, she took a risk and invited him into our home. From that day on, I had two

older brothers; my family went from four to five, and it significantly impacted all of our individual lives. My journey into empathy commenced with this drastic shift early in life, marked by the arrival of my older brother, whose experiences and circumstances of childhood were drastically different than mine. It was through this experience that I quickly learned the profound meaning of true empathy—the ability to absorb the pain of others or care with all of your being. In these transformative moments, the adoption of Andrew coupled with the blooming family business, played a pivotal role in teaching me the value of compassion, hard work, patience, care, and love.

As kids, we always had a specific bedtime routine. First, it was a bed snack, which was usually a scoop of ice cream. Then, we would all sit down to watch an episode of HGTV. We talked over almost the entire show, every night. Dad would say, “That is not how you do that” or “I could do that better.” Mom would be disgusted by the color wallpaper that the interior designer chose, and I would agree. Tyler and Andrew typically had little commentary, but when they did speak up it was because they *really* had an opinion. After the episode was over, we would moan and complain about having to go to bed. We would walk up the stairs as slowly as possible until Dad chased us saying, “Fee-fi-fo-fum.” All 3 of us kids would brush our teeth around one sink, bumping elbows. I loved watching HGTV as a kid because, unlike most DIY-ers, the Deal family really could build anything—and that is so cool.

### **Context**

In response to the economic recession that happened in the 1980s, stock market earnings were suffering and home foreclosures climbed. This was the birth of modern-day house flipping in America. As turnkey homes were built throughout the 80s and 90s, the thought of renovating

older homes became more popular. We have Bob Vila from the TV Show, “This Old House,” to thank for encouraging homeowners to tackle their home renovations. Lowe’s and Home Depot became locations for DIY-ers to buy any supplies necessary for home improvement (Watson). These stores empowered the average American homeowner to become avid DIY-ers. According to Home Depot, the heart of their company is “expertly trained floor associates who could teach customers how to handle a power tool, change a fill valve, or lay a tile” (The Home). Associates were able to sell, tell, and show how to do something to any person who walked through the door. Both Lowe’s and Home Depot are retail entities that Americans are familiar with and likely have shopped at. These stores allow people to engage with and understand materials, for their implications and practicality.

Rooted in a foundation of construction, and a weekly trip to a local hardware store, I bring forth a profound understanding of building-material properties and their applications, qualities that now empower me to push the boundaries of sculptural artistic expression in unconventional ways. Within these sculptural forms, each curve, texture, and juxtaposition explores materiality and what they conceptually denote. Process, routine, and repetition are at the forefront of this body of work, all of which fall under the umbrella of obsession. In these sculptural forms, I explore materiality through each curve and texture while concurrently evaluating the associations within the materials.

Each material, whether it be the softness of carpet, the resilience of mortar, or the strength of PVC, embodies a unique quality that resonates with the emotional nuances of human experience. By carefully selecting and acknowledging or manipulating these materials, I seek to convey not only their physical properties but also the empathetic connection between the artwork and its beholder/viewer. It is through this intentional use of materials that my sculptures become



vessels for the shared human experience, inviting viewers to connect with the tangible and intangible aspects of empathy, while also understanding family dynamics as a labor of love.

I embrace the opportunity to bring a fresh perspective to construction materials, molding and reshaping them with a sense of what and how labor is represented through value. Mass, weight, and physicality are not merely a consideration in the work but a visceral engagement with the materials themselves. Working on a large scale amplifies this physicality, demanding a nuanced understanding of balance, support, and structural integrity. It's a process that requires not only conceptual finesse but also a robust physicality in execution. Wrestling with the materials becomes a performative act, a relationship with gravity and resistance, as I shape, mold, and coax the sculptures into existence. This wrestling match with mass and weight is not a struggle to be overcome; rather, it is an integral part of my artistic process. The physicality of my work is a testament to the tangible reality of creation, where the weight of materials and the scale of sculptures contribute to the value of the work, infusing each piece with a palpable sense of presence, labor, and effort.

### **Body of Work**

Some works are handled with restraint, fulfilling their formal, visual, and conceptual purposes with minimal intervention. Focusing on material qualities and potential, these sculptures give us room to explore our relationship with the familiar. Conversely, other works in this group are excruciatingly handled. This means that the utility of the material is painstakingly reconstructed in service of exploration, inviting viewers to delve into the conversations formed between reconstruction, deconstruction, and expressive possibilities and value inherent in each material. In *Work, Documents of Contemporary Art*, Friederike Sigler discusses how work has

been defined since the economic shift that happened in the 1970s. In the Introduction of the book, Sigler says, “Since the shift from the industrial sector to the service sector that has taken place mainly in Western industrialized countries, work is primarily about turning in the perfect performance” (Sigler 14). This work attempts to redefine and recontextualize what a “perfect performance” is regarding the value of work and labor. A perfect performance in construction comes from practice and repetition of tasks. A performance within my artmaking is valued by effort, labor, craft, and concept, all which must collaborate to make this idea of “perfect.”

### *a. Carpet Bricks*



Figure 1a (detail)

Throughout history, carpet has been recognized for its various attributes, such as versatility, durability, affordability, comfort, and intricate patterning (History). In the context of college rental properties, where practicality often takes precedence, the carpet becomes a logical choice for bedrooms, living rooms, and stairs. The carpet acts like a tarp in these settings, where it is constantly ripped up and replaced.

In this sculptural exploration (Figure 1), I repurpose various carpet patterns and styles to construct building blocks. The carpet was sourced from our lifelong family supplier, who was downsizing their carpet sample options. Each piece of

carpet is meticulously sliced and ripped, recalling the shared moments of laughter and complaints from working alongside my brothers as we tore out carpets, leaving brush burns on our knees. The meticulous process of creating these carpet bricks, placed within a mold and bound with mortar, reflects the redundant yet mindful nature of familial labor. The resulting sculptural installation transforms a domestic material into a familiar structural household element, offering viewers a passage through textured landscapes of personal recollections of their relationship to carpet, mortar, and bricks.

Mortar and concrete hold a sentimental place in my heart, symbolizing the bonds formed with my family during shared construction endeavors. Memories of watching my dad create a concrete patio, marked with our handprints and the year '05, resonates as one of many foundational experiences. Collaborating with my family on various sidewalk projects and concrete block foundations has fueled my curiosity about the material's possibilities. This sculptural exploration is not just a physical manifestation but a homage to the resilience and versatility inherent in the material. Beyond the conventional applications lies a medium that expresses familial connections and personal growth. The weight of over a ton of mortar becomes a metaphorical anchor, grounding the sculptures with the enduring presence of familial bonds. In *Materiality*, Sculptor Jimmie Durham writes an article titled, "Between the Furniture and the Building (Between a Rock and a Hard Place 1998)." Durham says, "Some materials, innocent in themselves, have been overly scripted; given roles that are too dense. Stone suffers from architectural weight, the weight of a metaphor and the weight of history" (*Materiality* 158). I relate the notion of the architectural weight of stone to that of mortar in this piece. The work delves into the capabilities of mortar, not only exploring the strenuous physicality of hand-mixing over 50 bags of material but also questioning the literal weight of these materials within

the sculpture. By integrating concrete and mortar in unexpected ways, this exploration becomes a testament to the malleability of both material and memory, forging a visual narrative that transcends the physicality embedded in the very core of the work. Each brick is unique and individual, like that of human nature.

The act of cutting carpet, strip by strip, over and over, becomes a repetitive process that I crave. The physicality of the process proves to be important in my practice. In this piece (Fig. 1), the pattern and softness of the carpet become embedded within strong, hard mortar to create units to build a new structure. Over 400 bricks, requiring over 2400 hand-cut pieces of carpet and 1.5 tons of hand-mixed mortar, is a physical manifestation of my labor of love, where work and labor equate excellence.

### *b. Roll Roofing*



*Figure 2*

Asphalt roofing, typically perched atop homes, assumes a new identity within this thesis (Figure 2). Rooted in the practical wisdom gained from numerous roof repairs, where the persistent challenge of leaks echoed the inherent imperfections of traditional roofing, asphalt shingles take center stage. Learning that the seemingly rigid roofs could, in fact, leak despite continuous repairs, I dissect the material's nature. When purchasing this material at Home Depot, it comes in a

roll, like that of fabric, or linoleum flooring. I respond to the juxtaposition of the soft malleability of fabric coupled with what is a rigid protectant roof material. Shingles reveal a dual nature—reliable when intact, problematic when flawed. The roll of asphalt, initially fluid-like fabric during installation, prompts an exploration of its capabilities. By purposefully cutting holes into it, I examine how its structural integrity holds up under deliberate damage. Breaking away from the conventional use of shingles, this work boldly challenges expectations, featuring deliberately patterned holes that deviate from the intended solidity and reference tile flooring patterns. It's not just about relocation; it's a pragmatic subversion of roofing norms, acknowledging the material's flaws and pushing its boundaries. The ground transforms into a mosaic, and the walls, adorned with unconventional voids, narrate a story of purposeful transformation. Placing roofing material in unconventional spaces disrupts the anticipated relationship between the roof and the ground. The installation encourages viewers to reconsider designated material spaces, offering a fresh perspective on the intersection of form and function while questioning spatial hierarchies. Both Rachel Whiteread and Anthony Caro have also embraced the political and emotional connection of those spaces to everyday lives (pg 117). In *“Art and The Home: Comfort, Alienation, and the Everyday,”* Art Historian, Imogen Racz, discusses how Caro and Whiteread’s sculptural works “force the viewer to be aware of his or her body within surrounding spaces and to move accordingly, triggering related feelings about his or her relationship with the built world” (Racz 118). The placement of this rolled roofing within space requires the viewer to be face-to-face with the installation and question their significance to the scale and placement of the work.

Marie Hermann is a ceramic artist whose approach to display heavily inspires my choices throughout this show, whether pedestal, shelf, or neither. Hermann creates a dialogue between seemingly generic forms, though they are slightly altered or abstracted. These objects become

separate from any utility; “They become a series of poetic notes suggesting our deep affinity with domestic objects” (Thackara). Construction materials are domestic to most Americans.

In *Fragments Shored Against the Ruins*, by artist Nika Neelova, she talks about how the transformation of a rigid surface into something fluid, like that of animal hide is compelling for her artistic practice (Neave). In the piece, you can see how Neelova references parkour flooring from her past, and “uncovers a thread of continuity between the natural and architectural world. Gravity forms the shape of the sculpture and it fully obeys the natural laws so the materials are not forced into doing something” (Neave). This resonates heavily when I think about the construction of my sculpture and the display. Letting the material naturally respond to my deliberate intervention of cutting away a pattern is very important.

### c. TREX

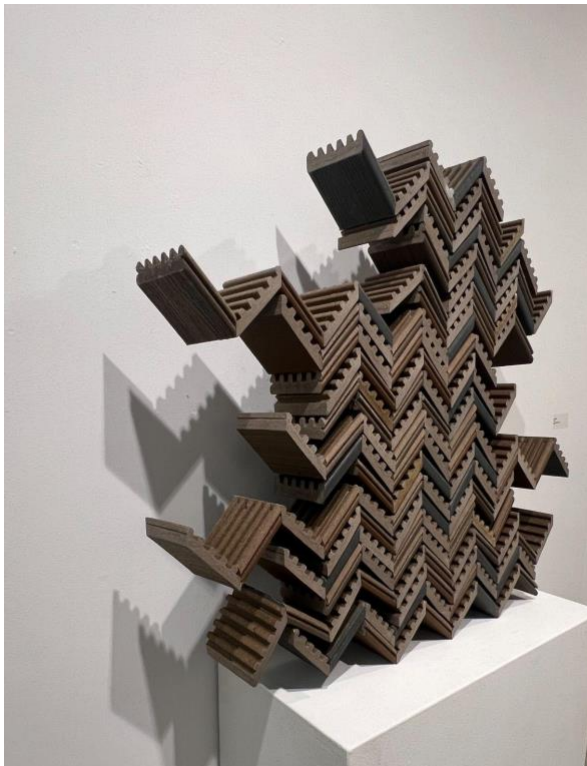


Figure 3a (detail)

TREX, a composite decking material introduced in 1996, blends innovation with sustainability, comprising 95% recycled materials, including sawdust and plastic (Trex). During a hands-on experience this past summer, constructing a deck with TREX provided valuable insights into its material properties. Notably, the composite proved to be as durable as it is rigid, exhibiting imperfections akin to traditional building materials. However, the true revelation occurred post-construction when the

remnants, often relegated to waste, caught my attention. Recognizing the overlooked potential of patterns available from the TREX, I embarked on a transformative journey. Embracing the inherent lines designed for cost efficiency, these discarded cut-offs ceased to be mere remnants but emerged as integral elements of sculptural design (Figure 3). Their appreciation became a pivotal aesthetic choice, unveiling a dynamic line quality as the material was cut in varying directions. This not only highlighted the rigidity of TREX but also produced a mesmerizing repeating pattern reminiscent of fabric or quilting.

#### *d. Zip-tied Sewer and Drainpipe*

PVC was first manufactured in 1935 and is now the most popular choice for sewer, drain, and water pipelines. Its durability is unmatched. It was created as a replacement for cast iron and copper pipes, as it became more cost-effective and durable. I like to consider the labor that PVC does every day, both in our homes and in our public water systems. Everything is connected and yet we hardly acknowledge it. Home Depot stores PVC pipes in an upright position, which when standing next to in the store, makes you question your size and spatial awareness. The ambiance created in the plumbing aisle, coupled with these material's purpose, I do what is seemingly impossible. I squeeze the hyperfunctional objects with a simple zip-tie, demonstrating the tension in everyday life.



*Figure 4a (detail)*

Utilizing a simple zip-tie, to squeeze and mangle the PVC speaks to the labor of the pipes, and those who create the systems and put plumbing together (Figure 4). The squeezing gesture provides a conceptual cue to hard work and durability. For Rachel Whiteread, “domestic spaces are measured and marked by our bodies and movements” (Racz 119). The choice to stand these pipes individually, as their own entities in space relates to the thinking of Whiteread. They demand space and produce a physicality that opens room for new appreciation as if these were like their own people. In, *Art and The Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday*, Racz goes on to talk about how “not only is the scale of a home measured in relation to the body, but a building itself a body that breathes, gets sick and has a structure and organs” (Racz 119). The physical work and labor that these utilitarian objects endure often go underappreciated.

Artists like Arcangelo Sassolino and Matias Faldbakken discuss the effects of labor through objects and sculptures that resonated during the creation of this sculpture. Specifically, I respond to Sassolino’s ability to create tension between two objects. He creates a pull in his work that inspired me to consider the tensile strength of materials. Tensile strength can be defined as, “the maximum stress that a material can bear before breaking” (Tensile). Faldbakken negates the use of common materials by inviting conversations that make you question *how*. And *why?* (Matias). Both artists use simple gestures to talk about a much larger conversation about humanity and labor.

#### *e. Spiral Ducts*

Looking at artists like Turner Prize Nominee: Ghislaine Leung, my relationship with objects immediately transforms. Specifically, Leung says, “The negotiation of limits in my work



is about trying to undo a certain dialect of value” (Ghislaine). Her relationship with materiality is inseparable from her identity.

The scale and form of HVAC ductwork, with its imposing presence, transcend mere practicality to emerge as a metaphor for the human body. In this sculptural exploration, my artistic intervention is minimal, as I embrace the inherent qualities of the duct, allowing them to prompt conceptual inquiries. The sheer size and structure of these ducts evoke an immediate comparison to the human form, prompting a heightened awareness of self



*Figure 5*

within their spatial context. The ducts, in their substantiality, become more than conduits for air—they become a sculptural embodiment, urging contemplation of both one's surroundings and sense of self. The minimal intervention in this exploration lies in allowing the ducts to retain their raw, unaltered state, creating a symbiotic relationship between the functionality of HVAC systems and their unexpected aesthetic resonance. My intervention falls in arrangement and display. Playing with the idea of tension, these tubes appear to be standing precariously, doing nothing. Atop a perch are slightly altered versions of the duct, where I cut along the spiral, letting the rigidity of the material expand into an interesting coil. The sculptural presence of HVAC ducts mounted for a new purpose, and expanded from their rigidity, becomes a canvas for

contemplation, prompting a visceral response to the imposing yet intriguing forms that mirror not just utility but an unexpected harmony with the human experience.

#### **f. Ridge Vent**



*Figure 6*

Ridge Ventilation became popular in the 1970s, after World War II when plywood was commonly used for roof structures. Ridge Vent provides a low-profile ventilation system that runs across the peak of a roof, before installing shingles. The ridge vent helps with heat regulation, as well as moisture issues. The material is a sheet of plastic, that has intricate detailing, that is rather beautiful, fulfilling a harmony of “form following function” (Hwang). In fact, upon close inspection, those who are unfamiliar with ridge vents, question its abilities and applications.

In this installation, I wanted to be true to the material’s flexibility, responding to the roll that you purchase from a hardware store. When looking closely, the plastic material is highly detailed, meticulous, and oddly beautiful. Embracing the beauty of a material that is intended to be hidden relates to many of the conceptual themes discussed throughout this thesis.

### g. 90° Adjustable Elbows



Figure 7

Adjustable Elbows are typically used to attach various venting systems around bends. The adjustable mechanism is solely for utility, to fit around any space that the venting might need to navigate. These elbows are sold individually at a hardware store, and once they are installed, they typically never see the potential that they possess again, and that is to be rotated and changed, indefinitely.

In this installation, I simply combined many adjustable elbows, making one tube structure that can constantly rotate and move, fulfilling its conceptual value. The placement of this work can vary, but it responds best to architecture that already exists in the space. This has the viewers question where the art ends, and where the architecture begins, like that of the HVAC duct.

### Conclusion

When I step back and look at *Reconstruct* as an entire installation, a few things become clear to me about this work, that may differ from my past work. Each sculpture possesses a level of abstraction. This allows various concepts to be represented through simpler gestures and innuendoes rather than direct representation. Labor, value, material relationships, and empathy are all themes touched on in each work.

I find it important to acknowledge the placement of the sculptures within the installation. There is an intentional flow throughout the space, forcing the viewer to physically engage their

bodies compared to the work. The choice between hanging, using a pedestal, or placing it on the floor were all intentional choices that positively influenced this installation.

I continuously questioned ideas of labor, domestic spaces, and the American DIY culture through making this body of work. Questioning the motives for making further reveals an interest in human interconnectivity. Investigating the larger human experience, through larger network systems and connectivity between neighbors, will continue to drive my future artistic investigations.

*Reconstruct* is an important growth in my artistic career because I have gained a deeper respect for myself and value the work I make, in addition to fueling my interests in accessible materials and interconnectivity. This work becomes a metaphor for labor and hard work in relationship to materiality, empathy and performance.

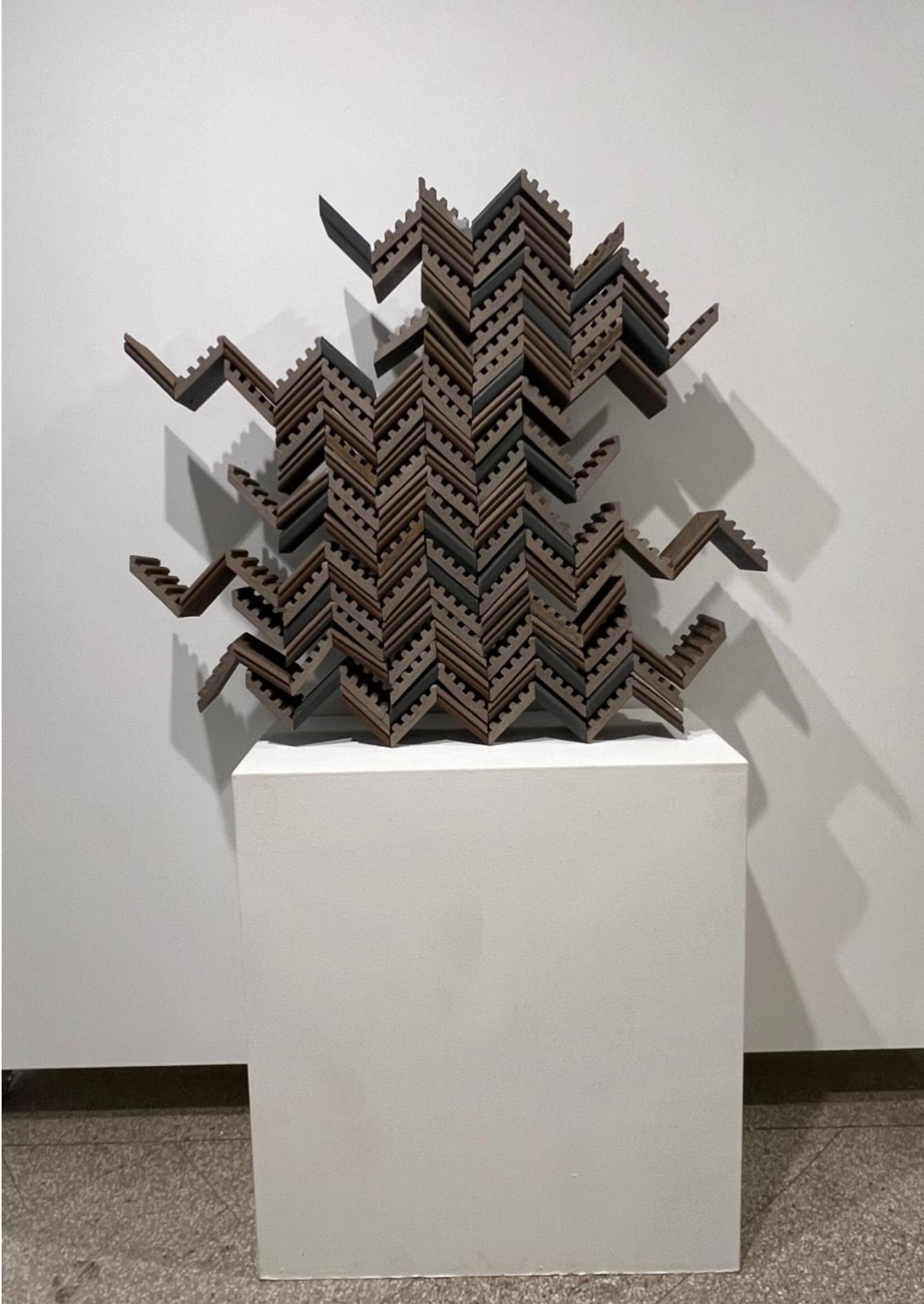
## List of Images



*Figure 1. Carpet Bricks, Carpet Samples and 1.5 tons of mortar, each brick 4.5"x4.5"x8", 2024*



*Figure 2. Fiberglass Mineral Surfaced Roll Roofing, hand-cut asphalt roofing, 3'x11'x30', 2024*



*Figure 3. TREX, composite decking cut-offs, 2024*



*Figure 4. Zip-tied Sewer and Drain Pipes, PVC and zip-ties, 2024*





Figure 5. Spiral HVAC Duct, galvanized steel, 10'x 1.5'x5", 2024, Photo by Elizabeth Lamark



Figure 6. Ridge Vent, Plastic, 10'x1.5'x6", 2024



*Figure 7. 90 degree adjustable elbows, aluminum, 2024*



*Reconstruct*, Installation View, RIT City Art Space, 2024, Photo by Elizabeth Lamark



*Reconstruct*, Installation View, RIT City Art Space, 2024, Photo by Elizabeth Lamark

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