

July 2016

On a Scale of 1 to Ten... Ten Being the Worst

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<https://doi.org/10.7275/8529338> https://scholarworks.umass.edu/masters_theses_2/378

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On a scale of 1 to 10... ten being the worst

A Thesis Presented

by

KYLE D. THORNE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2016

The Master of Fine Arts Program in Studio Arts

On a scale of 1 to 10... 10 being the worst

A Thesis Presented

By

KYLE D. THORNE

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Robin P. Mandel, Chair

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ABSTRACT

ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 10... 10 BEING THE WORST

MAY 2016

KYLE D. THORNE B.F.A., BALL STATE

UNIVERSITY

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AMHERST

Directed by: Assistant Professor Robin P. Mandel

On a scale of 1 to 10... 10 being the worst is an exhibition of sculpture that attempts to visualize the struggle, anxiety, and pain that occurs when your body lets you down during the process of making. Daily chronic pain places limitations on the work that I am able to create. The work in this exhibition not only depicts those limitations, but also expresses the anxiety that takes place while making it. To accomplish this there are several objects that allegorically reference bodies. These bodies are placed in various states of struggle and tension. Ready-made objects are incorporated alongside these bodies to provide a real world context of labor for the sculptures, and also to change the way that the viewer navigates and experiences the space.

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INTRODUCTION

This work is a representation of the struggle that I have with the physical limitations of my body. Early on in my art career the primary medium that I chose to work with was ceramics. Throwing pots requires both physical strength and a high degree of finesse, and is a process that felt to me to be highly sensual and addictive. However, when either the strength or finesse is not working the whole process collapses. Just when I was beginning to achieve the forms I desired, my hands were simultaneously beginning to give out. The pain I felt in those moments was the first sign of the struggle that would dictate every decision I have made about my practice since. Every act of throwing was overridden by excruciating pain. After two wrist surgeries, countless doctor visits, and years of physical therapy, I am left with two choices: either completely fuse the bones in my wrist, which will result in extremely limited wrist mobility, or live with the pain and make the best of it. Since extremely limited mobility is not an option for a sculptor, I have chosen to live with the pain. The work in this exhibition is a direct result of that choice. Many of the concepts, materials, and forms come either from the physical limitations or the mental anxiety that my body has placed on me.

Henry Moore once said that “there is a great deal still to be done with three dimensional form as a means of expressing what people feel about themselves and nature, and the world around them. But, I don’t think we shall, or should ever get far away from the thing that all sculpture is based on, in the end: the human body”

(Moore, 200). When Moore said this in 1961, it was partly to defend his continuing use of the human body as subject matter, despite the trends away from the figure in contemporary sculpture of that era. However, when I read these words now, they suggest an idea about the figure in sculpture that goes beyond representation. I am interested in the dialogue that takes place between my own body and my sculpture throughout the process of making.

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

Two of the main focuses in this body of work are the relationships that take place formally between the materials within the pieces, as well as the relationships that occur when the pieces are exhibited in a room together. There are many internal relationships that can be found within the individual pieces. In every sculpture the proportions of each object and the material it is constructed from are carefully considered in relation to the objects that surround it. In a similar manner, the external relationships that happen in the space and in between pieces are also designed to affect the way the viewer experiences the work.

In *All I want is a new body* there are several internal relationships. The surrogate body is bound to a large rectangular box by palletizing wrap. The box is fully coated in matte black paint and is devoid of any other distinguishing marks. This total lack of identifiable information allows the box to function as a large mass that announces its presence in the room by its visual weight. Furthermore, the sculpture cantilevers out into the space sixteen inches by a large steel bracket. The body is fully encapsulated by the palletizing wrap; pinned down to the black mass, it is unable to move. The spool of palletizing wrap used to encase the form is left on top of the black box as a visual reminder of the action that took place to trap the body. In doing so, the physical process that created the sculpture becomes a visual element in the piece.

In addition to these kinds of relationships with an individual piece, other works emphasize relationships external to the pieces themselves. In *Just Relax*, an open stepladder is held taut against the wall by neon orange ratchet straps. Mounted well above eye level, with its feet forced against the wall, it protrudes out into the room six feet. The ladder casts an uneasiness and anxiety over the room because of the way it extends into the space, forcing the viewer to walk around the room to look at the work much in the same way a viewer's eyes move around a drawing or painting. Robert Morris used similar tactics to change the way a viewer moved around and experienced the space his work is in:

The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some ways more reflexive because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context. (Morris)

Morris argues for removing the "internal relationships" of sculpture in favor of the external relationships. This idea was important to him because it causes the sculptural object to no longer be autonomous; the sculpture needs a viewer. Henry Moore, who I quoted earlier, would argue that internal relationships are integral to sculpture, and that we should not leave them behind. For him the power of sculpture lies in the way that the object relates to itself. For me these two artists represent opposite ends of an ideological pendulum: at one end, the highly formalized internal relationships within a sculpture, and at the other, the external relationships between the sculptures and the space surrounding them. I place my

work somewhere in the path of the pendulum, as I employ both of these relationships within my work.

To use a musical term, I am sampling. Contemporary art has reached a point where this willful recontextualization of ideas has become the norm. In Dario Robleto's essay from 1999, *I Love Everything Rock 'n' Roll (Except the Music)*, he states:

At this stage of our culture it is a given that our world is presented to us in a fragmented, chopped-up way. It's in the air. You can see it in people's eyes. What has not been offered at this point is a way to creatively maneuver in our world. DJ culture has changed all that. The rich and beautiful legacy of hip-hop/DJ culture and electronic/sample-based music is a flat-out rejection of all pessimistic strains of postmodernism. The worlds of aesthetics and art-making strategy will only benefit from this revolution in thought. (Robleto)

I am taking from Moore his ideas of the internal relationships of a sculpture and using them as a way to emphasize the form in each piece. On the other hand I am taking from Morris his ideas of how sculptures relate to each other in space to form a singular entity or installation. This act of sampling allows me to take from these artists ideas that I find to be related to my work, and leave behind other aspects that I find less relevant. This is in no way meant to be disrespectful to either Moore or Morris, but as a way for me to better understand both their work and my own sculptures through pulling from multiple viewpoints.

MATERIAL, FOUND OBJECT, SPACE

I extend the notion of external relationships to include the not only the negative space between works but also the walls to which they are attached. In *Inevitable Release*, a large green ratchet strap is stretched tightly from one end of the room to the other, creating a line that connects the two walls. Like Fred Sandback's



Figure 1: Fred Sandback, *Untitled* 1989

minimal string sculptures, the strap connects walls together and creates a linear element in space. Linking walls in this manner prompts the viewer to reevaluate the space that they are in, and where their body is in that space. For Sandback however, the physical materials are less important than the space they occupy. The yarn, which can be seen as the perimeter of an abstract plane, connects to the wall or floor and is completely

seamless and subtle, so the viewer does not think about its materiality. By contrast, in *Inevitable Release*, the strap is two inches wide, bright green, and terminates into visibly strong chrome plated hooks. The ratchet on the strap is also chromed and

designed to handle immense force. The anchor points that connect the strap to the wall are fabricated out of thick steel and bolted to the wall with stainless steel bolts. Using these strong materials with their muscular materiality is a way to communicate the force that is present in the piece, and to further allude to the process and the labor that is involved. Also unlike Sandback, there is some excess strap at one end of the line that hangs loosely down from the ratchet and rests on the floor. The strap is simultaneously expressing both extreme tension, and complete repose. These two opposing depictions of force, loose and tight, amplify the visible tension within the piece and the surrounding space.

In *On a scale of 1 to 10... 10 being the worst*, the surrogate body is mounted on top of a utility cart with two wires that enter each end of the form. The form is skinned with light colored wood with black matte paint poured over the top of the form, slowly encasing it. Directly below the body there is a wooden butcher block that rests atop the cart at an oblique angle. The table is topped with a matte black laminate. On one end a small amount of the laminate has been torn off. This exposed tear disturbs the pristine surface, bringing about an imperfection that alludes to the inevitable failure of the human body. The edge of the table is also light wood to continue the repetition between wood and matte black. The cart is missing its fourth wheel, putting itself into a precarious position, further emphasizing the idea of inevitable failure.

Other found objects have also been implemented into the body of work. Each one is chosen specifically because of the mechanical advantages they provide to

overcome the shortcomings that our bodies have. For instance, the ladder is made to give us an extended vertical reach. The vice, which appears in *Last Resort*, is a tool that has been in workshops for hundreds of years because it holds up the piece that is being worked on to free up the worker's hands. The cart is a tool to provide mobility and ease in the moving of multiple objects. Similarly, ratchet straps are designed to bind, immobilize, and hold objects tightly; however, an important part of the ratchet strap is that they are also designed to be temporary. With all of the extreme tension that ratchet straps produce, they also bring with them the idea of the inevitable release.

The use of found objects in the work is not just based on their utility. They are also used as a way to bring in moments of color to draw the viewer's eye around the room. The ratchet straps for example are used in multiple pieces because of the bright color that they afford. In *This will affect the rest of your life* the neon orange strap is in such stark contrast to the other materials in that piece, which causes it to stand out and draw the viewer's eye from across the room. Similarly, in several different pieces stainless steel and chrome are used as punctuation marks to hold the eye. All of the hardware that is used to mount objects to the wall is stainless steel, which contrasts with the blackened steel brackets. The visually repetitive hardware allows for moments of continuity across the pieces. In a similar manner chrome is also utilized throughout the sculptures as a way to catch the viewers eye from a distance.

SYMBOLISM

Along with the use of found objects, symbolism is also employed as a way to bring meaning to this body of work, mostly in the form of the “X”. In *This will affect the rest of your life* the structure is a reference to St. Andrew’s Cross, or the saltire.

The saltire has also been used throughout history as a sign of power in heraldry and

flags for many nations. In *This will affect*

the rest of your life it is the power that is

ingrained into the saltire, when made at

this scale, that gives this piece its

commanding presence over the room. This

piece is unique in this exhibition for its

omission of the body as a form within the

sculpture. The majority of the other pieces

contain forms that reference bodies, while this one is blatantly left empty of such a

form. This absence, and the structure’s foreboding dominance, provides the viewer

the opportunity to project themselves into a place of helplessness and struggle.



Figure 2: Bartolome Murillo, *The Martyrdom of St. Andrew* 1675

St. Andrew’s crosses are also widely used in the BDSM community to create a transference of power, dominance, and helplessness by placing someone onto the

cross. Though sadomasochism is one manifestation of bondage, I am more

interested in investigating the deeper, more emotional implication that is the

transference of power from one partner to the other. This body of work has multiple power transfers happening simultaneously. During the objects' creation they take the place of the submissive partner and I take on the role of the dominant one. However, in the struggle I have with my own body, I become submissive to my body, which complicates the transference of power in the work. During the process of making, I come to see the bodies I create as dominant. When that happens, I am both dominant and submissive at the same time. The paradoxical nature of this power dynamic is a discovery that I intend to explore further in subsequent bodies of work.

TRANSFORMATION

The surrogate bodies in these sculptures are of two varieties. One is an open framework that consists of entirely linear elements that I consider to be limbs. The other is a rounded, limbless form, phallic in nature, consisting of two connected volumes and resembling a pear or gourd. These surrogate bodies are visual reminders of the struggle and pain that takes place within the limbs of my own body.

This symbolic use of fruit has a long historic tradition in art. One can find examples in Edward Weston's photography, especially the manner in which he creates the illusion of bodies with his representation of fruits and other natural



Figure 3: Sarah Lucas, *Au Naturel* 1994

sexual organs. Furthermore, these “sexual organs” become a synecdochic expression of two figures, made present by their very absence.

While Lucas and Weston are disparate in their approach, they are similar in that they induce a transformation in the way these forms are perceived. Through

different methods and techniques the two of them take mundane objects and give them power and significance by referencing the body through them. The surrogate bodies in my own work, whether limbed or limbless, are intended to have a similar transformative effect. The viewer can see these sculptural forms as bodies, and perceive the tension and anxiety that the forms are undergoing.

The underlying structure of the pear---shaped form is assembled with multiple wooden ribs that interlock together to form a skeletal structure. After the wooden ribs are assembled a skin is stretched tightly around the form. With the skin in place, the underlying components become visible through the tension of the material. The way that the underlying structure is visible is similar to the way that elbows and knees can be seen through the skin because of their close proximity to the surface.¹

¹Not only do these materials and building techniques afford me the visual qualities that I am interested in, but they also contain a personal resonance. My initial experiences of making were in my grandfather's basement shop, where I first watched him, and eventually worked alongside him. Together we would work on his highly accurate scale remote control airplanes. The planes we made were constructed using a similar process to some of the sculptures in this body of work. The very tools and materials we worked with then have now become a part of my shop and my sculptures. The projects are visually similar at some stages of the process, but the context and results have changed. The tools and materials now function as aids to further enhance my understanding of my own body.

PRESENTATION

In planning the presentation for this body of work there have been multiple considerations and inspirations. In the individual pieces, the display is integral to the design similarly to that of Carol Bove. In Bove's work there is no way to distinguish where the work stops and the pedestal begins; the viewer sees the piece as one entity. In *Mudra* from 2013, she puts together wood shelves with books, periodicals, concrete and several other items to create a sculpture that is a collection of items curated into a display. In a similar manner, both *On a scale of 1 to 10... 10 being the worst* and *Last Resort* are set up as compositions using found and created objects. Following Bove's technique, the displays are meant to feel somewhat familiar and place the work in a context. For example, using objects like the vice and utility cart places the sculptures into the realm of physical labor. The use of laminated wood slab surfaces in several of the pieces also references the workbenches and butcher-block surfaces that are found in a workshop or a kitchen.

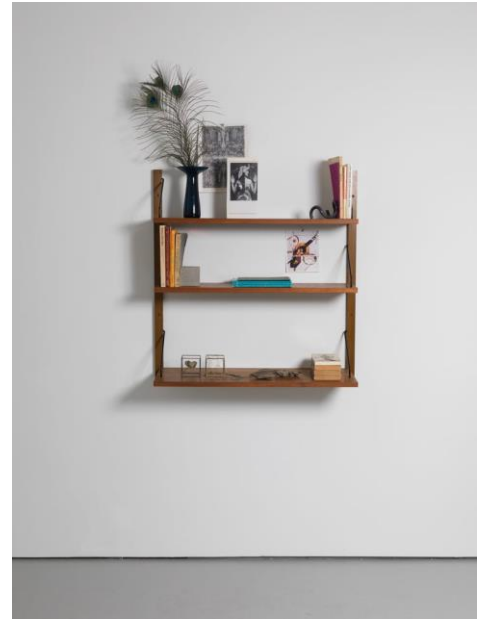


Figure 4: Carol Bove, *Mudra* 2013

The presentation is considered not only within the works themselves but also on a more global scale, such as the overall composition of the body of work. As I

stated earlier when talking about external and internal relationships, it became important for the pieces to interact with and affect each other. At Mayo Thompson's show, *8th Floor*, in 2015 at Greene Naftali in New York, I was struck by how much the individual works spoke to each other through the order in which you experienced them. When entering the show, the first few things encountered by the viewer were tables full of pen and ink



Figure 5: Mayo Thompson, *Regular Everything II* 1971

drawings of everyday events. The next few pieces were on the back wall and they became progressively darker in subject matter. What came next were a series of bronze castings, and a large paper work that acted as a respite to the dark subject matter. These were followed by a group of drawings that then brought the exhibition to a close. Adapting this approach to my own studio practice, I began to consider not only the relationships within each piece, but also how decisions about one piece could influence or change the viewer's understanding of the other pieces. *This will affect the rest of your life* is an example of a sculpture created with that intent. By consciously excluding a reference to the body, the sculpture allows viewers to project themselves into the work, and thereby re---contextualize all of the other pieces that include bodies.

CONCLUSION

This body of work is an investigation of the reciprocal effects between my artwork and the body produces it. Using multiple techniques, materials, and forms of display I have sought to further understand how my own body has affected my artistic practice. The work relates both to the labor that produced it, and to the pain, caused by the physical limitations of my own body, that is inherent in that labor. I have created an outlet for the anxiety that occurs when a sculptor is forced to choose between being able to continue working with their hands, and being in pain; or being relieved of the pain but being unable make the work that they want. In my case not being able to work with my hands is not a choice at all. This work is a result of that decision.

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ARTIST AT WORK

