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The Weight of Existence

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Abstraction:

Torn between our instinctual will to live and our conscious knowing of life's inevitable end, our mortality creates an existential tear in our being. This fissure is the birthplace of a meaningful existence. Throughout my artwork I express the rhythmic cadences of the human body and wrestle with the transient nature of being through the utility of sculpture and performance. The artwork does not provide any measurable outcome, only a deepening of feeling for what it means to be alive.

The Weight of Existence

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B.F.A. University of Wisconsin Stout, 2020

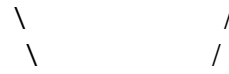
Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in
Studio Arts.

Syracuse University, May 2024

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LIFE-----time-----DEATH



MORTALITY

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MEANING

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I cannot say for sure what it means to be alive. What *it* is, is so granular to human existence that we cannot describe the feeling, only unveil the experience. The importance of my work and practice is revealing the feeling of being alive as a process, not an outcome. Engaging with life is a transaction of meaning making. We invest time and derive meaning from those things we put our time into. The more we are willing to give to something, the heavier that attachment becomes. I think its in what we do that makes life worth living, not in the outcomes or end goals of those actions. When thinking about what it means to be alive and the give and take, I cannot help but think of love. Much like Bell Hooks whose early poetry revolved around mortality, she too came back to love. If everything ultimately comes to an end, how do we discover pursuits that are meaningful? What is it inside of us that calls us to act on, to try, and to care about any of it? I think because of all these ideas that through the act of loving we are creating the meaning that deepens our affinity for being.

“Love is not consolation. It is light. Human existence is so fragile a thing and exposed to such danger that I cannot love without trembling.”

- Simon Weil, Gravity and Grace

I think of mortality as the marriage between life and death, the fruitful union that is continually renewing and renewable, giving birth to meaning. I create works that use the specific properties of materials to create ephemeral happenings. I explore the tender and grievous nature of mortality through the metaphors of these phenomena. I am most interested in using materials for their substance; what’s inside of them, that can be expressed. The reaction of these physical and ephemeral materials coming together makes a new third. The partnership of life and death is

the physical material of the work while the marriage is the phenomenon, the ephemeral happening that bond the two together.

I have always been fearful of death. Ever since a young age, I have had an awareness of time and the inevitability of our end. It was never a distant thought to see older classmates, my parents, or an elderly person and understand where I am in time and what is to come. Life has always been understood as this perpetual march forward. Despite knowing this, it is hard to grasp and quantify the life that remains ahead and not to feel the time used but instead to feel the potential of life to come. We have memory, a vital way to remember what has happened, a way to compress and interpret our time had. Fortunately, or unfortunately, there is no equivalent of memory looking forward, leaving us with a void of uncertainty. Like many others, my fear of death is rooted in this abject way where we cannot grapple with the forthcoming certainty of eternity. Our mortality is the existential tear created by our instinctual will to live, and our conscious knowing of the inevitable end. What we *know* and what we *feel* can be two very different things.

“All his life the example of a syllogism he had studied in Kiesewetter's logic – ‘Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal’ - had seemed to him to be true only in relation to Caius the man, man in general, and it was quite justified, but he wasn't Caius and he wasn't man in general, and he had always been something quite, quite special apart from all other beings.”

- Leo Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilych

My personal fear of death in a way is like Ouroboros the self-consuming snake. Every time I am reminded of my mortality; I am closer to the actuality of the very thing I fear.

Mortality itself is what makes any moment in our lives meaningful. It isn't just about death, when talking about mortality, we are talking about life in sight of death. Our limitation in time innately makes time valuable. It is the unconscious substructure of our meaningful existence. Posed with the opposite, if we were to live forever, life would carry no weight. To live infinitely, paradoxically, is to be void of everything. There is no meaning to life when there is no definitive end, one could continually live out every experience, frictionless, and have nothing to gain; there is no end goal or finish line to reach. In the way that mass provides the physical gravity of our bodies, mortality provides the emotional gravity of our consciousness. A meaningful existence is built through our exchange of time, and how we use time. We build value by choosing what we give time to, devoting our limited resources to what we believe to be worthy.

The Weight of Existence is the felt realization of our participation in a complex existence otherwise too large to grasp with reason.

Suppose we are to think of a glass prism refracting light, as it shines through the prism and is dispersed, the substance of the light is unveiled and made truer through the visible color spectrum displayed. The prism allows us to see the contents of what has always been there but is otherwise invisible to the naked experience. In this instance, life is the natural light, and the prism is death. When we reflect on death, we can unveil the content of life, and feel the value in the granular aspects of being. I strive to create the same effect in my artwork, in the confrontation of my practice, I hope the work can unveil something that has always been there, a value in life is now made actual. The visible is a way to access the invisible.

“Found, among so much brute material, metaphor befitting our own human condition.”

- Gustaf Sobin, Luminous Debris

The artwork *On Passing* (fig. 1) highlights and embodies these ideas I focus on in my work. I created this artwork that uses gravity as the metaphor for the transition between life and death. To do this, I mounted a tallow-and-wax cast of my hand to a steel rod. The rod was then heated by a candle which was fixed onto the structure below. The pieces function through their material properties. The steel rod carries the heat produced by the candle which melts the cast of my hand. Once the breaking point is met, the hand falls, the metaphor begins, and the piece is completed. It is the contents of these materials that allow me to create a situation for them to interact. The materials react to one another, so the hand can succumb to the obedience of gravity.

This ephemeral space is created between the coming together of life and death; the two joining and making a third. Much like the horizon, we perceive the skyline through the abutting of the earth and the sky. By pairing together materials that react and build on each other, we can create phenomenon. This is the new *third*; the *union* of the marriage is its own entity. I am not preoccupied with the materials as a visual component but rather their potential. I am looking for what is inside the materials that can be expressed to create the happening. In my work, the ephemeral action is the artwork.

Time is an intangible medium I wrestle with throughout my work. At times in the work, there is a completed action in which the piece may never return to its previous state. Other times the work runs in a loop or indefinitely. The work *Untitled* (fig. 2) uses two magnets that are tethered to opposing walls by cable wire. The magnets reach towards one another from opposite

sides of the room but cannot touch. There is a half-inch gap between the two, and the magnetic attractions allow them to hold each other up suspended in space. This piece emphasizes the concept of marriage, two independents coming together and making a third. It is through the relationship of the two that the magnets can hold their position and remain suspended in the air, operating seemingly free of gravity.

Gravity is a force of attraction. From one mass to another, they innately pull toward each other. Anything with mass also has gravity and the larger the mass and the closer the distance, the stronger the gravity is. Because of gravity, we can also feel when mass is lost.

Marriage, as M. Scott Peck describes in *The Road Less Traveled*, is the unity of two strong and independent individuals coming together and rooting their commitment to love one another. "I define love thus: The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." Love is a choice. Feelings are fleeting, and may be only an indication of one's situational presence. True and deep love expands beyond one's emotional state and becomes the foundation for a greater unity. When in love, one does not look for personal gain or what can be taken. One looks to help and offer up themselves for the growth of the other. Love, in its most gracious act, is giving attention.

What love and mortality have in common is their ability to lose oneself. Through both these concepts there is the shared ability to displace oneself and see the world anew. Mortality reminds us of a world that will one day be without us, and love reminds us of the endearment we have for others. I might think that the beauty in being alive is to live with mortality. Living with an understanding of disappearance, to fade away and leave behind what can continue past your

existence. To this sentiment, there is a love for the process, not the goal. To have a goal is to have an end. Through my work, there is only process.

Love is a way to make decisions. Different from choosing to love itself, once in love, it provides the nourishment for others. The creation of artwork requires a lot of work, attention, and patience. During the process of building, the decision-making is informed by what the work needs, not by my control or selfishness but, through listening. Because we care and when we listen, we can provide for the needs of others to reach their full potential.

When creating work, I am most focused on the internal, the substance of the material or action, against interpretation, untouched by language, and ignorant of our agenda. I am in search of the essence of these concepts, giving gravity to the meaning of now. Despite the various expressions of life and death, the subjects can still be identified. We as people are in constant flux, passing and intersecting the constant subjects like love, death, and gravity. We only engage with them momentarily as we are made aware of them situationally. Artworks can create those situational moments for use to engage with. Artworks can be the embodying matter as the subject itself, indifferent to all. What this really comes down to is best described by Barry Lopez in *Arctic Dreams* while he describes the innocence of the Musk Ox in their natural habitat:

“They were so intensely good at being precisely what they were. The longer you watched, the more intricately they seemed to be a part of where they were living, of what they were doing. Their color, their proportion against the contour of the land were exquisite. They were, in evolutions terms, innocent of us and of our plans.”

- Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*

Art carries the potential to hold subjects in the way Lopez describes the Musk Ox. Art and its subjects can live purely and indifferent to our plans. Does a Musk Ox know its a Musk Ox? And would it gain or lose anything by having or lacking that knowledge? I need to put myself in a position where the artwork can, to some degree, make itself. My mere approach to creating can destroy the very thing it hopes to capture.

Through the work of Bas Jan Ader, we can see the relationship clearly between the actions of the artwork and the metaphor. *Broken Fall (Organic)* is this genuine attempt to portray death through gravity and its metaphor. Ader's proposes that our defiance of gravity is the essence of being alive and when we become obedient to gravity we die. Phrases such as "look alive" and "drop dead" emphasize this relation, showcasing the directional use of gravity. *In Broken Fall (Organic)* Ader succumbed to the obedience of gravity by hanging onto a tree branch over a small creek. He holds onto the branch until he naturally loses his grip. After a minute and a half, we see Ader fall fifteen feet into the creek. While he is holding the branch, Ader is alive, he is "holding on for dear life". He put himself in a position where his body would inevitably give out as all bodies do. The fall from the tree is the transition from life to death. As he lies in the creek we can see the permanence of the action, the inability to defy gravity forever is the inability to live forever.

The works embody and express a world that feels truer through material means that go beyond their surface. The general experience of phenomena is infectious. It moves us in ways previously unknown and uplifts us into something greater, something grand in scope and content. To embody is to take the form of the thing, not only through appearance, but through its

substance. Imitation is only on the surface, a thin layer that can look like the actual. The embodiment is denser, giving us a luminous glimpse into that richness.

By this way of creating, I can expose what is inside. This is the deeper, unspoken, and felt relation to the world. In the work *Heart of Light* (fig. 3), I adhered a small circular mirror to my chest. Using the reflection of sunlight, my heartbeat is made visible as a small flickering sunbeam on the wall. The artwork is the action of events, the phenomena, and the happening. The work uses the material to unveil the nature of the world through the specific conditions that create happening. That happening infects us through its metaphor. Without the sunlight or a dark room, the spectacle cannot manifest. What this emphasizes in the work is the potential of the materials and how they require activation via another element. The pieces are built with their specific condition requirements and are just that; the mirror, the sunlight, and the body. The materials stand by waiting, holding the potential to be a truer representation of itself, a more accurate embodiment.

In my work, I am not necessarily preoccupied with the material acting as a visual component. There are a million and one materials within reach, all with their own properties and capabilities. When I create a work, the first goal is to capture an action or gesture which is the metaphor. Each material offers potential, potential that can be expressed under specific conditions. Once the phenomenon is understood, I select materials with specific properties to mimic the happening. It is what's inside the materials that gives the work beauty. It is common in Eastern cultures to leave silver unpolished, the beauty comes from the object's history and use, and the surface treatment is the visual language to reach that rich substance. The visual

decisions of the work come as a byproduct, layering their visual quality and associations atop their function.

In the moments the sublime is experienced, we decenter ourselves and realize our presence in the world. Upon reflection, the reality of our self, we realize the absurdity of our being. The sublime breaks apart singular perspectives, confronting us with the complexities of a world that does not need us. This is a terrifying experience as we realize ourselves *in* the world, not *as* the world.

My process for determining what is and is not an important phenomenon comes through the initial discovery and then using both logic and feeling to filter. In my studio practice, I create samples and play with no intention of outcome, so I can be free to escape what I know. I will come into my studio at different times of the day when there is a different quality of light or different temperature. These situations can unveil the materials in my studio in ways I wouldn't have known. If the happening can infect me, and displace me, I know I can then use logic, language, and established cultural norms to create connections to our humanity through metaphor. The event proves its value first, then it can be captured, translated, and shared. This also requires me to have an awareness outside of my studio, throughout my daily routine so I can recognize when something is *special*. It was at a stoplight when I saw several cars with their blinkers phasing in and out of sync. Years later this would lead me to create *Heartbeat in the Brain*. The work uses two metronomes that are set to eighty beats per minute. This is the average human heart rate. The metronomes rest on a tall red oak stand, one is held where the head would be and the other the heart. Even though they are set to the same beats per minute, they will continually phase, going in and out of sync.

Once the phenomena has been discovered and feels valuable, logic is applied to build the work. Logic and language can be used to put the phenomena into a physical form. I need to use materials that carry the potential to recreate the phenomena. In the case of *Heartbeat in the Brain* (fig. 4), I found that metronomes fall in and out of sync and it is rather difficult to keep them consistent. The metronomes were used for their function as an object and their potential. Because I had chosen the metronomes to create the feeling, the rest of the piece had to be filled in with logic. The construction of the work is filling out the piece to fulfill and function while maintaining continuity. The work is approached with this hybrid decision-making, using both feelings and logic to maintain the integrity of the happening and share it.

As illustrated in *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, the river which Siddhartha peers into represents the existence of everything. The water folds and laps over itself, expanding and contracting, birthing, and dying, and birthing again. There is no beginning or end to any of it, there is only transformation. Confined by its borders, the river has no form, moving forward with time it presses on. I am not presenting or arguing for a depiction of life after death or any afterlife. What I am presenting is our innate understanding of our connection to the world. We have the inherent will to live and we know we cannot live forever. We must understand our ability to leave marks on the world as memories, memories that continue after we are gone. Much like currents of the river rising to the top, surfacing, only to disappear shortly after.

“Weakness is a great thing, and strength is nothing. When a man is just born, he is weak and flexible. When he dies, he is hard and insensitive. When a tree is growing, it’s tender and pliant. But when it’s dry and hard, it dies. Hardness and strength are death’s companions. Pliancy

and weakness are expressions of the freshness of being. Because what has hardened will never win.”

- Tarkovsky, Stalker

I approach my work with endearment. Sorting through feelings and logic to reduce my work into its most minimal components and still produce phenomena. The act of reduction is an act of logic. By stripping away as much material as possible, it becomes a genuine approach to share the magic in the world. The work is presented by choice in the raw, the true, and the vulnerable. Feelings are used to guide gestures and spacing in the work, timing, and duration. Dancing between feeling and logic, the work becomes more complex, something participating through reason and other times intuition. Perhaps in the creation of work, the artwork is chasing its own humanity, or at least mimicking it. The artwork allows time to reflect on the complex nature of our existence through its simple gestures. Making those decisions with our limited time is what makes life worth living. The artwork embodying these ideas captures moments of the human experience, subtle and real moments that can cause introspection.

The phenomena are the vehicle that allows access to the artwork. I am using phenomena as the metaphor because it is something we have all engaged with, it doesn't need to be understood to have an infectious quality. One does not need to understand the sunset to identify its connection to us. We are more in tune with our world than I believe the current social climate prompts. Finding ways to isolate and frame phenomena creates an inherent connection to the viewer. Making the work specific to material and visual aesthetic is what begins to define the subject indirectly. To answer what it means to be alive is too large of a question. To talk about death is to begin to shape life.

I hope to create work that bridges together love and mortality through a lens that can be shared. The weight of existence is the feelings of presence, our participation in the world we will not always be a part of. Love allows the opportunity to see the world anew from a place of tenderness and generosity. Our mortality is part of life and experienced by every living thing, the joy of life made possible by its own end. I am not the one to ascribe the values to life, I just need you to know that it always ends the same. The work is the pursuit of reflection to embody the human experience, offering a way to better navigate our part in the world.



Fig. 1. *On Passing*

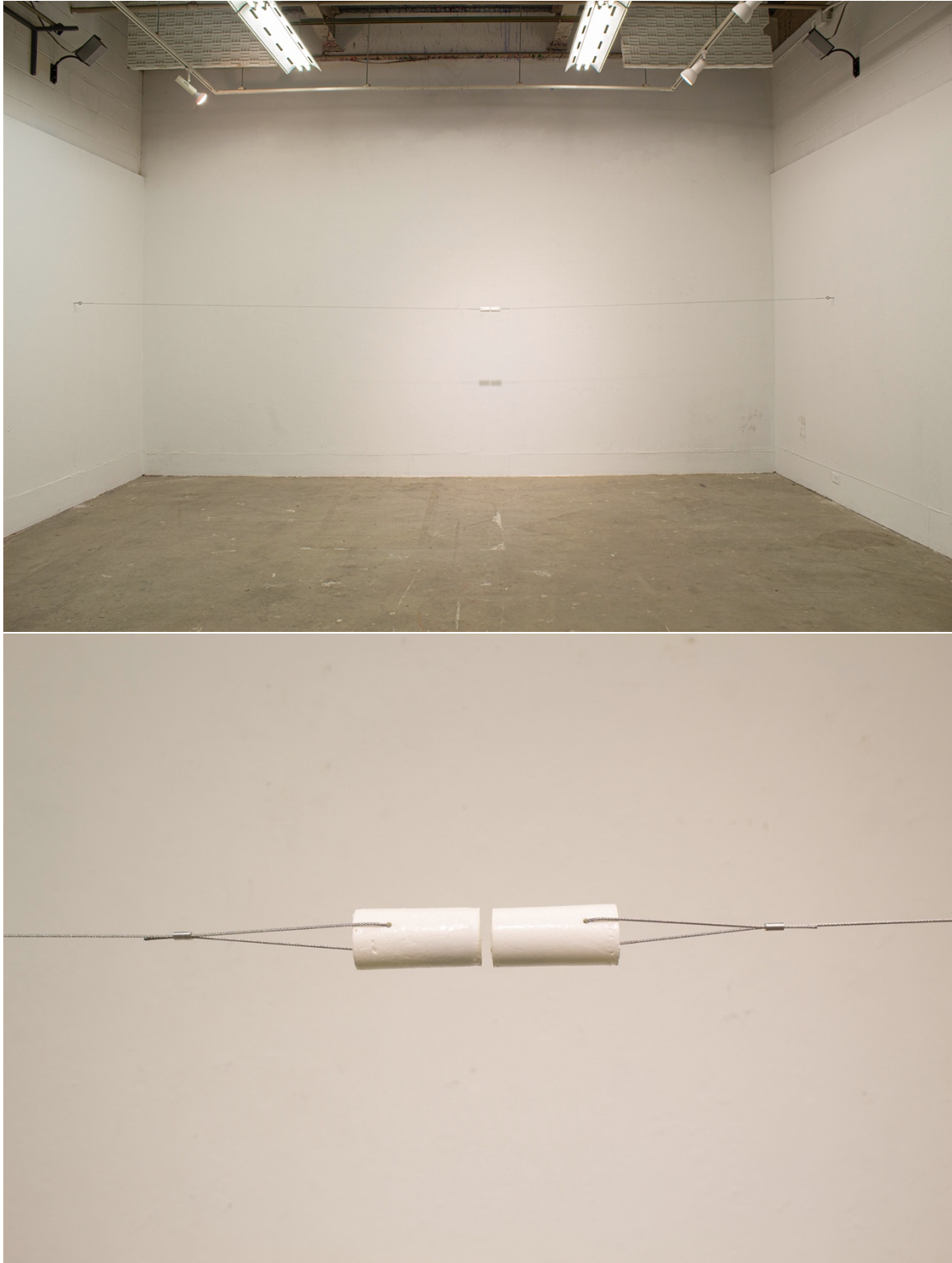


Fig. 2. *Untitled*



Fig. 3. *Heart of Light*



Fig. 4. *Heartbeat in the Brain*

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