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Thinking Through My Thesis Exhibition
and the “Ode to Marvel” Series

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Nathan Bradley Bockelman

June 2011

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Describing my Selected (Set of) Tropes

For my thesis show I presented a series of recent works conceived as a series and framed by the title “Ode to Marvel Comics Series,” or simply “Ode to Marvel.” The work was generated during the process of and in response to the realization of a performative, sculptural work. As with much of my work, the series began with a certain conceit, which then evolved, moving through its manifestations in a multiplicity of mediums. Much of the meaning in my work, as in this series, is produced not only through these conceits, but the specific medium(s) in which it happens to manifest. It is safe to say that much of the impetuous for making work comes from this desire to experiment in this manner, to play with the translation through media, and present this process as subject matter in the work.

Accordingly, in the context of the parts of this series shown in my thesis exhibition, I will expand on the initial impetuous and thought process with which I began. This may shed light onto the nature of my process and, in turn, give grounding for understanding the work that was eventually presented in the exhibition space.

The work in the “Ode to Marvel” series stemmed initially from an interest in a trope seen in culture. I had taken notice of this trope (or possibly a series of tropes) particularly in the cultural sphere of fantasy and action-adventure films, but most predominately comic books.

It may be problematic to try to refer to this particular event as a trope. Webster's online dictionary defines trope as: *a common or overused theme or device: cliché <the usual horror movie tropes>*.

Here I will describe the trope to which I am referring, including its general and specific features. It may be described as such: the representation of the human body (usually in comics or action films) fantastically thrown or hurled about while noticeably retaining its coherent form and subjecthood. This quality of seeming imperviousness runs in accordance with the usual qualities of the super heroes (or super villains) common in the comic book context. However, particular in this trope is the depiction of destruction or entropy around these circumstances. While destruction in this case might come easily from the will of a character or characters (the implied notion of super "powers" or strength providing that), what I was interested in was the use and depiction of the body itself as an unwilling instrument to leave a wake of imprints, marks and impressions on the environment. In these contexts, the body retains a certain phallic influence on the environment in a limp or defeated state. The drama of injury, suffering, or even bodily dismemberment may at times be portrayed in these contexts; however, the consequences are usually extremely distanced from certain realities, which may distract from the overall spectacular nature of the event. In such cases, the impervious body is free from normal spatial constraints, thrown about, severely displaced in its environment, and, as a result, the complex sculptural landscape becomes an additional subject: surroundings become intricately dissected and opened through this interaction. In such depictions one takes notice not only of the body, or lack there of, but also of the architecture, support

structures, hollow fields/rooms, layered spaces, texture of materials, etc. Basically, the overall spatial presence of objects and materials outside the body become dramatically described and analyzed.

Part of what becomes important in viewing these scenarios is the viewers' inherent projections of themselves into these bodies. These spectacular and seemingly fatal situations coupled with the body's impervious nature enact a certain type of catharsis for the viewer to experience. These fantasies are usually free from the psychological burden of the depiction of suffering or inherent fragility of the body. One might empathize with these fantasized subjects through a noble sense of martyrdom or a heroic sense of perseverance, both of which usually remain free from the abject realities and the implicit sense of tragedy present in such violence against the body.

Often, in these contexts what is depicted is that of a body being propelled into the ground by a force or an extreme situation. The fantastical setting or premise here allows a figure to retain its momentum while gradually burrowing into the ground, leaving behind a record or mark of the impact and eventual rest. One could compare this event to that of a comet or asteroid hitting the earth. Obviously, the body in this setting is interchangeable with any other object enduring such a situation—eventually coming to rest through an accumulation of the earth or matter gathering around it (almost burying it), but still retaining its mass, or form, while doing so. The resulting mark on the ground, usually abandoned by its super natural subject, is the iconic depiction at the heart of the trope I am describing.

While this occurs outside this fantasy trope, such as in the case of the asteroid, comet, or flying objects in general, there are several phenomena at play which add to its significance. One immediately apparent or scientific understanding would be the evidence of the interaction of two forces—that of gravity and centrifugal forces. Looking at this event culturally, and in context of its appearance in depictions in comic books, it also alludes to another significant occurrence: the evidence of a power struggle between one certain object interacting with other ambiguous yet powerful forces—here the object is a body which may or may not still be present.

What particularly interested me in these contexts was not only the use of the human body as the ‘mythic object’ or instrument that left the mark, but also its reintroduction to the ground or earth. I was interested in the poetic allegories this depiction could infer. For instance, one could consider how the representation of a body, rendered horizontal through some dramatic situation is forced, or at least flirting with, open or exposed earth as an allusion to death and the grave or burial site. The mark in the earth itself, a body-sized hole, semantically enacts the process of creating a grave. In this light, the ritual construction of a grave is dramatically transformed through the specific qualities of this trope. Taken further, one could construct how the symbol of death—that being the presence of gravity or act of dissent in general—is in struggle with the symbol of life and vitality—implied by the drama and freely moving forces from above, almost free or opposed to gravity. Additionally, the sensation of projecting oneself onto the body of the now-iconic figure in this scenario was also somewhat interesting, like that

of the phenomenon of rocks skipping on water or the feeling of sinking into the ground for some metaphysical reason.

It is with these interpretations that I began to consider translating this trope into an artwork. Instead of presenting its reoccurrence in culture as a topic of discussion or strategy for an artwork, I attempted to recreate the event sculpturally. I felt the representation of fantasy juxtaposed with reality (a sense of ‘sculptural reality’) would be inherent. I imagined a set of complications emerging from this new reality, which had the potential to stem from this translation.

I also felt it was important to reference the trope in general, or, to allude to the *over* dramatization portrayed in such events epitomized in comics books and fantasy culture. It was this desire, which propelled me to play with the modes of how these, and eventually other significant tropes in the comic book language, are represented. These observations began to inspire other works. By enacting the tropes physically not only might *evidence* of its unlikely occurrence in reality be represented, but also the significance of its *desire* to be depicted and our desire for its depiction.

The Photographs

With this as a pretext for my process of investigation, I will now discuss the work I included in my thesis exhibition. I will relate back to the ideas previously touched upon and also expand on the representations they have the potential to enact outside the context of comic books. I also want to briefly acknowledge the importance of the physical space of the gallery and how it influenced the decisions on what and how to present. Some of the original forms of the work changed with these considerations. In effect, the works, as

with the titles, take on a fluid nature that adapts to the physical and cultural context of the spatial realities to which it addresses itself.

Approaching my works installed in the center of the Sweeny Art Gallery space, whether entering from either entrance, one first encounters a few sculptural elements inhabiting the middle of the space and on opposing walls are two large, inkjet prints, which almost frame the sculptural works.

Centered in the middle of either wall are two large prints (each roughly sixty by one hundred inches). The first large print, vertical in orientation depicts a rectangular field of stone texture with the distorted impression of a figure. Opposite to it, and through the visible obstacles presented by the sculptures, is another large print, horizontal in orientation. Depicted in this print is a large stone or concrete sculpture, viewed from about head height in what looks like a suburban setting (a front yard one could assume). Looking closer, one can see the cube, or block-like shape of the sculpture, is disturbed on top by what looks like a gash, or mark receding down into it. From our vantage in the photo we are prevented from seeing much more than the indication of a mark or action, as well as left without evidence of what instrument or situation caused this.

In actuality the two prints depict views of the same sculpture from different vantages. The horizontal print (from a ground-level perspective) is titled *Tomb for Marvel/ Tomb for Lost Inertia (to be lifted)* (2011), and the vertical print (from an aerial perspective) is titled *Propped Up Tomb* (2011). It becomes obvious if the index of the object in each photo is not completely recognized the titles link the works semantically. Sharing similar characteristics sculpturally to a tomb, *Tomb for Marvel* describes the

certain ‘object-ness’ or mass of the object as well as hints to the nature of its surface topography. Metal hooks protruding from the surface of the block imply its potential as an object to be lifted and further exposed. The wrinkly folds impressed into the sides of the unnaturally squared edges evince a mold that held together what was once wet concrete. While these specific impressions alludes to the drama of the event that created it, the hooks, if one speculates the amount work it would take to move such an object alludes to drama of moving it. Further, stepping back from the print one would notice how the sculpture is barely contained by borders of the photo spanning from edge to edge. Its presentation, centered on the wall underneath the low ceiling with only dim lighting to view it creates a relatively confined and grim mood for viewing. It is here where the architecture of the exhibition space collaborates with the content to affect the viewer both physically and psychologically. What eventually emerges as the central subject in *Tomb* is the obscured mark or ‘gash’ impressed in the middle of the sculpture. The psychological effect of obscuring or withholding this information resembles the phenomenon of approaching a hole whose depth is only revealed through further examination. Here the hole is haunted by evidence of a certain force or violence having taken place to create it. Its form implies a wound, gash, vagina, or a whole host of associations. The accumulated pile and the layered folds surrounding the hole—mostly the result of movement of wet concrete bating the action—and bumpy surface texture resemble bodily features, such as wrinkled skin, pimples, pores, hair, or fat. What is arresting most about the form is its frozen state, creating the potential to be read as a representation of a (possibly fictive) action rather than ephemera of an actual

(presumably authentic) occurrence. Also, the scale of the sculpture (in relation to its surroundings) ties it to notions of a monolith, tomb, or some type of monument or public sculpture. The gothic and mythical associations of these forms become juxtaposed with the reference to Marvel Comics (implied by the series title). The jarring mash up attempts to assimilate two realities: the heavy psychological impact of *Tomb*, with its dubious physical presence in the world (also exuding a sense of loss, tragedy and myth), is put in dialogue with the drama present in comic books.

Moving to the opposite wall, *Propped Up Tomb* depicts the impression of a figure lying flat, with the subtle halo of accumulated concrete around the head. One might also notice a subtle streak or mark trailing up to the figure also impressed in concrete giving it the appearance or implication of rising upwards.

To note, this print and *Tomb* depict the same action/sculpture, which, I will divulge here, was created in light of the previously described trope. However, rather than explaining the process and circumstances of its creation I would like to describe the effects of that process and, more to the point, how it is now contextualized through photographic prints.

Looking at *Propped Up Tomb*, tall with an almost life size impression of a body, what is more apparent than evidence of an action is the iconic nature of the figure set on a flat pictorial field. Around the evenly colored and textured field (that is the concrete mold) one notices a band of darkness. This band reveals the space immediately outside the edges of the sculpture showing the earth itself—dirt, rocks, grass, concrete debris, even slight glimpses of the plastic sheeting used in the mold-making process, to which

the sculpture is set in. A tension in viewing emerges between the scale of the sculpture and its relation with the ground and the two-dimensional pictorial depiction seen on the face, or surface, of the sculpture and which dominates the composition of the image. What is depicted undulates between the result of a *real* situation and the simple representation of a body on a surface. The contrast between ground and field, along with the scale of the depicted body, slightly smaller than normal scale, present a depiction rife with references to the “real life” site, yet existing in another world. As a representation of a body, the figure’s pose and hovering presence resembles a series of cultural associations: the artist Ana Mendiata’s *Siluetta* series (where evidence of her body is embedded in ‘natural’ settings), the myth of Christ’s ascension from the tomb, Hans Solo’s dark, tomb-like encasement in ‘carbonite’ in the film *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*, or even the odd situations or results of zany yet ambitious experiments with the body presented in *Jackass* the skate culture-inspired television show. An effect in both of the photographic prints there exists the problem present in much of the dialogue around photography in the late 20th century—that of its ability to portray an objective reality. The indexed sculpture performs as an iconic object, or disturbance, in one and a picture plane organized around an iconic composition in another, toying with the idea of objective realities and constructed fantasies. In *Propped Up Tomb* the pictorial flattening that occurs is furthered by the strong rectangular shape of the sculpture that frames the figure. Looking at the edges of the photo and noticing the small hints of ground and grass around it (also informed by *Tomb*), it subtly reveals its object-ness and relation to the

environment, while at the same time attempting to conform to the mechanical framing of a photograph itself.

The long rectangular shape also references the conventional use in comics to depict such scenes—here, a body has traveled across the ground to finally rest and a rectangular shape is used to encompass the important aspects of this action or event. The shape of the sculpture—pragmatic, yet significant in its final depiction—cryptically binds itself to these pictorial modes of representations. This unnatural framing performed by the object-as-photograph, coupled with the uncertain and uncanny presence of a body impressed into rock, furthers to trivialize our perceptual distinctions between fantasy and reality.

The Site-Responsive Sculptural Installation

Stepping away from these prints and looking to the middle of the space one sees four wooden boards leaning against a wall (the room's soffit). The boards are permeable, with a sequence of holes cut in them through to which one can view the prints and surrounding space. This work, titled *Comic frame abstraction: "Surely he can dig his way out from under a few...thousand...tons...o' cement. HAH! Sure he can! Any second now! I know he can... ..can't he? CANT HE?"* (2011), consists of separate planks which contain a succession of openings, ranging from a basic rectangle that spans the surface of the plank to a small hole in its center. The affect is simple yet perplexing. The openings seem to describe a succession of time if one follows the shape's evolution, from rectangle to small hole, or small hole to rectangle depending on which way you read or on which side you begin. Coupled with the title, we see a literal narrative structure has been adjoined to

the work—one might begin to understand where the shapes are drawn from, or their relation to what the title reveals, as an ‘abstraction’ of a comic page.

In reality the planks and openings do reference a series of frames from a comic book. The title itself quotes the text contained in the sequence of frames while the shape of the cuts quote the formal technique seen in this particular series of frames. To briefly explain, in this series of frames, viewers are shown the depiction of a construction yard through a rectangular bounding box: frame one. As we progress to the next scene (seen through another rectangular frame) we notice that our view has been virtually pulled back and the edges of another *circular* frame have begun to creep into the picture plane (always remaining, though, within the larger rectangular frame of the comic book cell). Progressively we are pulled farther and farther back until all we see is a small hole through which we had been looking at the scene of the construction yard. While this specific information is not necessary to understand implications of the work, the planks mock this series of events, referencing a sort of progression in time as the comic frames do. In this case, their object hood and placement allow the viewer to examine the visual technique pulled from the spatial logic of a comic book scene, as well as interact with it physically. Set in the middle of the room, the negative space cut into the boards creates separate windows or frames for viewing the space, as well as force a similar concept of viewing. The individual boards work to objectify or literalize the logical structure that imply a progression of time with frames, while implying a potential for interchangeability through their separate module nature and casual placement. The use of raw wood alludes to the depiction of a wood fence seen later around the construction yard in the comic but

also furthers the theme of ‘construction’ seen in the materials of the works (as I will discuss further) which is often raw and un-aestheticized.

Also, not completely necessary to understand but inherent in the work is a reference to the narrative described in the comic—that of a character waiting for someone who has sunk into a volume of cement. This playfully connects the work to the myth described by the situation seen in the large prints.

To note, as I began making work, the coincidental parallels to these specific references and the type of myth-building in which they are involved also informed the direction of other works.

The “Performance” (Doubled)

This brings me the last work in the show, which may be understood more as a series of interconnected pieces, because its context exists in multiple sites. One could either approach the work in the space—a large concrete ball, floating in the middle of the space, strewn together by cables—or one could see the ephemera from of a performance that mimicked its creation—another concrete ball on the ground, a tub and tarp littered with dried concrete—or, finally, one could see a performance (done on the opening night) which revealed the process through which the concrete ball are made. The title of the concrete balls hung by cables in the space is *Constructed Ball/Energy Ball/ the biggest ball I could make* (2011). The title points, first, to the process of the object’s construction, describing the existence of this irregular ball of concrete, certainly an unnatural form, as ‘constructed.’ Second, the use of the term ‘energy’ described by ‘energy ball’ points to the philosophical implications of the work and energy that it took to construct the ball

(and further its relation to the trope of an energy ball referenced in comic books and fantasy settings which I will discuss in a moment). Lastly, the rest of the title points to the desire to construct such a thing, as well as its connection to the artist. The title becomes important in navigating the different sites I previously discussed and their relations. For instance, the relation of energy, work or construction becomes apparent when viewing its actual construction. During the performance, it takes approximately thirty minutes to accumulate a mass of wet concrete and mold it into a ball as it gradually cures and becomes hard. In the exhibition space the first attempt at creating this ball is tethered by industrial cables, which anchor the mass in a position that floats at about eye level for viewers. The tension seen in the cables anchoring it leads to the inherent tension inside the ball itself, which becomes a center point for this tension. Through this there is a kind of homage, or now once removed representation, of the idea of energy and its manipulation, paralleling the issues addressed in the performance itself. Looking further, the reference to the term ‘energy ball’ alludes to a trope seen in comics and science fiction. In these contexts, characters imbued with special or mystical powers are often depicted harnessing and projecting a form of ‘energy’—its depiction usually fabricated through visual techniques in animation or CG rendering to give the appearance of electricity or lightning. Manga cartoons often depict scenes where this mystical energy is first focused into a ball, which is then projected or has the potential to explode. *Constructed Ball/Energy Ball*, in this light, becomes a sort of homage, test or realization (as with aspects of *Tomb*) to this particular trope while inhabiting a material in almost antithetical to its ‘light’ or animated nature in fantasy contexts.

In the performance I present the audience with an abridged presentation of its creation. I appear in a full black rubber suit, drawn from SM culture. Its relation to this culture of autoeroticism is first displaced though its utility in this performance. Here the suit is used to manipulate concrete; the pragmatic function of it is to protect my skin from the basic chemicals in curing concrete, which burn the skin. The title and context of the series then displaces it again by putting it in the context of comic book and super hero culture. The tight suit and the obscured face, in its suggestion of themes of concealment, eroticism and forced anonymity, reveal an underlying relation between comic fantasy and SM culture, and erotic's thereof.

Also, further possible inference reveals the suit's practical presence in creating the sculpture seen in *Tomb*. For instance, the impression of an *actual* body onto a large body of concrete would necessitate a similar utility to protect the body. Coupled with this assumption these realities truly collide. In both cases, the autoeroticism visually apparent in the rubber suit is coupled with the practical nature of the suit, which protects the actual body of the performer while creating this work. Neither takes precedent.

Watching the performance itself portrays the artist as 'hero' described further in the title and in context of the term 'energy ball' in comics. What ensues is the drama of its creation pushing the performer to a crippled almost abject position of pain and exertion. In watching the process, the artist cradles a heap of mud-like material, evoking primordial associations with excrement, sludge, or something of base organic form slouching inward due to its growing weight. Over time the attention, and at times tenderness, given while shaping the accumulating mass begins to resemble the nurturing

gesture of the maternal figure (which is not necessarily to say the mother) cradling a baby. It can also refer simply to act of creation. Apparent also in this relation is presence of pain (both physically and mentally). A viewer begins to understand that the artist will not abandon or put down the growing form while its eventual its crunching weight folds the artist over resulting in the subtle but perceivable feeling of pain and exhaustion. The performance concludes when the material has reached a hardened state, now as a shaped ball, and the artist gently places it down—exhibiting its apparent finality as a sculpture of sorts.

While I refer to myself performing, I also want to leave open the possibility of an implied character obscured and anonymous in the suit. It was important that the work hold this relation both for its theatrical presence as well as the allusion to masked characters in general.

Conclusions

To reflect, the work in the series takes various approaches to dealing with tropes of a culture (comics, fantasy, cinema, etc.), while complicating these allusions through the enacting of material manifestations. Moreover, sharing the process of creating such work reveals the complicated nature of the role of the artist in general, as hero, character, martyr, fool, or the fantasy of an artist in culture. It was a hope of mine in this exploration to retain a level of criticality and examination towards the tropes I examine while at the same time share my own cultural involvement in the fantasies from which they arise. Put another way, the possible hyper masculine qualities, already loosely affixed to my identity as a young, somewhat athletic male, are examined, hyperbolized, and

recontextualised throughout this series, but are also allowed to retain a confessional element. It is my hope that issues of identity in terms of gender not only remain, but are exposed as fluid and never bound to a single cultural stereotype. It is true there are examinations of aggression, violence, power and masculinity evident in the series' cultural and artistic references. Their presence signals my desire to challenge and question the particular contexts in which such ideas are performed (as with comics), while using them to describe a rich, and possibly spiritual, territory for investigation. It was trying to balance all of these aims, which became the biggest challenge, for I both covet a personal and devotional approach to art-making, with its sense of autobiography, and am also engaged in a critical examination of constructs of the 'self' and their instability, as articulated through such cultural tropes as the ones I have discussed. The productive tension between these two approaches has repeatedly appeared in my work, playing out through my treatments of my own body.

More generally, I think this series, as well as lots of my other work, addresses the viewer's, as well as my own, subjective perception of reality. I express an emotive response to themes and topics in this world through different mediums, which alternately functions as a conduit for communicating and/or evidence of a lack there of. Lastly, it is my belief that to address these multiple and shifting realities addresses the context we live in today and our relation to, or possibly dependence on, cinematically-conceived narrative, or fantasies, like those addressed in the pages of this discussion. Of primary interest here is the juxtaposition of these shifting realities with my on-going examination

of how the human body performs and *is* performed in and through the world. What is live-ness, what is presence, what is reality and how we are constantly constructing it?

APPENDIX

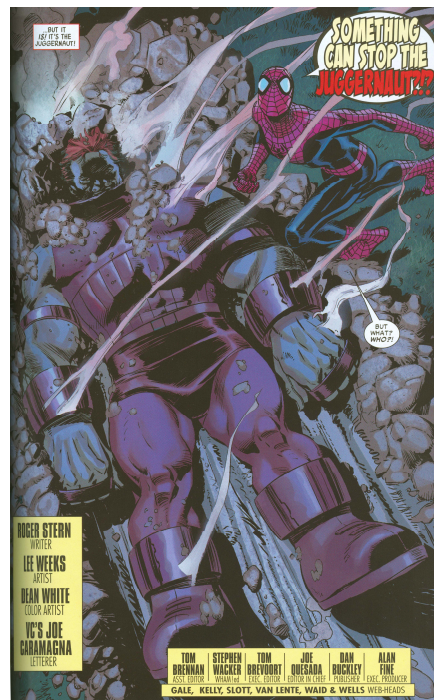


Fig. 1. Images of trope seen in comic books.



Fig. 2. View of exhibition from left entrance.



Fig. 3. View of exhibition from right entrance.



Fig. 4. View of *Propped Up Tomb*, 2011



Fig. 5. Installation view of *Comic Frame Abstraction*, 2011; *Constructed Ball/ Energy Ball/ The Biggest Ball I could make, Attempt #1*, 2011; and *Tomb for Marvel/Tomb for Lost Inertia (to be lifted)*, 2011.



Fig. 6. Installation view of *Tomb for Marvel*, 2011, through *Comic Frame Abstraction*, 2011.



Fig. 7. Installation view of *Tomb for Marvel/Tomb for Lost Inertia (to be lifted)*, 2011.



Fig. 8. Close view of *Propped Up Tomb*, 2011.



Fig. 9. Detail from *Propped Up Tomb*, 2011.



Fig. 10. Installation view of *Propped Up Tomb*, 2011.



Fig. 11. Installation view of *Comic Frame Abstraction*: "Surely he can dig his way out from under a few...thousand...tons...o' cement. HAH! Sure he can! Any second now! I know he can... ..can't he? CANT HE?", 2011.



Fig. 12. Installation view of *Comic Frame Abstraction*, 2011.



Fig. 13. Installation view of *Comic Frame Abstraction*, 2011.



Fig. 14. Installation view looking through *Comic Frame Abstraction*, 2011.



Fig. 15. View looking through peephole in *Comic Frame Abstraction*, 2011.



Fig. 16. View of *Propped Up Tomb*, 2011, looking through *Comic Frame Abstraction*, 2011.



Fig. 17. Installation view of *Constructed Ball/ Energy Ball/ The Biggest Ball I could make, Attempt #1*, 2011.



Fig. 18. Detail from installation view of *Constructed Ball/ Energy Ball/ The Biggest Ball I could make, Attempt #1*, 2011.



Fig. 19. Installation view of *Constructed Ball/ Energy Ball/ The Biggest Ball I could make, Attempt #1*, 2011; and *Propped Up Tomb*, 2011.



Fig. 20. Installation view of *Constructed Ball/ Energy Ball/ The Biggest Ball I could make, Attempt #1*, 2011; *Propped Up Tomb*, 2011; and *Comic Frame Abstraction*, 2011.

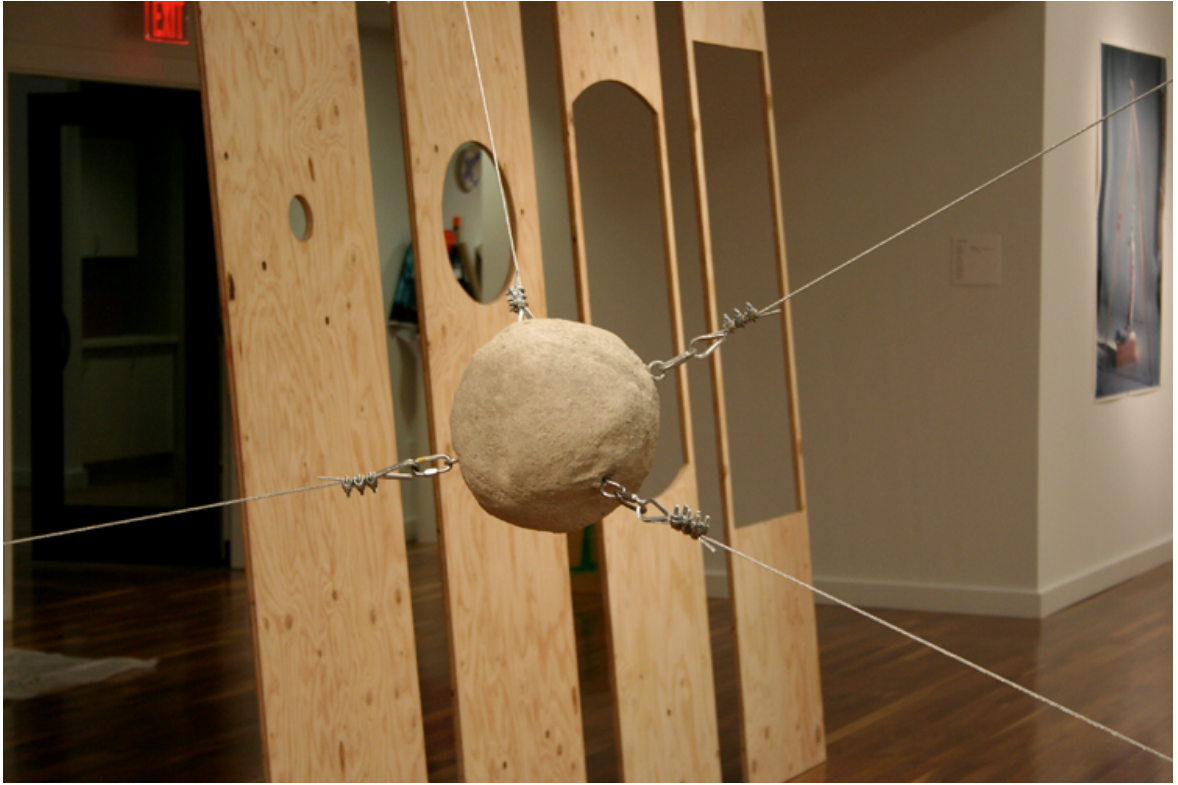


Fig. 21. Installation view of *Constructed Ball/ Energy Ball/ The Biggest Ball I could make, Attempt #1*, 2011.



Fig. 22. Performance still from *Energy Ball w/ Hero, Attempt # 2*, 2011.
Performed in the atrium of the Culver Center, Riverside, CA.



Fig. 23. Performance still from *Energy Ball w/ Hero, Attempt # 2, 2011*.
Performed in the atrium of the Culver Center, Riverside, CA.



Fig. 24. Performance still from *Energy Ball w/ Hero, Attempt # 2*, 2011.
Performed in the atrium of the Culver Center, Riverside, CA.



Fig. 25. Performance still from *Energy Ball w/ Hero, Attempt # 1*, 2011.
Performed in my garage.



Fig. 26. Performance still from *Energy Ball w/ Hero, Attempt # 1*, 2011.
Performed in my garage.



Fig. 27. Performance still from *Energy Ball w/ Hero, Attempt # 1*, 2011.
Performed in my garage.



Fig. 28. Performance still from *Energy Ball w/ Hero, Attempt # 1*, 2011.
Performed in my garage.



Fig. 29. Performance still from *Energy Ball w/ Hero, Attempt # 1*, 2011.
Performed in my garage.