

THREADS OF IMPERFECTION

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Master of Fine Arts

by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

THREADS OF IMPERFECTION

presented by Shirley Ann Boudreaux

a candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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THESIS DEDICATION

I lovingly dedicate this thesis to my beloved husband because in some ways everything is for him. Bebé you have supported me each and every step of this journey. While working on my Master Fine Art, I have ignored the world around us, often forgetting meals, birthdays, dates and civil conversation. You have been the light at the end of the day, the one to pick me up, and then dust me off when I thought I could not go on. Thank you for being my sounding board when I was in the dark more than anything, thank you for being soul mate. Most of all Bebé I would not have made it without you.

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ABSTRACT

The quest for perfection is exhausting and unrelenting, although many strive to attain it. This project challenges the notion of “perfection” as it pertains to the idealized family. Garment-like sculptures made from sewing thread, a material that suggests “hanging on by a thread”, depict family members and highlight the range of positive/negative emotions involved in family dynamics in order for viewers to evaluate their personal relationship with family.

Take me down to the river bend

Where I can wash this poison of righteousness from my skin.

This blinding dream that has dropped me down to the fighting end

There's barely anything left to me that you can see.

I'm just a fracture in this house of perfectness that has exiled me by decree.

In the rush of banishment

That rolling down from the everlasting stream

I claim imprisonment of imperfectness.

Now take me up to where the angels sing past the black that sorrow brings.

Then bring me home from righteousness with these secrets that I have seen.

—Shirley Boudreaux

Chapter I: Balancing Imperfection and Perfection

“No one is perfect... that’s why pencils have erasers.” — unknown author.

As adults we recognize that there are flaws in everything and everyone. Many of us have tunnel vision in this quest for perfection, because we know that there's no such thing as perfection. However, in my youth I spent an incredible amount of time and energy trying to be everything to everyone. I grew up in a culture (Mormon) where perfection in thought, word, act, and deed were mandated: According to an edict of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,

Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all people may “progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny.” Just as a child can develop the attributes of his or her parents over time, the divine nature that humans inherit can be developed to become like their Heavenly Father's.

“Perfection” as a noun can be defined as “[t]he condition, state, or quality of being free from defect; flawlessness, faultlessness; purity. Also in weakened sense: supreme or comparative excellence.”

This experience created a personal need to strive for perfection in everything I did. As I matured, I learned that life is messy and imperfect. Trying to be “perfect” within the tradition of the church is exhausting and unattainable and there are flaws in everything and everyone. Everyone lives with imperfection. It’s part of being human. We have to maintain a balance while still living a full life.

Traditions are taught to us by our family members and shown through observation of the behaviors in each personal relationship within the family. Society’s influence on the traditional family can be measured by outside influences such as strength, fragility,

and life-changing moments that can occur at any moment. At times beliefs can be corrosive within the family and society. This can happen when the belief is at odds with what is experienced. For example, 1 Timothy 2:12 of the Christian Bible says “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” Attempting to put this belief into practice invariably results in frustration of women’s personalities and wastes whatever gifts or wisdom they may have to offer. To compel someone to “be in silence,” to deny them the opportunity to express their voice and experience, is to stifle their humanity. Conversely, not every man is naturally suited to be in a position or mindset of authority. When individuals are forced into roles for which they are not suited, feelings of inadequacy produce mental and emotional discord.

Traditions within my Mormon family are where the idea of perfection came from and where I was taught to uphold each and every expectation to the highest standard. In my case, I made numerous earnest attempts to escape these unrealistic standards set by others. However, when these standards were not upheld it brought shame upon the family and upon the community. Being imperfect, in the eyes of the righteous, was a shameful path within the tradition of the Mormon family and viewed as harmful.

When I was growing up in Utah, one of those perfect Mormon families was the Osmonds. They were a couple with several young sons. The sons had a great ability to harmonize together. The youngest son at the time was Donny. He could sing very well for his age. Mr. and Mrs. Osmond were trying to raise money so their two oldest sons (who were deaf) could get hearing aids, and they also wanted the money to send the boys on a Mormon mission somewhere in the world. The boys became very popular with the girls as they grew older, especially Donny. They had their own television show with

Donny and his younger sister, Marie, as the hosts. They were famous and devout Mormons. Every family in my community wanted to be just like them. The Osmonds were the symbol of perfection in the community and at church. They did everything right. Their children were good, godly, and worked hard to help support the family. As they grew older, their lives changed and brought several challenges to their family and their faith. In reality they did not have the perfect family but experienced problems and disappointments like everyone else. In time, I realized that what I considered to be the ideal family was imperfect and flawed.

I came to realize the chance of reaching perfection is in each person's mindset. It is an unreachable goal, and trying to achieve this goal is not realistic. An example of the futility of perfection is the "perfect body" many young women strive to achieve. This places unrealistic expectations on the young women in our society. It places them in a situation where they are trapped in a corner. Various media representations from advertising, the entertainment industry, the fashion industry, music videos, and even video games constantly bombard us with an ideal image of female beauty that is young, slender, usually white, and perfectly proportioned. It is a body type that very few women naturally have, and yet it is virtually the only body type that we see. Even professional models, who are naturally as close to the ideal image of beauty as possible, have their images Photoshopped® and otherwise manipulated to make them even more "perfect," until they represent a standard that is literally impossible to attain in real life. By accepting the premise that a perfect body is attainable, and then attempting to achieve it, women become trapped in a vicious cycle of self-defeating wasted effort. Pursuing this impossible, artificial perfection can only result in feelings of inadequacy and can destroy

her sense of self: When a woman's sense of self-worth is tied to her physical beauty as defined by others—and unattainable—then she has relinquished control over her own dignity, and that ideal of perfection is not her own.

Another example of women's need for perfection is not having the ability to reach the level of perfection as a wife or mother. Often, I feel a high degree of anxiety about my own imperfections of not having the perfect house to raise children or the perfect physical body for my husband. I work every day to achieve perfection, even though I know this goal is unattainable, and so far I have been unsuccessful in reaching that dream that was placed on me in my youth. From my point of view, perfection is an illusion that we place on ourselves and imperfection is the beauty and reality of our lives. The gift of imperfection makes us try harder to be happy. If we just let go of who we think we are supposed to be and embrace who we really are, life has a way of working itself out.

My supposition is that you should make yourself happy first and let the rest find happiness too. Life is not easy, but it's the way we cope with the hard times and treat others that eventually defines us as human beings. Some days are harder than others. As a mother of three grown children, no matter what I did, or do, or the way I raised my children, they will never be perfect and they must go down their own paths.

Now that I'm older and comfortable with imperfection, I have worked out many issues in my life. I am content with my job, getting older, church, and children. As a result of these experiences and their impact on my life, imperfection/perfection has become the subject of my creative research. This project challenges the idea of "perfection" and stability in the family unit. Through the use of sewing thread, a material

that suggests “hanging on by a thread,” sculptures grounded in garment forms are created to highlight the fact there is no such thing as a perfect family.

To illustrate this idea, I have constructed a body of work that is centered on an idealized family unit; the family is shown in a perfect, flawless state but framed by examples of the imperfections that besiege this ideal in the course of daily life.

Sewing thread, because of its perceived qualities of strength and fragility, is used as a material to construct garment-like sculptures in various states of completion and deconstruction. The use of this material simultaneously suggests strength and fragility in various situations, from idealistic perfection to life-changing moments of crisis. The idiom “holding on by a thread” is suggested by open, worn areas on the garments, while the act of obsessively interlocking the threads through chaotic stitching, depicts the pressures of coveting perfection. Family members are showcased individually and in groupings. Extremes of family emotional states are suggested through the perfect whole garment contrasted with a thread-barren puddle. These echoes of garments highlight the futility of the quest for perfection and the ideal family, because in truth this condition is unattainable.

Chapter II:

“Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien. (The **perfect is the enemy of the good.**)”

—Voltaire

Formal Analysis

The show comprises five main pieces made of thread with five secondary pieces constructed out of wood and thread. The main pieces represent a family, the members of which are signified as garments constructed using stereotypically color coded thread. Pink is used to symbolize the daughter/little girl, blue for the son/little boy, red for the wife/mother, and white for the husband/father figure (Illus. 1, p. 18). The secondary pieces create the environment for the family. They are two-dimensional cutouts of furniture shapes painted gallery white with a border of nails with thread intertwined in it to complete the shape. The furniture (a desk, dresser, and picture frames) indicates a room or setting in which the interaction between family members is taking place and suggests a scene or narrative. The white wood visually recedes into the gallery walls, and the thread visually relates to the characters of the family members, which are also made of thread.

At 1875 square feet, the gallery is a large space, and thus each sculpture was surrounded by substantial negative space. Dramatic spotlights further contributed to a sense of isolation between each character by casting strong shadows against the floor, which added a layer of visual and narrative texture. The large area also resulted in a very quiet environment, almost stifling. This produced an ironically tranquil feeling in the gallery, which deviated slightly from my original intent. However, what the narrative lost in terms of edginess and tension, it gained in terms of isolation and loneliness. The cast

shadows had a haunting quality reminiscent of memories and contributed important narrative information about this family.

In “Family Portrait,” (Illus. 1, p. 18) which greeted viewers first upon entering the gallery, the shadows of the figures were cast onto the plinth and floor beneath them, taking on a presence of their own. The work was purposely lit so that a very strong, very dark shadow was created. The shadow is literally the darkness of these characters, revealed. Shadows also evoke the concept of memory, and also represent the soul. Because of the angle of the spotlight, the parents’ shadows are shown creeping away from the platform, which hints at what is coming next.

Next in the line of sight is the figure of the husband in his office, facing his wife. His figure is positioned so that it is turned toward the wife, implying that he is looking at her, across the entire width of the gallery (approximately 20 feet).

The act of gazing at someone or something suggests desire or longing to have or be near the object of the gaze. He is thinking of home, but not engaging with home. He is in tatters because of his internal conflict: He wants to be one place but is situated in another (the office). (See Illus. 2, p. 19)

The dress that represents the wife is situated in the home environment, across the gallery from the husband. These two figures are physically very far apart. This distance is accentuated by the lighting, and the fact that—although he is looking toward her—she is not looking at him, but back toward the family portrait. Their separation shows a lack of communication caused by their isolation.

In all of these pieces, the figures face one direction, suggesting a longing or sense of desire; but the shadows point in the opposite direction, pulling them back toward a

reality that they do not want to face. The figures have their backs to the shadow; which as mentioned earlier, for me represents the inner struggles (darkness) within oneself, memories, or the soul.

The final stage of the sequence is told by the mounds of unwound thread on the floor, in conjunction with two sets of four black picture frames on the wall. By themselves, the disintegrated piles of thread, in their loss of form, depict a moment of collapse when failure in the quest for perfection is realized. The series of frames give the viewer information that the setting is in a home, and the one frame in each set askew hints that something is amiss.

The garment as metaphor. The journey and the emotional state of each member of the family is shown through thread-like garments. By challenging the notion of perfection inside the family unit, I am asking viewers to evaluate their own behavior. The quantity of thread in each piece, and the complexity of the layers of thread, shows a measure of the work involved in staying emotionally healthy. A complete whole garment suggests the moment of life when we feel whole. Each layer of thread is used to suggest both positive and negative moments within life. Each garment is sewn onto a water-soluble substrate called Solvy® that is washed away once the sewing is complete, though a residue remains in the threads and acts as a stiffener. Solvy ® comes in sheets of translucent starch and provides a support for the threads while they are in progress. This step in the process—washing away the foundation while leaving a residue—metaphorically enacts the psychical erosion that a person may experience as the consequence of disappointment or disillusionment over not attaining perfection. “Fabric” is used as a metaphor for society or community, and thread is what holds fabric together.

In these pieces, the fabric (of how the family fits into their community, etc.) is missing and the threads are what remain.

Description of artwork.

“The Family.” “The Family” (Illus. 1, p. 18) is a human-sized, stereotypic iconic family: a mother, father, and two children, a boy and girl. The group measures 4.5' × 4.5' × 5.5'. There is a father standing behind the mother that represents the backbone of the family and their two children, a boy and a girl, in front. A 4' x 5' picture frame is suspended in front of the grouping of figures, strongly reinforcing the message that this is a moment posed for a portrait. The frame casts such a strong shadow onto the figures that even though this is a representation of the “perfect” moment of family life, there is an element of foreboding to it. They are displayed to suggest a formal family portrait: This is a representation of the “public face” of the family, the most perfect version that can be presented to the world. Each figure is made out of thread that has been sewn over and over in overlapping sewn lines that make a very tight whole garment, in order to suggest strength, tension, responsibility, and perfection. The children are placed in front of the mother and father, protected by the parents. Having the children in front also reinforces the idea that they are the most important members of the family. Stereotypical garments are used; the boy is a blue jumper and the girl is in a soft pink dress. Using these stereotypically traditional representations act as symbolic shorthand for the viewer: There is no ambiguity about who these characters are or their expected role.

“Holding on by a Thread” and “Echo of Home.” “Holding on by a Thread” (Illus. 2, p. 19) is a three dimensional human-shaped garment that suggests a mother’s dress. This piece measures 2' × 1' × 5.5'. It is composed of dark pink sewing thread and sewn lines that overlap one another in a circular pattern to form the illusion of fabric. The curvilinear pattern suggests femininity, while the lacey negative spaces between the lines belie its completeness. This incompleteness is just as important as the actual thread itself and alludes to disintegration. The dark pink color is used to highlight the stereotypes of gender, while the form suggests an older woman’s style of clothing. It has a boat neck, three-quarter sleeves, empire waist, and the suggestion of a long hemline; where the actual hemline would be has disintegrated into loosely gathered loops of thread, the length of which suggests a conservative dress that an older or middle-aged woman might wear to church. The top half of this garment is more tightly woven and symmetrical than the lower portion, which has more of an open freeform weave hanging to the floor. The bottom left side contains more negative space where the threads are not attached to suggest that the garment is falling apart and implies a gradation from order into chaos. The viewer’s eye naturally gravitates to the top of the garment, where the head should be, and then travels downward. This implied direction suggests to the viewer the direction of the narrative; she may still appear whole from the chest up, but she is in the process of falling apart at the fringes of her garment. This is a wife and mother who is no longer able to maintain even the appearance of perfection and is beginning to collapse from the inside out. She is lit from the front so her shadow is reaching back toward the silhouette of her dresser, “Echo of Home” (Illus. 6, p. 22). The dresser signifies a place in the home, specifically the bedroom. Positioned next to “Holding on by a Thread,” “Echo of Home”

provides context: She is situated in a private domestic environment. It also references the shadow.

The bedroom is a transitional space of refuge and also of preparation: It is where a woman “puts herself together” before entering the public sphere or going out into the world, and where she comes to strip off her façade at the end of the day. These life-sized simplified shapes represent furniture—a desk, dresser, and frames—and are made out of wood painted white with nails around the outside through which black thread has been strung. Its dimensions are 5' × 4' × 1".

“Hold On” and “Echo of Work.” “Hold On” (Illus. 3, p. 20) is representative of the man and his role in the family. It is depicted as a classical man’s shirt made of white thread and is approximately 4' × 2' × 5.5' in dimension. The figure hangs suspended above a white platform. His tie is on the platform, drawing the eye down and visually connecting to the silhouette of the desk behind him (Illus. 7, p. 23). In this installation, his shadow is also off the plinth, pointing away from his wife (Illus. 2, p. 19) and toward his desk.

The shirt is a representation of the father’s business work shirt. “White collar” shirts are associated with well-paying jobs and they are stereotypical signifiers of men as breadwinners or providers. It is also what many men wear to church. Sewn in extremely layered, tight, stitched thread that makes up the lines of the garment simultaneously suggests kinetic energy, the fast paced life of the working father, as well as his expected strength. The repetition of vertical and horizontally stitched lines suggests the grid, which is associated with order and logic and contrasts with the curvilinear pattern of the dress. The back-and-forth technique used to create the grid-like pattern of the shirt creates a

more aggressive undertone, and alludes to the aggression associated with masculinity; whereas the curved lines repeated throughout the dress have a delicate, lacy, “feminine” softness. Like the dress however, the weave becomes looser further down the form. The buttons on the shirt are tightly in place at the collar, but become progressively more loose and detached toward the bottom hem. The right arm and the bottom of the garment are on the verge of detaching, as though he is working himself to the point of disintegration. Like his partner’s figure in “Holding on by a Thread,” this is a husband and father in the process of wearing himself out.

Much like “Echo of Home” (Illus. 6, p. 22), “Echo of Work” (Illus. 7, p. 23) serves to provide a setting for its companion piece, “Done In” (Illus. 5, p. 21). It is the silhouette of a desk, informing the viewer that the man is within his office. It is approximately 5' × 4' × 2" in size and is made out of wood painted white with nails around the outside edge, through which black thread has been strung. The thread has been applied in multiple layers to form a dense, semi-opaque web that fills the shape. This is another reference to the shadow. This office is not a refuge, but where he goes to perform, to fulfill his responsibilities. It is a hostile, stressful atmosphere that helps explain why he is beginning to disintegrate.

“Weight of the World.” (Illus. 4, p. 21) The series has progressed to become more abstract in order to more eloquently depict the extreme emotional state of falling apart. “Weight of the World” and “Done In” (Illus. 5, p. 21) reflect adult moments of despair in the family. It measures 2' × 2' × 1' and is made using the same quantity of thread as was used to make the dress in “Holding on by a Thread.”

“Weight of the World” is a representation of an internal place that we feel and not the perfect version that we show to the world. It is made out of dark pink thread, symbolic of the mother figure, and appears to be an unwound heap on the floor. This piece has the feeling of life unwinding to the point of despair into a pile that lies on the floor. What was once a whole garment has almost completely disintegrated. This unraveled pile is meant to suggest tension, imperfection, heartache, sorrow, and sadness. There is no longer any resemblance to the outer shell of the ideal mother, but just the inner torments that lies in a heap on the hard cold floor showing that the weight of the world has taken its toll on this woman.

“Done In.” “Done In” is approximately 2' x 2' x 1' and uses the same quantity of thread as was used to make the garment, as though we are seeing the shirt in a disintegrated state.

This is a representation of feeling of despair, as though every aspect of your life is no longer working as it should or is even conspiring against you. This individual can no longer show the world that perfect, manly exterior and has come to the point of giving up. “Done In” is made out of white thread that has been unwound over and over to lie as a pile of thread that is in a heap on floor and is no longer a whole garment. This work shows us the psychological torment that is going on inside of this man’s life that he does not show the world. In my experience, it is a common occurrence for men who are working to provide for a family to come home at the end of the day and “collapse,” or “fall apart” from the weight of responsibility.

“Line of Memories.” Much like “Echo of Work”, “Line of Memories” (Illus. 8, p. 24) serves to provide a setting for its companion piece, “Done In.” It is the silhouette of family portraits, indicating that the man is at home. In many family homes, a wall is designated for the display of family photographs. This piece references that space within the home. There are four 8" × 10" picture frames painted gallery white and strung with black thread, which creates a web. The frames are arranged in a horizontal line and spaced approximately eight inches apart. As a whole, the arrangement is 6' × 2' × 1.5". The fourth frame on our right is hung crooked in relation to the other three, an indication that something is amiss or out of order.

“Memories of Time.” Much like “Echo of Home”, “Memories of Time” (Illus. 9, p. 25) serves to provide a setting for its companion piece, “Weight of the World”. It is the silhouette of family portraits, informing the viewer that the woman is in the home by referencing the wall of photographs. There are four 8" × 10" frames arranged in a square formation approximately 5' × 5' × 1.5" in size. Each frame has nails driven around the edge that are used as a support for intertwined black threads that fill the frame with a semi-transparent, shadowy web. The bottom right hand frame is hung crooked in relation to the other three, also indicating as in “Line of Memories,” that something is awry within the home.

Chapter III

Conclusion

“Have no fear of perfection—you’ll never reach It.” —Salvador Dali

I want viewers to be able to see themselves in the story that the work is telling, and re-evaluate how they see perfection; and in that re-evaluation, accept that the ideal is unattainable. As an example of what I was trying to represent throughout the thesis as manifested in the work, “Holding on by a Thread” (Illus. 2, p. 19) gives us a look into the internal feelings of what one person can be experiencing underneath a public persona. The stark lighting in the gallery accentuated this metaphoric contrast through the literal contrast of light and shadows. The process of maintaining an external face while undergoing internal emotional turmoil is, if not universal, nearly universal. I believe I was successful inasmuch as I was able to identify and illustrate an emotional situation to which many people, regardless of age, class, or background, would be able to relate.

While perfection may exist in concept, it does not exist in reality. Imperfection is part of the human condition, and without our imperfections we would lose much of our individuality. If a viewer is struggling with the burden of trying to attain this impossible standard, the work shows them one possible outcome of continuing with that struggle; and that outcome is one of self-destruction. The work is a counter-message to all of the messages we receive from the media, church, society, peers, family, and so on to strive for unrealistic standards of “perfection,” and gives the viewer permission to accept the flaws in their lives, to stop struggling to reach an impossible goal before they wind up in a heap on the floor. It is a warning, and also a suggestion to choose another path.

People have the freedom to pick and choose what life offers, and to choose what we take from life. Standards within groups or communities provide rules and structure, but they can be perceived differently from subjective viewpoints. We have the ability to choose our realities and how we deal with them so that we don't unravel. As Socrates is reported to have said, "[t]he unexamined life is not worth living."

This version is a moment in telling, but the show is still growing. I see other pieces being added that tell the story differently. The story I wanted to tell about the two adults has been told the way I wanted to tell it. From here, I want to tell the children's story.

Going through this process of making art that has come from my own soul and showing a part of my past has helped me understand my own life better. In understanding myself I can understand others. It has also led to an understanding that we as human beings are going through changes that affect the way we see life and present ourselves to the world.

This journey has been a healing process for me. It has helped me understand who I am, where I come from, and where I'm going. I cannot change the past, but I have learned to release the burden of trying to be perfect, that it is okay to fail, and okay not to be like everybody else. I feel a shaking of the ground I stand on. The world is changing. Just like the air, the nature of life is not permanence, but in a state of flux, with things ever changing.

We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us. The old skin has to be shed before the new one can come. —Joseph Campbell

Appendix

Illustration of Artwork



Illustration 1. “Family Portrait,” a sculpture comprising four garments made from sewing thread, a 4' × 5' picture frame, and a large white plinth.



Illustration 2. “Holding on by a Thread,” a sculpture of a dress in a state of disintegration made from red sewing thread, in the foreground. *Note.* Its companion piece, “Echo of Home,” is visible on the wall behind.

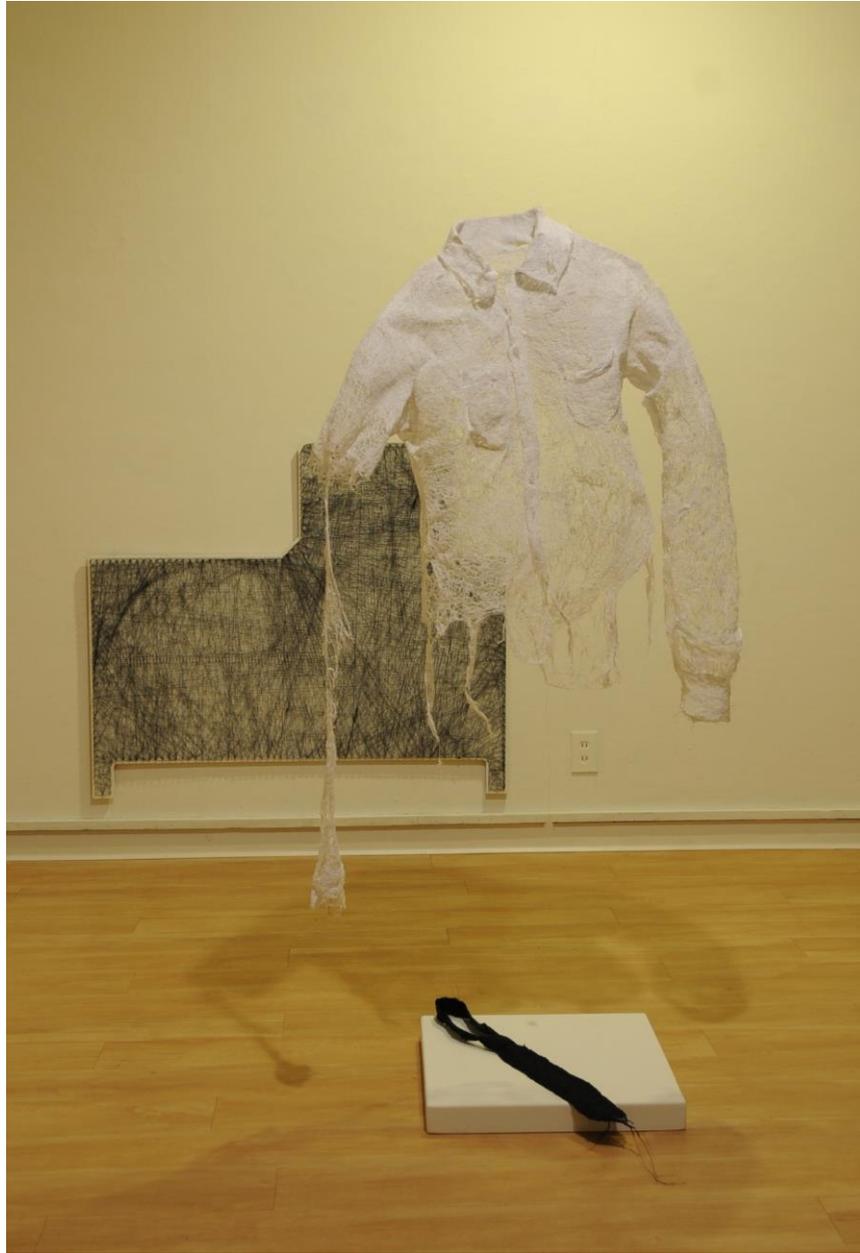


Illustration 3. “Hold On,” a sculpture of a man’s shirt and tie in a state of disintegration, made out of white and black sewing thread. *Note.* Its companion piece, “Echo of Work,” is visible on the wall behind.



Illustration 4. “Weight of the World,” a sculptural representation of the dress from “Holding on by a Thread” in a state of complete disintegration, suggesting the passage of time.



Illustration 5. “Done In,” a sculptural representation of the shirt from “Hold On” in a state of complete disintegration, suggesting the passage of time.



Illustration 6. “Echo of Home,” a sculptural silhouette of a dresser, on the wall behind its companion piece, “Holding on by a Thread.”

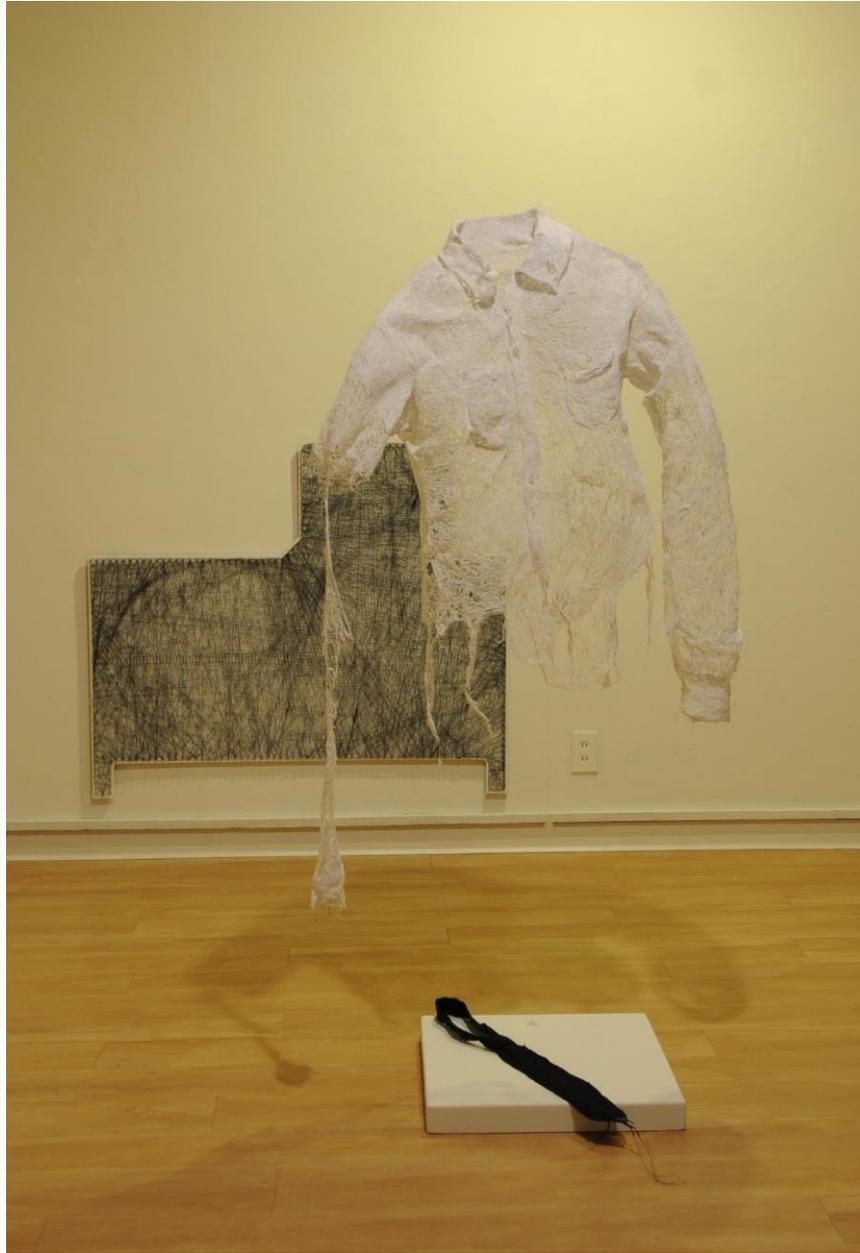


Figure 7. “Echo of Work” a sculptural silhouette of a desk, on the wall behind its companion piece, “Hold On.”

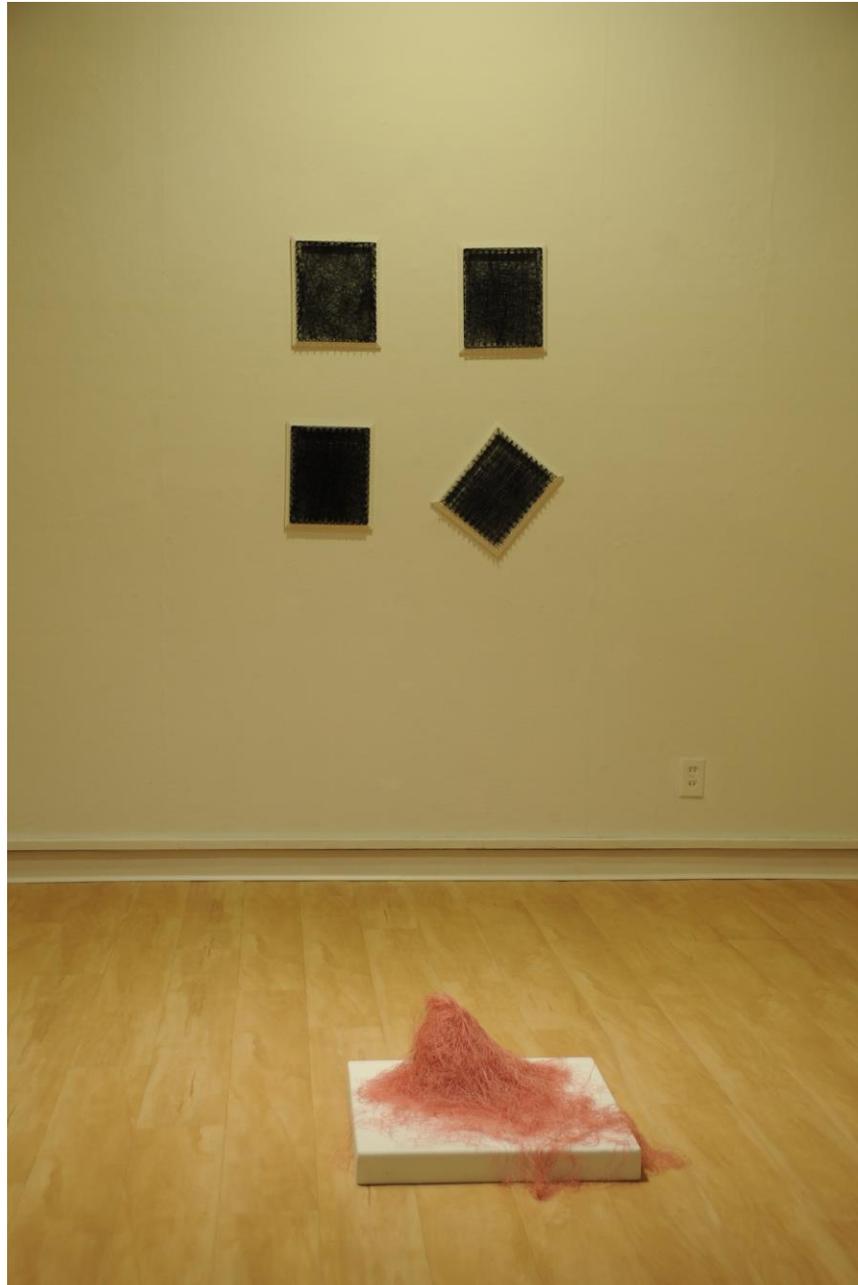
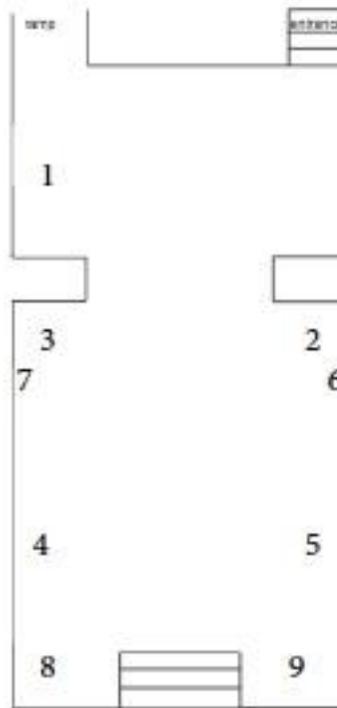


Illustration 8. “Memories of Time,” a sculpture made of four wooden picture frames, nails, and black sewing thread, which alludes to family portraits within the home. *Note.* Its companion piece “Weight of the World” is on the floor in front.



Illustration 9. “Line of Memories,” a sculpture made of four wooden picture frames, nails, and black sewing thread, which alludes to family portraits within the home. *Note.* Its companion piece “Done In” is on the floor in front.

Map of the Gallery



1. "The Family"
2. "Holding on by a Thread"
3. "Hold On"
4. "Weight of the world"
5. "Done In"
6. "Echo of Home"
7. "Echo of Work"
8. "Line of Memories"
9. "Memories of Time"

Video of the Exhibition in the gallery

<http://youtu.be/njuSfrbJX3k>

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