

INTRO

Hello, my name is Ruby, I am an intermedia major here at PNCA.

Thank you for being here. Today I will be sharing with you my thesis work I have made this semester, which I have titled *Tethering*.

Throughout this speech, I am going to walk all of you through my process of making this work, and the principles with which it was made. Through the ideas of process based making, materiality, iteration, gesture, and abstraction, I will frame this work for you in the same context in which I was creating it. I will also be discussing the key artists who have influenced this work, and contextualize mine through their precedent. Finally, I will share with you what I learned throughout this project, and how it has shaped me as an artist moving forward.

Before getting started, I want to mention that there are booklets on each chair in the room. These are visual aids, filled with process photos of this work. I know that some of the ways I describe this project may become a bit abstract, and I hope that some photos of the processes I am discussing today will make some of these talking points easier to contextualize. There is also a glossary of each sculpture and its respective number, Tether 1-5, in the back of the booklet.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Tethering, in short, is about relationships. It is about connection, it is about the ways in which we as people knit ourselves together, bind ourselves to each other. How we negotiate closeness with each other. These structures we build to create proximity to

each other are unstable, subject to constant change. We shift positions, we take a new stance, we push away and come back together.

We foster interdependence amongst ourselves, relying on each other to build ways of being that offer us new worlds. They are utterly impermanent. Some fall apart altogether, disintegrate under pressure, time, and outside environmental factors, while some carry us, in our own understanding of forever, through our lives.

This series, which consists of five sculptures, Tether 1 through 5, share the same central formal components: two sides, shaped like the letter J, wrapped together in five different ways.

Each sculpture has a pronounced sameness, as well as a pronounced difference, with the one next to it, in whatever way you view them.

These sculptures are not meant to be a linear progression, a chronology from one side of a spectrum to another. Rather, they all exist at the same time, almost as alternatives to each other, each one a proposition of a different way of embrace. In each work, there is a new prospect of tethering, a new means of closeness can be achieved.

This series is a family of objects, but each also stands alone. They exist both autonomously and in unison, each with their own internal logic, organizing, and expression, which exists in harmony with its counterparts through shared materials and handling. The ways in which this series could continue are nearly endless- this is not the only five ways of tethering, rather just the first five that presented themselves to me.

My artistic practice would be considered process based. What this means is that the focus of my artmaking is contingent on the relationship I forge with the material in my hands, which brings me to meaning through continual engagement. To be clear, I do not feel process is the meaning of the work. Rather, rigorous process based working allows meaning to emerge, unsettling it from the bed of my subconsciousness, allowing it to

rise to the surface. The lynchpin of these sculptures, of all the art I create, is my own search for understanding through the act of making.

So, the final forms standing before you today are a testament to process. I did not set out on this project with a clear idea in mind, a predetermined shape, a plan. Well, actually, I did, and then it became clear that the material did not care what my plan was.

The final artwork I am presenting you is the result of extensive material inquiry, of seemingly endless false starts, rejected ideas, failed sculptures, and hours of construction and deconstruction of ideas, form, and thought.

Eventually, I had to surrender, and approach this process only with a deep seated urge to create something out of a material that felt irresistible to me, and a sense of urgency to create work that expressed a part of myself that I could not articulate verbally.

I wanted to make work about interdependence, and connection. I wanted to make sculptures that consisted of multiple pieces, in which I would orchestrate a relationship between the two. Beyond that, I struggled to articulate an actual physical form. Thus, I turned to the materials for answers.

MATERIALITY 1/4

Materiality is a conceptual approach to art that asserts that the materials used to make work have their own inherent qualities, histories, and essences that will be imbued in the final artwork.

As Georges Didi Hubermann, a French philosopher and art historian asserts, there have been two clashing schools of thought pertaining to materiality, particularly as it is a newer development as content and philosophical concern in modern art.

On one hand, material could be considered solely as pragmatic- based on tradition,

history, or functionality.

In the other, because of these qualities, materials begin to be imbued with cultural significance and personal meaning. Both of them are realities of material choice, and thus between them is a tension:

The essence of the art object consists equally of the will of the artist, and the material itself.

In this way, materials take their own life as much as they are given life by an artist's hand.

Materiality in my practice is something I consider to be a negotiation between the material's natural inclination and the artist's intervention, fostering a relationship between the two that can produce an artwork that could only exist through their union.

I find myself obsessive about the meanings, physicality, and emotional impact of material selection.

Working with material is a collaborative process, rather than solely my artistic will being imposed upon a medium. Materials bring their own series of lessons and messages to me through our mutual engagement, which allow me to uncover meaning over the duration of the creation. This process is one of both research and intuitive making, unifying the scientific, historical, or cultural information about the medium with my response to it.

In short, my response to the material often reveals parts of my subconscious or emotional world I previously did not have access to in tangible thought, or spoken word. Through making the art, I begin to find a framework for expression of the deepest parts of myself and my perspective.

MATERIALITY 2/4: RUBBER LATEX

These sculptures are made of natural rubber latex tubing. I stumbled upon this material by chance, wandering past a roll of it at the hardware store. Seemingly inexplicably

attracted to the ephemeral, transparent line, I bought ten feet of it and brought it back to my studio.

Despite a rational understanding of its utilitarian function, I was enraptured by its formal attributes- a softness, a quiet insistence on its own pliability. I ran it through my hands constantly, wrapping it around my fingers and palms over and over again, feeling its elasticity, its eerily soft texture, and watching its yellow transparency shift as it bent and moved.

At conception, natural latex is a sap, harvested predominantly from the *Hevea brasiliensis* [HEHVAYA BRAZIL-IENSIS] tree, or a rubber tree. During this harvest, called tapping, ammonia is added to the sap to prevent prematurely congealing, before the sap is strained, washed multiple times, and rolled to remove excess water. The subsequent latex is then vulcanized to improve stability and durability, before being molded into its final form. This industrialized process transforms deeply organic matter, priming it for seemingly endless applications. The result is a material that is extremely stretchy, durable, and malleable.

Latex's great pliability and durability, however, is threatened by its own mortality. The material is compromised primarily through UV rays, which accelerate oxidization, creating a loss of elasticity. The other primary form of breakdown is through oils, which compromise the structure of the polymers as they diffuse into the material itself. Slowly but steadily through contact with the world at large, it will disintegrate.

MATERIALITY 3/4: LATEX QUALITIES

Thus, in working with latex, there is a paradox of both generation form and degeneration of material. The former happens with immediacy, whereas the latter is set in motion by contact with my hands. The oils of my skin, naturally occurring, will slowly be absorbed

into the latex- gently, methodically working their way into the bonds between the polymers.

Throughout this process, the latex's natural propensity to degeneration is accelerated by my hands in the act of making the sculptures. Over time- weeks, months, years, the whole form will be compromised, crumbling into some version of nothing.

The process of making these sculptures is a mimicry of our own material and emotional realities: everything is subject to change. Contact contributes to erosion, and erosion will eventually lead to new forms. This impermanence, when used to address the notion of connection and tethering, places emphasis on the fleeting nature of relationships and bonds, which are infinitely subject to change, decay, and ultimately, transformation.

The first telltale signs of erosion in these sculptures are the color. When first created, the latex is a light yellow ochre. As time passes in the sunlight, and my hands pass over the material again and again, the sculptures begin to transform, now an array of amber browns, dusty pinks, and oranges.

Eventually, they will simply begin to disintegrate. As they erode, they will eventually take on new physical forms, as the tubes begin to collapse and fade away, leaving behind only their skeletons as proof of their existence. I will address the lifespan of these sculptures further, but for now understand they eventually will submit to entropy, as we all eventually do.

MATERIALITY 4/4: HANDLING

I want to now address my material handling- the actual creation of the work. Throughout the process of material inquiry and investigation, I explored an seemingly endless array of interacting with the tubing. Perhaps the most overt assertion of the latex tubing is that it is a line. To acquire mass, it must be laid alongside itself in one way or another: wrapped, coiled, braided, or bound together to make it thicker.

Another material quality that lends to both the intrigue and the frustration of the latex is its paradoxical nature of both pliability and resistance. Unlike wire or metal, which will obediently stay laid in a specific way if guided with enough force, the tubing snaps eternally back into its original form. It springs out of a tight wrap unless secured, it buckles when asked to be a straight line. It requires a sustained tension on the line to create any shape of my own desire, which once lost simply becomes a tangle, nearly formless.

Providing that tension in its most simplistic way would be, ultimately, to guide it around a sturdy structure, and bind it. Thus, logically, creating an armature to wrap the tubing around was the solution.

This also allowed me to create the work at a larger scale, not solely relying on the mass of the tubing itself. Through this discovery, I was led to a new material lesson: through resistance, we find form.

Understanding I would need to introduce an armature to create these sculptures, I began to explore how I could create two forms embracing one another, becoming unified in their presentation. I arrived at the J shapes of each half of these sculptures because they offered the quality I was looking for: of embrace, but also repetition. A sameness. Each side mirrored the other, wrapped around the other, their union was mutual, rather than an assertion of one side or the other.

The first sculpture I made for this project, *Tether 1 (POINT)*, revealed to me that there were so many ways to approach the central form I designed, and that simply leaving it at my first idea would not satisfy the potential of the shape I had made.

Each half could be bound together in a multitude of ways, offering fertile ground for formal exploration and repetition. Thus, one sculpture idea became five, as I found myself itching to create it again, this time with a new proposition. I exhausted this

central shape through my thesis inquiry, creating emphasis on the handling of the tubing and the ability for the shape to be transformed through iteration.

ITERATION

Iteration in art is to create a series of multiple pieces of work, whose progression stems from the knowledge, reflections, or implications of the version that came before it. To work iteratively is to act on the questions and conclusions I come to in the act of making, creating another form in response, carrying the knowledge the material reveals to me into a new existence.

Iteration was a fundamental principle in the making of this series. It is an opportunity to express an idea in many different perspectives, offering a myriad of conclusions rather than a sole one. Iteration creates room for myself as an artist not to settle on a single final form to execute a concept or idea, rather as many as is needed to articulate the idea fully.

In total, there are five final iterations of the *Tethering* sculptures. I worked multiple at a time, usually two, making their base structures out of chicken wire in multiples, before wrapping them in cotton fabric that had been submerged in liquid latex. Then, I finally would begin to wrap the latex tubing around them, responding to the tension of the material, the way it laid on the armature, how and where it resisted my guidance.

A give and take between the two of us guided me slowly to a resolution. After each side is wrapped, or sometimes in the middle of the process, I would then begin to bind them to one another. I would arrange them on my work table in a myriad of ways, looking for new means of connecting the forms that resonated with some unknown, unseen version of what I was looking for.

As I began to construct the sculptures, I found myself in a place of virtually constant revision of form. Each new attempt to wrap the sculptures brought a new set of complications, new aesthetic revelations to be embraced or rejected, and new knowledge the material gave me as it revealed its true nature.

Each new revelation in material handling had a domino effect of revising the old approach: effectively, each new discovery played out in one iteration was then applied to the ones previous and future. Several times over, a supposedly completed sculpture would be taken apart and reconfigured to apply my new method. This method of artmaking is called seriality.

SERIALITY:

Seriality as an artistic principle is defined as a mode of artmaking with an applied system or internal logic that determines the formal components. This system overrides other aesthetic principles that come up in the making of the work, and leads to an exhaustion of the material or the system through the process.

This seriality of making is echoed in the repetition of the wrapping of the latex itself, the repetitive J shape of the sculptures, and the multiple iterations of the work I have made.

Seriality is a tool used by many influential artists of the western art canon. Through repetition, an idea can be articulated over and over again, a way of implying mass or expansion that is not contingent solely upon scale. Through this thesis work, I found myself examining the work of one of my first and largest artistic influences:

Postminimalist sculptor Eva Hesse.

A prolific artist in her short career, she spent her sculptural practice in an exhaustive pursuit of material exploration, particularly in resins, latex, and industrial materials.

In her mediums of choice, she was akin to her Minimalist peers, yet, instead of outsourcing production for a high-finish, austere aesthetic, she leaned into a much more intimate approach, breathing life into industrial means through her own artistic hand. Her work was deeply invested in her own relationship with her materials, utilizing methods of wrapping, layering, and dipping to create forms that were bodily, organic, and at the time, utterly original.

In Hesse's work, repetition and seriality lend themselves to the absurd: absurdity of repetitive acts, repetitive forms, objects that did not necessarily need repeating, but were nonetheless replicated.

The impact is an insistence on the art object, a commitment to it over and over again, a constant reiteration that their existence is intentional, purposeful, and meaningful. Seriality leads us to a notion of endlessness: endless possibilities, an absence of beginning or end within the art and the process with which it was made.

GESTURE:

This brings me to the idea of gesture. Throughout the process of making this body of work, the act of wrapping began to take on a personal symbology. Wrapping, as an act, has a simple purpose: to encase, to cover, to hold, to protect. In this body of work, wrapping acts as a gesture of embrace. It brings the sculptures together, cradles them in a steady unity. It is an assurance of closeness. It is, to me, a response to fracture, a means of returning to origin, to self, to home. It is a speculative act, an alternative to disconnection, estrangement, or isolation.

Through wrapping these sculptures to themselves and each other, I am able to create an expression of care. The gestalt nature of these systems, with no discernable beginning or end of the lines of latex, emphasize enmeshment, and imply a unity of the form. The latex being so closely bound to itself indicates a mirrored unity in the material, the repetition of the line is a reinforcement, a strengthening of the weave within each individual form, and, in progression of the series, the tethering of each side to each other.

I worked through at least six ways of wrapping the latex before I came to a consistent methodology. Ironically, it was the absolute simplest approach, the most rudimentary version of application that was the most effective in covering the armature of the pieces, and then connecting each side. Yet another material lesson.

The idea of wrapping these sculptures, whilst intuitive, was also influenced by postmodernist artist Harmony Hammond. Her *Wrapped Sculptures*, created between 1976 and 1984, are sculptures made by wrapping wood skeletons with strips of fabric, covered in paint and latex, creating what she considered a “skin” atop the “muscle” of the fabric binding. The wrapped sculptures often utilize multiples, usually two, in relationship to one another. Like my own work, they denote similarity and difference, unity and separation.

She positions them often in direct contact with one another; either leaning on each other on a wall, touching at the edges, or occasionally attached to each other. Hammond was expressing affection, intimacy, and unity amongst women and particularly lesbians through their placement, but what she and I share is an attention to closeness. The contact points of the forms, how and where they intersect, become a central expression of care and connection.

Hammond creates what she calls a presence of essence. The viewer is shown the act of making in the physical presence of the wrapped forms. Their creation is present and is equally the content of the artwork as much as the concept.

The art is about each pass of the fabric over the wood skeleton, the decisions Hammond made about how many times each should be wrapped, the thickness acquired through layers, the lack of any visible ends in the fabric. Through this logic, the content of the work is also seriality, repetition, density, closeness, and her hand in the act of making.

FORMAL DECISIONS

There are three primary formal decisions I have made in this series. The J shape of my central components, my methodology of wrapping, and the way the two halves attach to each other. The first piece of this series, Tether 01, is actually not tethered at all. The two halves hug each other on either end, they are interlocked, resting on each other. This was the starting place of this project, and the first iteration that showed me how many more could come, that left me looking for a more distinct bond between the two sides.

A more direct expression of this attachment felt necessary, but it also felt necessary to keep Tether 1 in the final presentation. It was the birthplace of this body of work, and it also calls direct attention to the notion of two- some distinction of individual entities that undergo a transformation.

Two of these pieces, Tether 2 and Tether 3 are wrapped in such a way that they sit atop each other, with much more overall contact between each half. The way they are positioned was perhaps my original vision for these forms, and their difference in the way each of them are tethered- similar, but different.

In Tether 3, the two pieces look as if they may be either becoming or unbecoming one larger form. In the other, they look almost lashed together to keep them from springing apart.

The other two, Tether 4 and Tether 5, respectively, take on a different way of closeness, looped together, then tethered to themselves as a means of tethering to each other.

They create a V shape, and exist more laterally, while the first two relate vertically, in stacking.

In this series, some of the sculptures look more like a loving embrace, while others look like an imposed closeness from an outside force.

These sculptures are presented on concrete plinths, which hover about an inch off the floor. This was a very intentional decision. I felt that a standard white pedestal would divorce the individual pieces from each other, and the larger environment.

I also wanted to ensure that the body of work felt like a series of sculptures, rather than a larger installation project. Our associations with the plinth ground the viewer, contextualizing each individual sculpture in its objecthood. I wanted all five plinths to be exactly the same in size, despite some scale variance in the sculptures themselves, as another element of visual repetition.

Lastly, the concrete provides contrast, in color and materiality. Concrete is a hard, immovable material, in contrast to the latex tubing, which is soft and pliable. The gray cool toned base mitigates the warm, close color tones of the sculptures, which are echoed in the color of the wood floors in this gallery space.

ABSTRACTION AND THE BODY

I did not make this sculpture series with a sole person in mind, nor a sole relationship as subject matter. They are all informed by every person I have ever found myself tethered to. It's important to me that the work is abstract, so that you may go find your own perspective within them. I lean into abstraction in sculpture making because I think the connection between myself, as an artist, and you, as a viewer, is contingent upon your agency as a viewer to see your own perspective in the work, in conversation with mine, which has made it.

While I am discussing abstraction, I would like to briefly mention the body. These sculptures, almost undeniably, look as if they could have come from inside the body.

One could argue, when discussing relationships especially, that each side of the sculpture could be a surrogate for a body, or a person.

The intention of these sculptures was not so directly to be a direct representation or image of a specific human, or body part, but I will acknowledge that embrace usually happens with our bodies, and our relationships of all kinds are experienced through the body- our minds and our hearts, at the very least. Our bodies are the filters we experience life through, they compose our realities.

Latex, most often, is attributed to a skinlike quality, and it ages and decomposes as ours does too. Our skin is the first contact our bodies have with the outside world, where our insides and consciousness begin.

REFLECTIONS: WHAT CHANGED

When I first set out to make this project, I was trying to focus on the notion that our connections with each other create a massive network, across our world. Everyone is inherently entwined with everyone else, our reality is an endless nexus of relationships and attachments. I still believe that to be true, but somehow I kept finding myself working with two forms, in direct contact with one another.

I think sculpture is an excellent way to work through an understanding of relationships, because it creates a kinesthetic example for us as viewers and makers in how one object relates to another. I get to see the impact, physically, of my actions, as I make sculptures, and allow them to teach me about the impact of my actions in less material, more emotional ways as well.

Throughout this process, I realized that in order to address the big picture, I had to first be brave enough to address the smallest one: the interaction between yourself and whoever is closest to you. To accept that we are all truly tethered to one another globally, we must first be able to have an unyielding acceptance that this process begins

in the people you surround yourself with, the people you come from, and the people you haven't met yet.

CONCLUSION:

Before wrapping up, I would like to take a moment to thank the people who made this project possible for me. First and foremost, I am incredibly grateful for Michelle, my mentor for this project, and an educator that has an immeasurable impact on my practice in more ways than I could express. I would like to thank my panel for their generosity in time and effort. Thank you to my dad for helping me with these pedestals, and my whole family for their unwavering support in my life and my pursuit of art. I also have to thank my friends, most of whom I have met during my time at this school, for allowing me to tether to them, and changing my life in doing so.

CONCLUSION: LIFESPAN

Now, I am ready to talk about the lifespan of this series. I am going to talk about Eva Hesse again, in particular her sculpture *Expanded Expansion*, made in 1969. This work is infamous within the artworld, not only for its iconic shape, but also for its reputation as a piece that the MoMa has fought to keep alive.

The massive sculpture, made of sixteen ten foot fiberglass and resin pillars, with cheesecloth submerged in latex hung between each one, has been on a steady path to complete obsolescence since its creation. The latex, now almost 60 years old, has been keeping its promise of eventual disintegration.

The Museum of Modern Art,, and the artworld at large, is at odds about how to continue displaying it, and questions of the work's current state is still an indication of Hesse's

artistic intention, or if the change is so great that it has taken on a meaning of its own. When Hesse was asked about the preservation of her own work and her use of volatile materials, her response was “Life doesn’t last, art doesn’t last.”.

I don’t know how long the Tethering series will last. I have no intention of interfering with its natural lifespan. It will not be repaired, and I ask that in whatever art space it may end up in, that decisions in its presentation are not contingent upon extending its life. The material choice of latex is one I have embraced, in all its entropy, as the most concrete evidence of impermanence, and a testament to the beauty of it. What I do know is connection, love and care in the face of constant change is what knits our realities together, what holds us on this earth. It is what allows us to dare to continue to march in our rightful, fleeting place in eternity of time.

Thank you.