

“COWARD”/KORKAK

by

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“COWARD”/KORKAK

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“COWARD”/ KORKAK

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M.F.A., Visual Arts and Visual Communication Design

Thesis Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Erdağ Aksel

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Keywords: fear, anxiety, phobia, drawing, collage, abundance, accumulation, materials

This text functions as a supplementary document to the exhibition *Coward*, and provides background information to the exhibited works and cannot be considered separately from it. The objective of this text is to point out some concepts that are related to the artworks, to examine the production process, to analyze artworks separately, and to reach a conclusion about the way in which an artwork comes into being and how it could be in relationship with its surroundings and environment.

“COWARD”/ KORKAK

Sena Arcak

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Bu metin, Coward/ Korkak sergisini destekleyici niteliktedir ve ayrı bir metin olarak adlandırılmaz. Amacı, serginin oluşumunda ortaya çıkan bazı kavramları incelemek, sanat eserlerinin oluşum süreçlerine yer verip, ayrı ayrı işleri incelemek ve bir işin ortaya çıkışında etkili olan etkilere ve etmenlere değinmektir.

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Keywords: fear, anxiety, phobia, drawing, collage, abundance, repetition, accumulation

Introduction

This thesis functions as a supplementary document to the exhibition *Coward*, and provides background information to the exhibited works. The exhibition is divided into three different sections, which are titled as follows: *Rhapsodies*, *Garish Pairs* and *Scale Series*. All of these works can be thematically unified under the concept of fear. *Rhapsodies* consist of two drawings on canvas using electrical cables to create three-dimensional lines that activate a space around the surface. *Garish* involves the two sculptures on separate pedestals made up of glittery sequins and colorful candies. Finally, the *Scale Series* refers to a drawing, a wall collage and a site-specific installation using eighty-four bathroom scales.

The objective of this text is to point out some concepts that are related to the artworks, to examine the production process, to analyze artworks separately, and to reach a conclusion about the way in which an artwork comes into being and how it could relate to its surroundings and environment. The works in the exhibition have a potential and an intention to intervene and selectively hide or bring to the fore certain emotions. More specifically these emotions are: fear, anxiety and phobias. The works here aim to refer to and evoke certain fears or consequences of fearful and intimidating experiences. The title of the exhibition *Coward* acts as a suggestive word in order to introduce the exhibition and gives a clue about the implemented emotions in the artworks that are mentioned above.

The word “coward” is used here to refer to a person who is afraid of facing dangers, and tries to avoid difficult situations due to fear and lack of courage. It is fear and the unnerving

feelings fear arouses that makes one act like a coward. Although it is perhaps hard to find the impression of fear in the gallery space at first glance, the artworks in the exhibition come out of everyday experiences that incite fear. As such, the sight or touch -imagined or actual- of these works will potentially evoke personal memories and emotions that one wants to avoid.

Fear & Anxiety and Phobias

Fear, anxiety and phobia are feelings that are fundamentally interrelated because they stimulate each other. They are universal feelings that cut across many different cultures. Fear is the base feeling that potentially turns into anxiety and phobia. It is an important and perhaps necessary emotion that every living creature possesses in order to survive. Without fear, it would be impossible to survive because without fears they would not be able to protect themselves from potential threats or risks. Fear can also be learned through experiences. Humans learn to fear by encountering dangerous, threatening and painful incidents throughout their lives. Even if the encounter may not take place directly, it would be enough to fear something by reading or hearing about dangers that others have experienced. In life, there are things that one just would not do, because something terrible might happen as a consequence. However along with this lack of action a feeling of insecurity is also triggered.

According to Gordon (1980), “the key to understanding the structure of fearing is the fact that fearing requires uncertainty of a particular kind: non-deliberative uncertainty, or uncertainty that is due to one’s being undecided among alternative actions.”¹ We may assume that uncertainty provokes fear because it leads people to anxiety and uneasiness. Fear and anxiety seem to be similar, however a distinction should be made between them. Anxiety is

¹ Gordon, M. Robert. Fear. *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (Oct., 1980), p. 560, Duke University Press.

something objectless because it is a vague, unpleasant emotional state and it is “experienced by the subject, without reference to a specific object”² whereas fear has a specific object. In other words, anxiety is an emotion that is irrational, like phobia, whereas fear could have reason and logic.

On the other hand, phobia is more different than these in terms of being an excessive and deeper feeling of fear from a particular object or situation. It is a powerful, uncontrollable and irrational feeling. There are three types of phobias: 1-Social phobias (fear of social situation), 2-Agoraphobia (fear of being trapped in an inescapable place), and 3-Specific phobias (fear of specific objects or situations).

Since these three types of phobias are peculiar to numerous people, and they tend to occur unconsciously in the brain, large groups of people could have the same fears, anxieties and phobias. In other words one’s specific fears could be shared by large number of other people. For example:

I have a fear of crossing the streets. (Because once a car almost hit me)

I have a fear of expressing opinions. (Because I fear to say something wrong)

I have a fear of failure. (Because I would be ashamed)

I have a fear of thunder and lightening. (Because of its sound)

I have a fear of insects. (Because they disgust me and they could bite)

I have a fear of blushing. (Because people might understand that I am embarrassed.)

I have a fear of gaining weight. (Because I don’t want to be fat)

I have a fear of speaking in public. (Because my face turns red and I get too nervous) ...

² Freud, Sigmund. (1895a [1894]). (1916-1917a [1915-1917]). Introductory lectures on psycho-analysis (Parts I and II). *SE*, 15-16.

Visual Stimulation, Materials, and the Beginning of the Process

The use of numerous materials in my artworks is due to the visual stimulation that I experience during my visits to Eminönü and Karaköy. These are two old districts of the city on either side of the Golden Horn. This area is the eminent historical commercial center of Istanbul. Many wholesalers, hardware and craft stores are located here. Especially in Eminönü, one finds wholesalers of fabrics, drapers, candy sellers, spices, kitchen utensils, toys, Tupperware, luggage, underwear, novelty stores and more. The stark contrast between the congested crowdedness of the streets and the perfectly chaotic orderliness of goods displayed inside and outside the stores sparkle the mind (Figures 1, and 2). At the same time, this area is also known as providing the cheapest goods in the city. For this reason, people that visit there tend to be either wholesalers or Istanbul's lower income groups naturally looking for good deals. If one was to make a visual reading of the crowd sociologically this visible aspect also creates another contrast with the visual affluence of the shops abundant with goods and materials. This colorful and intense spilling-over visuality of the materials creates a particular overall attractiveness because it displays an unexpected, and extravagantly rich image, reminding us of accumulative works of Arman (1928-2005), and Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996). (Figures 3, and 4).

The choice of the materials for art obviously begins with the imagination. Every material stimulates a different idea in mind. Because of that I tend to acquire a lot of materials and accumulate them in my studio. This accumulation in the studio creates an abundance of ideas. With this method I start to get to know the material, its function, character and its potential to convey various meanings. From that perspective, materials can be thought of as the letters in the alphabet. Better perhaps, they can be looked at as words. If making art is about creating meaning, and in this context it can be compared to writing, walking the streets in Eminönü can be likened

to taking a magical trip within a thesaurus. I tend to bring back to my studio as many words as I can carry from this bulky thesaurus. Once back in the studio, while working on the artworks, rather than using the material as it is, I choose to gather them together with other materials, change their form and use them as a medium. The materials that I buy are commonly everyday objects such as needles, wires, sacks, scales, and fabrics that we use at home. I am careful to keep them simple and readable by anyone.

Rhapsodies: Different approaches to Drawing

Rhapsodies are two separate drawings made mostly on canvas using electrical cables. Images of a dragonfly and a spider are depicted with short and twisted pieces of black-coated copper wire. Some of the lines of the image run out of canvas continuing into the wall. The basis of the idea for this project can be found on the earlier works that I have made by sticking pins on the canvas in order to create three-dimensional lines for drawing. In these earlier projects, my initial aim was to *draw* an image on canvas by using pins that are inserted into the canvas from the back so that the sharp metal point of every pin would create the fundamental element that forms a line: a dot. While visually the dot created by a single pin is subtle and perhaps hardly noticeable at first, it nevertheless becomes more forceful when it is part of a larger whole. While giving the illusory effect of grouping together into the line that depicts the insect images, these single dots also tend to maintain their sharp and pointed individually. This self-referential quality of the pins allows the viewer to examine the three-dimensional drawing from different angles, forcing him/her to move closer and away from the canvas and enjoy the various visual alternatives that interpose and blend into one another as shadows move mimicking the movement of the viewer. Experimenting with different materials on canvas was an exciting activity and it certainly reminds me of my favorite artist Eva Hesse. She was an artist that did not pay much

attention to the norms of traditional painting or rules when making an artwork. What she paid attention to was the absurdity of the visual deduction that she produced. She was also very much interested in the materials. Plenty of her works inspired and showed me the alternative, possibilities of making art. When I observe Hesse's works I see a revolt, a rebellion done in a very precise, organized, and silent but aggressive way. In her *Metronomic Irregularity* of 1966 (Figure 5), she uses wires on two surfaces placed as two canvases. The wires are gathering the panels in an abstract and repetitive way. The complexity of this work limits itself and is terminated by the edges of the surfaces. The two surfaces create borders of the work. The feeling of spontaneity within the work reminds us of the abstract expressionist paintings such as Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* 1950 (Figure 6). Eva Hesse's works also have been inspirational for me in terms of her alternative technique of drawing by using wires and her sensitive way of incorporating drawing with the third dimension.

In *Rhapsodies*, plastic coated copper electrical cables seemed easier to work with because of their flexible nature of copper. The formability of the material allowed me to twist the cables as much as I wanted helping me draw, free from the stiffness of many other three-dimensional material. The twisted cable forms performed similar to line drawings and on canvas referred to Hesse's wires. I attached the cables as if I was drawing on canvas intending to achieve powerful, dominating images of insects. The sharp contrast between the neutral color of raw canvas and the shiny black of the plastic coating also helped create this effect. Furthermore, the three-dimensional character of the twisted cables cast shadows on the canvas activating the immediate space over the surface. At first the shadows were not clear under fluorescent studio lights. I experimented with different light sources holding and moving them in front of the canvas. At the end, for the *Dragonfly* image I decided to hang a moving light bulb in front of the canvas. With the movement of the light bulb the shadows of the cables became sharpened and

they created an illusion of a moving insect. Two imaginary long antennas were added on the Dragonfly's head coming out of the canvas and going into the wall. These extended three-dimensional lines somehow moved into the spectators' space empowering the dragonfly image. The moving light over these long antennas created even more dramatic shadows in motion.

The size and shapes of the cables along with the cast shadows allowed me to create a painting that spatially and cognitively fell in between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality. The incorporation of dramatic lighting and the addition of two antennas on the bug, that extended away from the canvas into the wall as well as the illusionist dimension resulting from the light bulb in motion helped to create the fearsome image of a giant dragonfly as if it wishes to get out from the canvas. With the spider image on the second canvas I tried to spill out of the canvas by overflowing the legs of the spider onto the wall. For this piece a single light source was enough because spider on its own created a sufficiently powerful image. In each work there is an enlargement, hence an exaggeration. However I used the canvas as to limit the image in order to have the control over the giant insect. Otherwise it seemed that both the insect and the drawing would be uncontainable. Perhaps it could be regarded as the fear of the artist that refuges to the canvas.

Garish Pairs and Scale Series

It has been mentioned above that fear could be learned through experiences and external effects. The pieces called *Garish Pairs* and *Scale Series* correspond to the trained (conditioned) experiences in terms of their relation to the general female fear of gaining weight. As a woman it is certainly related to personal memories and fears, however as I mentioned earlier fear and anxiety are personal feelings as well as common feelings and shared emotions in many instances.

One of the reasons for the fear of gaining weight is perhaps the pressure imposed by mass media and other women to be skinny or to compulsively become thinner. I would like to mention here a survey that is made on women, called ‘silhouette studies’.³ Women were asked to indicate their ‘current figure’, ‘ideal figure’ and ‘the figure that most men would find attractive’. Women tended to select a heavier figure than their own for their current figure, they selected a thin figure as one that men would find attractive, and for the ideal figure they selected one that is even thinner than the previous. The researchers obviously concluded “women’s perceptions put pressure on them to lose weight.”⁴ As a woman, I am curious about how these perceptions develop and how women accept it, embrace it and then make an effort to lose weight. In my personal experience, weight has always been an issue especially among Turkish women, and perhaps the most popular subject of daily conversation. The idea of an idealized social image of the beautiful body leads people to feel uncomfortable with their bodies and the anxiety of being fat leads them to fear gaining weight.

Throughout history the ideal body shape has changed according to contemporary concepts of beauty and attractiveness. Sarah Grogan argues: “It is possible to trace a cultural change in the ‘ideal body’ from the voluptuous figures favored from the Middle Ages to the thin body types favored by the fashion magazines of today.”⁵ This changing ideal image has also reverberated in visual culture. Art has had an impact on that idealized body image as artworks somehow represent female images of the ideal body types. And in contrast to today’s magazines, the voluptuous bodies that are depicted on canvas show an alternative and natural form of a

³Grogan, Sarah. “Body Image, Understanding body dissatisfaction in men, women and children”, *“Culture and Body Image”* (NY, 1999), p. 26

⁴Grogan, Sarah. “Body Image, Understanding body dissatisfaction in men, women and children”, *“Culture and Body Image”* (NY, 1999), p. 26

⁵Grogan, Sarah. “Body Image, Understanding body dissatisfaction in men, women and children”, *“Culture and Body Image”* (NY, 1999), p. 13

body. The archetypal image of this female body can be observed, for example, in the work of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). Contemporary artists have also taken up this issue such as Fernando Botero (1932-). Another contemporary artist, Jenny Saville has approached the issue from a very different angle, depicting obese women. She explained: “I am not painting disgusting, big women. I’m painting women who’ve been made to think they’re big and disgusting, who imagine their thighs go on forever...”⁶ (Figures 7, 8 & 9)

Garish Pairs consist of two sculptures on separate pedestals. Two different bundles are made out of sequins and candies. Here again, I departed from the material itself. The idea first appeared during a visit to Eminönü. The glittery and pompous sequins that are put on store windows were visually very attractive. They were placed in different cellophanes bags and each package contained a single color of sequins. From the outside of the display case they were certainly creating a very rich and visually attractive presence. That powerful appearance made me buy some bags. After bringing them to the studio, I mixed all of the packages and created a pile on the floor. The pile was colorful, stimulating and shiny, provoking, a strong urge to touch. Sequins created a powerful image but conceptually I was at a loss. It appeared as if it was nothing other than a stimulating pile. Then I started to manipulate the material; the flexibility and the light-weightness of it lead me to put them in different containers and cups. The material was taking the form of each cup, however there was a problem; since the containers were closed it was impossible to see all of the sequins. At some point, I decided to put them in a flexible transparent black cloth. This way, the extreme brightness of the sequins would decrease and they would form their own shape in that flexible cloth. I began by hanging the sequin bag onto the wall. Then I decided to put it on the floor and started to move it observing the malleable character. While giving it various shapes I started making a bottom and realized though on the

⁶ Pollock, Griselda. “Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts”, Routledge, 1996. Chapter 6, Rowley, A. ‘On viewing three paintings by Jenny Saville: rethinking a feminist practice of painting’. p. 95

floor, the activity was very similar to my other three-dimensional drawings. With a few touches the sequins ended up as a human bottom. To make the bottom clearer, I dressed it with a thong. After putting a thong on, the project began to move in the direction of the subject of weight because the traces of the thong on sequins took the shape of cellulite. The edges were creating curves as if fats were overflowing from the loin. The colorful, shiny sequins in black fabric created an imposing sensual appearance

I later filled the pile of candies on my studio floor into cellophane sacks, first trying to shape another bottom. The size and solidness of the material would not allow an elastic bottom like sequins. At that point I placed a red rotating emergency light next to the candies. The reflection of the red rotating light over the translucent candies created a sense of an emergency situation. The candy alarm coming next to a fleshy bottom completed the work. In the end, they were both attractive, stimulating yet undesirable and scary for many women at the same time.

Scale series progressed simultaneously with *Garish Pairs*. The initial idea for this series developed while manipulating the bathroom scale. I opened it and tried to observe how the mechanism works. For a person in fear of gaining weight this is an object that one interacts with throughout life. While checking out how it really functions and questioning its meaning, personal memories sprung up. As it has been mentioned earlier the subject of weight, the pressure, the stimulus from the others and the compulsory thoughts to become thinner moved me to do these works.

The first element in this series is a collage on the wall. In the collage, the indicator of a scale is put on the wall next to a hair dryer that blows and rotates the indicator slowly. The slow turning of the indicator bit-by-bit and increasing the increments of the weight create a personal

tension. The shiny long red metal that cuts the indicator into two and underlines the change on the indicator intends to intensify the fearful experience of gaining weight.

Another part in the scale series is made up of eighty-four bathroom scales installed on the floor of a six square meter room. The scales are organized as tiles, constituting a pattern on the floor. The idea of producing this project emerged as a reaction to the societal pressure that is induced by a constant flow of images of thin women in print and digital media. But more than that, I feel much more troubled by the competitive and judgmental pressure imposed on each other by women. The judgmental looks and comments of women is a source of greater stress than those of men. Furthermore, this is not simply an issue about being overweight or not. There is a complex social code of dressing up, which goes beyond what size one wears. A girl who has a curvier bottom or larger breasts is sure to notice a complete visual scan of her body in public if she is wearing something that is tight around those parts of her body. This constant scrutiny is more disturbing to me when it comes from women than men. The anxiety to be judged by female members of my own family or friends, or even complete strangers has turned into a phobia of scales and weighing myself although the scale itself is not an object to be afraid of. Scales remind me of women's gaze, and turn these simple machines into much more than the number they give me when I step on them.

The bathroom scale is to me a private object. I would not accept another person to see my weight but people are curious about how much I weigh, which is quite disturbing. Because of this, rather than installing the scales in the center of the gallery place I made a private room. The decision to enter or not is up to the spectator.

Conclusion

The transformation of materials into different meanings has generated the exhibition *Coward*. Creating a language by combining and gathering the materials has been the method of my production process. These gatherings created visual materials and they unified under similar concepts. The transformation of the materials was possible through experimenting. Experimenting the material has been a method that many artists have followed. As Edward Lucie Smith remarks "...Eva Hesse lies in her exceptionally free and experimental attitude towards materials. ..., to create forms and textures which seem to come directly from the depths of the unconscious mind."⁷ Like Hesse, the initial in my projects was never the concept itself, the material brought me to the concept and I believe that my experienced memories somehow oriented me unconsciously.

Fear is an emotion that prevents us from dangers and it is essential to survive. We make an effort not to be hurt and especially by the experiences we learn how to live by avoiding ourselves from dangers or painful situations. As fear emerges as a response in order not to be hurt or damaged, some works in the exhibition also developed as a response to fearful situations. By gathering different materials and by changing their meaning helped me produce a personal language within them. As an artist my intention always was to experiment, to transform the materials and to reflect a language.

⁷ Lucie-Smith, Edward, *Art Today*, New York: Phaidon Press., 2000 p. 138

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APPENDIX



Figure 1, Eminönü, Belt Claps



Figure 2, Mannequins, Eminönü



Figure 3, Arman, Trompettes, 1995, Bronze



Figure 4, Felix Gonzalez- Torres, Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA), 1991

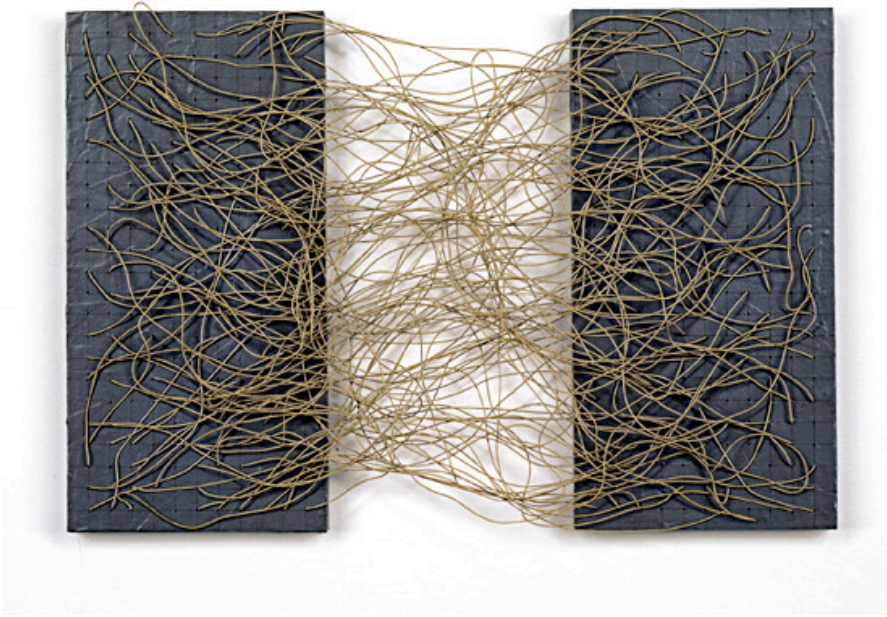


Figure 5, Eva Hesse, Metronomic Irregularity I, 1996



Figure 6, Jackson Pollock, Autumn Rhythm (Number 30), 1950



Figure 7, Peter Paul Rubens, Three Graces, 1639



Figure 8, Fernando Botero, Dancer at the Pole, 2001

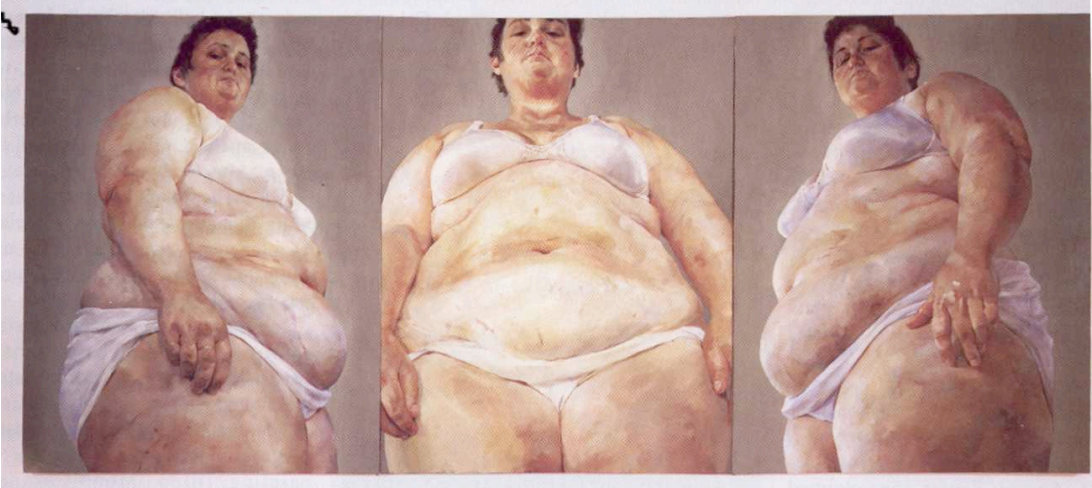


Figure 8, Jenny Saville, Strategy, 1994

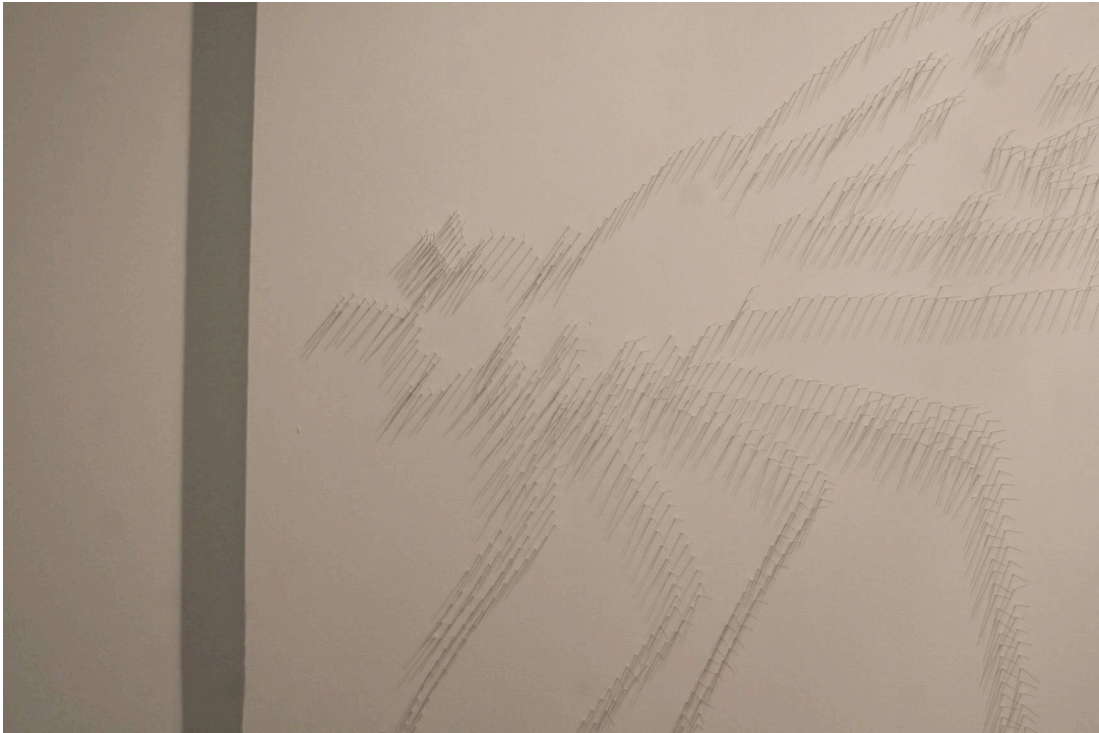


Figure 10, Dragonfly, made by pins, 2008

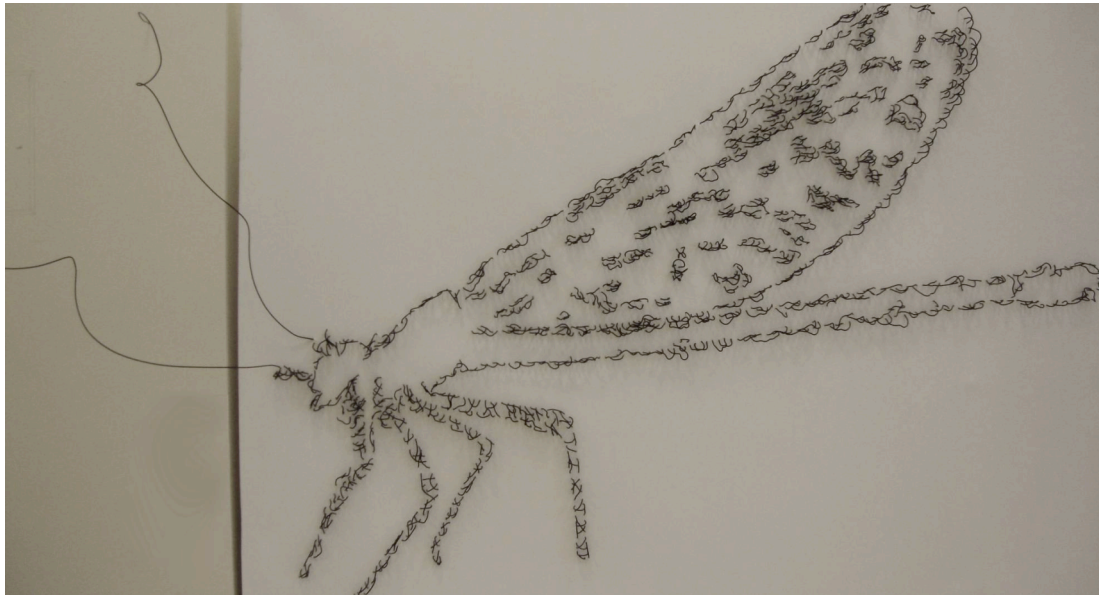


Figure 11, Dragonfly, made by electrical cables, 2010



Figure 12, Rhapsodies, 2010, with moving light bulb in front.



Figure 13, Rhapsodies, Spider, 2010



Figure 14, Garish Pairs, 2010



Figure 15, Garish Detail



Figure 16, Garish Detail

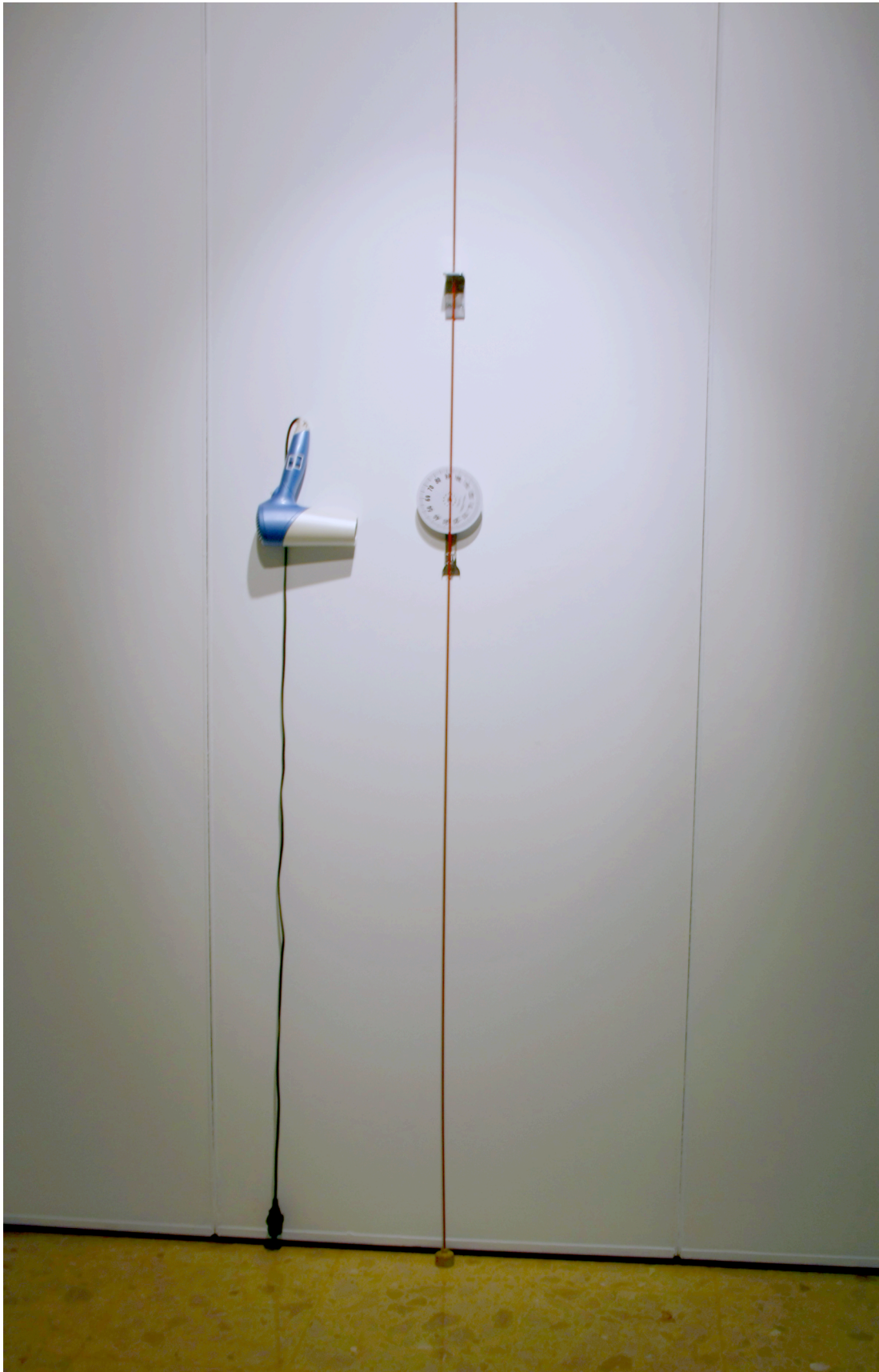


Figure 17, Scale Series, No 1

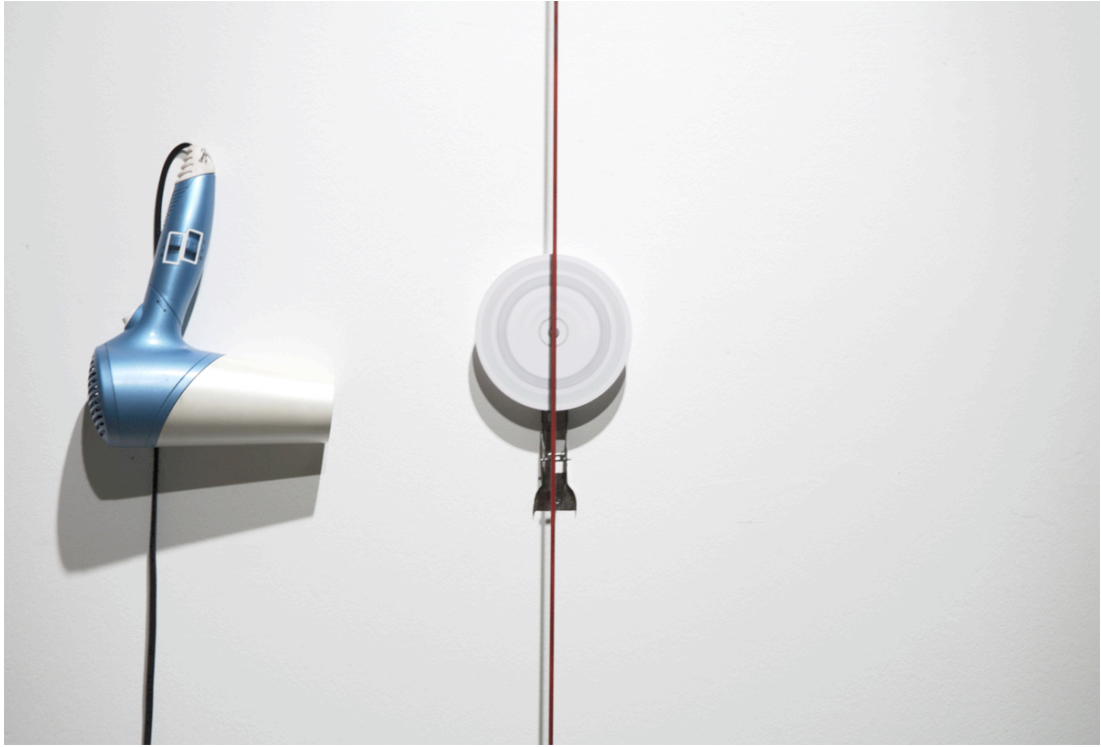


Figure 18, Scale Series, No 1 Detail



Figure 19, Scale Series, No 2, Scale Room



Figure 20, Scale Series, No 2, Scale Room, Detail



Figure 21, Scale Series, No 3



Figure 22, Scale Series, No 3



Figure 23, Exhibition Entrance



Figure 24, Exhibition "Coward", no 1



Figure 25, Exhibition "Coward", no 2