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by

Shalena Bethany White

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Humble Alchemy

APPROVED BY SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor: _____

Jeff Williams

Margo Sawyer

Humble Alchemy

By

Shalena Bethany White, B.F.A.

Report

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Humble Alchemy

By

Shalena Bethany White, M.F.A.

The University of Texas at Austin

SUPERVISOR: Jeff Williams

Abstract

This master's report addresses the conceptual and material investigations that were explored within my artistic research made at the University of Texas at Austin between 2011 and 2014. These works are a confluence of adornment, sculpture and installation art. These pieces incorporate ancient and contemporary metalworking techniques with raw, organic material. The notion of elegant ornamentation is expanded beyond the body into the adornment of architecture.

The potential for transformation and reinvention within found elements is explored within this work. The natural resources I work with have gone through a cycle, which is interrupted when the objects are removed from the earth. I see my process in relationship to alchemical concepts of transmutation. Through manipulation, common matter evolves into precious material. The refined, meticulous craftsmanship conveys a sense of reverence and honor towards the common material. This intervention with the material is an act of preservation and veneration.

This work explores my sense of intrigue about the extraordinary potential of mundane materials, and investigates conventional notions of material value.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations.....	vii
Text.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Materials and Process.....	2
Material Transformation.....	3
Beyond Traditional Adornment.....	7
Illustrations.....	12
References.....	21

List of Illustrations

Illustration 1: <i>Sophora Secundiflora</i> , Texas mountain laurel seeds and handmade brass pins, 240" x 84" x 6", 2012.....	12
Illustration 2: <i>Mountain Laurel Mandala I</i> , Texas mountain laurel seeds and sewing pins, 72" x 72" x .5", 2013.....	13
Illustration 3: <i>Mountain Laurel Mandalas</i> , Texas mountain laurel seeds and sewing pins, 114" x 222" x .5", 2013.....	14
Illustration 4: <i>Mountain Laurel Mandala II</i> , Texas mountain laurel seeds and sewing pins 114" x 114" x .5", 2013.....	15
Illustration 5: <i>Mountain Laurel Mandala III</i> , Texas mountain laurel seeds and sewing pins 24" x 24" x .5", 2013.....	16
Illustration 6: <i>Earth Spirit</i> , earth, china clay, wood, cheesecloth, recycled newspaper, tape, string, glue, steel, graphite, aluminum oxide and quartz, 24" x 328" x 5", 2012.....	17
Illustration 7: <i>Geological Alchemy I</i> , found rocks, copper, brass, bronze and sterling silver, 8" x 290" x 16", 2013.....	18
Illustration 8: <i>Geological Alchemy II</i> , found rocks, copper, red brass, bronze and sterling silver, 48" x 48" x 2", 2014.....	19
Illustration 9: <i>Rock with Silhouette</i> , found rock and copper, 40" x 24" x 24", 2013.....	20

Introduction

"But a weed is simply a plant that wants to grow where people want something else. In blaming nature, people mistake the culprit. Weeds are people's idea, not nature's." – Author unknown

In my practice, I create meticulous works of adornment and sculpture that incorporate traditional metalsmithing techniques with raw materials. A central idea explored within the work is the recognition of the value in ordinary things: both in remnants of the natural world and discarded manmade fragments. This work explores a sense of intrigue about the extraordinary potential of mundane materials, and investigates conventional notions of material value.

During graduate school, my studio practice has transformed in terms of the materials I choose to work with and the context my work exists within. I entered the program with a strong intent to create wearable work and after three years of study I can define myself as not only a metalsmith, but also as a sculptor and installation artist. While my practice is rooted in the metals tradition, branching out into alternative mediums and artistic disciplines has allowed me to create art that is accessible to a larger audience.

This master's report documents the development of my ideas, process and body of work during three years of study in Studio Art at the University of Texas at Austin. This paper addresses the conceptual and material investigations that were explored within my graduate research.

Materials and Process

The materials that I use to create artwork are a catalyst for the ideas explored within the work. My creative process often begins with a reverence for materials discovered in the environment. I am often on a treasure hunt, seeking my next creative resource. I gather remarkable elements from my surroundings such as botanical seeds, earth and rough stones. I visualize the formation and capacity for life within these natural objects. I am interested in the story of each stone, seed and pile of earth that is collected. I imagine the past, present and future trajectory of the objects by envisioning their formation, their physical origins, who handled these materials before me and what potential they have for human use. Digging my hands into the dirt and gathering remnants of nature allows an exploration of the material's potential that is reframed through my studio practice.

The process of collecting and transforming natural resources is a meditative practice. Repetitive methods in the creation of the work act as ritual and meditation. Focusing on the materials and the physical act of creation fosters a space of deep

concentration and purpose that transcends intellectual thought. This provides a quiet and tranquil state of mind that allows communication with the materials, allowing them to speak through the work of my hands. A lot of time is invested into each material in order to have extensive exploration with them. They are treated in a sacred manner, with meticulous care and highly refined craftsmanship. The care that is taken with each medium conveys a sense of reverence towards the common material. When transformed into works of art, they become venerated offerings.

Material Transformation

The philosophical concept of value originates with human existence. “Man is at the same time the creator, practitioner and consumer of value. Value order and hierarchy of objects are not inherent in the nature of the world, but are given according to people’s values.”¹ Even precious metals and gemstones are not inherently precious. They are made precious through skillful manipulation and by the collective belief that they are valuable. This work is an exploration of the potential of raw materials that is investigated through the transformation they undergo when found objects are manipulated and combined with metal.

¹ Li, Deshun. “Value Theory: A Research Into Subjectivity.” (2014): 18

I enjoy exploring the capacity for reinvention within found elements. Something that is normally disposable is not cast away but given a new life. Like alchemists in ancient times, I aim to convert common matter into something precious. Re-presenting ordinary materials as valuable art objects is a form of alchemy. The value of the found objects are explored through a distillation process. They are manipulated and transformed until they emerge into a new context.

I aim to see my existence from an enlightened viewpoint in line with the philosophy of Tibetan Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. In his writing, he talks about seeing mindfully through spiritual eyes. When he looks at an orange, he sees that it is a miracle. He does not only see the orange; he also envisions the tree, sunlight, water and soil that fed the orange blossom. ² Through mindful attention, one can become aware of the sacred nature of even the most mundane things. This notion underpins my creative efforts.

The natural resources that are gathered, such as Texas Mountain Laurel seeds, are embedded with precious information about their physical origins and cultural history. Research reveals that these seeds have been used for spiritual ceremonies and adornment pieces in Native American cultures.

² Nhat Hanh, Thich. "Be Free Where You Are." (2002): 11

These toxic seeds, also known as mescal beans have a rich cultural history. In the southwestern United States and Mexico, these valuable seeds were used by many Native American tribes in a vision- seeking dance which was centered around ingesting the potent seeds. Consumption of these highly toxic hallucinogenic seeds can be fatal and the practice was abandoned for a safer hallucinogenic- the peyote cactus. The Texas Mountain Laurel seeds still remain an important part of the ritual as ceremonial adornment worn by the leader of the peyote ceremony.³

In my sculptures and installations, ideas of ornamentation are borrowed from the realm of jewelry and applied to sculpture. In the Mountain Laurel Seed installations, architectural environments are embellished with thousands of vibrant red botanical seeds. In *Sophora Secundiflora*, the meandering map-like arrangement of the vividly colored Texas mountain laurel seeds creates a delicate rhythm and repetition that activates the space as a three-dimensional drawing.

Mountain Laurel Mandala I carries the dialogue of jewelry through the meticulous treatment of materials. Each seed is approached as a precious gemstone. They are gathered, polished, pierced and pinned to the wall, one by one. The accumulation of Texas mountain laurel seeds are arranged to convey a fluid and

³ Turner, Matt Warnock. "Remarkable Plants of Texas: Uncommon Accounts of Our Common Natives." (2009): 152-157.

harmonious solidity as well as an ethereal dissolution of form. In Tibetan Buddhist sand mandalas, the tedious placement of each grain of sand is a form of acceptance. The work is impermanent and the sand is returned to the river as a metaphor for life.

Mountain Laurel Mandala I is also a temporary offering, honoring the potential for life contained within each seed.

Mountain Laurel Mandalas is a triptych of circular patterns on the wall composed of thousands of Texas Mountain Laurel seeds. Through scale, repetition and placement, the entire wall is engaged. The center mandala, *Mountain Laurel Mandala II* reflects the Fibonacci sequence, the mathematical formula that represents the perfect proportion. This self-organizing system of growth is found virtually everywhere in the natural world in celestial and terrestrial realms.

The two accompanying mandalas, *Mountain Laurel Mandala III and IV* are densely packed circles filled with fields of red, showing the nuances of color variation present within these seeds. These mandalas act as a visual resting place from the center mandala, which vibrates and pulsates with the energy of aliveness.

This triptych references Tibetan Buddhist sand mandalas through its site specificity and ephemeral nature. Similar to the approach of the monks, the creation of the seed mandalas is a labor intensive community effort which results in a piece that will only exist temporarily. These works pay homage to and reflect the impermanent nature of life. These mandalas are intended to be a meditative tool for the viewer.

In the *Mountain Laurel Mandala series*, there is a relationship between the references in the work and the materials used to create them. Buddhist mandalas represent an ideal, enlightened state of consciousness and can be compared to altered mental states achieved through consuming these seeds. Those who meditate or hallucinate have the same goal: to transcend the individual self, and experience the divine.

Extracting ordinary elements from the landscape and reframing them is a method of contextualizing the material in efforts to highlight raw beauty often overlooked in our environments.

Beyond Traditional Adornment

The field of contemporary metalsmithing has grown to encompass a broad range of artistic disciplines. I am influenced by other metalsmiths to create work that is rooted in, yet expands the context of jewelry through a multidisciplinary approach.

Within the context of wearable ornamentation in Western culture, greater value is assigned to adornments that contain precious metals and gemstones. In contrast to this conventional notion, artist Robert Ebendorf incorporates unusual found objects such as street debris combined with traditional goldsmithing. In his work, discarded objects are reframed to take on a new life. Through his conceptual approach to jewelry, he reassesses the meaning of artifacts of daily life by reversing the idea of what is

precious. Trash placed into the context of jewelry begins to question perceptions of what is precious and gives the found material a new value.

My works such as the *Earth Spirit* challenge conventional notions of value and assert that preciousness resides in undervalued materials, such as earth itself. *Earth Spirit* is a sculptural neckpiece with layers of individual pod forms made with a variety of mundane materials including newspaper, wood, cheesecloth, linen, glue, tape, quartz, graphite, aluminum oxide and dirt. Incorporating these ordinary things within the context of jewelry investigates the hierarchy of preciousness and highlights the found materials.

The work of Caroline Gore is installation, photography and adornment in her site-specific interventions. In *Via della Bella Donne*, she gilded the crevices of a cobblestone sidewalk in Florence, using ornamentation to highlight the beauty that often goes unnoticed in our environments. These interventions reward passersby who happen to notice. Her observations are recorded through photographs, then translated into a piece of jewelry that acts as a memory of the moment and creates a dialogue between image and object.

Similar to the artistic approach of Gore, my work extends adornment beyond the realm of the body. It functions within multiple disciplines, both as wearable work and independently of the body in a sculptural context.

In *Geological Alchemy I*, the found, ordinary rocks are elevated as precious objects through their polished metal settings. The stones are wearable brooches, here expanded beyond jewelry into installation. The space itself becomes adorned. Their placement upon the wall as singular objects conveys a sense that each rock is important. The multitude of stones is arranged on a long wall at eye level, allowing the viewer to notice the level of detail in each of these meticulous settings. The rocks are set into the wall on brass rods, creating dynamic linear shadows and a flow of arching horizontal lines that undulate within the space.

The *Geological Alchemy* series is composed of rocks that have been collected from sites throughout the United States. The individuality of each stone speaks to different geographic locations and geological origins. An ordinary rock has extraordinary geological history. The unique formation and composition of each rock was brought about by enormous amounts of pressure and heat within the earth. Rocks provide a geological record. The processes of erosion, sedimentation or volcanic activity can be observed within them. Some of these rocks were shaped by the movement of water in rivers and oceans. Others were found in the mountains or urban environments. By extracting these resources from the earth, their natural cycle is interrupted. This intervention with the material is an act of preservation.

The metal settings activate and elevate the found rocks from ordinary to extraordinary. The metal is manipulated in some cases to intervene within the rock, the

precious metal inlay marking the strata where there was a collision of elements within this object's formation. The metalsmithing process of shaping metal with heat and force, parallels the geological action within the earth's core that forms rocks over millions of years.

In *Geological Alchemy II*, the rocks are presented as a sculptural wall piece using the Fibonacci sequence. This particular arrangement appropriates phyllotaxy from the botanical world in order to reference the rhythmic growth of forms within nature. While the growth of plants can be observed over short periods of time, the formation of rocks happens on a much greater time scale. A connection is made between botany and geology in order to acknowledge the process of geological formation that we do not see within our life cycle.

Rock with Silhouette is an exploration of stone setting on a larger scale. This sculpture juxtaposes a raw, natural element with a handmade reflection of its form. The copper silhouette outlines the contours of the stone in order to highlight its raw beauty and act as an adornment for the found object. There is a dynamic interplay between the rough rock and its polished metal counterpart. Ordinary materials reach their extraordinary potential through transformation into meticulous works of art.

After graduation, I plan to set up a studio space in Austin and continue to develop an artistic practice that oscillates between sculpture and wearable work. I will explore the seeds of ideas planted in graduate school that intersect multiple disciplines

like creating large scale public works that reference jewelry but are not meant to be worn on the body. I would like to create enormous brooches for public sites that adorn the architecture of interior and exterior spaces. I will continue exploration of the endless potential for metamorphosis with humble elements. I plan to exhibit internationally and have a solo exhibition in the near future.

Illustration 1

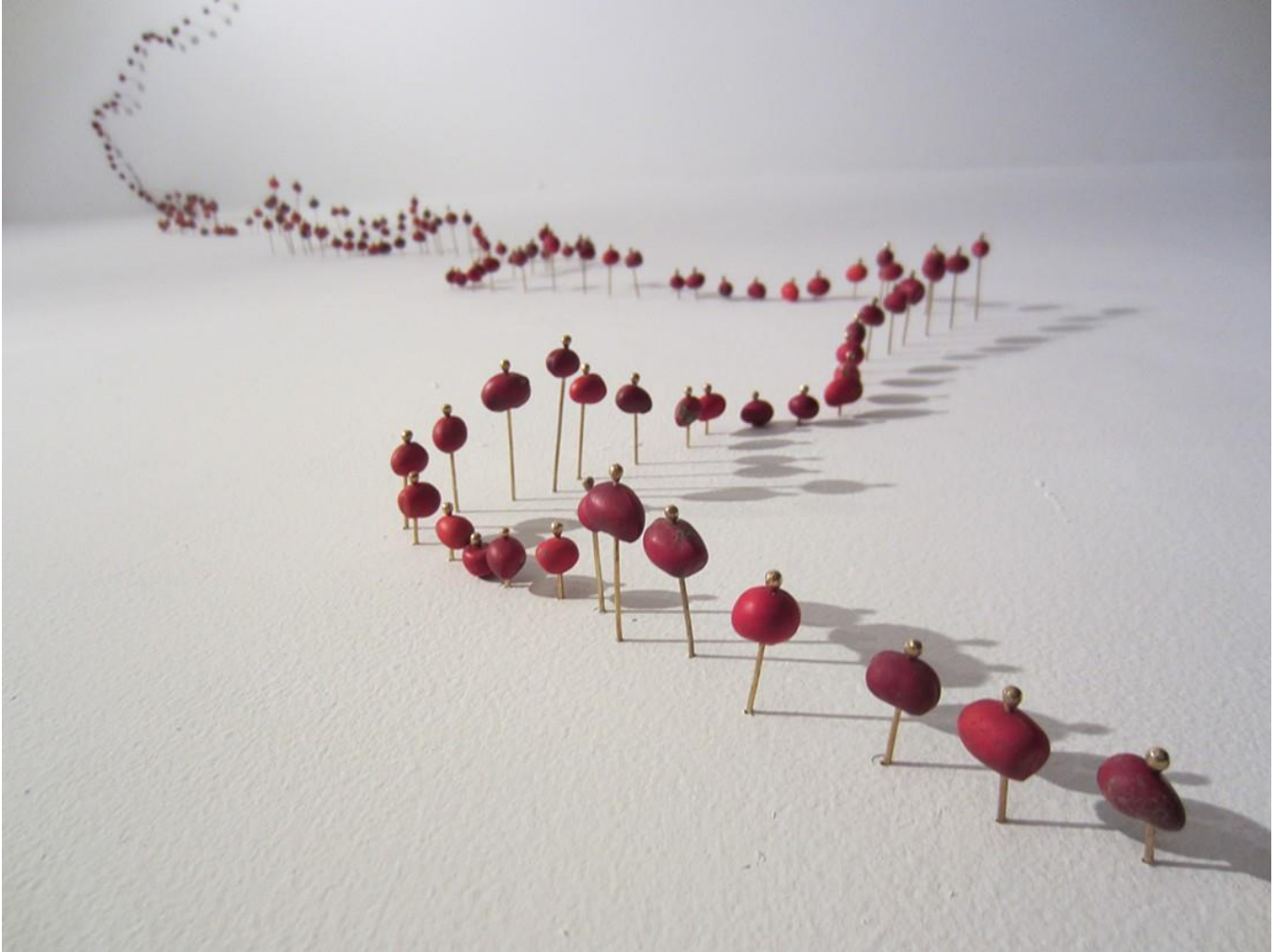


Illustration 2

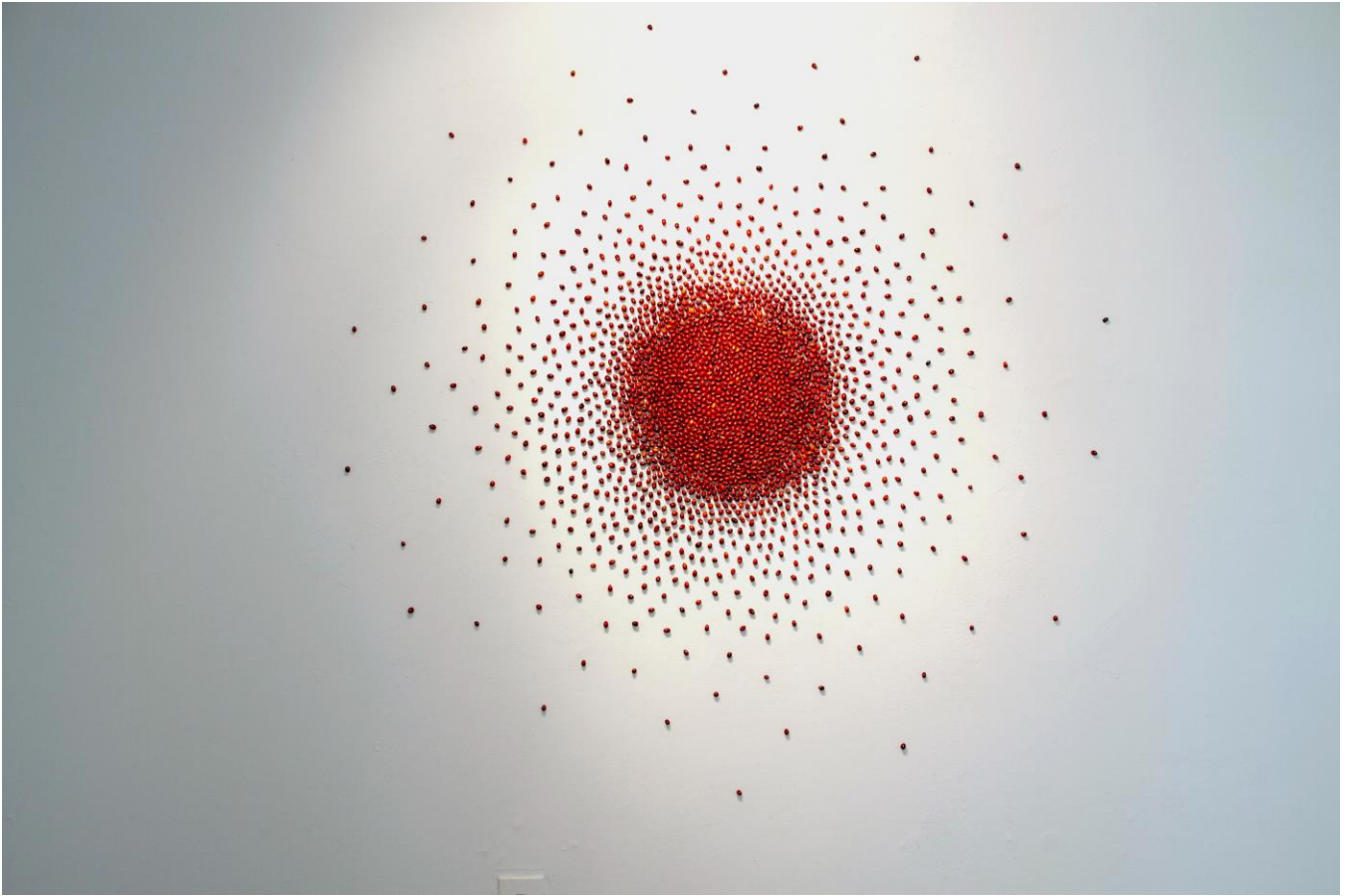


Illustration 3



Illustration 4

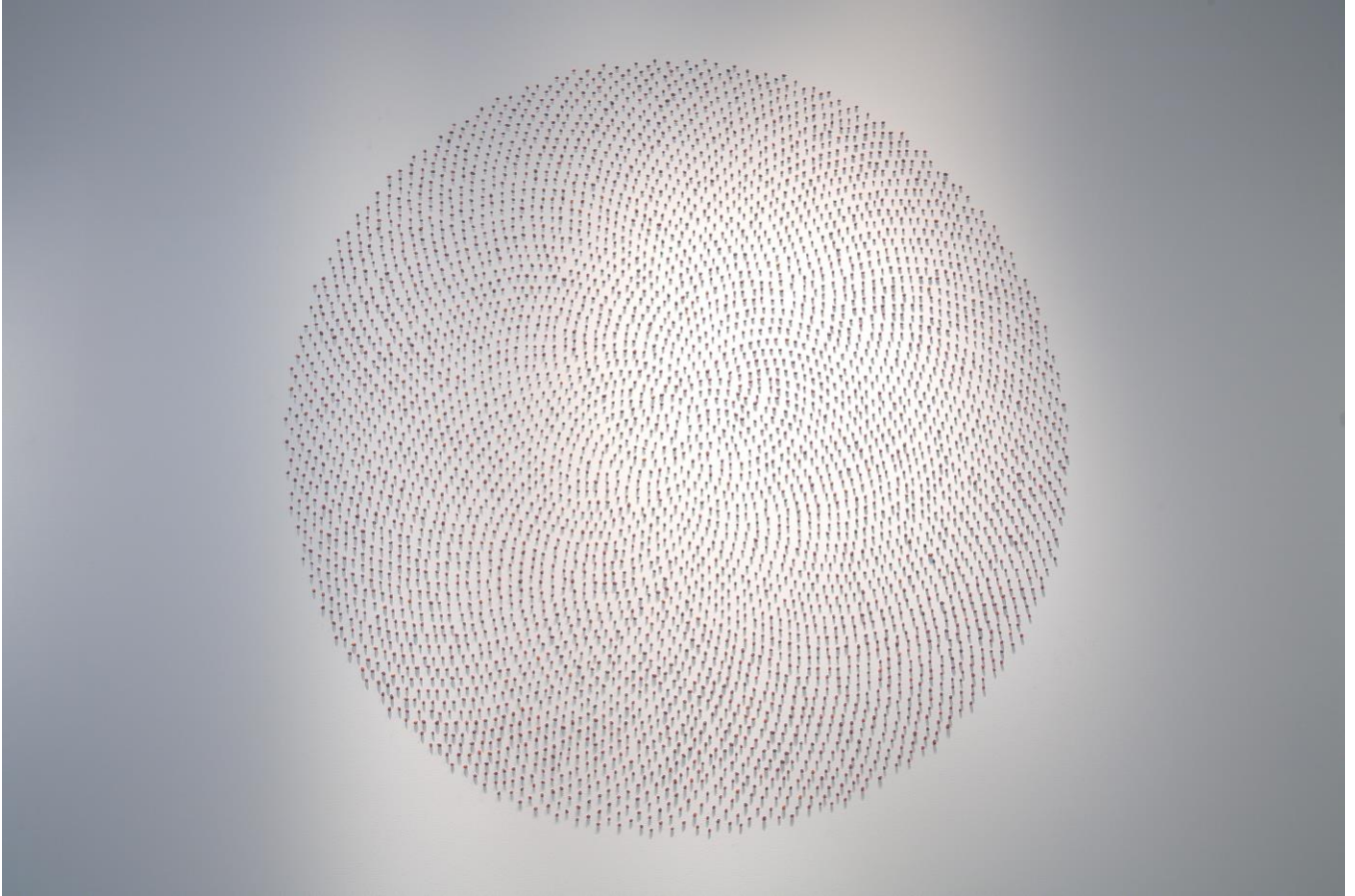


Illustration 5



Illustration 6



Illustration 7

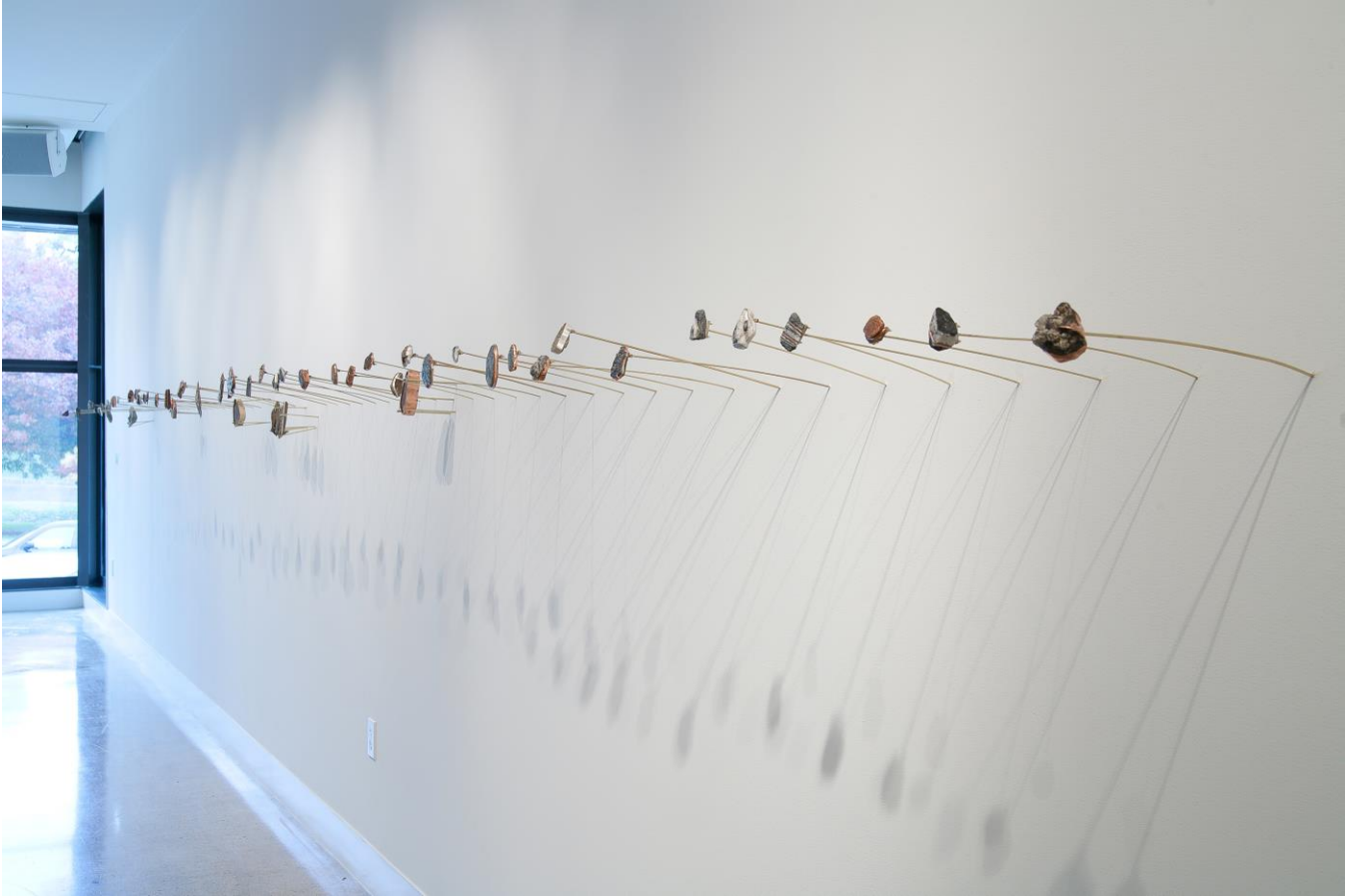


Illustration 8



Illustration 9



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Li, Deshun. "Value Theory: A Research Into Subjectivity." (2014): 18

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