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Meta-forms

A thesis

presented to the faculty of
the Department of Art and Design
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

by

Rickey Bump

May 2016

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Keywords: stimulation, potential, attention, self-potential, fulfillment, literal, figural, non-objectivity, abstraction.

ABSTRACT

Meta-forms

by

Rickey Bump

The artist discusses his Master of Fine Arts exhibition, *Meta-forms*, held at the Tipton Gallery in downtown Johnson City. Exhibition dates are from March 14 through March 25, 2016. The artworks on display are a series of drawings made from carving wood panels and sheet metal and are accompanied with a large scaled site-specific installation. The exhibition culminates from research of historic and contemporary figures for non-objective art. The author gives insight to the artistic process while creating his exhibition, as well as their personal connection with the artwork.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Enjoying art is a personal matter. It's made up by contemplation, silence, abstraction.”

-Renzo Piano

The past few years have been a transitional period of both tangible and intangible degrees. I lived on the outskirts of Chicago most of my life before moving to the considerably smaller community of Johnson City, TN. for graduate school. There were many aspects of living in a major city I found unpleasant, and was often conflicted by the surrounding environment. The constant crowds, retail stores, and never ending traffic were simply a part of life. People appeared to easily tune out the distraction around them without any ill affect, but I couldn't shrug it off as easily. It was difficult balancing social and personal life while living in the Chicago area, and therefore chose to relocate.

I now reside in the Appalachian mountains of East Tennessee where, needless to say, it's drastically different from city life. Enjoying the solitude of the mountains is an attraction I often take advantage of since moving here. I refer to hiking in the mountains as my reset button because of its rejuvenating effects. In one way or another, most of us implement some kind of escape from our daily routine, regardless of the vehicle (Collier, “Escapism and Contemporary Life”). Hiking in nature, working out at the gym, or even painting your bedroom could all be considered activities we do to relieve stress and social pressure. These activities are critical for

well-being because they help diffuse and balance the adverse amount of information we're exposed to daily (Simmel, 12).

Obtaining solitude on the trails of the Appalachian Mountains has offered relief from daily life while simultaneously providing moments of self-reflection. In addition to enjoying nature, I also depend on creativity and artistic exploration as a vehicle for escape and introspection. Over the past few years I've made efforts to simplify my lifestyle and remove unwanted social distractions. Inevitably these concepts have also impacted my thoughts about my artistic process.

Prior to attending graduate school I was making drawings with a representational approach, focusing my practice on how well I could render and portray landscapes, objects, people, and social narratives. My earlier process was motivated by accuracy and technical skill with consideration of genre painters like Vermeer or Rembrandt as the epitome of artistry. Striving for accuracy while drawing or painting objectively was extremely frustrating and discouraging- often leading to disconnected outcomes in the studio. Eventually I grew more detached with my work and began questioning personal underlying reasons for, and principles of, making art.

After challenging prior judgments about art, I grew interest for non-objective art and began new explorations of abstraction; rather than models of recognizable symbols for meaning. More selfishly, in efforts to strengthen my connection with the work, I've developed an artistic process that promotes meditative introspection as a means of therapeutic relief from social pressures. The focal point of my research and practice has been to conceptualize and convey the topics of self-awareness and actualization through non-objective modes of art making.

CHAPTER 2

ACHIEVING MINDLESSNESS

While living in the Chicago area, things like car horns and crowd chatter in many ways make up the sensory framework of living. Eating, walking, speaking, and basically every other facet of urban life seemingly happens faster. Stimulation is everywhere and solitude is difficult to find. After years of living the city life, I found myself increasingly anxious, physically restless, and felt fatigued both physically and mentally. Urban sociologist Georg Simmel believes city dwellers suffer from total sensory overload with a negative effect of difficulty coping with daily life (Simmel 13). Furthermore, Simmel adds that urban residents develop the need to detach themselves from their environments in order to cope with constant stimulation and ongoing social pressure (13). Our need for escape simultaneously increases as we become more exposed to external stimulation and detachment helps balance anxiety and restores attention loss.

By moving to a smaller community I've removed many of the distractions of city life, but still am not pardoned from the pressures of contemporary culture. Trending fashions of all accounts dominate contemporary popular culture with idealization and promotion meant to manipulate the masses. At what other period in time is it likely to see a ten story tall billboard advertisement of a glamourized Barbie Doll? Regardless of personal social differences, contemporary culture undoubtedly affects and influences our personality and behavior. Professor Dr. Alexander Thomas, of the Regensburg University Institute for Psychology, defines

socialization as “a life-long process aimed at learning socially relevant values, attitudes, norms, and behavior which make it possible living in [our] communities without greater confliction” (Kleniewski, Thomas 18). According to Dr. Thomas, “successful socialization offers the individual the necessary tools for orientation and finding their way in the world”(72). I interpret Dr. Thomas’ description of socialization to suggest that our measure of success ultimately lies in how well we operate within society.

Unfortunately Dr. Thomas’ ideas about conforming to society are in many ways true. I can’t deny that we all belong to a structured way of living and typically have to abide by the norms and laws of various social systems. Inevitably there are both positive and negative aspects to living in contemporary culture. I contemplated how personal behavior and decision making could be subject to the expectations of those around us instead of what is in the individual’s best interest. When I was younger, I scoffed at the idea of being an artist because of the associated condemnation of impracticality and probability of a successful career. After a series of life changes, I now realize that many of my viewpoints and behaviors were altered by the social pressures around me. I began to question how certain social parameters also affected the achievement of self-awareness and self-potential.

In his theory of self-actualization, psychologist Abraham Maslow suggests that all human beings possess unrealized potential (Edwards, 921). Self-actualization occurs when we meet that self-potential and discover the true self (925). Maslow described 18 characteristics of self-actualizing and adds that one way to reach self-potential is through detaching oneself from society (924). I relate social detachment and actualization alongside Carl Jung’s idea of “wholeness” and individuation. Carl Jung saw the process of individuation as the integration

between conscious and unconscious aspects of our psyche (Jacobi, 15). Jung adds that autonomy and “wholeness” occur at the sum of the unconscious and conscious self (15). Sharing a similar philosophy with both Maslow and Jung, I believe the process of art making can serve as a vehicle for achieving “wholeness” and self-potential.

I often refer to being mindless while I’m making art. I’m not suggesting the word literally as being absent minded or without a purpose. I’m figuratively suggesting that being mindless is something deeper, beyond the outside influence of social parameters. I’m describing a therapeutic state that is free from outside influence and reliant purely on individual instinct and reaction. Regardless of context, isn’t it agreeable that we all need moments to temporarily shut down and escape social order? Did our prehistoric ancestors find relief from their harsh world while carving their spears and weaving their baskets? Did medieval blacksmiths find therapy while painstakingly forging steel? Art philosopher Crispin Sartwell lends to my idea of mindlessness when he describes the artistic process as “becoming absorbed in what one is doing at the present moment, in the process one is engaged in right now” (Sartwell, 25).

More than likely we have all witnessed, if not ourselves, somebody who has been totally absorbed in an action or process. Picture a pianist’s performance. There is a tangible connection seen through the performer’s psyche, body rhythm and harmony of sound. It is something so involved that it somehow breaks through to an unconscious and conscious state of being -a state of mindlessness. Personally, being absorbed by with the creative process and achieving mindlessness is the critical ingredient for reaching self-potential. I find that I am most fulfilled by removing myself from social pressures and can achieve a form of self-actualization while making art.

CHAPTER 3

LETTING GO

Art has consistently relieved much of my social pressures as well as allowed me to express my personal thoughts. Since beginning graduate school, I've concentrated on stepping away from preconceived ideas I had about art and the creative process. A significant factor leading way for the progression of those thoughts came while reading a letter from Sol LeWitt to Eva Hesse. Hesse had written to LeWitt about her troubles and insecurities with her artwork. LeWitt responds with empathy towards Hesse's struggles and writes he sometimes finds "agonizing reappraisal" is necessary for his work. He offers advice by telling Hesse to make her worst work. "The worst [she] could think of and see what happens, but mainly [to] relax and let everything go to hell". "But when you work, or before you work, you have to empty your mind". "Don't think that your work has to conform to any preconceived form [or idea]" he adds. I had been internally struggling with my artwork and process prior to reading their letter and identified with Hesse's self-doubt and insecurity. I had also connected with LeWitt's responding advice of letting go. After reading their correspondence, I kept thinking about clearing my mind and letting go. I needed to somehow completely forget the past and start with a fresh outlook.

I questioned if an art piece could have no content at all (an idea that I have since deemed impossible). Despite being a self-contradictory idea, I was intrigued by the possible outcome of having an art piece that was free from an exact meaning or purpose. Coinciding with remodeling my creative process, I was researching the effects of cultural overstimulation while

simultaneously comparing them to ideas about the dissimulation of senses. I came upon an article about Dr. Donald O. Hebb, a professor of psychology at Montreal's McGill University. Dr. Hebb, along with other university researchers, deprived participants of sensory input (Rasmussen, 1). The consequential result of delusional and erratic behavior that Hebb anticipated to occur in a couple weeks happened after just a couple of days. I was intrigued by this because of my affinity for solitude as well as my contradictory desire for certain stimuli like music or television. The thought of my niece swiping an iPad at six months old came to mind. Are we innately programmed to need constant stimulation? I questioned not only our desire and motives for stimulation but, in a more broadened sense, how those stimulations made us react physically and mentally. Consequentially, I created a three day participatory art exhibit, *Isolated Minds* (fig 1), at the D.P. Culp University Center on the campus of East Tennessee State University.



Figure 1. *Isolated Minds*, 2013.

The *Isolated Minds* exhibition was created to combine two intentions. I wanted to provide the viewer with solitude and silence while at the same time challenging their comfortableness with the absence of visual or auditory stimulation. Here I was interested in the possible conversation about the forms of stimulation that affect us while creating a controlled, temporary, and relatively extreme escape.

In the center of an enormous empty ballroom sat an oversized rickety chair with blacked out goggles and sound canceling headphones. Participants were able to sit unadulterated in the ballroom for as long as they felt comfortable. To limit outside interference, I had asked them not to bring any cellphones and personal belongings into the exhibition space. The idea was to take away stimulation from three major senses of sight, hearing, and touch, by having them wear the blacked out goggles, headphones, and oversized latex gloves. Afterwards I was able to gain feedback of viewer experiences by utilizing a blog and survey. One noteworthy result experienced by nearly all of the participants was the feeling they had only been in the exhibit for half of the amount of time they actually were. The longest participant sat for one hour and forty-five minutes and afterward said she thought it was merely thirty minutes. The consensual response from participants was that absence of stimuli and stimulation had a considerable impact both physically and cognitively. Nearly all participants of the exhibition stated they had some kind of self-reflective thought in which clarity was gained. Furthermore, the absence of distraction and brief setting of silence seemingly had positive effect on the participants.

Personal theory about art making was significantly different with my approach to making the *Isolated Minds* exhibition. Older work reflected a way of thinking driven by arranged images and visual depictions meant to manipulate specific emotions. The *Isolated Minds* exhibition was

different to that line of thinking because it set aside previous ways of making and explored non-objective ideas like physical sensation through participatory art. In the end the progression of personal theory about art and art making lead to a more connected and engaged outcome with the work and creative process.

CHAPTER 4

POSTMODERN EFFECT

Suspending predispositions of any facet is not an easy task. At times I feel like a cautious tourist carefully exploring the land. I looked at early postmodern figures like abstract expressionist Franz Kline and had a new viewpoint as I re-examined his artwork. I grew to admire the honesty and transparency of his work as well as the coined “Minimal” artists such as Donald Judd, Sol Lewitt, and Richard Serra. I was intrigued by the notion that “the box is just a box” as Judd would say (Judd, 178). I use the word “honest” when describing his artwork, to suggest that with little visual analysis, the true nature of things appear. When Judd suggests that “a box is just a box” he is saying that we should see the material for what it is, in itself (178). For what is right in front of us. Although there may be obviousness to Judd’s work, any interpretations of meaning are highly individualized. I’m primarily interested with Judd’s arrangement of the boxes in correlation with a viewer’s physical perception of spatial relationships. Likeminded to Judd I began to support the simple yet impactful ideas of physical perception and sensation.

Richard Serra’s *Torqued Ellipses* at the Dia Beacon in New York is an example of experiential art meant to challenge the viewer’s sensory responsiveness. As part of my research, I visited Serra’s Ellipses and can attest to the works intense physical affects. The gigantic steel walls of the ellipses at times condense inward and then drastically expand into cavernous open cavities. While navigating through his work, my body seemed to compress inward along with the

walls as they narrowed. Likewise, when the walls became separated with more space, I could physically feel a release of pressure. Ultimately, I had to “find my way” through primitive instinct and reaction to the information presented in front of me. This is not to say that we aren’t using instinct and reaction while roaming the city. Instead I use this example here in support of the idea of mindless activity. All references to society were basically gone, which allowed for momentary escape and introspection. While encountering Serra’s ellipses I was able to have a unique, individual experience that offered a form of self-realization in that I was fully aware of myself, my body, and the unisons with my surroundings.

While researching other minimal and conceptual artists, I came upon the article *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object*, by art critic Lucy Lippard. She writes that non-objective artists were “perhaps more concerned with intellectual distinctions in representation and relationships than those who rely on the object as vehicle/receptacle” (Lippard, 2). I turned to writings by postmodern theorists like Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes to better understand what Lippard meant by “representation and relationships” and “object as vehicle/receptacle” (2).

Mid-twentieth century theorists offered new ideas about language, known as Semiotics (Moxey, 32). Derrida and Barthes among others offered discourse to the idea of the “sign” and “signification”. Signification is the condition and process of how we cognitively apply meaning to things. At every moment “signs” around us help us perceive, interpret, and understand our surroundings (48). Historically speaking, artists have heavily relied upon signs as vehicles of meaning with their work. Any narrative utilizes a predetermined set of signs to collectively tell a story. Regardless of context and content, it is highly unlikely that personal interpretation of meaning is replicable and therefore the process of signification is absolutely individualized and

plural in nature (63). Here the connection can be made with artists like Judd and Serra, who set out to eliminate the object or “sign” from their work in an attempt to remove associations and reference of meaning. Furthermore, artists like Judd and Serra utilized simple abstract forms not only to take away exact meaning, but to help facilitate individual analysis and interpretation.

The term 'literalism' was used by art critic Michael Fried to describe the Minimalist aesthetic as a common understanding of purpose- not in terms of something else, or as representing something else (Fried, 2). The literal meaning of a word, for example, negates any figures of speech (similes, metaphor, hyperbole, personification, etc.). The distinction between the 'literal' and the 'figural' is that the first has direct meaning and the latter is indirect. There is a culturally shared, generalized, and absolute understanding with the literal, whereas the figural is dependent on further analysis for interpretation.

In my opinion, Eva Hess's artwork perfectly illustrates concepts of the literal and figural. As with her piece, *Vertiginous Detour*, Hesse frequently re-purposed common objects or ready-mades like rope, latex, and fibers that tended to deteriorate with time. Her use of unexpected materials and palpable textures created visceral forms that invite the viewer to pay close attention to the careful manipulation of each object.

The subject of Hesse's work dealt with heavy personal matters. Her mother's suicide and the passing of her father led to an internal struggle often seen through her work (Lippard, 1979). Her artwork embodied portrayals of mortality, order, chaos, hardness and softness. The aesthetic of Hesse's creations is considered and categorized by art historians as Post-minimal, which took the vernacular of Minimalism and infused it with emotion or expression resulting in both literal and figural interpretations of the work.

There are certain generalizations with contemporary culture that I find relevant and similar to mid-twentieth century generation that challenged cultural ideologies. Technologies and resources were monumentally exposed to the masses and popular culture exploded into the topics and politics of consumerism, technology, war, and pollution. I relate with the Minimalist and Post-minimalist artists whom offered fresh viewpoints directly in challenge of cultural ideologies and politics. I believe circumstantial parallels can be drawn between the mid-twentieth century reforms and personal differences I have with contemporary culture. Likeminded to earlier artists like Judd, Serra, and Hesse, I have shifted away from using “signs” as a vehicle for meaning and have begun investigating non-objective principles of art.

CHAPTER 5

PROCESS AND MATERIALS

As mentioned earlier, the artistic process is a vehicle for introspection and meditation. While entering graduate school I questioned personal underlying principles for making art and past motives for rendering objects “realistically”. What I essentially liked about representational drawing was the process of mindless repetitions of shading that helped facilitate meditation during the act of making. Repeating the same gesture or mark over and over (fig 2) helps bring familiarity to the material and helps understand the variety within itself. Being familiar with materials is important to help turn on cruise-control and allow effortless contemplation. John Cage says “if something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all” (Cage 93). Repetition has the capacity to turn one action into multitude viewpoints, or thoughts. Being able to have a designated source of uninterrupted thought not only helps with conceptual development of the artwork, but also helps digest and process daily life.



Figure 2. *Meta-form 1*, detail of carved whiteboard, 2016.

I had worked with traditional mediums of drawing (graphite, charcoal) prior to graduate school, but also began exploring everyday sources for materials towards the latter half of my undergraduate degree. Exploring common materials like dirt and concrete allows for a process that is spontaneous and more responsive to the material/medium. I believe the integrity of the actual material shouldn't be hidden; rather it should remain a prominent aspect of the completed work. I might grab a notion of what it might be in the end, but what the final result will be is secondary to the creative process itself. I find the analysis and discovery happening along the way the most important and can relate this idea to the feeling of discovery that happens while hiking in the mountains. Relying on instinct and reaction offers an element of adventure and surprise similarly achieved during an unplanned creative process.

I created an installation, the work titled *500 Washers* (Fig 3), at the SUBmarine gallery at ETSU, where I arranged and rearranged five hundred hardware store zinc-washers on the gallery wall. While walking down the aisle of Home Depot, my attention was suddenly distracted by an amazing reflection of light coming from a small zinc washer lying on the ground. I couldn't help

but to investigate it's potential as an art medium. After leaving Home Depot with hundreds of washers in hand, I headed for the gallery with high anticipation and uncertainty for the final outcome. Placement of the washers on the wall was in response to the reflected light and the work developed from a series of reactions to light and shadow. The larger pieces had noticeably different refractions of light than smaller ones and the process of making the work became a dance of addition and subtraction. While making this work, I found that I was more engaged and connected with a creative process that is highly dependent on intuition and reaction to material.

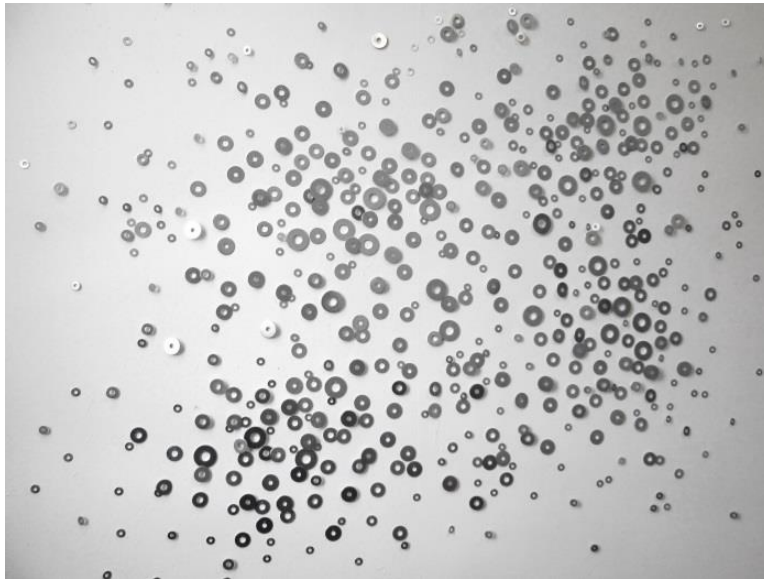


Figure 3. *500 Washers*. Zinc washers, 2014.

Repurposing ordinary materials like sheet metal, plywood, and duct tape has become synonymous with my current work. I often take advantage of everyday products as a way to engage both literal and figural interpretation. The familiarity allows the viewer to associate and recognize each object's intended use while simultaneously analyzing its figurative purpose. Support of this can be seen throughout the exhibition *Meta-forms*, and particularly *Meta-form 6* (fig 7). The site specific installation that was built for the exhibition uses the notion of line

figuratively as a journey or path. At the Tipton Gallery I arranged numerous ten foot long by six inch wide strips of sheet metal continuously along the wall. The sheet metal detaches from the wall and connects with other pieces at certain areas and is repeated throughout the installation. My desire to make this installation came from my affinity with site-specificity and working intuitively within a designated space. The line becomes a path to create a journey for the viewer to takes with their eyes. The repeated shift of focus metaphorically speaks of the back and forth journey of trying to get from one place to the next- moving forward yet stepping back.



Figure 4. *Meta-form 6*. Steel. 2016.

I've focused the past few years on simplifying thoughts about the creative process and strengthening a deepened connection with my artwork. Working non-objectively and removing symbols from my work has helped remove personal expectations that art should conform to preconceived forms or ideas. I now have higher regard for the actual process of making rather than for the final product. To strengthen this idea, I've implemented smaller studies and exercises as a means of exploration and experimentation. Summarily, working more

spontaneously with materials and embracing the unfamiliar or unknown has helped strengthen my artistic process.

CHAPTER 6

META-FORMS

Throughout graduate studies, and for the making of the exhibition *Meta-forms*, I've focused on process driven practices aimed to challenge traditional standards of art making while simultaneously creating a unique experience for the viewer. The work itself has been simplified or stripped down to simple line, shape, form, and texture with aim to challenge the viewer with the unfamiliar and induce self-thought and contemplation. Utilizing minimal and abstracted forms serves purpose to offer both literal and figural connotations of the work, while also offering room for individual interpretation. Ultimately, researching and producing this work has been a personal journey of reform and progression. Developing an internal connection with the artistic process has allowed me to find an intimate balance and meditation within myself. The artwork serves not only as a physical capstone of graduate research, yet embodies years of introspection and personal evolution.

The thesis exhibition *Meta-forms* is the byproduct of significant life changes of the past decade that has led to self-actualization and fulfillment. The collection of artworks being shown consist of three-dimensional drawings made from carving wood panels and sheet metal, along with a large scaled site-specific installation utilizing long strips of sheet metal. Carvings like *Meta-form 4* (fig 8), are made from common industrial materials with factory painted surfaces that involve removing the superficial surface and exposing the underlying material. The physical act of carving away the exterior surface becomes a metaphor in multiple ways. Part of the

overhaul of my recent thought stems from inquiries of how certain social parameters, such as living in a major city, affect achieving self-potential. Essentially, the essence of stripping away the exterior and revealing the interior figuratively represents the journey of self-actualization over the past few years.

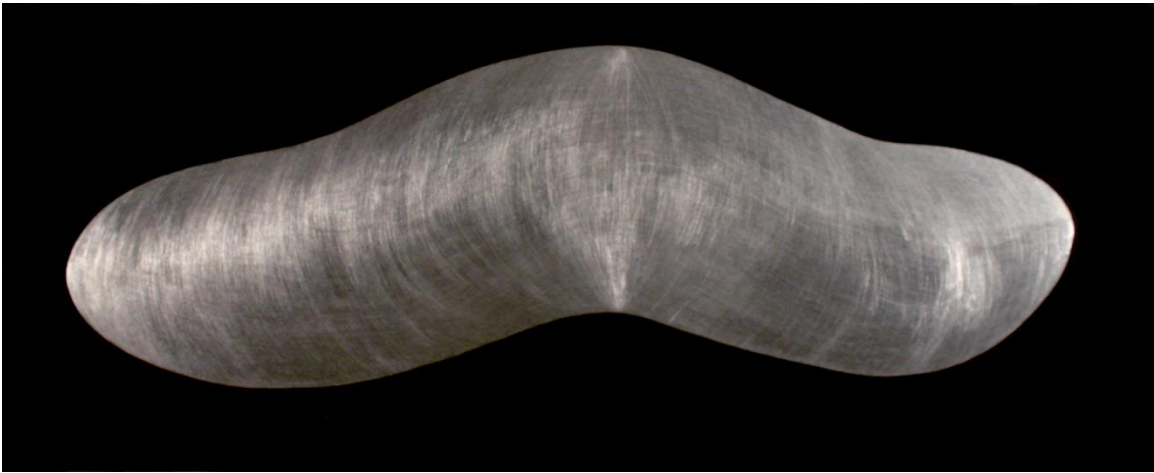
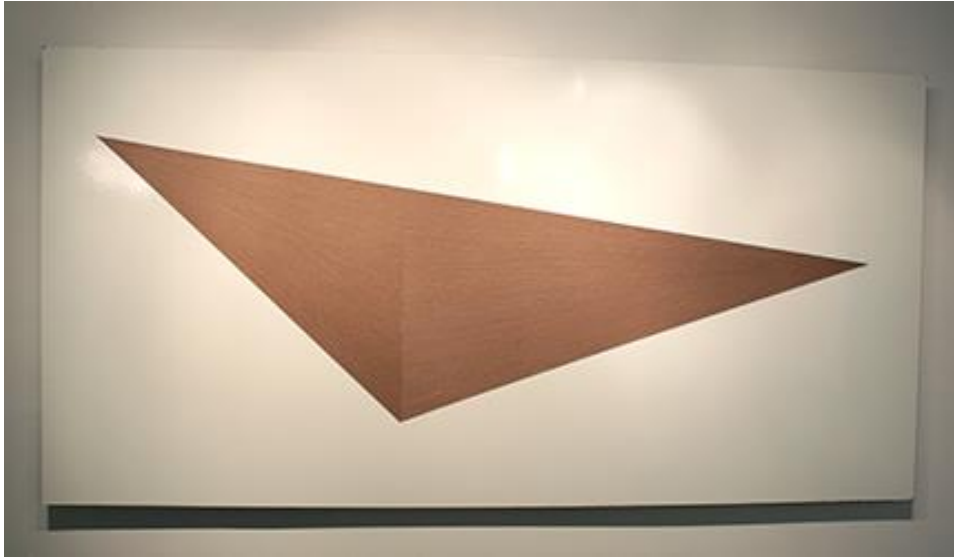


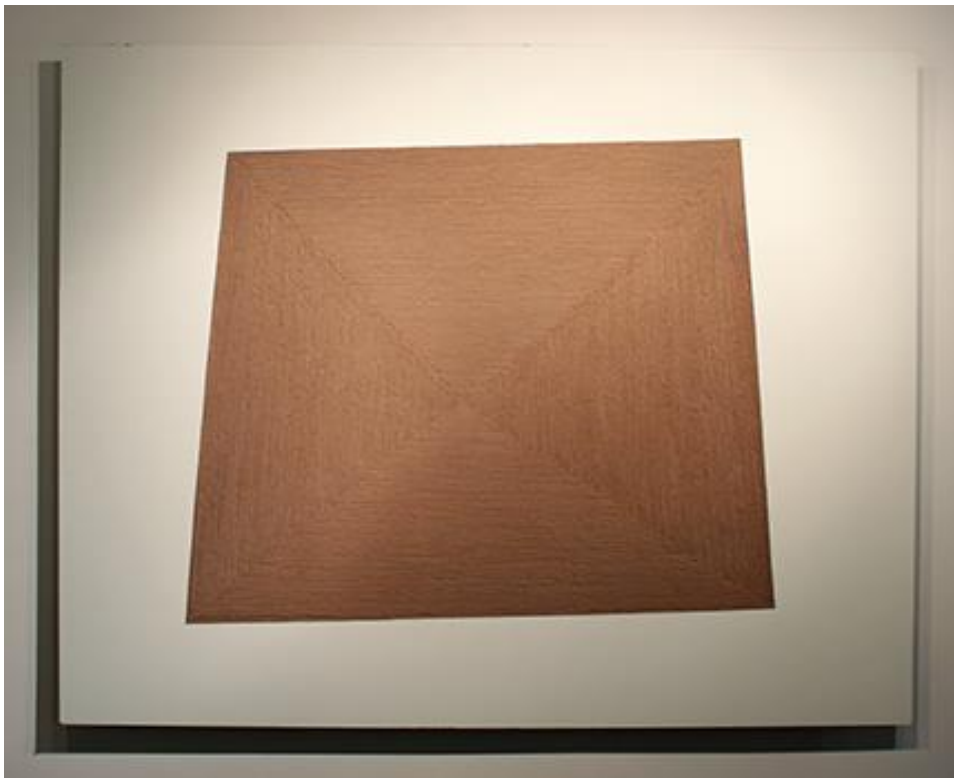
Figure 5. *Meta-form 4*. Carved steel sheet. 2016.

CATALOG OF EXHIBITION

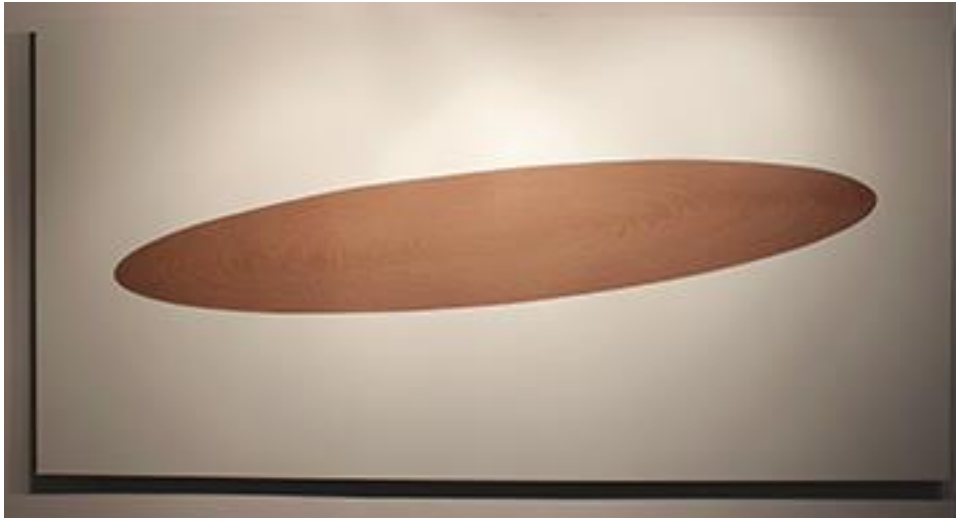
1. Meta-form 1. Carved whiteboard. 2016.



2. Meta-form 2. Carved whiteboard. 2016.



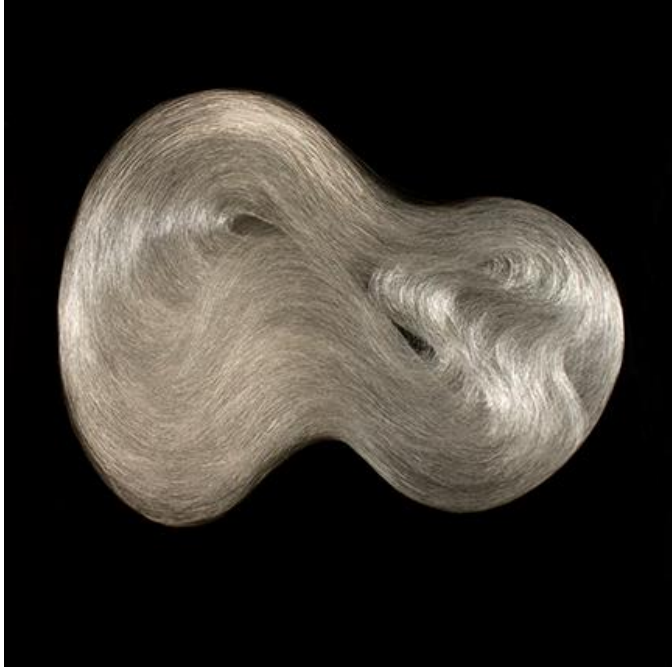
3. Meta-form 3. Carved whiteboard. 2016.



4. Meta-form 4. Caved steel sheet. 2016.



5. Meta-form 5. Carved steel sheet. 2016



6. Meta-form 6. Steel. 2016



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Diverge, Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN. 2014
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