

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: POTENTIAL DISASTERS

JL Stewart Watson, MFA 2010

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Chair

The common conceptual thread woven through my work is a fascination with the point at which two things meet, thereby creating a third entirely new event. This ongoing theme of two forces and their point of contact speak of weakness and controlled failure. Whether it is with feather filled, upholstery fabric forms pinned to the wall by bowed steel armatures, or tense steel rods sprung between wall and floor, my interest lies in exploring how the slow, kinetic action of one, affects the other. I construct three-dimensional drawings with steel rods that rely upon relationships with their surroundings. The starting and ending points of the rods are ambiguous; rather, they are a series of marks that link one point to another. Developed through self-created codes and natural genetic patterning from my personal history, each rod represents a relationship. These installations and three-dimensional drawings are part of the series entitled *Potential Disasters*. The work has potential for slip, change or collapse. I guide, direct, and balance elements, but once the installation is established, the resulting event is out of my control.

POTENTIAL DISASTERS

By

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University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
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2010

Advisory Committee:
Professor John Ruppert, Chair
Professor Dawn Gavin
Professor Jefferson Pinder

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Dedication

I dedicate this paper and the accompanying installations to James Vernon Vose, our son, Pulman Percival, my parents, Janet Stewart and Robert Bruce, my sisters, and to the ancestors without whom I would not be here.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family and all of my dear friends for their love, support, and countless theramutes, with special nods to Michelle Avary, Anna Menendez, Ruth Bowler, Sarah Laing, and Timothy & Angela Horjus.

I also take this opportunity to thank my directed studies and theory professors, safety compliance guru - Jerry Romanow, and our office rockstars; Jojo, Kathie, and Danielle.

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POWK

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Potential Disasters

The common conceptual thread woven through my work is a fascination with the point at which two things meet, thereby creating a third entirely new event. This ongoing theme of two forces and their point of contact speaks of weakness and controlled failure. Whether it is with feather filled, upholstery fabric forms pinned to the wall by bowed steel armatures, or tense steel rods sprung between wall and floor, my interest lies in exploring how the slow, kinetic action of one, affects the other. I construct three-dimensional drawings with steel rods that rely upon relationships with their surroundings. Developed through self-created codes and natural genetic patterning from my personal history, each rod represents a relationship. Some refer to specific genealogical lines that connect Aunt to Uncle or Mother to Son; others reflect relationships that develop through time and companionship. Both situations depend upon painted steel implements bolted to the wall holding it all together. The starting and ending points are ambiguous. They are simply a series of marks that link one point to another. These recent installations and three-dimensional drawings are part of the series entitled *Potential Disasters*. Through decay, time, precariousness, humor, or some combination thereof, once the work leaves my hands, there is potential for slip, change or collapse. I guide, direct, and balance elements, but once the installation is established, the resulting event is out of my control.

Chapter 2: Previous Disasters

The point at which two different things meet and the real or imagined tension created has been a theme of my work for as long as I can recall. My previous experiments and site specific sculptures have used such materials as candy, dough, steel, concrete, fabric, feathers and bronze. By sewing, baking, and cooking in industrial and alternative contexts I coupled the domestic materials with industrial treatments and applications through precarious balance, tension and weight.

As in *eocene520#*¹, molten candy was poured into unique molds, and cast around bronze that was revealed as the candy changed and decayed over time. This body of work began as an exploration of women's issues such as place and purpose. Through my own struggle with physical limitations, degradation and surgeries to my spine, my work grew to address more universal ideas of weakness and controlled failure. Initially, I fought against the nature of the materials, trying to keep the candy in stasis, but by giving in to flaw and metamorphosis, I realized the potential for the installations themselves to create new and different work while continually evolving throughout the life of the installation. By taking away the structures, I could emphasize the drawing components of the candy, light and shadow. This led to

1 Images 1, 2 & 3
eocene 520# 2006 50" x 204" x 120" variable
sugar, corn syrup, water, paper, bronze, cast iron

*10feet or so*² with no interior structure and *full spectrum*³ where I cast candy around fluorescent tubes that became the light and shadow.

A more recent work, *inheritance*⁴, generates from a version of my family tree. Steel rods were set into holes in the floor and pinned raw wool filled “puffs” to the wall. Each small, upholstered puff represented a specific family member whose position on the wall was established by randomly flexing the rods creating a mass.

Other recent works include dense graphite drawings on paper such as *generate: c*⁵, with patterns appropriated from guinea fowl and farm bird feathers, my family lineage, DNA coding and the Braille alphabet. Each coded drawing holds information that may not be understood by merely looking at it. By abstracting the images into graphic black and white drawings, there is the impression of organic and scientific information at the same time. Feathers become a metaphor for genetics through natural and unnatural order. Each feather is unique, but part of something that is the same – part of the same bird or the same species. The spots and stripes of fowl feathers are like DNA strands or mysterious strands of information that have the possibility of being solved or explaining who or what we are. That is, an amalgam of

2 Images 4 & 5

10feet or so 2008 variable studio installation day 1 & day 4
sugar, corn syrup, water, aircraft cable

3 Image 6

full spectrum 2009 25”x 168” x 48”
sugar, corn syrup, water, fluorescent tubes, wiring, ballasts, steel, wood, ribbons

4 Image 7

inheritance 2009 96” x 80” x 80” variable
steel, upholstery fabric, raw wool, thread

5 Images 8 & 9

generate: c, f 2009 14” 1 4”
graphite and white charcoal on paper.

data - both learned and innate. So much of what we are - as a family or species - is similar, that the tiny bit that makes us unique is what interests me. I have created a vocabulary – an alphabet of stuff with which I can express my need to speak about my history, where I am in the scheme of things, and a nostalgia for things of which I have no recollection. None of the objects or materials themselves is old or antiquated, yet I use them as contemporary signifiers of historical data.

Chapter 3: Mechanical Failure (personal disasters)

As my work addressed weight, balance, tension and decay, I was encountering these situations in my own body. I became two things; organic and mechanic. The points of contact in my body are not merely flesh and bone anymore, but metal as well. Flaws in my genetic makeup have influenced my work so that the universal has become personal again. Ironically, making art has contributed to the degradation of my vertebrae and discs, leading to spinal surgeries including a fusion and instrumentation operation that removed failing disc tissue and replaced it with cadaver bone, and titanium rods and bolts for stability⁶.

While not an overwhelming preoccupation, my awareness of my genetic predisposition to mechanical failure and human interventions is a factor in how my work has evolved. Chronic pain is my constant reminder of decay and the presence of the mechanical interventions within.

⁶ Image 10
x-ray image of my spine 2007

Chapter 4: Potential Disasters and other family matters

The primary materials in the Potential Disaster Series are common to all three installations: steel, feathers and fabric. Each is balanced, pinned, prodded or propped in ways that accentuate the parlous nature of elements in space. Some seem to defy gravity, while others revel in its existence. Honesty in presentation and material remains conceptually vital to my work. There are no secret hangers or safety nets keeping the work from toppling over, the precariousness is real as is the potential for a kinetic event. Systematic dependency of materials without regard to origin or termination points is a fundamental aspect of each *Potential Disaster*. As with the result of my genetic makeup, constant adjustments and concessions are made during construction to accommodate previous placement of elements, such that the installations often create unexpected compositions.

generator 2010

With *generator 2010*⁷, I began with a stash of rods, painted connectors, and pillow forms. Each steel rod was cut to a different length, and ground to points that would assist in pinning and piercing to the walls and floor. The painted steel connectors were fabricated to varied lengths and colors were chosen based up on a palette from myriad fabrics strewn across my studio. Once in the space, I attached connectors to the wall intuitively, building the installation on site. Some rods move independently

7 Images 11 & 12
generator 2010 150" x 230" x 120"
steel, upholstery fabric, goose feathers, thread, paint

through space, while others are threaded through the connector rods at varied trajectories creating the webbed, three-dimensional drawing. The title refers to a creator: of energy, of family, of oneself, and the possibility of transcending one's genetic and mnemonic history.

potential disaster: pq

*Potential disaster: pq*⁸ features two slender steel rods that bow and balance a single precarious feather-filled form high into the corner of the gallery. The tension is real, and one missed step could topple the installation. There is potential for either of the materials to be unstable, yet they find a point where they are both in harmony. I strive for this moment; anything is possible and everything depends upon everything else.

sibling rivalries

*Sibling rivalries*⁹ consists of an excess of puffy shapes sewn from upholstery and dress fabric, feathers, steel rods, and casters. The forms are filled with goose down and feathers that emulate body-like masses on the floor of a small room. Three steel rods with incorporated casters are oriented upside down on the ceiling looking as if they may be keeping the forms pressed to the floor. Black marks are drawn across the

8 Image 13
potential disaster: pq 2010 130" x 56" x 65"
upholstery fabric, goose feathers, steel, thread

9 Images 14 & 15
sibling rivalries 2010 150" x 72" x 84" variable
goose feathers, 2009 Thanksgiving turkey feathers, fabric, steel, casters, thread

ceiling by the casters suggesting a struggle to keep them in place. The knowledge that something *has* happened and the potential for something *to* happen is eminent.

Through non-mechanical reproduction, multiples are created that are similar, but never the same. This is phenomenon is crucial as evidence of the human hand and its imperfections in my process oriented work. Sewing the pillow forms with exposed seams emphasizes the industrial nature of their construction. The upholstery fabrics I have chosen are meant to evoke luxury and the perception of well-to-do living rooms or the opulence of a romantic costume classic. This is the ideal, not the reality of what I know, rather, it is a fabricated memory of my past. Lush fabrics have always lured me in with their shiny, gilded surfaces, and a decidedly false sense of wealth. By heaping the amorphous pillows together, I suggest both the comfort of a well-worn sofa, and the relationships people have with things in their everyday lives. *Sibling rivalries* is reminiscent of time spent in bedrooms; with sisters, pillow fights, sleeping, taking sides, and of a time between quirky and ominous.

Chapter 6: Potential Offspring

This and all of my work, is about time and decay; celebration and fear; balance and material; humor and family; mysteries and solutions; genetics and codes; pain and propping; dropping and arching; failing and succeeding.

Looking forward is much like delving into history; it requires knowledge and an awareness of where I am right now in order to proceed. Genealogy and my family history continue to inform me as I reveal other generations of ancestors with every future construction.

Each *Potential Disaster* is like a relationship or member of the family: unique, ridiculous, precarious and wonderful. They are a series of individuals that make up the whole as they both rely upon and are affected by the outcome and trajectory of others. Success may be through failure, or by finding that perfect balance of object in gravity.

Images



Image 1 **eocene 520# 2006**
50"x 204" x 120"variable
sugar, corn syrup, water, paper, bronze, cast iron

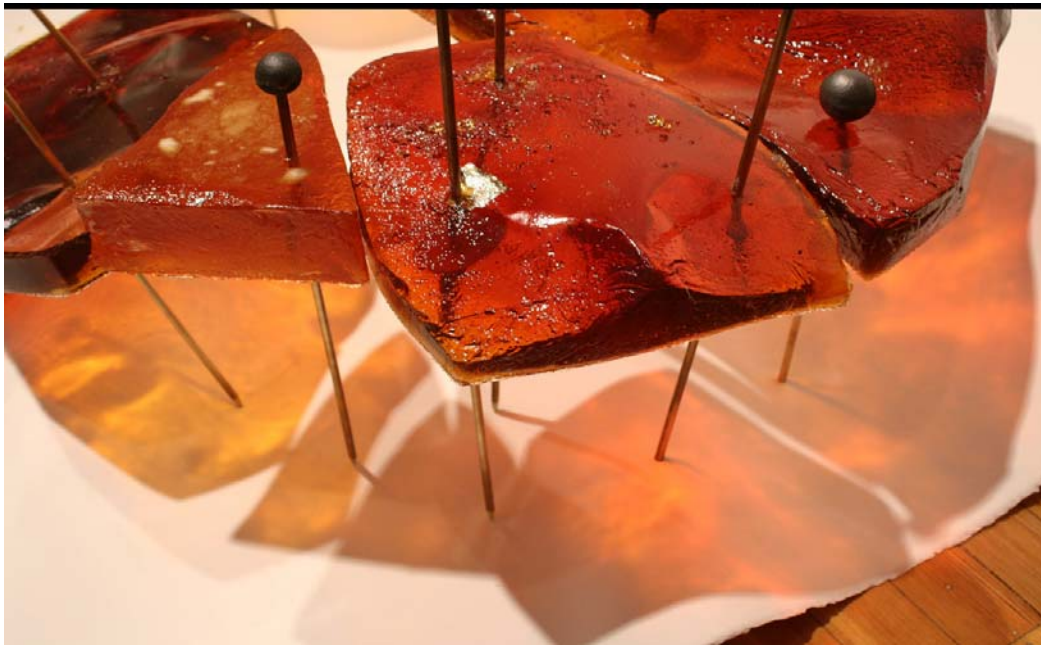


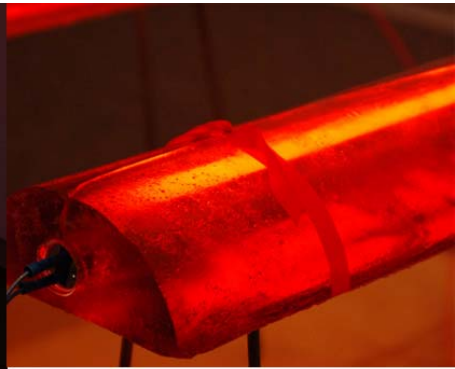
Image 2 **eocene 520# detail**



Image 3 **eocene 520#** detail (day 35)



Images 4 & 5 **10feet or so** 2008
variable studio installation : days 1 & 5
sugar, corn syrup, water, galvanized cable



JL Stewart Watson 2009
Full Spectrum
Cast Candy (sugar corn syrup, water), fluorescent tubes, wiring,
ballasts, steel, wood, ribbons
25" x 168" x 48"

Image 6 **full spectrum** 2009

25" x 168" x 48"

cast candy, fluorescent tubes, ballasts, wiring, steel, wood, ribbons



JL Stewart Watson
2009 Studio installation
inheritance
96" x 80" x 80" (variable)
steel, upholstery fabric, raw wool, thread

Image 7 **inheritance** 2009

96" x 80" x 80"

steel, upholstery fabric, raw wool, thread

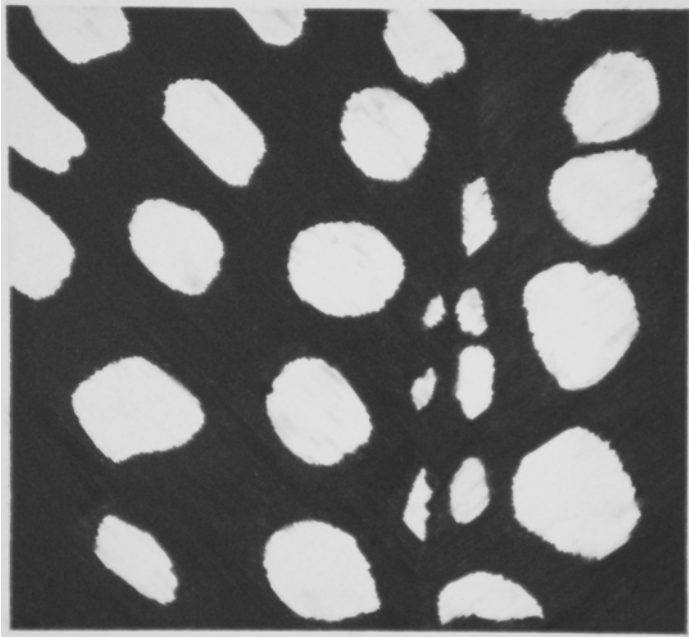


Image 8 **generate: c** 2009
14"x 14"
graphite and white charcoal on paper

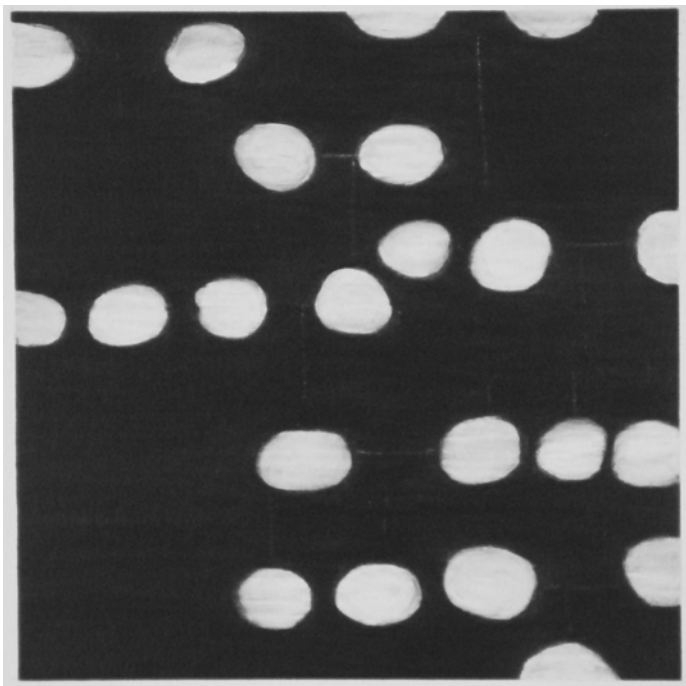


Image 9 **generate: f** 2009
14" x 14"
graphite and white charcoal on paper

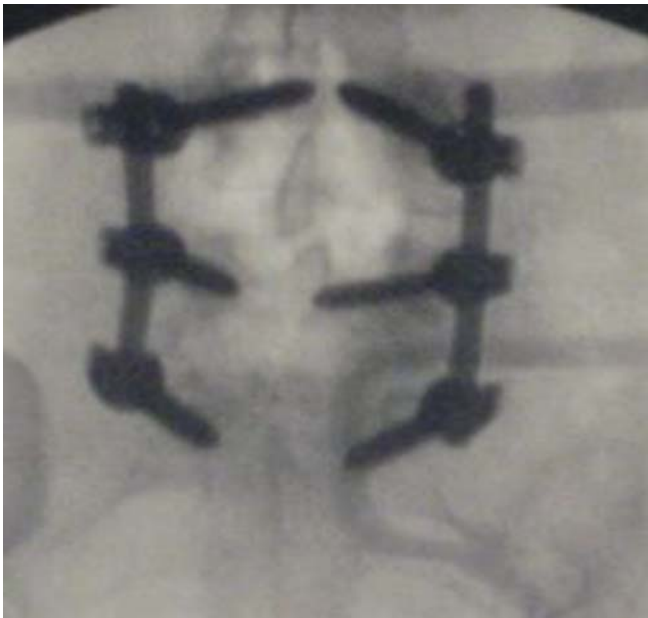


Image 10 **spine x-ray 2007**
JLS Watson spinal x-ray



Image 11 **generator 2010**
150"x 230"x 120"
steel, upholstery fabric, goose feathers, thread, paint

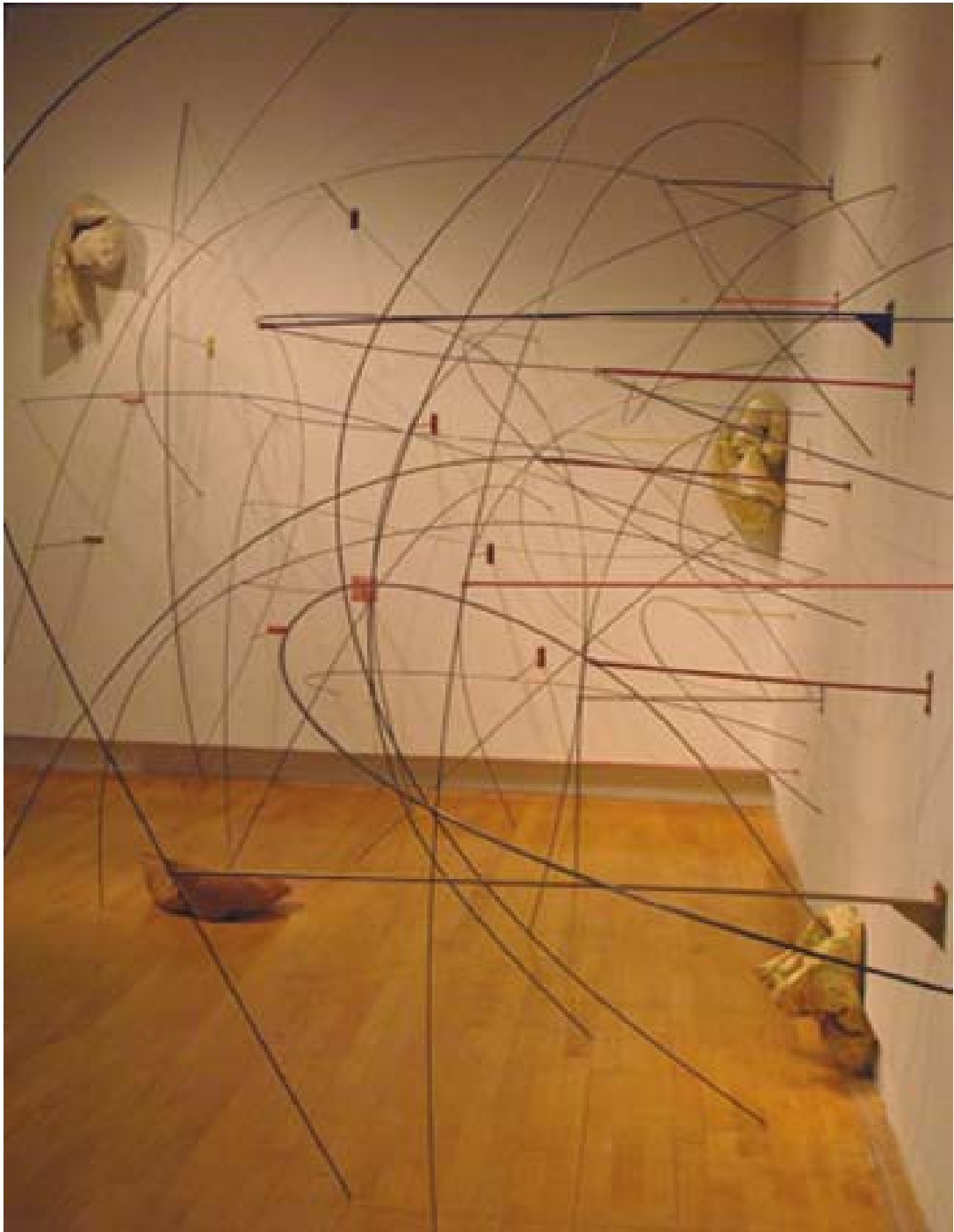


Image 12 **generator 2010**



Image 13 **potential disaster: pq** 2010
130" x 56" x 65" (variable)
upholstery fabric, goose feathers, steel, thread



Image 14 **sibling rivalries** 2010
150" x 72" x 84" variable
goose feathers, 2009 Thanksgiving turkey feathers, fabric,
steel, casters, thread



Image 15 **sibling rivalries** 2010 caster marks on ceiling detail

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