

Master of Fine Art Thesis

INTEGRATING LAND

Diego E. Loya

Submitted in partial satisfaction of requirement for the
degree of Master of Fine Arts, School of Art and Design
Division of Sculpture/Dimensional Studies
New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University
Alfred, New York

2019

Diego E. Loya, MFA

Diane Cox, Thesis Advisor

Karen Donnellan, Thesis Advisor

INTEGRATING LAND

Diego E. Loya

Entre los individuos como entre las naciones,
el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz.

Among individuals and the nations,
respect for the rights of others is what constitutes peace.

-Benito Juarez

Preface

Since I can remember, I've always enjoyed listening to other people's life stories. Through these stories I have been able to learn about the past that reflects the present of many of these people. One story that really impacted my life and later influenced my career as an artist was my grandfather's journey to the United States. Although my grandfather has several stories to tell, there is an instant where one of his stories really stuck with me deeply.

My paternal Grandfather, Pascual Loya, had been traveling through the desert for quite some time on his journey over to the United States from Mexico. The time came when the light in the sky kept fading as the sun would tuck away giving a last soft sigh. At this time my grandfather, standing in a pool of warm sand, surrounded by similarities and confusion in the landscape, decided to take a break as the journey would be more challenging in the dark. Before anything else occurred, he took off one shoe and placed it gently on the warm ground pointing towards the direction he was heading.

Realizing my grandfather had used his shoe as a compass, I became amazed by the poetics involved in his actions. A shoe being such vulnerable object when isolating it, yet such an essential protector, became a tool of navigation for this very important journey. This small part of his story resurfaced during my undergrad studies, influencing the piece *In Motion*. Working up to this project I began collecting shoes from family members and friends, allowing me to also use this everyday object as a crucial tool in this piece. As the number of shoes increased the variety of people became more present in the group of shoes. It was

important to give each shoe their presence but also keep them concealed in such way to avoid focus on the physicality and non-relevant details. Even after the manipulation process the history of these shoes remains present in their folds, tears, and postures; this speaks of identify and individuality. *In Motion* was created not only thinking of the journey of my beloved grandfather, but also the one of many individuals that are other people's beloveds.



Figure 1

In Motion
2015

Various sized shoes covered in laster, slip, resin and soils

Table of Content

	page:
Preface	2
Exhibition Statement	6
Value in simple materials	8
Ofrendas a Heart-filled feast	10
Union of Skins	12
Respect - Surrender	17
Interpreting the Horizon	23
Citations	25

Exhibition Statement

All my life, I've traveled to and from the United States and Mexico, creating homes in both of these countries. In the constant act of crossing the border that divides these two territories, I feel as if my heart has sewn the two planes even closer than what they already are. Understanding my privilege, I was always thankful for being able to come and go, when possible, to these both places that contributed so much to who I am today. The older I got, the more intrigued I became in understanding the issues that thickened the separation between my two homes.

As an artist I hold a responsibility to create works of art that are important to my journey, while keeping it relevant to others. Drawing inspiration from my Mexican heritage and the impactful stories of loved ones, I expand on current day issues that affect me and those who I love. I soften my communication by using familiar and sensitive materials that are inviting to the viewer. Through these, I tell the story of an inherit search for human rights. With three or more generations of immigrants before me, I become attentive to the needs of people who face the same or similar issues in their lives. I understand the process and needs for regulations and protection barriers, but I find it difficult to understand the ease to reject a genuine call for help.

Throughout this body of work I don't ask the viewer to change points of view associated with any labels, but rather to clear the layers of invisible boundaries we create and find the natural similarities that connect us as a human race. The need to survive should not be denied to any living being; instead, we must build closer

relations of altruism that can help better shape the future of life and preserve the home that fosters these possibilities, the Earth.

Value in Simple Materials

I remember when my father would come home from work with neglected treasures. These could be anything from a used toy to a simple strip of neon-colored vinyl tape. Sometimes, if I was lucky, it would even be something as cool as an old Polaroid camera. Occasionally, I would experience the encounters with these neglected treasures firsthand when my father would take me to work with him on Saturday mornings. At the time, I would drag myself to accompany him, for it was not my favorite Saturday activity, but something inside me always chose to accept my father's invitation and today I'm thankful I did. Raised in a humble home of loving immigrants, I learned to find value in the simplest things that surround me.

My father would always teach me how to be as resourceful as possible. The idea of throwing something away because we no longer need it was an almost abstract idea. Before throwing something away we would ask ourselves a few questions:

Is there a way it can be fixed?

Are there parts that can be recycled?

Can someone else make good use of it?

In response to these questions, there was almost always a "yes". Thanks to this mindset, my parents not only taught me to take good care of what I had, but also to share with those who have less. My parents always expressed that the value of life is not found in physical objects, but rather in the memories and feelings that we carry within.

Being resourceful has helped enrich my creativity and it influences my material selection. The materials that I use in my studio are mostly everyday objects that are generally not seen as something profitable. Collecting these materials can be as spontaneous as finding a rope in the middle of the road as I'm walking to the studio. I often refer to these collected items as humble materials. Having something that exists with a forgotten purpose inspires me to give it another opportunity - in perhaps a different context - to be able to serve a greater good.

After collecting these materials, I began exploring their limitations and abilities through manipulation. During this exploration the materials then become small investigations that can later inform conceptual ideas. They are almost like dimensional doodles, allowing me to get my hands working and my mind moving. All my studio projects are always in flux and open to change, even when I am aiming towards more developed work. I try to always be responsive to the materials and the growth of the given works until it feels ready to move out of the studio. Through the process of creating, I stay in tune with the concepts and ideas that shape my work.

Even when these small explorations don't inform other work, I tend to hold on to them for as long as I can. At times it can seem difficult to let go of something I've collected or made, no matter the contribution it provides to my work. The responsibility I hold with each thing I own can be traced back to my upbringing. But aside from my studio practice, I always remain mindful of the value of the emotions and connections we can share as humans.

Ofrendas

Throughout my studio practice I find it very Important to navigate through my ideas with an open mind, and more importantly an open heart. I believe most of my creations carry a layer of care and attention, especially when dealing with sensitive materials and topics. *Ofrendas* is a piece where I investigate intuitive making and the offerings of individual studies that harmonize in a feast of equality.

A horizontal plane with a slanted end that connects to the wall, carries a variety of intriguing visual treats. On the surface of this structure lies history and above it tradition. The closer you get, the sooner you realize what is typically seen as vertical now lies horizontal. This worn down door is the base that holds several different studio explorations as well as inspirations.

Ofrendas is partly inspired by the famous Mexican celebration, Día de Muertos, that is traced back to pre-hispanic times. Before Christianity arrived to the American continent, there was a different perspective to death among the Mexicas indigenous groups. In combination with Catholic traditions Dia de Muertos became a combination between ancient beliefs and new orders of religion. In present day traditions families go out to the cemetery to decorate the tombs of loved ones with flowers and offerings. These offerings often consist of foods and treats that the deceased used to enjoy in life.

Although *Ofrendas* can seem like a scattering of Ideas, they all serve a purpose to the grand whole. Briony Fer, the author of *Eva Hesse: Studiowork*, described the surface of Hesse's studio table to testify that order can also exist among chaos. "There is a cluster certainly, but each thing relates to all the other

things”¹. In the mix of variations there is a link between the small treats of studio exploration and the setting of a table ready for a feast. The offerings on this door represent the humble sharing of what is in my studio with the viewer. In relation to a feast, I reflect on the act of sharing something indispensable with others. Sharing a feast has always been a strong tradition in my family. Through my mothers cooking I learned the act of compassionate sharing through taste, that would bring joy to those she shared with. Feeding others, especially when in great need of food, was something that my parents enjoyed doing often. Even when I knew the sources were limited, my mother always found a way of making a meal out of what she had at hand. In retrospect, I’ve adapted this beautiful act into my life, but also into my art practice. When making these small studio explorations I gather what is at my reach and, like in cooking, I work intuitively but most important with affection.

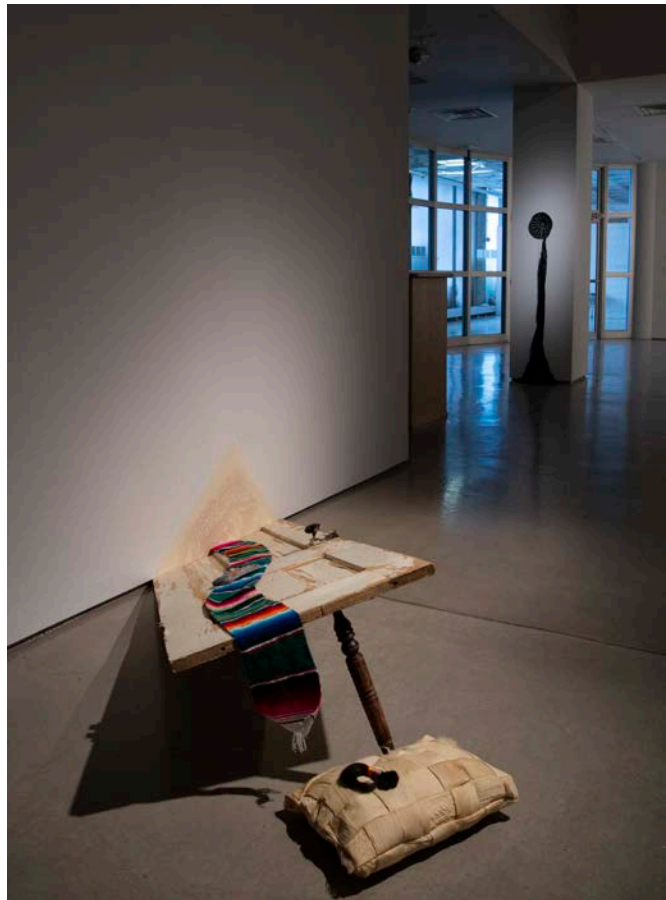


Figure 2

Ofrendas
2019

Found objects, sugar casting with dried peppers, corn husks, wool, laser cut print (*La Calavera Catrina*, José Guadalupe Posada, 1910-1913) and human hair.

¹ Fer, 54

Union of Skins

The importance of soil to the human race is vital. Many if not most important things, such as food, water, shelter, clothing derive from it. I have had a close connection to the surface of the earth, since I can remember. Playing with the earth was often my favorite activity as a kid, and since then I've had a great appreciation for it. Recently I've been intrigued with how the soil can progressively become something bigger, something like landscapes or territories.



Figure 3

Union of Skins (detail)
2019

Matte acrylic medium, Soil from Mexico and the United States

This hasn't been more relevant than when I travel through Texas to the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua. I would see how the land practiced a unique choreography where the lively green surfaces changed to a warm, bone-dry tan, almost like feeling the change of seasons passing by rapidly and discretely. The changes were also evident when the flat land would wrinkle and rise, completely transforming the rhythm of the dance as I travelled distances through the expanding soil.

Crossing over to Mexico always feels different, not because of the land, but because of everything that is not the land. There are different styles of architectures and establishments that create the clear distinction between the two countries. In contrast to this, the tones and shapes of the hills remain similar to before crossing the border. I notice that on this side of the river the air also kisses the earth, as the wind picks up dust just from the surface. The similarities at this proximity are very close, but with distance the surface of the land begins to transition to different tones. Soils are evidently different when they are part of distant territories but they are still part of one continuous land, in this case the North American continent. The expanded topsoil that I witness is simply the skin of the earth.

On one of my trips back to the United states, I stopped several miles before arriving to the border, and I gathered a small portion of the superficial territory, challenging the integrity of Mexican soil's identity. Does the soil become part of the United States as soon as it crosses the border? Is the soil now my property because I own it? How much earth does it take to be considered a land?



Figure 4
Union of Skins (detail 2)
2019
Matte acrylic medium, Soil
from Mexico and the United
States

Thinking of the bigger picture, I've noticed the value of land in relation to ownership and power. How this, in most cultures today, gives an entitlement of the land to whom ever has claimed it. Many tribes native to the American continents are known to believe the opposite, viewing themselves as being part of the land and not the land as something that belongs to them.

After collecting earth from both Mexico and the United States, I began to identify them based on tones. Noticing how even when the colors were similar there was always a slight hue of difference. In this realization, I began to correlate these comparison to the various tones of skins that exist. The basic labels society uses currently to identify people based on skin color or ethnic groups, don't have the full extension of the unique beauty behind each skin tone. The multiple colors of skins have attracted me for some time now. Finding beauty and respect in every tone can allow for a better perspective in life. But due to constant attacks and aggressions towards people of different skin color, I realized the importance of speaking out against this issue we continue to cover up. This behavior is something I have witnessed in different countries and various different communities. It is the way we have viewed each other for generations, regardless of the similarities. Sometimes I believe fear plays a role in the divergence among communities. The fear of the unknown creates boundaries that prevent us from understanding or even given the other side an opportunity.

Thinking about the entirety of the Earth and my belief of being native to the Earth in contrast to a more specific territory, sparked the beginning of *Union of Skins*. These skin-like forms were manifestations of the combination of soils from

two different countries that began to form a land where with simply a touch you can be in two or more places at once.

The blends that occur in *Union of Skins*, have a superficial context of multiple lands in one. The deeper exploration within these thin landscapes goes back to the importance of the human race. Just like soil is essential to our everyday life either directly or indirectly, the union and collaboration represented through these tones express the importance of cooperation with one another. Bringing two countries together in one piece builds on the poetics of beauty in the union of two or more things that are the same but unique at the same time.

For many years the segregation among people who belong to a different group has been validated through fear and ignorance, causing unnecessary violence and hate. I believe in the act of changing through building connections across communities.

A common mistake we make when people identify with a community is to assume they are all the same; within a single community there is at least some diversity present. We are not always part of only one group at a time, and even if we were it doesn't represent who we are entirely. With this confusion comes the mistake of creating stereotypes, and sometimes even false accusations. *Union of Skins* is a subtle exploration that challenges modern day support of xenophobia and racism.

As an individual that is part of multiple communities and some that are minorities, I take the responsibility to communicate the importance in diversity. Just like the soils in these works have come together from different places, we as humans have migrated all over the world. Dismissing the importance of origin for

just a second, we realize that we are here now, next to each other, in the same place. Skin is just a layer of the outside of us and as beautiful as it can be, the importance of one's identity goes beyond what we can see.

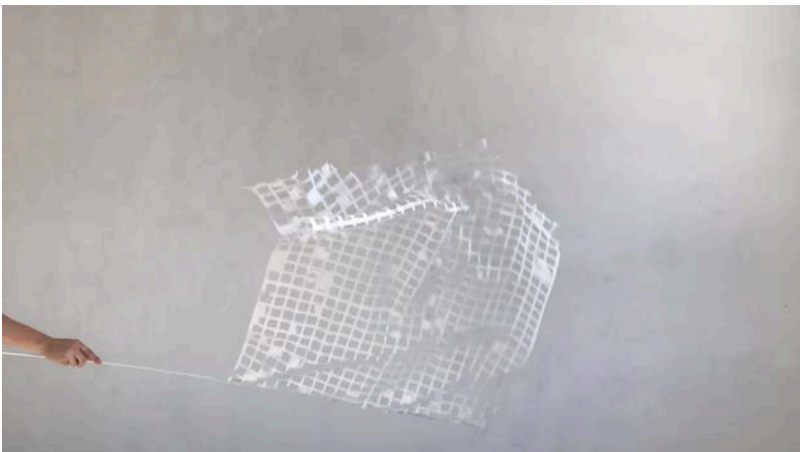
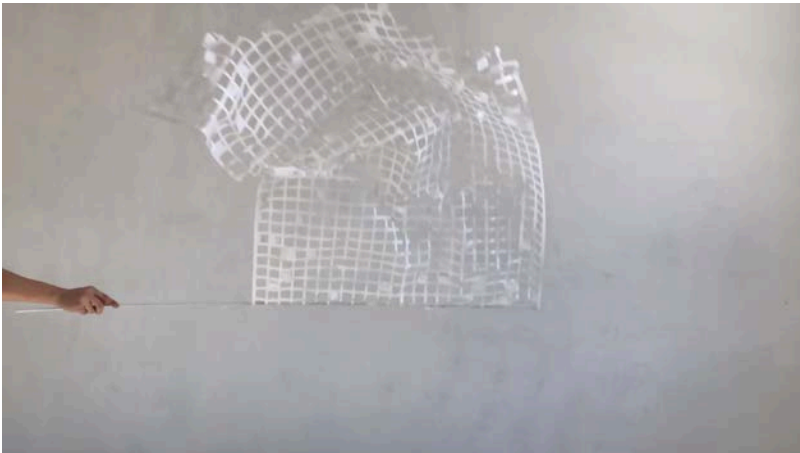
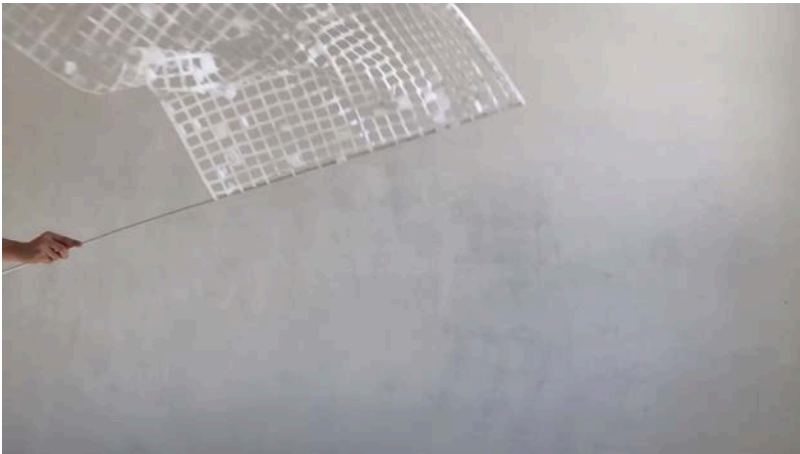


Figure 5
Respect - Surrender
2019
Video stills

Respect - Surrender (video)

A delicate white sheet is introduced from the left side of the frame. This thin, ragged piece of paper rests on the tip of a thin white pole, similar to the way flags tend to be displayed. In contrast to a flag, other than a cut-out grid of round-cornered squares, this fragile sheet of thin paper is void of any symbols, shapes or colors. As it makes its way fully in to the frame, the soft flow of movement begins. The white netting begins to mimic the wind as they interchange greetings with each other. As this thin piece of paper gracefully changes shape in midair, I am reminded of the meditative ocean waves rolling in and rolling out.

The video plays out at a slower speed than normal, allowing each movement and instant of this piece be observed longer than average. Partially this decision was made thinking of the details the paper creates as it folds with movement. Another factor that plays into this, is the value of time, and a way to highlight the now. Many crucial decisions can erupt spontaneously and can be difficult to fully analyze. For many people this is the case before taking on a journey to what is hopefully a better opportunity.

As the waving action continues, the white flag-like paper also interacts with the natural lighting coming from a nearby window. The interaction between this piece and the sun light create a dramatic contrast.

The flag in this piece is inspired by the traditional Mexican craft, *papel picado*. This is usually a sorting of illustrations cut out of thin Chinese paper that is

used during different holidays and celebrations. It has a grid cut out to be similar to the design of most *paper picado*. Although the flag is not meant to represent a specific country or territory, It does indeed contain a small cultural connection to the Mexican people. Using the style of a papel picado combined with the idea of a white surrender flag, this video links the migration of my Mexican heritage in to the United States. Reflecting on the loss and displacement that many of my loved ones have faced, I wave this flag thinking of all the people around the world that experience tyranny and are pushed away from what they consider home.

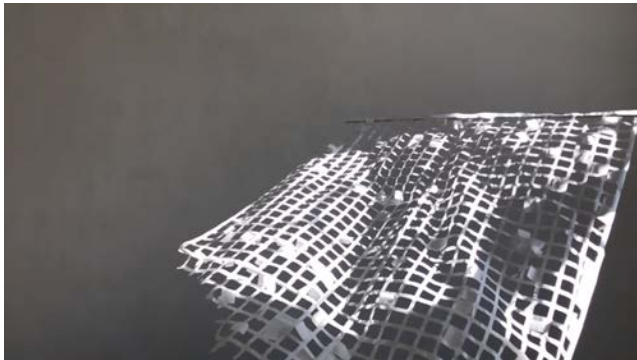


Figure 6
Respect - Surrender
2019
Video stills



When I would travel across the border, I would stand fascinated to see the massive flags wave as the wind would pass through them. As amazed as I was to see these pieces of fabric swing around, I never felt a connection to either of these countries' flags the way many patriotic people in my surroundings did. This empty white flag does not mark or divide any territories, instead it speaks of issues that revolve around its representation as an object. More than a flag of surrender, it represents respect for the innocent people who have been forced to surrender their identities and everything they call home. The people that lose in war are not always the "villains" but sometimes the innocents, those who never asked for a war in the first place.

Because of the massive violence in Mexico produced by the War on Drugs, during 2006 my mother's sister, Lupe, my godmother, fled with her family to the United States in search of a safer life. In Mexico her husband had worked at a small neighborhood store where he would spend most of his time during the week. The store was a decent source of income for the family, but with all the investments that went into the project, they were making just enough to pay all their bills and the interest on their loans. There were times that weren't that good for them; the customers would be fewer and their income would get tighter and tighter. But there were times when things were not just bad, but worse. After being blackmailed by a group of drug traffickers, my uncle was asked for an amount that surpassed his ability to pay in order to protect he and his family's lives. Because they only gave him a few days to come up with the money, as a family they decided it would be safer to surrender what they had in Mexico and flee without a trace.

Many people are not as lucky or do not have the opportunity my family did. Some fight for their rights, and others lose them as soon as small violent metal fingers penetrate their flesh. It is a very tough decision to leave everything you have worked hard for behind in order to survive. This is a reality that doesn't only exist in Mexico but in various countries around the world. The root of it all comes from violence and corruption that ignore the basics of human rights.

Interpreting the Horizon

For the past few years the rumors and planning for a wall that would cover the entire southern border of the United States have been creating discord not only between the two countries but among various individuals within those communities. Since the suggestion of the plans for this wall, several invisible boundaries have become visible, giving many people the validation to discriminate and disrespect one another on the basis of borders. The issue does not originate in the desire for a physical border but in the lack of attention in the social separations it has been creating.

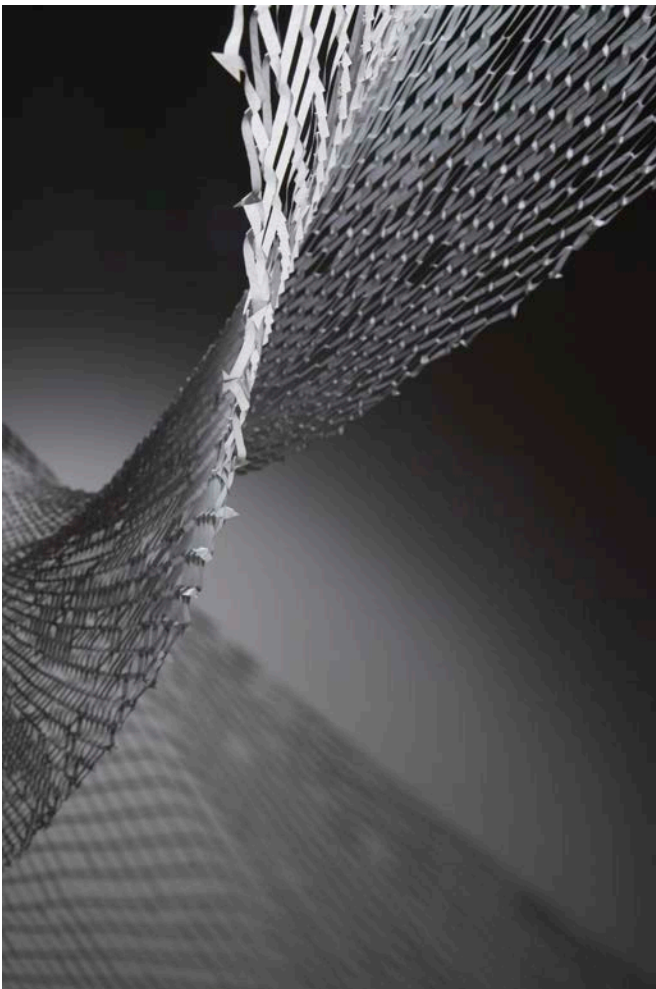


Figure 7
Interpreting the Horizon
(detail shot)
2019
laser cut tissue paper and metal rods

In the making of *Interpreting the Horizon*, I utilize the same technique of the gridded Chinese paper that is influenced by the *papel picado* technique. Beginning at one end with the verticality of a wall, this piece transitions to a horizontal plane that exists above the viewer. As the piece progresses from one side to the other it creates a twist with stretches and wrinkles.

One of the most important explorations of this piece is becoming open to the perspectives of others, taking the opportunity to set aside one's viewpoint in order to understand the views of others. The shifting of direction in this piece challenges the limitations of what is expected and thought to be the only truth. In the place where this thin delicate piece converges, struggle and tension become obvious. Ignoring one's preconceptions in order to understand the perspective of others, it becomes difficult to fully let go of what you've cared for so long even if it is just for a second. As the effort to understand is pushed, the tension is released, and the ability to understand others' perspectives begins to stretch like an exercising muscle.

One could argue that this understanding of others is based in empathy. The ability to empathize with others makes us better human beings. In my work the term empathy plays many roles, starting with the practice of my every day life, to the way I treat my materials in the studio. Empathy has been a strong link in my exploration of perspective. This doesn't mean that your perspective should shift to accommodate others all the time, but to make an effort to at least meet them half way where the tensions exist. In this case the tension is what distances the two

extremes. I'm not saying either side is correct, but it is worthwhile to try and understand what lies on the other side of what one believes.

Another important element of this piece consists in the use of material. The fact that this large structure is so thin and fragile, makes the piece even more vulnerable. In its defenseless state, rips and tears are very likely to occur, and this also contributes to the conceptual idea behind this work. Voicing the delicacy of a strict system alludes to the ability of easily tearing down a wall that is simply made from paper. Then I imagine how much easier it would be to bring down the barriers that are made up of nothing.



Figure 8
Interpreting the Horizon
2019
laser cut tissue paper and metal rods

Citations:

Fer, Briony. *Eva Hesse: Studiowork*. Yale University Press, 2009.