

Hairball

by

Denise DiPiazzo

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Chairperson Jon Keith Swindell

Ruth Ann Atchley, Ph.D.

John Hachmeister

Tanya Hartman

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The Thesis Committee for Denise DiPiazza
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

Hairball

Chairperson Jon Keith Swindell

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Abstract

Hairball is a metaphor for life as an accumulation of things, good and bad, over time: years, people, ambitions, loves, fears, and cells. Whereas time is typically thought of as linear, in truth it winds in many directions through our lives, sometimes densely and sometimes loosely, and usually uncontrollably.

Sometimes it's hard just to live.

Tricycle in the ocean

Tricycle in the ocean

Tricycle in the ocean

This work was conceived from the idea of one person, the counsel of a few, and the hands of many. It was structured specifically on a large scale so the artist would be pushed beyond her physical and mental comfort zones and thereby be compelled to seek help from others. To surmount this challenge, a dynamic community of helpers was created and, through their partnership and care, *Hairball* was allowed to manifest organically into a fully-formed behemoth of darkness and light.

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Trenor Architects

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Introduction

Is it possible for terror and joy to coexist simultaneously?

Hairball explores the paradox of feeling a sense of helplessness one moment and vitality the next. *Hairball* is a metaphor for life as an accumulation of things, good and bad, over time: years, people, ambitions, loves, fears, and cells. Whereas time is typically thought of as linear, in truth it winds in many directions through our lives, sometimes densely and sometimes loosely, and usually uncontrollably.

Origins

The origin of this body of work stemmed from a galvanizing life event, which happened just one month before thesis work was to commence. A diagnosis of life-threatening proportions stopped the flow of time as it was previously known and re-routed it. Fear was the initial gut-wrenching emotion: It will cut! It will burn. It will scar. Next the questioning began: Will I live? Who will I become as a result of this? In order to process this new reality, I chose to look at it through a layered lens of artistic inquiry as well as psychological discovery, thus using myself as a type of site-specific artwork. With the help of a psychologist during the earlier months and later enlisting a professor in the Psychology department as a member of my thesis committee, I was able to visualize my notion of “the Void” as an answer to the question: When something bad is taken away and a space is left, with what would you fill it? Where once there was fear, there now may be opportunity.

This led to the concept of a layered space as a series of shells that contained darkness and light. It also gave form to the perception that something that is actually very small — the size of which fits in the palm of my hand — could at times feel overwhelmingly large, seemingly my whole universe.

To begin the process of making new work, I started collecting found objects approximately the size of my fist — some natural and others man-made, some from my near surroundings and others from my journeys across the world. Most prized were those which had a void of their own. As time progressed and my physical energy replenished, I began winding these objects with grass or string, swirling each of them about in the palm of my hand like a small nest. While doing this, I reminisced about a story I had read in Gaston Bachelard's book *The Poetics of Space*, which told of a bird making a shelter by using its own belly to bow a shape for its dwelling.

Soon the winding became obsessive and I found myself using any bits of linear material with which I could make woven and knotted forms. These forms grew bigger and bigger, progressing from the utilization of finger-and-hand manipulations to arms-and-shoulders motions, and eventually to movements employing my legs and whole body.



Image 1



Image 2

This movement of making began to take me out of myself and back into the world. I was ready to create a void that I could fit inside, a place within which I could position myself to start daydreaming about a future of made-up places and therapeutic escapes. This was the jumping off point for the larger work *Hairball*, which would symbolize a new concept of time as I imagined it, one of knotted and woven linear time.

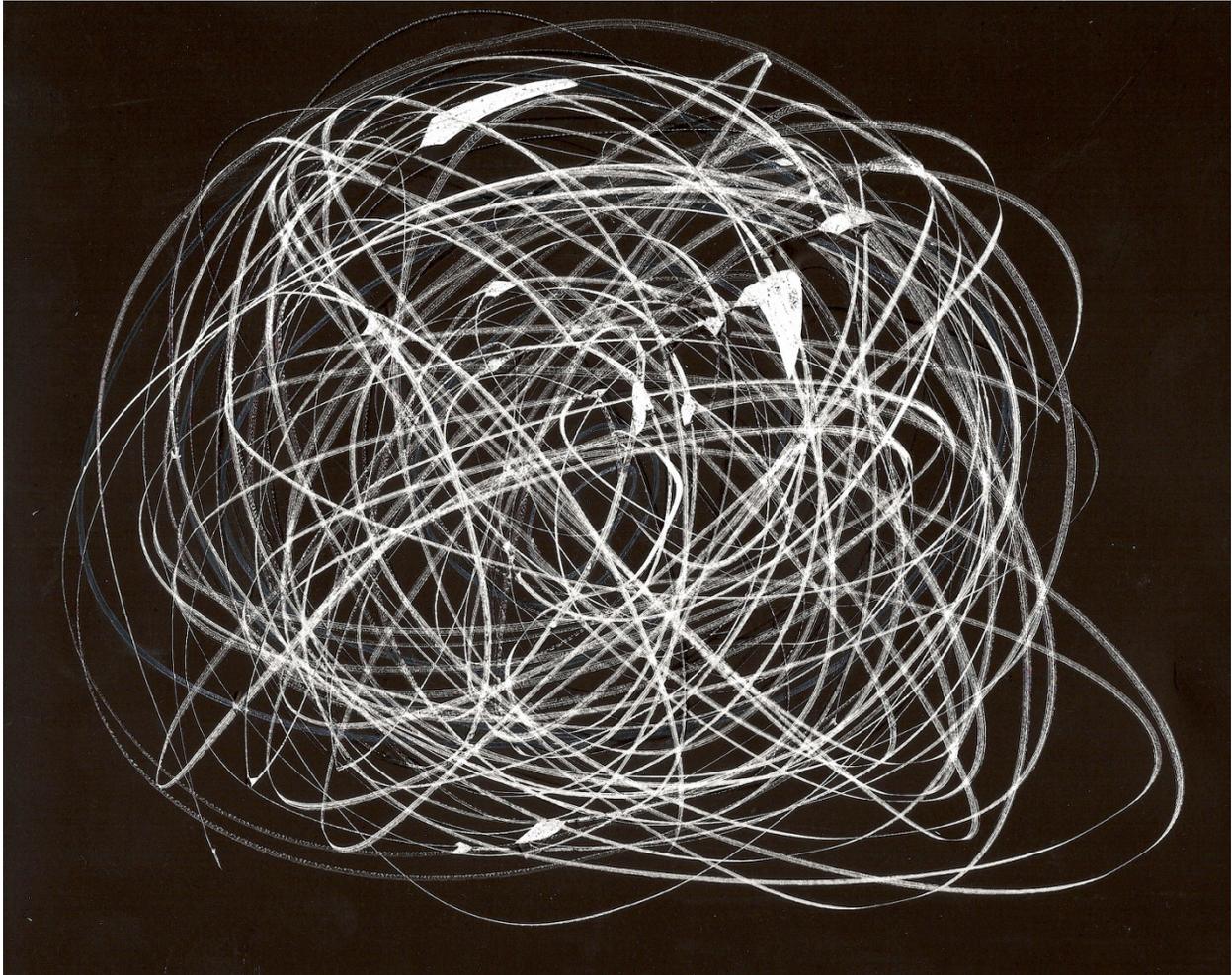


Image 3

Planning

This work was conceived from the idea of one person, the counsel of a few, and the hands of many. It was structured specifically on a large scale so that I would be pushed beyond my physical limits and mental comfort zones and thereby be compelled to seek help from others.

A large structure was planned which would create an outer as well as an inner form. The outer form, an aluminum armature sphere ten feet in diameter, would represent my body overpowered by all of the information and detritus of life.

A bandage material would be wound around this aluminum sphere, transforming it from an identifiable material to a symbolic one. The inner form, an aluminum armature sphere five feet in diameter, would represent my inner sanctum, a safe and heavenly realm where I could reside in a place absent of fear. It would be caringly wound with organic threads and soft fibers in bright whites. In contrast, the exterior ball would be snaked with black and grey synthetic materials in larger gauges to represent the caustic, malignant, choking vine of cancer.

I drew upon my roots in planning, becoming the architect once again, and I created a mathematically elegant structure, a scaffold upon which the many layers of the project would rest. In my comfort zone I could plan, figure, and procure for the next phase in which I would have to let go of control, feel the burden of unknowing, and put my faith in the creative process that I had prescribed for myself.

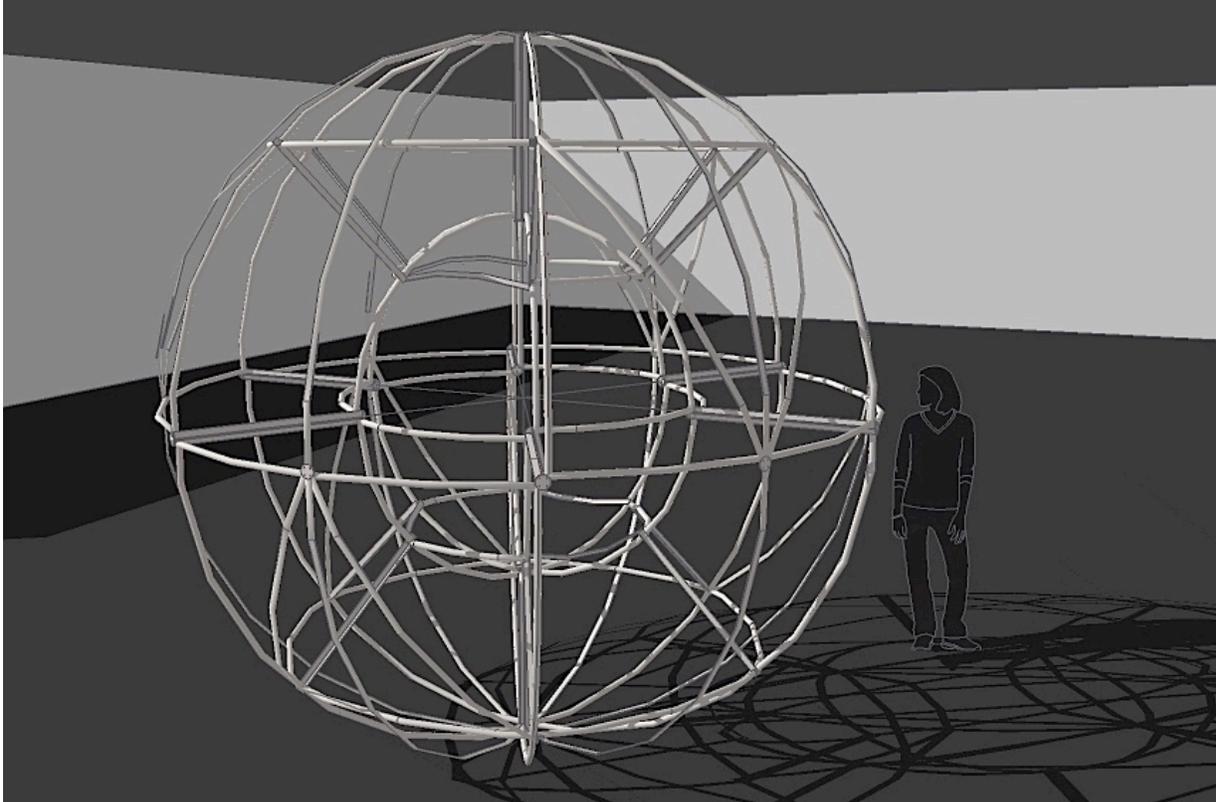


Image 4



Image 5

Making

A huge challenge of my illness was being forced to ask for and receive help from others, yet this became a gift for me to be reacquainted with people on a deeper personal level. It became a gift to them also as they were able to contribute to my well-being and recovery, which led me to include them as stakeholders in the creation of this work. Thus a dynamic community was created of over sixty helpers, from five to eighty years of age. They each were given various tasks from holding zip-ties to winding thousands of feet of bandage and other material around the large outer sphere. Through their partnership and care, *Hairball* was thereby manifested organically into a fully-formed behemoth of darkness and light.

The realization of this organic process was due in part to unaccustomed hands working with unusual materials in an unfamiliar setting. Literally having to roll a two-hundred pound, ten-foot ball of drainage pipe and rocks around the gallery — under the direction of an artist who had never before attempted such an undertaking — made for an unpredictable and exciting experience. One participant-helper stated that she gained more from her involvement than she felt she was able to give in return. Most helpers said they had no idea what I was asking them to do, but nonetheless came to contribute in the spirit of curiosity, friendship, and support.



Image 6



Image 7

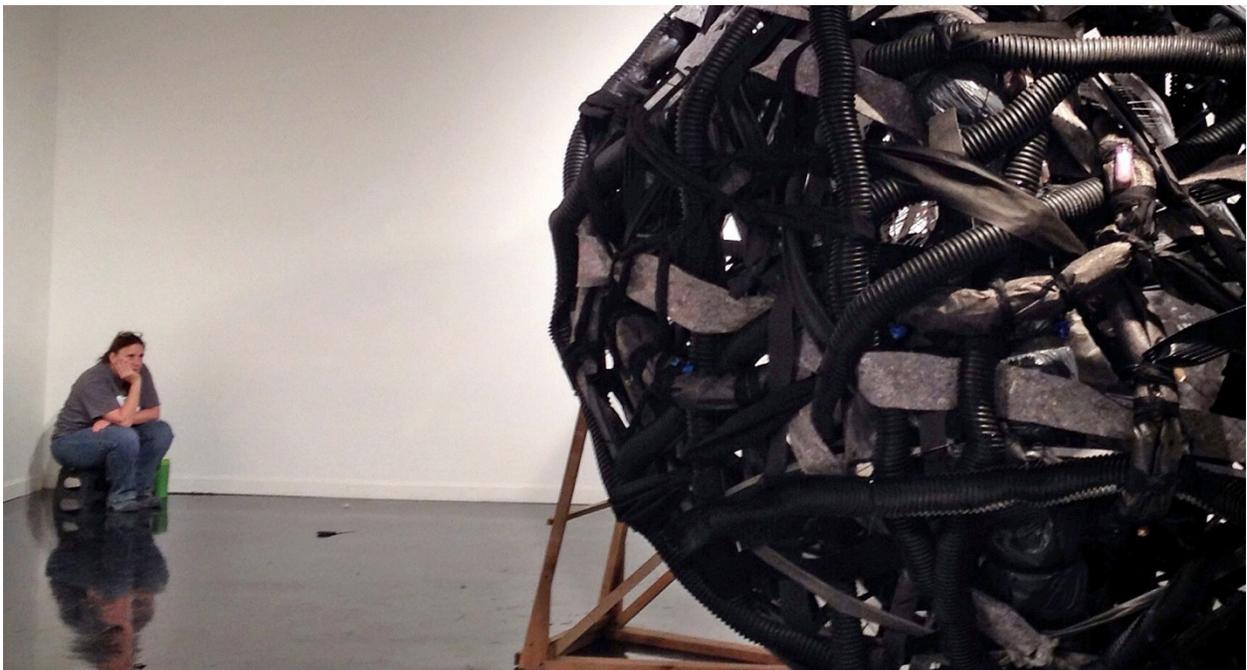


Image 8

At Rest

After three days of construction in the gallery, *Hairball* settled into a period of rest. A time for contemplation of the piece in the gallery setting revealed an interesting and rich series of layers to the work. The most apparent of these was the varied textures and materials in the outer surface, the “malignant skin” — a term used to describe the dark, synthetic, knotted coating of the *Hairball*.

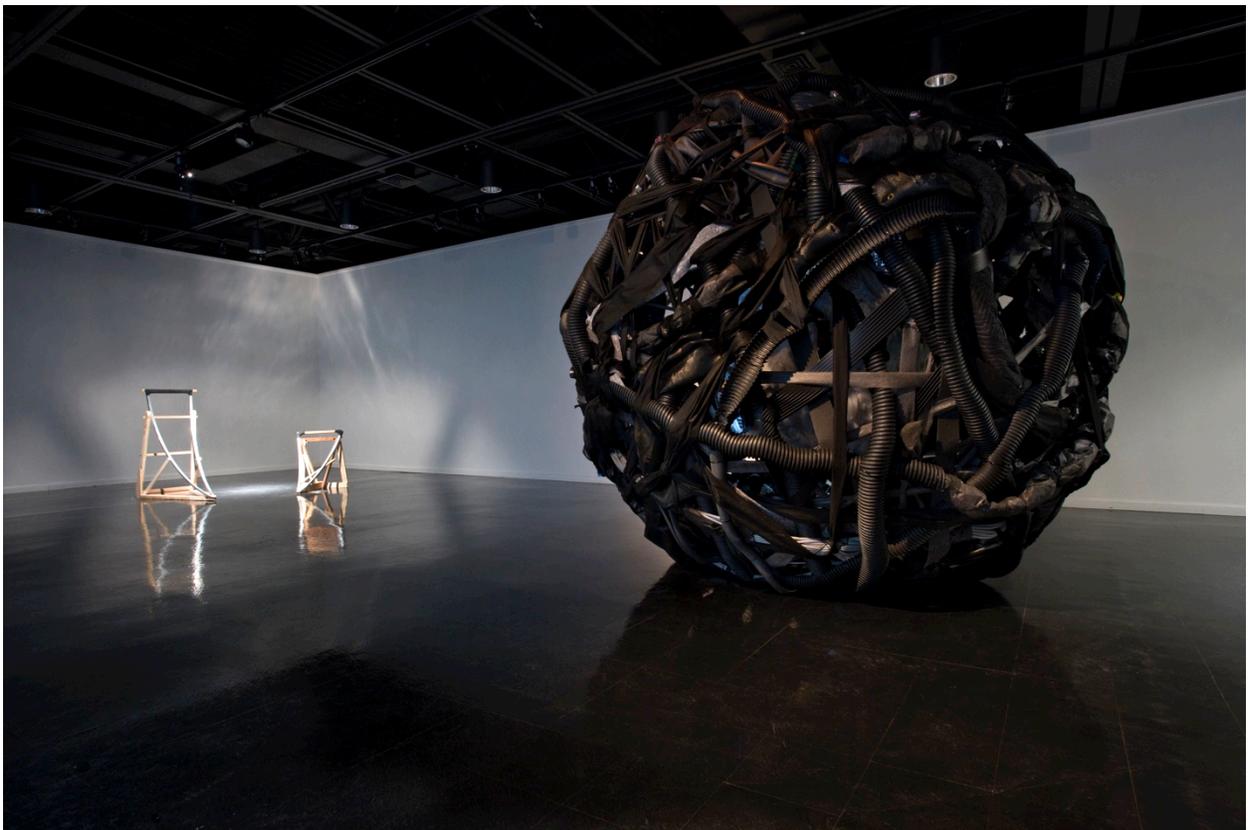


Image 9

Surprisingly, the interstitial space between the outer “skin” and the inner sphere created an otherworldly environment. If one were to put their head and shoulders in through an opening of the outer surface layer, a feeling of being inside of a cell on the micro side — or being in space on the macro side — was conjured. The bright white, soft cloudlike feel of the interior realm set against the caustic yellow light seeping through the multi-directional outer shell contributed to the perception that one was in an unfamiliar, fictional place.



Image 10

Other set pieces that were located nearby in the gallery space were two “crutches” constructed of curved aluminum and salvaged wood, and the “shroud” — a garment for the artist to wear as a costume for a possible future performance. *Hairball* was placed in the low, dark-ceilinged side of the gallery, and soft lights were positioned to graze across the large, off-kilter ball, producing a heavy, compressed effect with dark cast shadows. Elsewhere, in two opposite corners of the gallery, single dimmed spotlights were placed above the “crutches” and the “shroud,” alluding to some possible connection between them and the *Hairball*. These two additions were not originally planned as part of the thesis exhibition, but they assumed strong identities as time went on. The “crutches” were made as functional objects to steady the ball when rolled into new positions during the construction process. The aluminum, wood, and bandage around the top handle of these forms made them reminiscent of medical apparatus, which was an underlying theme in the concept of the project.



Image 11



Image 12

Situated on the far end of the adjacent gallery space, under a set of high skylights was the “shroud.” Natural light coming in from that side of the gallery played well against the artificial light on the low side of the gallery, reinforcing the concept of darkness and light.



Image 13

A costume, made by my mother as per my directions sent via the mail, was intended to be a reference to hospital patient attire but in a more neutral skin-tone color created with natural tea-dyed muslin. Pinned to the lapel, was a sprig of Verveine tea sent from a dear friend's garden in France, still wafting its soothing scent as a nighttime sleep aid. The whole ensemble was hanging on a high-backed valet stand, as if solemnly perched on a throne and awaiting further instructions. One observer commented that upon seeing this tableau alone in the corner, she felt she would cry.



Image 14

In addition to these objects, placed near the gallery entry was a time-lapse video that showed the process of making the *Hairball*, starting from a single piece of the scaffold being placed on the gallery floor. Observers of the video could get a glimpse of the inner workings of the construction and full-bodied effort it took to achieve such a large undertaking. It was also a memorable way for the helper-participants to revisit their time as makers in the gallery.

A camera filmed time-lapse photos throughout the entire gallery show and reception, as well as during the later deconstruction of the piece. Also, a camera was placed on a rotating timer secured to the inside of the structure, to record the *Hairball's* view outward. Images and videos will be placed on a webpage (www.denisedipiazzohairball.tumblr.com), which was created for the documentation of the project.

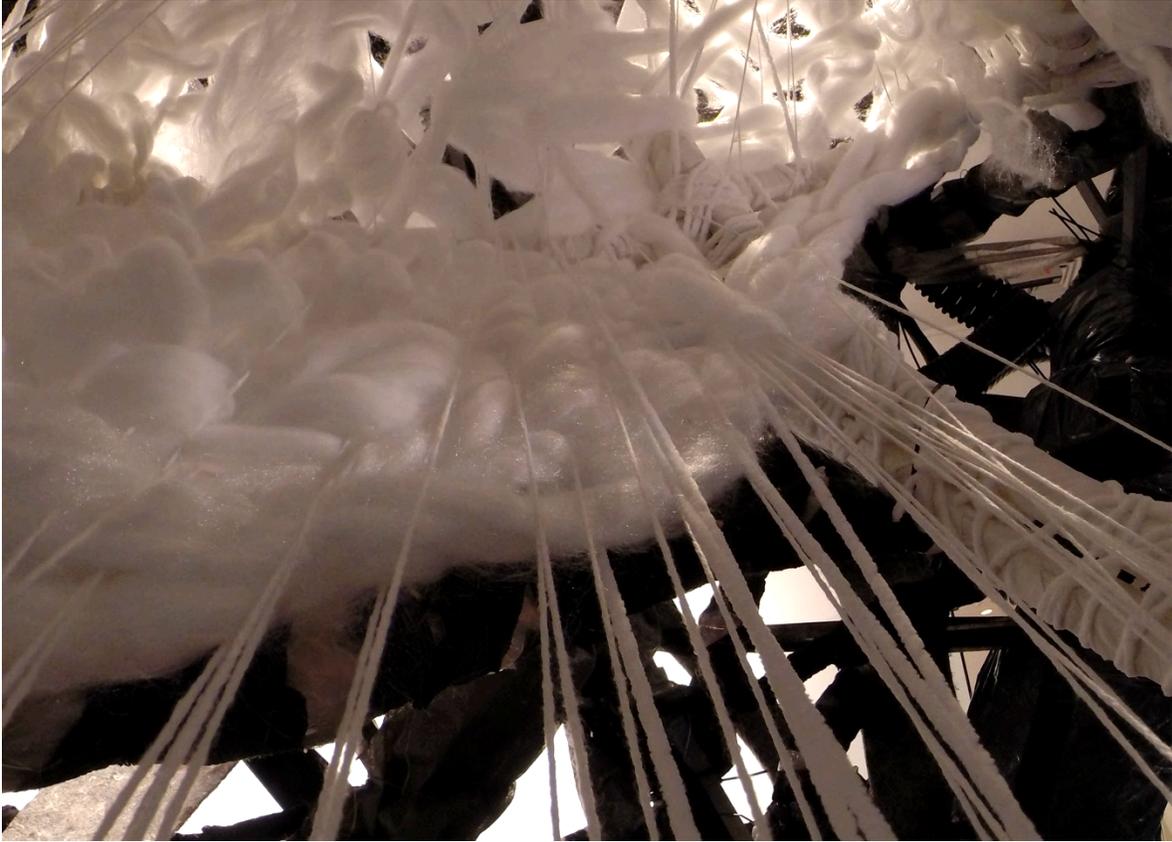


Image 15



Image 16

Unmaking

The unmaking process was just as telling as the making of *Hairball*. During the gallery reception the community of helpers was invited to come and snip off a piece of the binding material of the outer sphere, symbolically releasing all of the pent-up tension and baggage of the past year.



Image 17

Once some of the outer skin was released, I was able to climb inside the structure and get into the central space to nestle within the fluffy white retreat. (Residing within the *Hairball* was something I had planned to do all week long as a performance, to culminate in slashing open the ball and splitting it in two. Once the *Hairball* settled in the corner, however, it seemed more appropriate to let it rest-in-place and be contemplated as it was.)



Image 18

As I inhabited the center of the piece during the reception, others began to engage more with the sculpture and commenced to roll it around with me inside. It was a playful and joyful way for us to interact with the work in a new way, with the knowledge this was our last night to experience *Hairball* in its full form.

During the deconstruction some interesting surprises became apparent. As I looked at the piles of released layers on the floor, I began to think of the concept of time once again — but in this instance time became unknotted, clearer in a sense, and it was easier to see the past year with the perspective of some distance whereby joy and wonder are more readily felt. While the aluminum armature frame was being unbolted, one section was found to be warped greatly, flattened in some areas and tightly curved in others.



Image 19

This was the section that took the brunt of the forces of rolling the structure. It was an interesting transformation during making that was revealed only in unmaking. As I ponder it now it strikes me on a deep emotional level, as a metaphor for what my body and psyche have endured throughout the making and the unmaking of the cancer.



Image 20

Perceptions

My goal as an artist is to create three-dimensional works, which manifest in full-bodied experiences. Some perceptions and reactions of those who experienced *Hairball* first hand include: *“It affected me on a bodily level”*; *“It was intense”*; *“It was like something cellular gone wrong”*; *“It seemed planetary”*; *“I walked around it three times and I saw something different each time”*.

A meaningful culmination to this project was the opportunity to meet with my psychologist on-site with the *Hairball* before it was dismantled. As a participant in the process from the beginning, I invited her to give a synopsis of her experience engaging with the work:

“I had the pleasure of hearing about the Hairball and seeing bits of it becoming for many months as Denise developed and refined and then redefined what she was doing to represent her journey through cancer as one part of her life experience. I saw and heard about travels and travails and the pieces, small and large, that she collected to represent parts of her journey. Finally, I got to meet the beast and crawl around inside it, ultimately finding my way to the top to stick my head out for a better look. I found the Hairball to be richly layered, dark as well as light, soothing as well as a little scary and filled with delightful surprises. I am glad to have had a part in the becoming (and unbecoming) of the Hairball.” — Luci Lee



Image 21

From my own vantage point as both artist and subject, having the time and perspective to create the final work at some distance from the initial shock of my diagnosis allowed the piece to move from didactic to poetic. This was the outcome I was striving for from the beginning.

Collected over the course of a year, 365 objects of many colors and materials were originally intended to be the centerpiece of the work, to signify my memories of the event. Yet their emotional grasp on me lessened over time and I was able to allow them to be obscured within the fabric of the piece. Only a few of these objects could be discovered upon closer scrutiny, enabling *Hairball* to transcend any one single material and resulting in the piece being read as a cohesive whole.

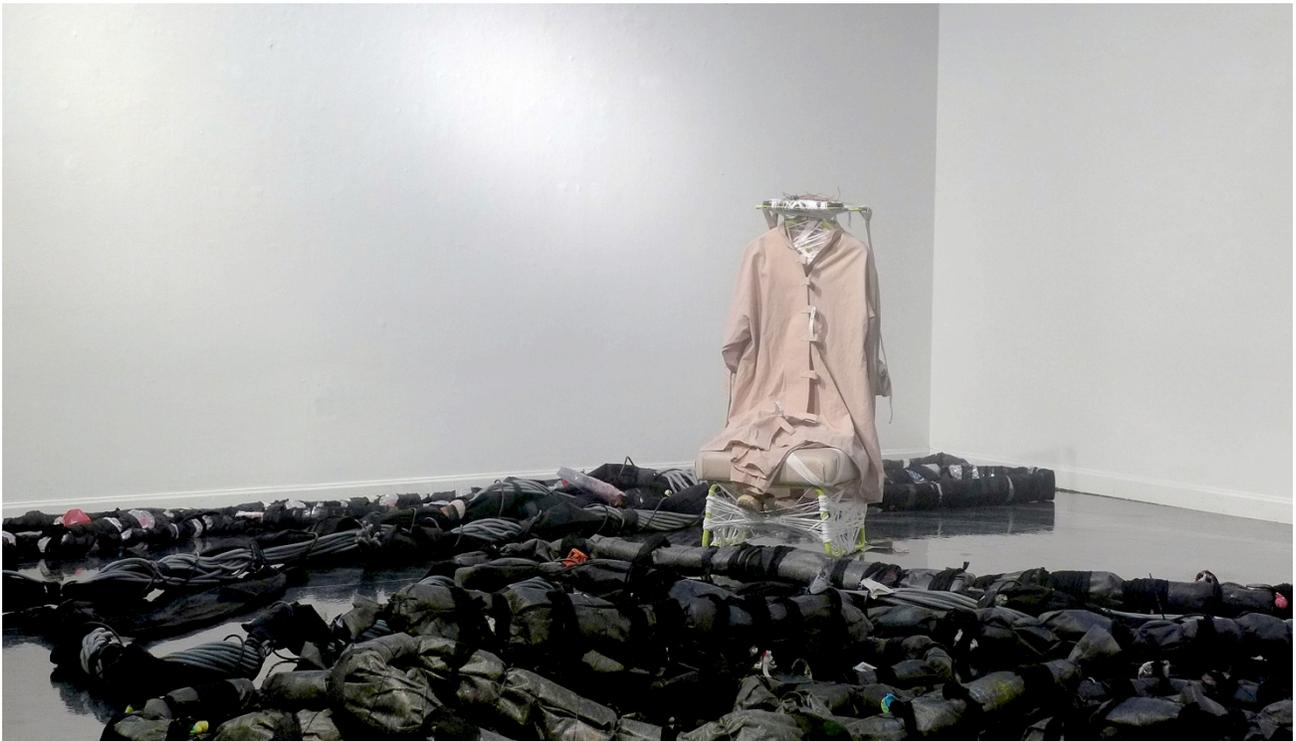


Image 22

Improvements

While I was pleased overall with the work as it was shown, control of lighting in the gallery space and inside the *Hairball* could have been better achieved. In the future I would test the lighting system beforehand and, if needed, supply lights that could be dimmed to control the color temperature more specifically. I would also work to integrate the light source more seamlessly on the interior of the piece, so only the light and not the light source could be seen.

Sensory components of sound and smell were discussed during the planning of the piece but not fully realized due to time constraints. Audio files of uplifting, natural sounds of people and nature as well as mechanical, surreal sounds taken from the radiation suite were collected. I have begun to mix them into an interwoven layering of sounds and I will continue to refine them for future use. Likewise a collection of smells relating to soothing and refreshing, as opposed to chemical and clinical, is underway for use in future experiential works.

Future Work

Work stemming from this thesis, will incorporate new ways of contemplating the concept of linear time, creating knotted forms in a multitude of media. Taking the materials from the deconstruction of *Hairball* and piling them, rolling them, and looking at them in mass as they relate to the pieces and parts of the scaffold will be explored with the addition of sounds and smells previously discussed.

A significantly integral part of this project was the experience of directing a team of helpers to accomplish a colossal task. While it had its challenges, it was an enriching act of art making, and I foresee working within the larger community on group projects in the future.

Images

Image 1 - Display Cases with *Windings*, photograph by Denise DiPiazza, 2014.

Image 2 - *Timeship Spacemachine*, photograph by Denise DiPiazza, 2014.

Image 3 - Sketch of *Hairball* concept, Denise DiPiazza, 2014.

Image 4 - Digital rendering of *Hairball Scaffold*, Denise DiPiazza, 2014.

Image 5 - Construction of *Hairball Scaffold*, photograph by Denise DiPiazza, 2014.

Image 6 & 7 - Construction of *Hairball*, photograph by Denise DiPiazza, 2014.

Image 8 - Artist with *Hairball*, photograph by Patricia Steadman, 2014.

Image 9 - 14 - Gallery Documentation of *Hairball*, photographs by Aaron Paden, 2014.

Image 15 & 16 - Gallery Documentation of *Hairball*, interior, photograph by Denise DiPiazza, 2014.

Image 17 & 18 - Gallery Documentation of *Hairball*, photograph by Stacey McMahan, 2014.

Image 19 - 22 - Documentation of *Hairball* deconstruction, photographs by Denise DiPiazza, 2014.

Works Cited

Bachelard, Gaston, 1969. *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon [originally 1958].