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Real Goner

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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Herron School of Art & Design
Bachelor of Fine Art in Sculpture, 2014

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract:

The purpose of this thesis paper is to tell the story behind, and outline the theoretical and conceptual framework underlying the exhibition, *Real Goner*. The exhibition combines a number of elements drawn from music and art history, as well as the theoretical writings of Albert Camus, Guy Debord, and Joseph Kosuth. Together, these elements produce a cryptic exhibition that attempts to address the inherent chaos, and apparent meaninglessness of existence; and to see art as a proposition, a performance, and a practice. The exhibition addresses issues of celebrity, the production and consumption of culture, and where that cycle leaves us as lesser participants within the spectacle.

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Background:

Music has always been a powerful social force. It has bound people together throughout nearly all of human history, and some form of it exists in every known culture. Music's emotional immediacy and pure abstractness are what make it so powerful and versatile. It can signal war, loss, or longing. It is used for celebrations. It helps us pass the time. It energizes us. Music pulls us out of bad moods, or helps us get down in their depths. In its own special way, it binds us together. It can even be revolutionary. Those who study it can describe it through the language of analysis and theory, but describing the way it *feels* to hear a powerful piece of music is much more difficult. The most articulate speaker may come close, but still feel that something is missing from his or her words.

Over the past two hundred years or so, a great cultural shift has slowly taken place around music. Before the invention of recording devices, music was a generally social experience, as it had to be performed to be heard. However, following the lineage of countless inventions and innovations down from the phonograph all the way to the combination of the smart phone, internet, and "earbuds," the experience of listening to music has become increasingly personal and private. Of course, it is still a social activity, but our connections are no longer purely dependent on geography. Furthermore, music itself has developed more and more diverse a marketplace, with new styles and niches emerging and cycling in and out of popularity with increasing frequency.

As the infrastructure around the production of music became more corporatized, it also developed a cult of personality. I grew up in a time when the internet as we know it now, was just beginning to form, and much of my early musical experience was delivered through the cable tv channels like MTV and VH1. Shows on MTV, like Total Request Live (TRL) for example, played a major role in determining the popularity of a given artist.

Performers entered the scene for their music and talent, but the power structures gradually shifted the focus to the performers themselves. Questions about performers' personal lives began to emerge, the changing nature of their relationship to the spotlight, their prolificacy, their relationships to each other, etc. Of course, MTV and VH1 did not invent the cultural obsession with celebrity, but they did help to amplify it and introduce it to new generations. Most people have some version of this list, and that list is never purely dominated by the broad culture. There is also the immediate culture of the home.

My father, my brothers, and I are all drummers. I spent a large portion of my upbringing working as a roadie for my dad. This involved helping him tear down his drums at home, loading them up in his truck, rebuilding them at whatever venue, tuning, helping with mic checks, tearing it all down again, and taking it all back home. Doing this work gave me an intimate view into some environments that most people do not get to witness at an early age. I saw the inside of a bar by the time I was eleven or twelve. I experienced the recording studio around the same time. I remember sitting backstage at an outdoor arena concert that he played when I was eight or nine years old. In the process, I became familiar with a number of tropes among my dad's musician friends. There was the regionally successful singer-songwriter, who thought himself far more charming than he actually was. There was the alcoholic bass player whose wife was always threatening to leave. There was usually some quirky older fellow playing keyboards. His life was comparatively stable. They were usually fathers, though some of them did not find out until later in life. None of them were full-time musicians. Instead, they all seemed to be holding onto a dream that died years before I met them. This is what I witnessed growing up - social engagement as a distraction from the mundane reminders that your life is not exactly what you wanted it to be. It was a lesson in the ways that people sometimes try to trick themselves into being happy.

From an early age, I began to understand the mundane troubles of these people's lives. I was able to see how they were affected, and what they did to pull themselves out of their

unhappiness. Not realizing it at the time, I applied these same suppositions to my own life, and my own experience of victimization in school. Naturally, I turned to music for escape. It was a safe space – especially with headphones, or now alone in the car. The nature of my tastes meant that regardless of lyrical content, there was always sufficient complexity in any one song that presented a challenge to decipher, memorize and execute behind the drum-set. When there were lyrics, they were loaded with valuable reflections about the pains of life and how to get through them.

Despite the inherently social nature of music, it is usually not social for me. Instead, I consume music in private and discuss it later with people I trust. This is because music is also a spiritual activity for me. It is a ritual based in compulsion and obsession. It has long provided the only space in which I have been able to get the necessary distance from my life to attain some perspective. It has also provided a space in which I have been able to forget about those questions entirely when I want, and focus simply on the formal complexities of the music itself. It is a sacred mental space.

This brings me to the final point of this background. My experience with one album in particular, Tom Waits' *Real Gone* (2004), was notably impactful at an important time in my life. It consistently challenged my tastes, but it was also tied to a friendship that took many ugly turns over the course of 20 years and ended in grief, disappointment, and frustration. For many years following the end of that friendship, I was unable to disassociate Waits' album with my negative memories of that time. However, in the second half of 2017, I had the privilege of studying abroad in the U.K. and Ireland. I realized that the phrase "real gone" presented a linguistic opportunity to describe my circumstances. I also understood that though it is a simple phrase, its potential for various interpretations makes it complex enough to serve as a conceptual foundation for a body of work. I recognized that allowing myself to reconsider Waits' album in a new place would provide the safety necessary to re-contextualize it and make new associations and memories. Finally, it would allow me to reexamine the impact of that friendship on my life.

While I could not remove those negative associations, I was able to add new complexity to my understanding of both the album and the meaning that its title came to have for me. Over the course of 6 months, I came to understand “real gone” as a state of being and developed the following list of actions, behaviors, and symptoms that represent that state of being. This list, written in stream-of-thought prose, is comprehensive, but not exhaustive:

Sleeping, dying, avoiding, failing to avoid, barely holding on, letting go, forgetting, being forgotten, existing only as a memory, being misremembered, sleeping through the day, staying up at night, leaving your family, pursuing goals, failing, not failing enough, dreaming, only dreaming, regressive behaviors, shame, not realizing shame, relying on formalism, relying on poetics, relying on literalism, metacognition as content, self-critique as content, the breakdown of language, oversimplification, over-complication, hopeless neurosis, bad rhymes, not knowing, thinking you know, unchecked beliefs, an unchecked system for checking beliefs, infinite regress, finite progress, obvious contradictions, not doing laundry for months on end, showering too often, informed hopelessness, blind hope, the realization that all of your struggles are self-imposed and passé in the eyes of your peers, feeling sincere in your path and being told that you’re not, making work about your current circumstances, thinking that’s bullshit but doing it anyway, concern about ‘interpretation,’ being invisible, and disappearing...

This list contains numerous couplings and contradictions, which taken as a whole, serve to construct a landscape of thought upon which to build meaning. The various interpretations of “real gone” contained within it can be placed into one of two categories: conceptual, or biographical. My intention is to blur the line between those two categories, and to develop a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the phrase, and of art itself. Thus, the artwork featured in the exhibition reflects the inherent contradictions of this new understanding.

Influences:

My parents imparted my first influences to me, especially my father, who has always had a particular taste for the absurd. He himself is a great influence on me. He introduced me to musicians like Frank Zappa and writers like Douglas Adams. As a result, I have developed my own appreciation of the absurd, especially when it is challenging to understand.

Embracing an absurdist perspective means that the pool of potential influence is infinite. On the one hand, this is a good thing because one is free to take in all things as potential catalysts for projects. On the other hand, people on the outside of the process are often left wondering how it is possible to incorporate so many disparate components into a coherent thought or practice. It also means that over the course of a long-term project, new influences can destabilize the understanding of the project and change its direction. Throughout the course of putting this exhibition together, I have been influenced by a number of visual artists, musicians, and writers. Here however, I will discuss only those who played a deciding role in the final formation of the exhibition.

Over the past three years, I have been increasingly influenced by the Austrian artist Erwin Wurm. Wurm maintains a multifaceted sculptural practice that incorporates writing, performance, interactive installations, and object making. Wurm's photographic projects involving people following instructions to interact with objects in specific ways were a major influence on the earliest visual research I pursued during my study abroad. However, his object making bares far more influence in the later period of assembling this exhibition. Wurm has a talent for transforming the mundane into the fantastic and surreal. Consider *Fat Convertible* (2004), a shiny red Porsche bursting with folds of fat. In an article on museomagazine.com, writer, Peter Zuspan called it...

a striking object, not only for the polished craftsmanship of its fabrication, a baroque *tour de force* of industrial arts, but more for the ease with which it presents itself. The familiarity of both the glossy red Porsche and the swollen folds of obesity cloaks the uncomfortable combination of man and machine in a kind of easiness, in which the result is less a contemplation of formal meanings or even the satirical political overtones of gluttonous consumerism or

overwrought financial markets, but most immediately, in quasi-sensational fashion, humor and delight (Zuspan, 1).

The vast majority of Wurm's work can be characterized as a melding of the human form with those of mundane objects - the anthropomorphization of objects and the objectification of the figure - propelled with phenomenal force into the realm of the absurd. As well as *Fat Convertible*, I have been inspired by two other figurative sculptures: *The Artist Who Swallowed the World* (2006), and *The Artist Who Swallowed the World When It Was Still A Disc* (2006). I admire these works not only as objects, but even more so as demonstrations of Wurm's commitment to playing with language. In my own way, I have applied Wurm's sensibility to the design and construction of the drums in the exhibition. They are extruded through space along a predetermined central curve that roughly corresponds to the human body in a particular pose, resulting in interference between the surfaces that make up the shell and an overall absurd effect. If one were looking to express the poetics of the body through figurative sculpture, this would be among the worst possible approaches, which is precisely why I have chosen it. Melding the drum with figure this way produces the sculptural equivalent of a stick figure, rife with the possibility for various interpretations. It reduces the figure to a single line, yet that line is produced following an absurdly complicated method of construction.

Wurm has also produced a series of "one-minute sculptures," in which participants are given some instruction to carry out. The resulting poses were photographed and published in numerous publications including Wurm's own books. One of my favorite examples from this series is the prompt, "Throw yourself away (Wurm, 80)." In these images, people are seen posed inside of trashcans. Some go in head first, others prefer to remain upright. All of them use their bodies to achieve sculpture for the duration of the photograph.

Another major influence behind my practice, and this exhibition in particular, is the Belgian-born artist Francis Alÿs. His performance titled, *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing* (1997), has been of paramount importance to me throughout my graduate school

experience. In the performance, documented via handheld camera, Alÿs is seen pushing a large block of ice through Mexico City over the course of a day. As the ice melts, Alÿs transitions from pushing with the full weight of his body, to eventually kicking around a small ball of ice much like children tend to kick random pebbles around in the street. The combination of the title and the performance makes for a perfectly succinct rumination on the difficulties of artistic expression, and the feelings of futility that often accompany the process and completion of a work. Furthermore, this piece ties in perfectly with Camus' writing on *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The artist plays out the role of Sisyphus, the ice his stone. This influence can be seen most directly in one piece featured in the exhibition, titled *Drum Roll*. While *Drum Roll* participates in a long line of works inspired by *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it is unique in that it negates Sisyphus's role in carrying out the action (Camus, 1).

In the end, this project and the final exhibition, *Real Goner*, are not designed to answer questions, or to propose any sort of ideology or cultural analysis. It is an acknowledgement of the inherent meaninglessness of existence, and the confusion that results from that meaninglessness. Beyond that, it is an expression that one should press on, find the right space in which to exist, and try to be happy in that space. What more can one do?

Conceptual Framework:

Four key writers inform the conceptual framework for *Real Goner*: Guy Debord, Albert Camus, Joseph Kosuth, and Tom Waits. Waits's album, *Real Gone* (2004), was the catalyst for the exhibition, and provides the framework's affect. Guy Debord's famous Marxist critique, *The Society of the Spectacle* establishes the context for understanding the role of pop culture in the exhibition. Kosuth's essay, titled *Art After Philosophy*, sets up a series of questions within that context. Finally, Camus' writing on absurdity - especially *The Myth of Sisyphus* - marks a final positioning and ordering of thoughts; an embrace of the absurd in the face of the spectacle's uncertainty.

As previously stated, Tom Waits' album, *Real Gone* was the catalyst for this exhibition, and for the project as a whole. This album is perhaps the most unusual in Waits's catalogue. It features a great deal of Waits beat-boxing, which runs contrary to his much more regular use of the piano. *Real Gone* features no piano tracks. While it would be foolish to postulate a singular message built into the album, there are certainly identifiable themes within the lyrics. Waits is not doing the work of cultural analysis. He is a story-teller, and the stories featured in this album are bleak. Waits does not shy away from dark subject matter, and as many of the titles in the *Real Goner* exhibition and coloring book draw directly from this album, Waits' influence on the language and mood is critical.

Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, published in 1967, presents a bleak outlook on the culture of its time. However, the advent and propagation of the internet, the cell phone network, and the personal smartphone demonstrates its contemporary relevance. Debord's main concern throughout his writing project was 'the spectacle.' For Debord, 'the spectacle,' though never strictly defined, presents itself as the mediation of experience through images. This means that rather than being confronted with reality, we are confronted with an image of reality. Debord states in premise 61:

The agent of the spectacle who is put on stage as a star is the opposite of an individual; he is as clearly the enemy of his own individuality as of the individuality of others. Entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomous qualities in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the succession of things. The stars of consumption, though outwardly representing different personality types, actually show each of these types enjoying equal access to, and deriving equal happiness from, the entire realm of consumption. The stars of decision making must possess the full range of admired human qualities: official differences between them are thus canceled out by the official similarity implied by their supposed excellence in every field of endeavor...The admirable people who personify the system are well known for not being what they seem; they attain greatness by stooping below the reality of the most insignificant individual life, and everyone knows it. (Debord, 25)

This means that within the context of “the spectacle,” individuals are flattened out into images. More than that, the spectacle absorbs and transforms the identities of the people who are at the center of attention within it. With this in mind, each musician whose image and story I have adapted to the pursuit of this small book should also be thought of as his or her own foil. This is because the price of entering the spectacle is the division of one’s identity into the private self and the public self. Most people experience this division to some degree, but performers of the caliber listed in the *Real Goner* coloring book experience this division an order of magnitude greater than those who are not in that spotlight. This begs the question, “which is the *real* Elvis; the public, or the private Elvis?”

To grasp this concept from another perspective, consider Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*. The installation features a physical chair, a photographic enlargement of the chair, and a photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of the word “chair.” This work and others like it by Kosuth, are most often interpreted as asking the following question: “Which one is the real chair?” Kosuth wants his audience to consider that perhaps none of them is the *real* chair - that a “chair” is not a physical thing, but a set of ideas held by a person or group around a generally understood concept of “chair-ness.” This is how I have to think of, for example, Janis Joplin. I can learn about her, but I will never know who Janis Joplin *actually* was. I can only know her as a set of ideas *about* “Janis Joplin.” My goal is to confront my audience with their own limited conceptions of other people, and perhaps of themselves. This logic applies to all the real-world figures featured in this book.

My intention is to question the boundary between the set of ideas in individual viewers’ minds that makes up “Jimi Hendrix,” from the authentic, (formerly) corporeal *Jimi Hendrix*; and to question whether we can hope to understand the latter at all. Furthermore, I interpret Debord’s writings on “the spectacle” as recognizing pop-culture for better or worse, as an ultimately normalizing force within society. In premise 219, he writes:

The spectacle obliterates the boundaries between self and world by crushing the self besieged by the presence-absence of the world. It also obliterates the boundaries between true and false by repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances. Individuals who passively accept their subjection to an alien everyday reality are thus driven toward a madness that reacts to this fate by resorting to illusory magical techniques. The essence of this pseudoresponse to an unanswerable communication is the acceptance and consumption of commodities. The consumer's compulsion to imitate is a truly infantile need, conditioned by all the aspects of his fundamental dispossession. As Gabel puts it in describing a quite different level of pathology, "the abnormal need for representation compensates for an agonizing feeling of being at the margin of existence." (Debord, 80)

With Debord and Kosuth in mind, I chose my pop-culture icons based on one unifying trait: they all have deeply troubled stories that are wrapped up in the emergent problems of becoming an object of the spectacle. Fame can be a beacon of possibility and progress, or a cloud of hopelessness. Each one of them shared in some version of this transformation.

There is also the matter of the invented characters in the story titled, *Le Triage à Trois*. Paul, James, and Michael were inspired by three musicians I came upon at the Cliffs of Moher: an accordionist, a penny-whistler, and a fiddler respectively. They were real people all performing in separate areas at the cliffs on the same day. However, their existence within the coloring book does not explicitly connect them to the real world. Furthermore, their only connection to it from there is my personal memory of them. Therefore, as far as the reader is concerned, the question of whether they actually exist is unanswered. Placing them in context with performers who were real at some point, whose narratives are dramatically altered, gives them a sense of comparative legitimacy. Their unreal-ness as characters is matched against realistic, if at least plausible events. Because they are in context with unreal versions of actual performers, they become more believable as characters. In other words, the coloring book questions the real by making it seem unreal, and questions the unreal by making it seem real. Together, these varying degrees of realness and truth create an environment, the coloring book, in which they are both called into question.

Camus' influence is critical here. Where I started with absurdist influences, Camus offers a philosophy of the absurd. In particular, he is credited with claiming that the last true philosophical question is suicide, and what one should do when the question of life's value hangs in the balance. The problem lies in that we want meaning and order from life, but nothing in the world seems to want to give us that. Thus, the need is never reconciled with the reality. Ultimately, Camus decides that it is best to take a distanced view of one's own life, so that its events seem less personal, and more a part of the chaos that is existence itself. Each character in the coloring book - adapted from the real world, or purely fictional - deals with this problem in some way. Camus' influence is strongest in the work where notions of chaos are introduced, as will be discussed in the following section.

Finally, one key conceptual component emerged naturally throughout the production of this work: the portal. A portal is an opening within an otherwise closed boundary. It can connect two points in space or time, or two disparate ideas. Its relevance in *Real Goner*, however, is as the boundary between life and death. The portal is what makes it possible, at least as a mental activity, to travel back and forth between the two, thus further playing into the aforementioned questions of realness and truth.

Formal Analysis:

The thesis exhibition, *Real Goner*, is broken into three main components: a series of anthropomorphized drums, an interactive installation, and a coloring book.

The gallery is eighty feet deep by twenty-three feet wide, with an eleven foot high ceiling, and the entrance is marked by a concave glass wall. As one enters the space, there is a long wall on the left side that runs the entire length of the gallery. The right side of the space, however, is punctuated with a series of columns and one sixteen-foot long wall, which are set away from the exterior wall by about six feet. Because I am interested in questioning the role of the gallery, all of the work in the exhibition interacts with its architecture in either a dominant or

subordinate fashion. The result is an exhibition that has an overall antagonistic relationship to its setting. It also indicates interactions between the work and the space, as well as between the viewers and the work, and the viewers and the space. I will detail the specific interactions of each piece below.

The exhibition contains a number of two-dimensional and three-dimensional works, but the one element they all have in common is line. There are four drums spread throughout the gallery, four images projected on a central wall, and a carpet on the floor; all which heavily emphasize the use of line. As is the case with the drums, a line can be very simple, while still managing to express complex forms like the body. The images projected on the wall embrace a more typical use of line, as do the coloring books toward the creation of cartoon-like images. The carpet on the floor serves to connect one of those projected images with the real world, and thus carries the two-dimensional approach to line into three dimensions. However, an exhaustive discussion of line as formal component of this work would not serve to illuminate the exhibition in any particularly useful way. Suffice it to say that line is a valuable tool in any artist's bag, and an element that I use particularly often toward a whole host of purposes.

There are five drums in the exhibition, four of which were built according to the same process. These four were first designed using CAD software. I cut the staves out of plywood per the diameter of the drum. I then cut out the individual facets from those staves that make up the rings, and then laminated those together to construct the entire drum. After the drum is assembled, I shaped and sanded the facets into a smooth, continuous surface. Finally, the drums are primed and painted according to their individual narratives. Holes are drilled for hardware and the hardware and heads are mounted on the drum. While it is a complicated and lengthy process to get to this point, the act of designing the drum is fairly simple. I think about this like being a composer. Mozart would never allow himself to get hung up over minor chord vs. a diminished chord. If it sounds good, it sounds good. He would not have concerned himself with the intricacies of music theory while composing a piece. In this same way, I have

not concerned myself with the details of any individual piece during the process of designing it. Using CAD software allows me to design complex forms, which I can analyze later in order to physically construct them. It also allows me to give properties to objects which would not normally apply. A drum does not usually bend through space, or wrap around a tight curve. This property of illusion is a critical means toward the end of mixing 'figure' or 'body' and 'drum.'

I am using the drum as a stand-in for the body, but I am also using it as a symbol. Drums are made to literally take a beating. Therefore, they must be built to last. If they are not, they will not stand the test of time, and they probably will not sound very good either. This equation: drum = body, drum = object for hitting; relies on the transitive property to indicate: body = object for hitting, or person = object for hitting. It is a way of indicating the abuse that life serves to all of us. These drums are beyond repair and beyond saving. They are consigned, or they have consigned themselves to disabuse and death. They are null-objects, empty vessels where the search for 'meaning' ends with their deaths.

Three of the drums are slightly larger than human-scale, while the fourth is an arch that viewers pass under as they enter the gallery. Like the arch, the other three drums directly address the surrounding architecture. Yet, unlike the arch - which has a neutral relationship with the gallery - the other three drums submit to the gallery's will. The first drum of this nature that viewers encounter, titled *The Great Escape*, is situated at the front of the gallery. It lies low to the ground at a slight angle to the floor, its belly sagging to the ground, with one end raised a foot above the concrete where it meets a floor-to-ceiling window. The glass appears to have sliced a human-head-sized section off the drum like a guillotine, leaving it discarded on the floor just outside the gallery. The drum's pale red color subtly references the color of the body as it is being drained of blood. The exhibition title, *Real Goner*, is displayed in large black text on the wall behind the drum. This sets the tone for the rest of the exhibition.

The second drum viewers experience is the arch-shaped drum, titled *Hermetic Seal*. It is painted a pale yellow, and calls to mind the gates of Heaven, or the "Golden Arches" of

McDonalds, and viewers may pass underneath it to enter the exhibition. One vertical side of the drum has three floor tom legs, which allow it to stand one foot above the floor, while the other drumhead goes all the way to the floor, with both heads facing the ground. This drum has the most power over the space, as it is the least figurative, and the most architectural. It also signifies a distinction between interior space and exterior space. The gallery in this exhibition is not simply a space where art is displayed, but a space where alternate ways of understanding the world can be openly explored. It is the first instance of a portal to 'another dimension.' Once viewers cross underneath the drum, they can see that the side that faces into the gallery has a set of symbols carved into it. The symbols are Latin text reads, "Utinam Deus incolumen custodiat te ostendunt de hac thesi." Translated into English, this means, "May God keep you safe from this thesis show," or read another way, "May God keep you out of the lecture hall show. This statement, carved into the arch of the drum, looks like something scrawled desperately by a captive in a horror movie, or perhaps by someone who has been possessed by a demon. Even though the sentiment it is designed for protection, it has the potential to spark fear or aversion. This reinforces a feeling of distrust for the unknowing participation of viewers with language they do not understand. The potential for misunderstanding is mobilized as content in and of itself. This is largely the result of Camus' influence. The lack of understanding is a form of chaos in the minds of viewers, a space where a question needs answered, but no answer is given.

The third drum viewers encounter is titled *The Passion of St. Sebastian*. This drum is painted a pale green to match the color of St. Sebastian's waistcloth as it is depicted in numerous classical paintings. Though there are many versions of this image, Il Sodoma's *Passion of Saint Sebastian*, painted in 1525, is of particular interest to me for its Renaissance style rendering and its focus on St. Sebastian. Other versions of this painting lack realism by comparison, and include numerous other characters that distract from the very personal trauma that is the critical focus of the story. For the exhibition, the drum is strapped to the first column in

the gallery, and one has to walk around from the opposite side of the entrance to see it. Like the paintings, the drum is shot through with a series of arrows. However, in keeping with the abstraction of other elements in the exhibition, the arrows are represented by square wooden dowels, painted white to match the gallery's walls, thus reinforcing the antagonistic relationship between the sculptures and the gallery.

The fourth drum in the exhibition appears in a video, titled *Drum Roll*, which is played on a loop. It is mounted on the left wall of the gallery. In it, a snare drum sandwiched between two green foam wheels, all held together with a yellow ratchet strap, is seen rolling uphill through a wooded area over the course of a day, only to roll back down the hill at the end of the day. This work takes its inspiration from Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus writes, "The absurd man is someone who lives with the feeling of absurdity, who consciously maintains an awareness for the senselessness of everything around him." Camus asserted that there is a basic problem in being human, which is that we desire to find or make order and meaning in life. The problem is that existence supplies no indications of what we want to call meaning. Camus argues that we must accept that life itself is absurd, and endeavor to live meaningfully anyway. In other words, the absurd man is Sisyphus when he smiles. However, this piece negates Sisyphus outright. Like the drums physically present in the exhibition, the snare drum rolling around in this video is anthropomorphized. It rolls uphill without the need for Sisyphus to push it. This further pushes out the potential for hope in the exhibition. What are we to do when we realize that existence presses on whether we are here to do the work or not?

The final drum in the exhibition, titled *Leap of Faith*, hangs from a pedestal mounted on the ceiling, as though from a noose, at the back of the gallery. It is painted a faded blue grey to mimic the loss of oxygen to the body, and on the floor in front of it is the drum throne it is inferred to have leapt from. It also has a special relationship with the arch-shaped drum at the entrance, *Hermetic Seal*. As viewers walk under the arch, it aligns their bodies and focuses their attention on *Leap of Faith*. Viewers are then lead through the other works in the exhibition on

their way to see the final drum. The indication of the body with this drum comes from the fact that at its top, the shell bends around a tight curve, causing the top head to look down, and inserting a crease in the shell, much like a chin pulled taught under the weight of the body when the noose cinches around the neck. The noose, however is replaced with the pedestal, which rests almost supernaturally on the ceiling, creating an area of confusion in the area where the drum touches the pedestal. Is it hanging, or hovering? It's posture says one thing, but physics says another.

The second part of the exhibition is an interactive installation. It takes place on an 11' carpet cut to the shape of a symbol called The Great Pentacle, or Solomon's Seal. It is the same symbol repeated in the image depicting Britney Spears used both for the projection and the coloring book. This symbol might be understood more generally as a pentagram, or magic circle, but it has its own significance within that context.

The carpet used to make the magic circle was sourced from a local home. The owner decided to update the carpet to raise his resale value, and I was able to scavenge it in the process. It looks like any carpet in any contemporary suburban home – thick, beige, and non-descript. Placed around the pentacle's seven points are seven candelabras holding crayons. The crayons follow the color scheme of the typical Crayola eight pack. I decided it was important to keep the exhibition feeling playful to contrast the jarring subject matter. The use of Crayola style crayons and bedroom carpet is designed to transform the familiar setting of the home into something foreign and uncomfortable, because the setting of the great pentacle is misunderstood. Most importantly, the carpet acts as the stage upon which the activity happens. Four images with corresponding stories are projected on the wall in front of The Great Pentacle. They are projected in succession, transitioning every 15 minutes. Masonite on the wall where the images are projected provides an opportunity for viewers to pick up the crayons and color on the gallery's wall. As the images change over, and lose their relationship to layers of color underneath, something new and uncontrolled will emerge that cannot be completely predicted.

The opportunity for chance and change is critical to this portion of the exhibition because it reinforces the antagonistic relationship between the gallery, and the artworks that fill it. It stands in direct contrast to the treatment of the drums in the exhibition. Where the drums are subordinate, even victimized by the gallery, the act of coloring on the gallery wall signifies a reclamation on the part of the artwork. It is an intentionally absurd gesture toward the resurrection of the musicians featured in the work, but it also provides a chance for empowered viewers willing to enter The Great Pentacle, to claim ownership over the art and over the gallery.

The final element of the exhibition is a stack of 150 identical coloring books that expand on the ideas of the projected drawings on the wall. The book has a pink cover with black and yellow trim. Elvis Presley appears in outline posed in one his classic dance moves at the center of the page, and the text “Real Goner Coloring Book” written in large, black, unruly letters at the top and bottom. The entire cover has a noise filter applied to it to give it the feeling of static on an otherworldly television; as though the book, like the arch-shaped drum, the television, or the large carpet on the floor, presented a portal to another dimension.

The coloring book contains the same 4 stories as those in the projection, but it also contains other stand-alone images and stand-alone stories. Each image was created in Adobe Photoshop through a series of steps. The first step was a collage process that combined images I collected during my travels and studies through the U.K. and Ireland with images of the various musicians sourced from the internet. The collages, composed of visually disparate elements, were then simplified into line drawings to unify them into a single style, both individually and as a group. Viewers are also welcome to take a copy home. The choice is left open. What is most important about the coloring book is that it provides an opportunity for the work to have a life beyond the gallery after the exhibition ends, and that that life is a gift to those who choose to take it. That “life” exists in the ongoing interaction of the viewer with the object, and the object’s conceptual link to the exhibition. This is why I will give the coloring books away during the closing night of the exhibition.

Three of the stories shared by the coloring book and the interactive installation are based around three real-life pop stars: Elvis Presley, Kurt Cobain, and Britney Spears. The fourth story is based around three fictional characters: Paul, Michael, and James. Each of these stories has a corresponding coloring book page. The reader may refer to the References section of this thesis for the texts and images that comprise the coloring book, but I will discuss the images here.

The first three stories listed above emerged over time as the result of a natural curiosity I have with each figure. My connection to each one is different, but speaks to a distinct stage of my experience growing up. Each character is also tied to a personal relationship in my life about which I have had some kind of trouble, or misunderstanding.

The first story I wrote, titled *Hoist that Rag*, is about Elvis Presley. I have a personal interest in Elvis, but I am also intrigued by Elvis's power as celebrity to change social norms. My personal interest in Elvis is rooted in my relationship with my step-grandfather who passed away several years ago. I admired him when I was young, and that admiration took into account the fact that he was a big fan of Elvis. He was, afterall, the person who introduced me to Elvis. As a result, however arbitrary, they are forever linked in my mind. As I grew older and learned more about my grandfather's past, I started to resent him. In the years since he passed, however, I have come to see myself as a hypocrite for judging him. I think of Elvis in much the same way, though through the scope of his celebrity status. The difference is that he also occupies a larger social sphere, even after his death.

Elvis is widely admired as "The King of Rock and Roll," yet like many famous musicians, he struggled with self-control regarding his diet and health. More than that, Elvis was at various points in his career socially derided as performing "the Devil's music." This was largely a Pentecostal response not only to the pelvic movement associated with his performances, but to Elvis's transference of Gospel music from a religious setting to a secular one. The Pentecostal church derided Elvis's music as hedonistic and sinful. One could argue that the circumstances

of his death both; fit that description and stand as a powerful metaphor for the struggle for self-control, and as a cautionary tale about the excesses of fame. The conceptual thread tying my grandfather to Elvis is simply that they both had this brand of trouble in their lives - difficulty with self-control that resulted in some form of social judgment. They have become a platform from which to ask myself questions like, "If I can change the way I view one, can I change the way I view the other?" or, "If I can change the way I view the other, can I change the way I view myself?" There are also questions beyond the personal, like, "If society can mourn the loss of such a troubled individual as Elvis, can we also be kinder to each other in general?" or more broadly, "What is the role of forgiveness in contemporary society, and how have the rules governing its use changed over time?" "What are we willing to forgive now, that we weren't willing to before?" "What are we no longer willing to forgive that we once were?"

The story opens with the phrase, "All people are eventually understood through the lens of their deaths." This is my response to a statement made by the philosopher, Simon Critchley, in his short book titled, *Notes on Suicide*. In it, Critchley claims:

...We cannot but see the life of, say, Paul Celan or Kurt Cobain through the optic of their final seconds. Think about it in a less heroic manner: if I decided to leave my hotel room right now and walk into the churning waves, then my entire life would be read through that moment. Would that make sense of my life? Not really. But could we avoid trying to make sense of my life in terms of that final act? Not really. And I imagine that the same would be true of you, dear reader. Suicide might grant life coherence, but only by robbing it of complexity by viewing it through the instant of one's death (Critchley, 66).

While I certainly agree with Critchley that this is especially true of suicide, I think it is true of peoples' deaths in general. Elvis grew up regularly attending Pentecostal services that would eventually inspire his musical act. However, as he came to fame, he had to defend against the negative judgments of his own community. Yet, even though he died under such pitifully embarrassing circumstances, and society cannot disassociate those circumstances from his identity, he is still regarded as the King of Rock and Roll. My goal is to use Elvis as an example

of this idea, and my technique for questioning the assumptions that underpin such judgments is the studied morphing of narrative details.

In the image, Elvis is depicted in one of his classic dance poses: his knees bent up, toes tipped touching the ground, his right arm pointed straight up, and his left arm out to the side. He looks weightless. He is positioned in front of an ancient looking false niche. The ornate architecture of the arch behind him features stone columns, rosettes, and a series of linear facets organized radially along the convex surface of the arch – implying a ‘supernatural order.’ Just stage-left of Elvis, however, is the toilet that haunts him in the fictionalized story of his death. This adds an element of absurdity to the image, and strengthens the significance of the portal as a theme throughout the exhibition. Elvis’s relationship to the toilet is somewhat ambiguous in the image. On its own, it suggests no more than that Elvis is performing next to the toilet; but with the narrative context in mind, it may appear as though he has narrowly avoided sitting down on it, thus avoiding his death.

The second story I wrote, titled *Dead and Lovely*, is about Britney Spears. Spears has spoken publicly about her struggles with mental health and her experience of childhood stardom. I was inspired to rewrite the story of her notorious public meltdown in which a reporter confronted her about her sudden decision to shave her head and she attacked him with an umbrella. This was the first time I remember seeing a celebrity I admired in my youth struggle so openly, and being antagonized by the same media that once admired her.

Spears is depicted in her living room with her back to the picture plane. She sits on the hardwood floor, surrounded by The Great Pentacle, which is adorned with candles at the points and valleys of the concentric hexagram and heptagram shapes. One of the defining walls of her living room is punctuated with a series of arches, again recalling ‘the portal.’ The image is drawn with a harshly skewed perspective designed to emphasize the magic circle on the floor. It is also the only image rendered with a double-outline style, which has the effect of confusing the

boundaries between objects. This is to emphasize the strong sense of surrealism in her particular narrative.

The third narrative I altered, titled *Carving Out a Future with a Gun and an Axe*, was written about Kurt Cobain. My connection to Kurt Cobain is based in my relationship with my father. A year after Cobain's death, when I was five years old, my father taught me how to play *Smells Like Teen Spirit* on the drums. It was the first time I was able to coordinate my limbs to execute the rhythms my ears heard. Just like Elvis and Britney, my perception of Cobain changed over time. First, he was the man who supplied a song cool enough for me to *want* to learn, yet easy enough for me to *be able to* learn. Nirvana became a major influence during my early childhood and adolescent years, and Kurt Cobain's death was my introduction to the idea of suicide.

To create this image, I designed a digital model to serve as Cobain's bedroom. I populated the model with images from the internet of band posters that he might have had in his room growing up, as well as furniture, and a model of a seated figure. I then adjusted the camera to a wide angle of view and positioned it above the back wall of the room. I used the same process to capture the image in the mirror. From there, I took screenshots of the model, and imported them in Adobe Photoshop. Cobain is seen from above in a fictionalized version of his bedroom. The fisheye lens-style of the drawing shows him sitting at the end of the bed, his back to the picture plane, surrounded by posters of his favorite bands. There is a standing mirror situated in front of him that shows him, hunched over, looking down the shotgun detailed in the narrative. Scattered about the room are dirty clothes, and he has a small television placed just to the right side of the bed. The layout of the room is based on my personal experience of mine and my friends' bedrooms growing up. Many pieces of this exhibition place mundane elements within supernatural, surreal, or otherwise exceptional circumstances. This image and its corresponding narrative confuse the mundane and the surreal. Cobain, who is exceptionally well-known in U.S. culture, is presented in mundane circumstances. With his back to the picture

plane, and his room decorated according to clichés about ‘young male angst’, he can be thought of less as ‘Kurt Cobain, father of Grunge,’ and more as ‘the potential energy that made a Kurt Cobain possible.’

The fourth story shared between the parts of the exhibition, titled *Le Triage a Trois*, is based on two trips I made out to the Cliffs of Moher, in Co. Claire, Ireland. Three musicians – an accordionist named Paul, a penny-whistler named James, and a fiddler named Michael - meet at the cliffs where they all planned to take their lives by jumping off the farthest edge. Meeting under such extraordinary circumstances forges a bond between them, and they choose to start playing together at the cliffs on a regular basis. However, after performing together for many years, they eventually disbanded and, one by one, took their lives by jumping off the cliffs as they had each originally planned.

This image was constructed from a photo I took during my second trip to the cliffs, and images of each instrument sourced from the internet. The instruments are shown lying discarded on the ground by the edge of the cliff. The illustration depicts the addendum at the end of the story, and contains a very subtle allusion to the “portal,” which is presented via the large negative space at the top center of the image, implying the place where they each jumped off. The neck of the violin projects just above the horizon of the cliff, as though it is teetering on the edge.

Beyond the four narratives the coloring book and the projection share, the book contains a series of stand-alone images and vignette-style stories. The images in this category feature: Janis Joplin, George Harrison, John Lennon, Tupac Shakur, The Notorious B.I.G., Amy Winehouse, Jimi Hendrix, and The Artist Formerly Known as Prince. Tupac and The Notorious B.I.G. have the special designation of being rendered in connect-the-dots style. This is a formalist gesture designed to reflect the mystery around their interrelated deaths. All of the other musicians are depicted in the full-outline. Because they do not have narratives to attend their images, the formula for assembling each image in this set is the same. Each figure is posed in

front of a headstone, false niche, or mausoleum as though performing on stage. While the first four stories explore, at least in part, the inner workings of a character's life, these images only allow viewers to read what they know of each figure into the work. The emphasis, for example, is not on questioning who Janis Joplin actually was, but who "Janis Joplin" is to each individual viewer.

In the end, this project and the final exhibition, *Real Goner*, are not designed to answer questions, or to propose any sort of ideology or cultural analysis. It is an acknowledgement of the inherent meaninglessness of existence, and the confusion which results from that meaninglessness. Beyond that, it is an expression that one should press on, find the right space in which to exist, and try to be happy in that space. What more can one do?

Exhibition Images:

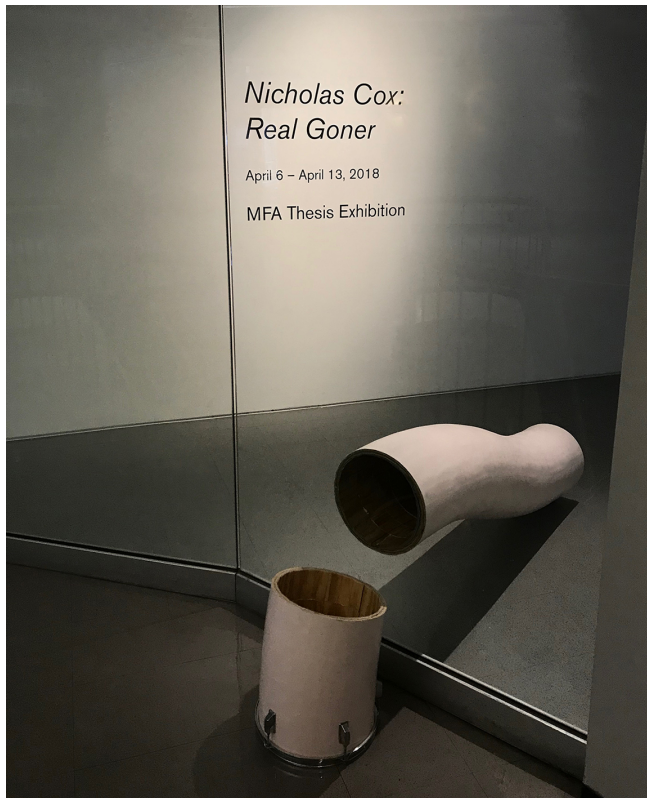


Figure 1: *The Great Escape*; 6' Long x 1' Diameter; Plywood, Paint, Drum Hardware; 2018



Figure 1.1: *The Great Escape* (Detail 1)



Figure 1.2: *The Great Escape* (Detail 2)



Figure 2: *Hermetic Seal*; 16' Long, 1'1" Diameter, 8' Height, 4'6" Width; Plywood, Paint, Drum Hardware; 2018

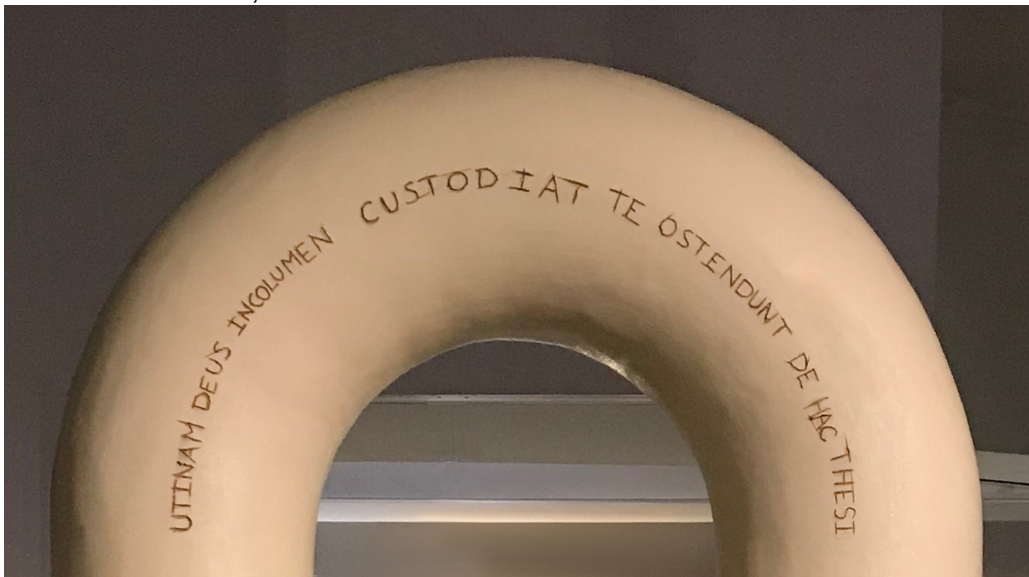


Figure 2.1: *Hermetic Seal* (Detail 1)



Figure 2.2: *Hermetic Seal* (Detail 2)

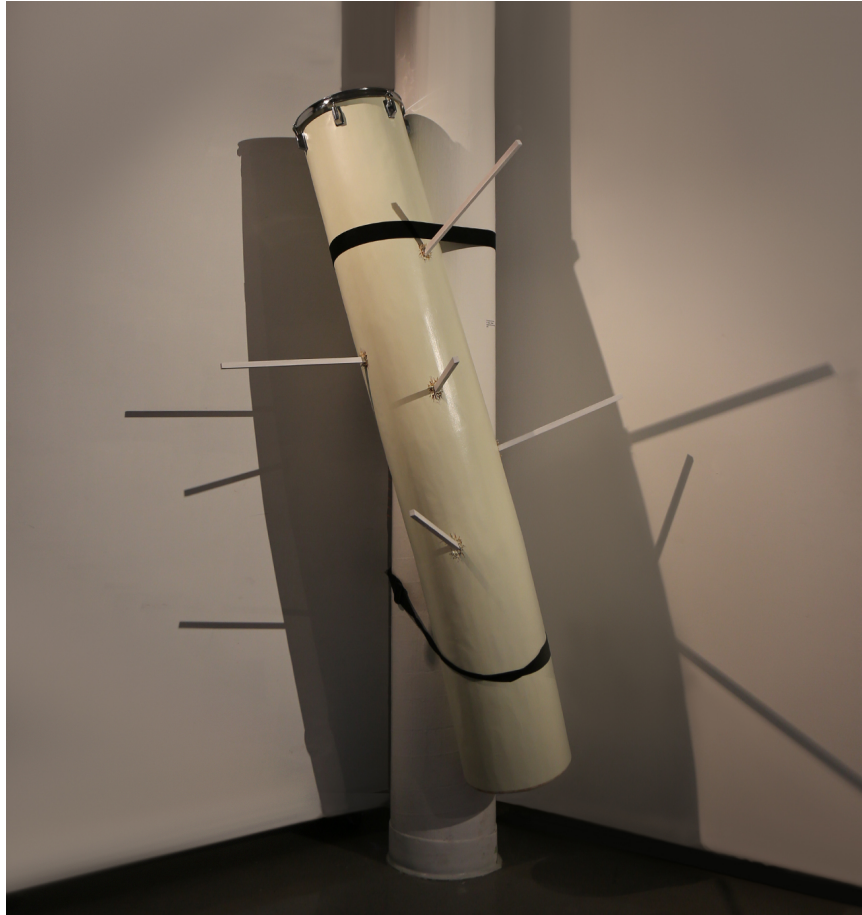


Figure 3: *The Passion of St. Sebastian*; 6' Long, 1'1" Diameter; Plywood, Paint, Drum Hardware, Guitar Straps, Ratchet Strap; 2018



Figure 3.1: *The Passion of St. Sebastian* (Detail 1)



Figure 3.2: *The Passion of St. Sebastian* (Detail 2)



Figure 4: *Real Goner: Coloring Book Stack*; 8.5"x11" – 20 pages;150 Copies; Pink Pedestal; 2018



Figure 5: *Solomon's Seal*; 11' Diameter; Carpet, 7 Candelabras, Crayons; 2018



Figure 5.1: *Solomon's Seal* (Detail)



Figure 6: *Make It Rain*; Interactive Projection, Crayons; Week-Long Duration, 2018

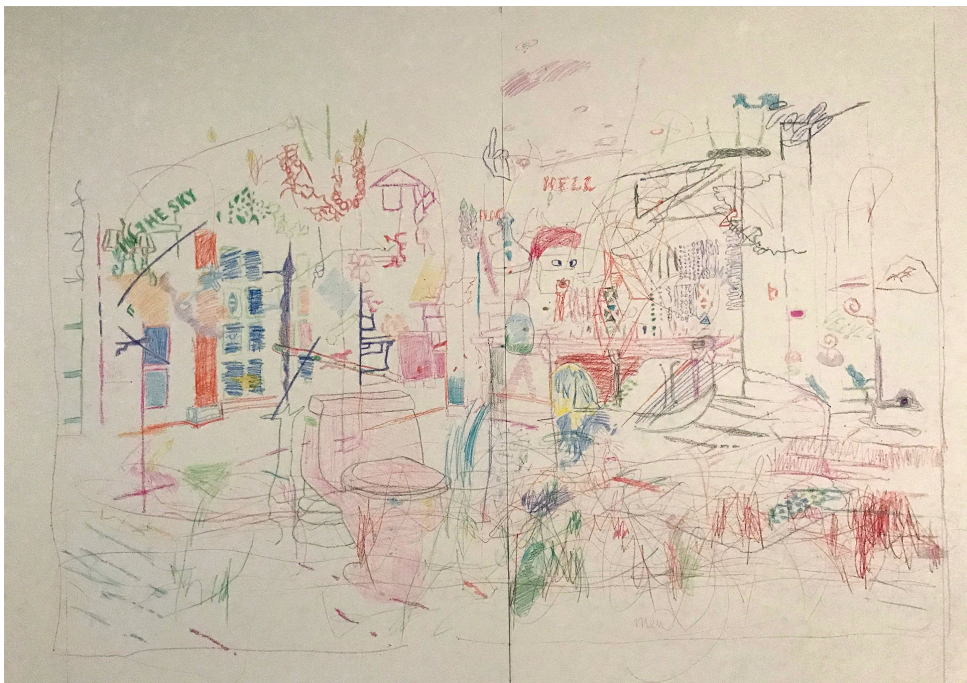


Figure 6.1: *Make It Rain*; Final Product, 2018

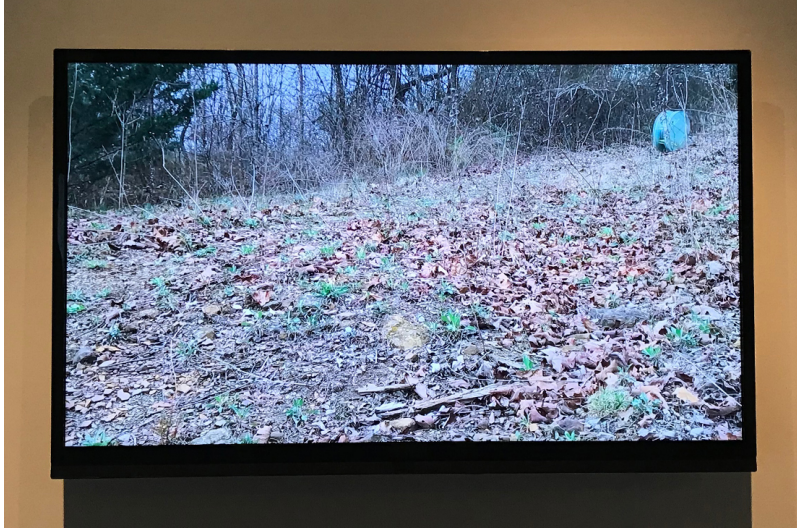


Figure 7: *Drum Roll*; 2:11 Single-Channel Video, 14"x5.5" Snare Drum, Foam Wheels, Ratchet Strap, Gravity; 2018



Figure 8: *Leap of Faith*; 6' Long x1' Diameter Drum, 1.5'x1.5'x2' Pedestal; Plywood, Paint, Drum Hardware; 2018



Figure 8.1: *Leap of Faith* (Detail)



Figure 9: *Real Goner* (Exhibition Wide Shot: Front of Gallery)



Figure 9.1: *Real Goner* (Exhibition Wide Shot: Back of Gallery)

Reference Images:



Francis Alÿs, *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*, Film Still, 1997, (Alÿs)



Erwin Wurm, *Fat Convertible*, 2004, Mixed Media (Zuspan)



Il Sodoma, *The Passion of St. Sebastian*, Oil on Canvas, 206x154cm, 1525 (Aist)

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