

SPIRIT LINE

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**MASTER OF FINE ARTS
IN
ART**

AUGUST 2007

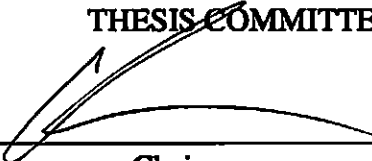
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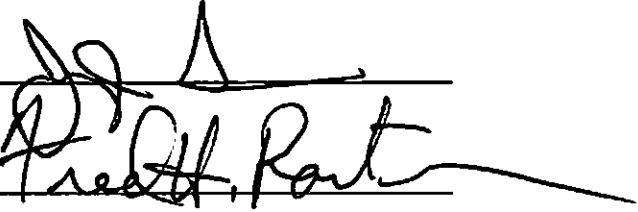
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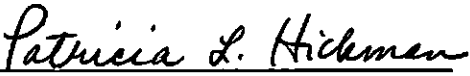
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special gratitude for the following people: Aagii Clement, Bessie and Bob Fallis, Hopi Dancers, Jean Pitman, Manny Salvador, Marilyn Snyder, Navajo Weavers, Pat Hickman, Susie Lomatsuka, family, friends, and mentors. Without those people, *Spirit Line* would not have manifested, and many thanks to horses for allowing me to incorporate their hairs to communicate my vision.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Spirit Line represents intangible relationships that connect us all. It expresses my gratitude for a personal connection I have to the American Southwest with Native Americans and others.

For me this connection is a blessing that resides beyond my physical existence. Japanese paper from my own heritage and horsehair from the American Southwest--both cultural references--together embody my hopes and prayers. *Spirit Line* aligns with the quietness within ourselves and invites awareness of individual lines that form a world tapestry.

CHAPTER 2. INSPIRATION

“In this living silence is reality. Only in utter simplicity, when all craving has ceased, is the bliss of reality.”¹

Jiddu Krishnamurti

The inspiration for *Spirit Line* came to me while I watched the snow falling for days at the Hopi Reservation in Arizona (Plate 1). The image of snow covering the skin of mother earth to be completely whitened left a strong visual impression on me. Everything became white as if the snow purified the world with its silence, and it appeared to be a quiet answer to the Hopis’ prayers. It also seemed to cleanse my thoughts and transport me to a very deep place, as if into my own *kiva*.²

Apart from everything else, the snow brought me an unexplainable sense of calmness that I had never experienced before. It was partially because where I stayed on the Hopi Reservation was remote from Western civilization, but there was also an internal harmony there for me that enabled me to surrender to whatever might happen outside of me. I realized that the same snow that communicates with the Hopis’ prayers by providing an essence of life also gave me a serenity that I had long prayed for. While the Hopi land absorbs the desperately needed moisture into its ground for the coming year, I too soaked up the stillness that the snow granted me.

After this experience, I started to wonder if I could create an installation which would reflect what I had experienced on the Hopi Reservation. My inspiration at the Hopi

¹ Susunaga Weeraperuma, *Bliss of Reality* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1984), 1.

² *Kiva* is an underground, ceremonial chamber.

Reservation was one moment of many cumulative experiences, and I wanted to celebrate this intangible link that led me to find that calm state of mind. In Japanese, deep relationship is described as *en* which is fatal connections between peoples, places, and things.³ For that which functions beyond my comprehension, *Spirit Line* became a space where all journeys intersect and realize my connections in this world.

³ Oreste Vaccari, *Vaccari's Standard Japanese-English dictionary/ by Oreste Vaccari and Enko Elisa Vaccari* (Tokyo: Jochi Gakuin; Hatsubaisho Maruzen, 1990), 216.

CHAPTER 3. INTENTION

My Masters of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition, *Spirit Line*, strongly relied on my desire to share what I have received during this period of time of my graduate study at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. I wanted to bring a significant part of my life from the American Southwest to Hawai'i in gratitude for the place that had been the foundation of my learning, both academically and non-academically. In this visual way, I feel I opened a doorway through *Spirit Line* that connects here with there. At the same time, I was able to give form to my personal, spiritual, and somewhat healing experience at the formal conclusion of my graduate study.

It was a natural process for me to respond to the inspiration that I received on the Hopi Reservation for my thesis exhibition because throughout my graduate experience, I have been interested in the manifestation of things that we cannot literally see, yet we feel or know exist. I believe--that there is an energy that brings life to us which exists beyond our physical being connecting all humans, animals, and things of nature--is my core artistic expression and intention.

This energy is described as *kami* in Japanese indicating the sacred life force all beings embrace. Native Americans call this force the "Creator" or "Great Spirit" which is a basis for their spiritual belief. Because of these fundamental similarities between two cultures, the Native Americans' world view deeply resonates with me. Although spiritualism is not commonly discussed in art courses at the university, I feel it was for me important to bring this perspective into the institution.

Most importantly, there is no question in my mind that spirituality, including cultural knowledge and wisdom, is equally significant to the life knowledge that we seek at academic institutions. Although our society is mostly based on Western secular perspectives, our acknowledging other values that have been practiced for many centuries is long over due. To integrate such differences is a means to creating a balanced world where both Western secular and spiritual views are validated. Thus, I feel strongly that I must continue to visually express what I value in spite of the difficulty I have faced in the university. *Spirit Line* was my challenge to create an art form which relates to both values and goes beyond separate limitations. Therefore, *Spirit Line* metaphorically spoke to a commonality of peoples.

Indigenous traditions, spirituality, and art have been interests of mine since I was young. My curiosity guided me to travel to places such as the American Southwest where I have been allowed to observe and learn traditional ways of life. These experiences are precious to me, and I take them seriously concerning my responsibilities as an outsider. I feel that things people share with me are gifts that should be passed on to others when I have opportunities with proper permissions, credits, and respects. By doing so, I become a point of connection and bridge between different beliefs, cultures, and peoples. At the same time, for me, this is a way to participate in this world. As a cross-cultural student, honoring a cycle of life, I created *Spirit Line* as a visual statement of my personal connections.

CHAPTER 4. INFLUENCES

While *Spirit Line* embodies several cultural and spiritual influences, my own cultural background, which is Japanese, gave me a solid foundation. Generally, I see the art making process as a weaving: all different elements of importance come together when various colors of yarn create a whole tapestry. In this paradigm, my Japanese background is the warp (vertical yarns run parallel to the selvage)⁴ and other cultural and spiritual influences are the weft (horizontal yarns run right angle to the selvage).⁵ Even though the warp can or cannot be seen in the weaving, structurally without the warp, the weft cannot be placed or even exist. It means, then, my Japanese-ness will always remain as the warp.

The warp in a weaving may or may not be visible to others; however, artistically sharing the beauty of my culture is a pleasure to me, for my art reflects Japanese philosophy, culture, spirituality, and aesthetic values. Particularly I feel closely related to the Japanese minimal aesthetics. Traditional Japanese art for instance, combines complicated cultural, religious, and historical influences which were embodied in simple forms. I am interested in such refinement that can be achieved through art.

In *Spirit Line* minimum representation became possible with two suspended hanging lines to express both my physical and conceptual views (Plate 2). I referenced an ancient weaving structure by the vertical lines of horsehair with Japanese paper as the warp, and the horizontal lines where viewers interacted with the warp as the weft

⁴ Isabel B. Wingate, *Fairchild's Dictionary of Textiles* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1979), 660.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 235.

(Plate 3, 4). *Spirit Line* therefore portrayed our lives that are often viewed metaphorically as a tapestry.

In addition to my own roots, two Native American traditional practices by the Hopis and the Navajos had a strong impact on me, both personally and artistically.

The Hopis in Arizona are one of the traditional Native American groups in the United States. I have been privileged to learn their way of life in which their spiritual beliefs and ceremonial practices are integrated into their lives. To the Hopis, there is no separation between being spiritual and living, and I see their way of life as an art in itself.

For centuries the Hopis have kept their traditional ceremonies that have significant purposes, meanings, and histories corresponding with their cosmology. It is very complicated to understand for outsiders, but their prayers are for life, people's health, and happiness. Robert Boissiere describes the ceremony,

Ceremonies are the channel, the pipeline through which the very soul of a people flows through the ages. Without a ceremonial life, the essence of civilization or a society will not stand the test of time.⁶

Because I want to honor the Hopis' privacy, I am intentionally avoiding explanatory accounts of my personal experiences regarding their specific ceremonies in this paper. However, many studies, publications, and internet resources about the Hopis are available to the public.

The most influential part of their ceremony for me was to actually witness their dedication and responsibility for their own beliefs. Their dance is a way of communication to the Creator, and the essence of our being becomes clear to me as the invisible connection to the force becomes visible during the ceremony. Considering the

⁶ Robert Boissiere, *Meditations with the Hopi* (Vermont: Bear and Company, 1986), 76.

reverence of their ceremony to all humanity, I was reminded of my own possibility, capability, and responsibility. In the Hopis' ceremonies, I see where an action becomes beauty, a ceremony becomes a force, and a belief becomes life.

According to Boissiere, *pahos* has been a part of the Hopis' ceremonial life for centuries.⁷ They symbolize "threads" between the Creator and peoples, and embody the Hopis' messages to the Creator as vehicles based on their legends.⁸ Preparing *pahos* made with eagle or turkey feathers attached to cotton string is a part of the Hopis' ceremonial tradition for all the ceremonies held in the *kiva*, and *pahos* are placed in homes and sacred sites.⁹ Similar to the Hopis' ceremonies with *pahos*, *Spirit Line* became a manifestation of my prayers in response to the time I have spent on the Hopi Reservation.

Learning Navajo Weaving had an equal impact on my world view, and it opened a new way for me to interact with my own art works. To the Navajos, weaving is their connection to their myth, land, and religion passed on through many generations. Their physical and spiritual lives as well as the Navajo's unique cultural values of order, beauty, harmony, and balance are all expressed in this art form. Today it is perceived as a fine art that has been continuously evolving.

The structure of the Navajo loom is a metaphor for the sky and the earth; it symbolically and actually refers to where all the creation and its sacredness begin. The Navajos believe that their weaving is a representation of the universe, and I wanted to

⁷ Boissiere, *Meditations with the Hopi*, 78.

⁸ Frank Waters, *Book of the Hopi* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 132.

⁹ Boissiere, *Meditations with the Hopi*, 78.

maximize this notion of living in a world tapestry through their traditional vertical weaving framework.

The nature of the creation process is believed to be a sacred activity; therefore, the weaver uses a symbol of line, “Weaver’s Pathway” or “Spirit Trail.”¹⁰ This specific technique impressed me and strongly influenced *Spirit Line*’s concept, structure, and its naming.

According to Kathleen Whitaker, the “Weaver’s Pathway” originated in Pueblo pottery, and the Navajos adopted this notion into their weaving by the beginning of the twentieth century.¹¹ To escape a part of the sacred creation process during weavings, the Navajo weavers make a small contrasting colored line from the background through the border to the selvage creating the pathway, so that the weaver’s spirit, mind, vision, and energy will not be trapped in the weaving.¹²

There are several interpretations of the “Weaver’s Pathway,” but it encourages and protects the weavers for the continuation of creative process in the future.¹³

So the Pathway, like prayer, may represent a symbolic way of reducing an ever-present, underlying threat. As well as supplying positive energy to prepare the weaver for the next rug. For the moment of Pathway is a moment of liberation, of peace, of security--and a wish for the future: May the next weaving be even better.¹⁴

¹⁰ Noël Bennett, *The Weaver’s Pathway: A Clarification of the ‘Spirit Trail’ in Navajo Weaving* (Flagstaff, Arizona: Northland Press, 1973), 29-30.

¹¹ Kathleen Whitaker, *Southwest Textiles: Weavings of the Navajo and Pueblo/ Kathleen Whitaker; with Textile Analysis Assistance by Susie Hart* (Los Angeles: University of Washington Press: In Association with Southwest Museum, 2002), 310.

¹² Don Dedra, *Navajo Rugs* (Flagstaff: Northland Publishing, 1996), 92.

¹³ Bennett, *The Weaver’s Pathway: A Clarification of the ‘Spirit Trail’ in Navajo Weaving*, 34-35.

¹⁴ Noël Bennett and Tiana Bighorse, *Navajo Weaving Way: The Path from Fleece to Rug* (Colorado: Interweave Press Inc., 1997), 148.

It is one of the most unique features of Navajo weaving and is still practiced among the contemporary weavers. The Navajo says, “Without the doorway, there can be no progress.”¹⁵

I feel that, with *Spirit Line*, my study at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa is concluded; however, this work of art becomes an agent for me to continue my journey as an artist. Likewise the Navajo weavers say, “May *Spirit Line* be the doorway, and the pathway to a new beginning for all peoples.”

¹⁵ Bennett, *The Weaver’s Pathway: A Clarification of the ‘Spirit Trail’ in Navajo Weaving*, 29-30.

CHAPTER 5. INVITATION

Although the title of my exhibition *Spirit Line* was singular, I applied the caption to cite three specific lines: 1) the vertical line which represents the linkage between the life force and beings; 2) the passage between two hanging lines which guides our life by connecting to each other, places, and incidences; 3) the intangible lines which viewers themselves bring into *Spirit Line*. Through this composition, I invited viewers to experience multidimensional relationships that exist in the world.

First, vertical lines were constructed for representing the communication between the Creator and beings. The line portrayed a life force, or *mana* in which we inherit from our ancestors physically as well as spiritually. The linkage and knots of individual strings expressed the lineage we have inherited, at the same time; it was my prayer for peoples to be inspired by these connections that permit us to be who we are (Plate 5).

To express this intangible relationship, horsehair from the American Southwest and paper from Japan were used (Plate 6). Incorporating both materials represents my strong relationship with these cultures.

In the Native American belief, the horse is a sacred animal that was first called “sky dog” believed to be either a monster or a messenger from the heavens.¹⁶ Pawnee chief, Lekota-Lesa once said,

¹⁶ National Museum of American Indian; Smithsonian Institution, *A Song for the Horse Nation* (Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2006), 7.

In the beginning of all beings, wisdom and knowledge were with the animals, for *Tirawa*, the One Above, did not speak to man. He sent certain animals to tell man that he showed himself through the beast, and that from them, and from the stars and the moon, man should learn.¹⁷

At the first encounter with this powerful creature, the Hopis placed their ceremonial blankets on the ground for this holy animal, the horse.¹⁸

After originating in America more than forty millions years ago, the horse spread out to the rest of the world and it has been in the company of humans assisting our lives in most parts of the world.¹⁹ Ironically, the horse became extinct in its homeland, but it was brought back to America by Christopher Columbus's second voyage in the late fifteen hundreds.²⁰ Instead of treating the horse for my own benefit, I wanted to apply the energy of the horse according to its original Native Americans' belief of being a messenger between the Creator and us. Using horsehair, a material that has been used in many cultures including the Native Americans, I made individual modular parts to contain my hopes. With *Spirit Line*, I visualized that peoples' movement through the passage would release those embedded prayers. The lines of horsehair with Japanese paper were meant to be like Hopi dancers, praying for the goodness for the world. At the same time, it was visually portraying the snow that I saw on the Hopi Reservation (Plate 7, 8).

Four to ten strings of horsehair were joined one by one with knots on both ends to create a long sequence of lines. These long lines were later attached to the horizontal

¹⁷ Tony Stromberg, *Spirit Horses* (California: New World Library, 2005), 11.

¹⁸ National Museum of American Indian; Smithsonian Institution, *A Song for the Horse*, 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

suspension line on the top, which measured fourteen feet in height and eighteen feet in width (Plate 9). Each line was placed about a half inch apart in succession, and four hundred fifty lines were connected to a single suspension lines. The sacred color of white for Japanese, Hopis, and Navajos was chosen to simulate the snow, hoping to bring purity and life into the space.

One of the essential aspects of *Spirit Line* was to generate a sense of calmness through a visual form as close as possible to my original inspiration. I believe that fiber is capable of imprinting one's *mana*; therefore, I was very cautious of my interaction and intention with materials. When I began my creation, I started with a purification ritual to treat the materials as ceremonial parts of a spiritual whole. Many times I had difficulty concentrating on the stillness, but this hardship reminded me to understand why the experience on the Hopi Reservation was so crucial to me. Because we are often too busy occupying ourselves with our everyday life, we can easily dismiss our quiet moments to connect to who we are, to an essence of life. *Spirit Line* provoked a silent communication that allowed me to acknowledge the invisible line that exists between each other, our ancestors, the creator, and to us.

Furthermore, three of my Native American elders agreed to record their songs specifically chosen for *Spirit Line* to assist me to more easily achieve a meditative state of mind during the creative process. Their participation was very much appreciated as their voices and songs were imprinted onto the horsehair too. While I was knotting the horsehair, I listened to a total of eighteen songs over and over again. The repetition of the

knotting motion and the rhythm of songs seemed to harmonize perfectly. At some points, it allowed me to enter the state of mind that the original inspiration came from.

Raoul Graumont and John Hensel explains the history of the knot,

Neolithic Man made rope and tied simple knots. The lake-dwellers during the Stone Age, and Incas in Peru used the sheet-bend in making their nets. The Incas also had a decimal system of numbers based on knots tied in suspended cords, the type of the knot and its position in the cord each having a special significance.²¹

Quipus made of knots are known as knot-records counting quantities of goods in storage in warehouses which was developed to document Inca history. This method contains systematic meanings, like a writing system, through its application, colors and placement.²² The simple movement of making knots, which has been used by various cultures, became an essential part of *Spirit Line* for me to express both the actual physical linkage of lines as well as the reflection of my concept. Like *quipus*, the knots of *Spirit Line* became a visual document of time that I spent in the creation.

The horsehair I used for *Spirit Line* was gathered from a store in Flagstaff just outside of the Hopi Reservation when I visited the area. Other batches of hair were personally collected from the ranch of my adopted Hopi family, and some horsehair was given to me as a gift. White horsehairs for ceremonial usage were given to me by my Hopi family, other horsehair which had been used in ceremonies for the last seven years came from my friend in New Mexico, and a small amount of locally donated horsehair from Hawai'i was also added into Japanese paper. I incorporated some brown and black colors of horsehair on the bottom portion of the lines, so that parts of the lines would

²¹ Raoul Graumont and John Hensel, *Encyclopedia of Knots and Fancy Rope Work* (Cambridge, Maryland: Cornell Maritime Press, 1952), 3.

²² *Ibid.*

disappear against the darker wall and floor. They represented the closeness to the mother earth in contrast to all white horsehair on the upper portions near to the sky.

I choose Japanese calligraphy paper as a binding agent for the horsehair. This was especially thin paper which allowed me to securely join each of horsehair strings tightly together with a little glue. I found that Japanese paper gave strength to the lines without any visual distraction. Although the paper was much whiter than the horsehair, both colors and textures became harmonious (Plate 10). Since my grandfather was a calligrapher, I felt that it was important for me to incorporate not only my cultural heritage, but also my own lineage with this familiar material into *Spirit Line*. Japanese paper was an agent for me to integrate both physical and metaphoric lines together.

For the second concept of *Spirit Line*, I created a space where people can walk through or go around lines. While the passage allowed viewers to focus on their path, viewers could reflect numerous relationships that have been associated with their own life in the past, present, and future. Where do they come from? Where are they now? Where are they going? These questions suggested by the passage enabled viewers to experience their personal journeys which were guided by many unknown/unseen connections. These divine relationships, *en*, were celebrated in this passage.

Third, the invisible line invited viewers to inquire of their responsibility and meaning in being a part of creation in this world. *Spirit Line* metaphorically expresses our conscious and unconscious contribution to a world tapestry as the viewers themselves became invisible lines or the weft. At the same time, I wanted viewers to explore a notion of being weavers in this world.

My intention for *Spirit Line* was to establish a quiet environment where people could listen to themselves, reflecting on their own connections to others as I was able to do so in the snow on the Hopi Reservation. And to recognize the force that enables us to live our unique lives.

CHAPTER 6. EXHIBITION

The night before the opening of my exhibition, after the installation had all been completed, my friend Marilyn Snyder and I held a private ceremony for *Spirit Line*. To set a clear intention and message, sage and sweet grass were burnt, purifying and inviting the goodness to be present throughout the exhibition. Tobacco was smoked, prayers were chanted, and the smell of ash remained for several days.

My Masters of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition, *Spirit Line*, was open from April 1, 2007 until April 13, 2007 at Commons Gallery at University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (Plate 11). Again sage and sweet grass were present at the entrance of the gallery leaving smoke and the burning scent at the reception.

The back walls of the gallery were moved in about four feet, creating a space to fit *Spirit Line* proportionally to the exhibition space. At the both ends of the two hanging lines, there were enough rooms for viewers to wander around. The passage between the two hanging lines was three and a half feet, so that viewers could walk through comfortably without physically touching the lines. Because of the air circulation in the gallery space, the lines were constantly moving, creating a slight wavy motion. There were two stainless steel supporting fish lines across the top, picking up the hanging lines at ten points.

The wall paint was chosen to especially reference the color of the American Southwest, in addition to simulate the tone of the gallery's existing wooden floor for neutralizing the background as a whole. Against this earthy brown paint, the translucent

white lines stood out in the space. The commercial name of the paint was “Fort Sumner Tan,” which came from a name of interment camp in New Mexico which was established in the late nineteenth century by the U.S. Government to relocate Navajo peoples. Not only did that place impact the history of the Navajos, but it also forced Navajo weaving to take another course in its development. It was my own personal way to pay tribute to the tragic history of the Navajo people.

Due to the size of my studio space, I was not able to view *Spirit Line* from the side until the installation was finished. At the opening, I was able to see for the first time viewers interacting with *Spirit Line*. Nevertheless, I envisioned how it might look; it was very interesting to see people’s reactions and interactions from a distance through the gallery’s windows. It was as if watching a movie scene or a theater stage.

Spirit Line did not come to life during its production stages until I installed it and held the ceremony at the gallery. On the morning of my opening, when I saw my exhibition, I realized that *Spirit Line* did not belong to me anymore. It was meant for the people as I had originally intended it to be. At that moment, I knew it began its own journey.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

It has been a pleasure for me to incorporate elements from the Hopis and the Navajos, as well as my own traditions into a single art form. As we are all connected, intertwined, and woven into our lives, this integration was expressed through *Spirit Line*. This is, in fact, my vision as an artist.

My hope is that *Spirit Line* brought some of these inspirations to viewers such as those I was able to receive during my study at University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Without my experiences in Hawai'i or the American Southwest, *Spirit Line* would never have been created. Both places were significant to my life and they provided me a balance of what I seek in learning.

As a conclusion of my study, I expressed in *Spirit Line* what I came to do, to minimally weave, in a most unexpected way. Now, I am ready to go where my *Spirit Line* guides me next (Plate 12).



Plate 1: Hopi Reservation



Plate 2: *Spirit Line* passage



Plate 3: *Spirit Line* overall I



Plate 4: *Spirit Line* passage detail



Plate 5: *Spirit Line* bottom view



Plate 6: *Spirit Line* detail II



Plate 7: *Spirit Line* vertical line I

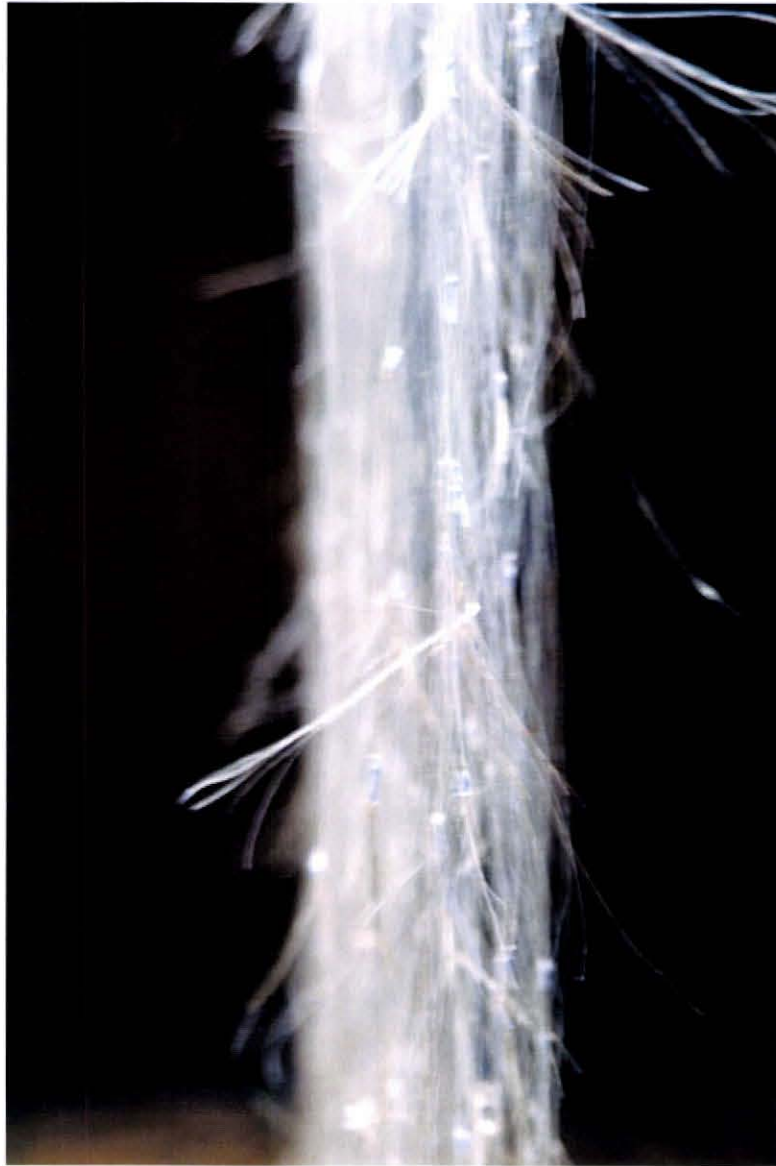


Plate 8: Spirit Line detail I



Plate 9: *Spirit Line* overall II



Plate 10: *Spirit Line* vertical line detail

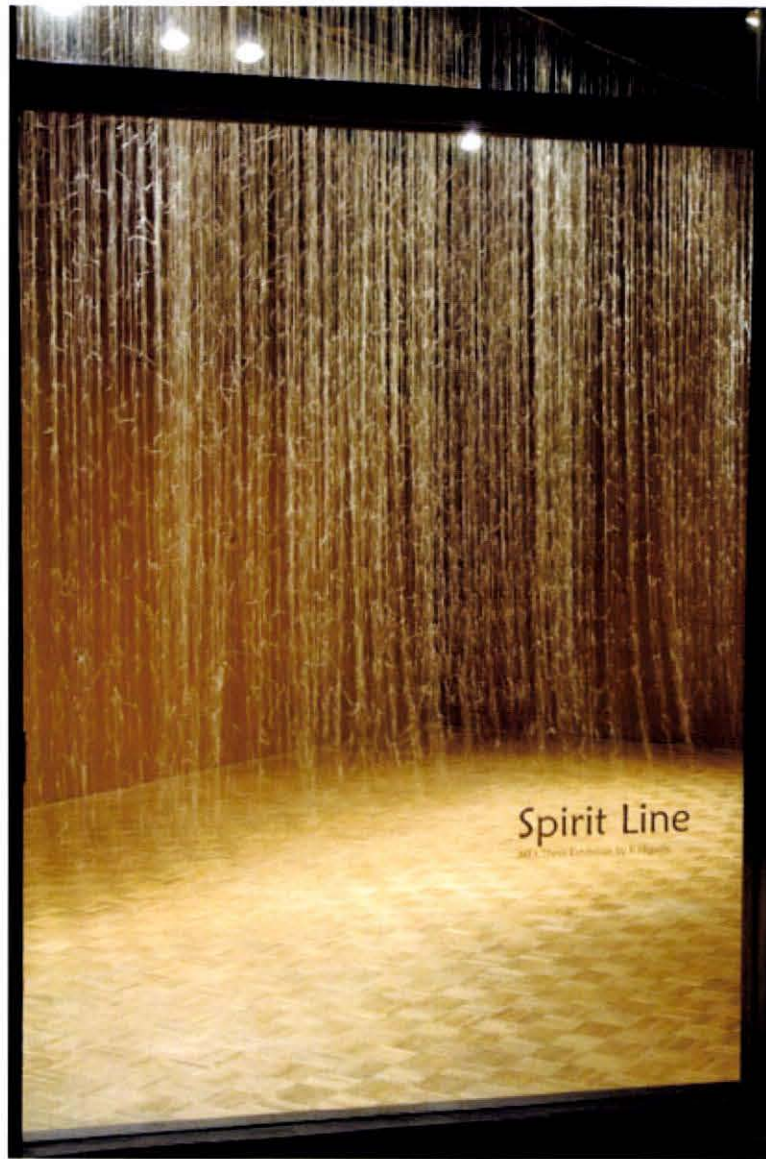


Plate 11: *Spirit Line* frontal



Plate 12: *Spirit Line* and I

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