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Janine Antoni at Luhring Augustine

One could well appreciate Janine Antoni's excellent new sculpture *To Draw a Line* without having witnessed her tightrope performance an hour before the opening. On the other hand, I'm glad I was there. Two looming 9-foot steel reels faced each other across the gallery. They recalled outsize machine components that you might see down at a shipyard or on the floor of a clamorous factory, but also various monumentally scaled metal sculptures from the 1960s and '70s, when Minimalism went massive and moved outdoors. Set on small inclines, the spools stretched taut between them a rope that ran overhead to form the "line" of the title. This line was made by splicing a 100-foot section of handmade rope, fashioned methodically by Antoni and her assistant over months, to a section of manufactured industrial rope. Near the bottom of the reels, the ends of the rope frayed and expanded onto the floor to form a vast, billowing pile of raw hemp strands, which together suggested a lovely cloud, tangled hair, a bed or a net.

This being the start of the new season, the opening-night crowd buzzed with excitement until the moment when Antoni emerged to climb up one reel on a slight ladder extending from the industrial rope, at which point the room went silent. Barefoot and wearing a loose dress, she stepped out onto

the tightrope and then slowly moved toward the middle, where handmade and industrial rope conjoined. The details were riveting: Antoni's feet on the rope, her swaying body, the adjustments she made, her heightened mixture of ungainliness and grace.

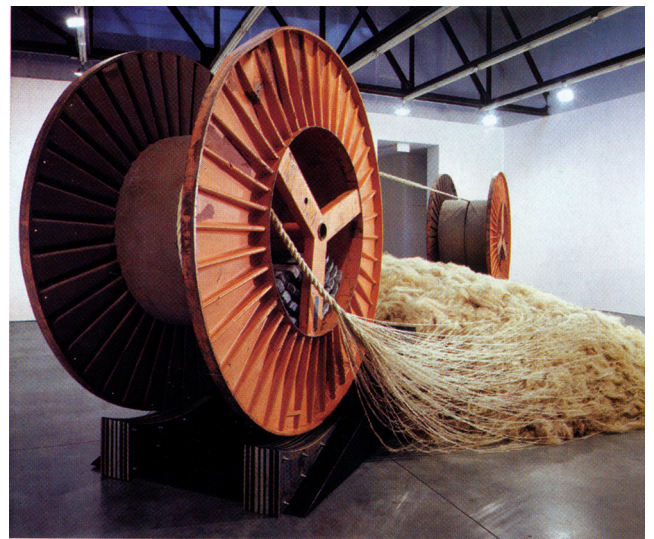
This performance was not about moving from point A to point B, however; it was pure process: the state of being aloft, of maintaining equilibrium against the downward pull of gravity. After several minutes (tension-filled for the audience), Antoni fell, but in a particular way: not head over heels with limbs akimbo, but head over heels and exquisitely, something she had practiced for months under the tutelage of a stuntman. This loss of control was the control, and it was both startling and entrancing. In any event, Antoni fell, landed on the hemp pile and got up to thunderous applause. Subsequent viewers will be able to infer what happened from the impression Antoni's body left in the hemp.

This exhibition was all about balance, but balance writ large: balance as a purely physical condition, but also as a psychological and spiritual one; balance (and its opposite, the risk of falling or losing control) as a metaphor for adventurous art-making, but even more for a way of being in an often tumultuous and unnerving world. To this end, every facet of the work had its very specific function, but also its conceptual acuity, poetic resonance and pronounced beauty. For instance,

Antoni used the same material to fashion both her support and her safety net, while extending her interest in recasting traditionally feminine activities, in this case braiding.

Also on view was *Caryatid*, featuring a striking inverted photograph in which Antoni, shot from the back, seemingly balances head down on a vase. Nearby, pieces of the now-broken vessel were gathered together to make a sculpture that was itself balance incarnate. The showstopper, however, was *To Draw a Line*, which drew not only a literal line in space, but also a metaphorical one between inspiration and precision, arduous work and instantaneous catharsis, gravity and flight.

—Gregory Volk



Janine Antoni: *To Draw a Line*, 2003, hemp fiber, hemp rope, two steel reels, mixed mediums, 10 by 20 by 35 feet; at Luhring Augustine.