

Sobe Silva

PNCA BFA Thesis Proposal FA19

Circus is a magical and unbelievable world of its own. Entrancing narratives and fantastic spectacles have drawn audiences far and wide for centuries. Generations of knowledge, skills, and experiences have been passed on to entertain the masses, pulling them away from a reality they may not want to inhabit. Mesmerizing shows put on by passionate groups, like Cirque du Soleil, perform internationally to spread a message: like *One Drop's* call for global drinking water, *Luzia's* adventure through Mexico's rich culture, and *Kuriosus'* heartfelt message to embrace our curiosities. These acts are the culmination of years of passion and training. Exploration, experimentation, successes, failures, and unfortunately, even death, have led to the development of more awe-inspiring and death-defying performances.

I look at my circus training and creative practice as parallel roads. Experimental and process driven, I use my practices to learn new techniques to understand the best method for the project in front of me. I focus on acquiring skills and experiences, challenging myself to problem solve any situation. As a performer, my skills range from aerial acrobat in training, a dancing eight-foot stilt-walker, fire dancer, and even bringing to life transformative character costumes. Performance leaves room for endless possibilities, especially in the circus: fabricating stories, characters, props, even the way we move our bodies in space with and around objects. Then there's the objects.

As a circus artist I hone my craft on equipment and rigging; objects fabricated by individuals who have put the labor, handwork, and time into understanding what is required of it, usually from first-hand experience. That kind of expertise is a craft. Like blacksmiths, electricians, and welders, it takes labor, handwork, and time to understand the possibilities and boundaries of a material or process. Materials like metal were originally taught through generations of families and apprenticeships together as part of a guild. Knowledge and individual experiences passed down, evolving with each iteration, and honing their craft. With the Industrial Revolution and the advancement of our technology, the human factor in making shifted to mechanical as machines became the worker to the

craft. These crafts were, and still are, needed by society but it's the craftsman that tends to be overlooked.

Our passion is an invisible labor. Behind the scenes are countless hours of training and practicing, trial and error, failures and reiterations that aren't seen by the final viewer. All the effort is put forth to make that effort invisible, for the final work to be a flawless manifestation of creativity. Whether it's constructing a building or constructing a show, it takes numerous amounts of thinkers and makers collaborating their skills and experiences to produce the outcome. An assortment of skills and experiences become crucial when the creative team is smaller as various projects require different problem-solving components. The ability to understand materials, processes, and techniques to the fullest extent is what motivates my creativity. Through the acquisition of various skills and experiences, I can perform within the world and fully conceptualize, design, and fabricate a world of my own or of someone else's.

My proposal comes directly from my passion and motivation. I am proposing I build what I train and trust my life on every time I climb up. An apparatus built around and for the relationship with performance art, a trapeze bar. To do so, I will have to improve some of my current skills and learn new ones in order to complete all the components required. These components include stainless steel welding, threading a steel cable through the rope as well as creating an eye-splice on each end, and stitching a leather elbow cover to finish it. I've also had to make new contacts to supplement my research. One of the biggest safety concerns is the quality of the weld that holds the bar in place. To ensure the safety I will continue to improve my welding skills. Through repetition and under the inspection of a local material specialist, I will improve my ability with the TIG and MIG welder, documenting my progress through hour logs and photographs. My project will be presented on site at *The Circus Project*, a non-profit circus arts training organization. A fellow circus member of that community will be collaborating with me for a demonstration on my work. The collaboration will include their own set of skills as well as training me in a new set. The work is not about the performance, it is merely a visual aid to demonstrate not only the work that goes into what we do, but the importance in the construction of the object of our choosing.

Bibliography

Aerial Animals: Versatile Circus Equipment. "A Family Business." Colorado, 2010.
<https://www.aerialanimals.com/about-us.html>

A family owned circus business based in Golden, Colorado, *Aerial Animals* was founded in 2010 by two supporting parents for their daughter. They have built their business from the ground up and are open about their journey through what they do. They build custom rigging and their site contains detailed layouts of how to customize your apparatus to your needs.

Bates, Bobby. *Bobby's Big Top, Inc.* Alabama, 1989. <https://bobbysbigtop.com/>

One of the leader providers in custom aerial rigging, Bobby Bates career has included professional aerial acrobat, stuntman, rigging specialist, and trainer for companies like Circus Circus, Ringling Brothers, and Disneyland. He provided me with information in my research process of how to build a trapeze.

Briceno, Eduardo. "The Power of Belief – Mindset and Success." *TEDx Talks: Manhattan Beach*, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN34FNbOKXc>

A discussion on the power of belief in oneself. The talk shows examples of the power of words and their influence on our ability to perform to our fullest potential.

Chung, Youjin. "The Unity of Art and Life." *The International Journal of the Arts in Society: Annual Review* 6, no. 3 (2011): 211–20.

This article discusses the Fluxus artists of the 1960's and their desire to blur the line between art and life, starting with John Cage. The works examined everyday activities (such as cutting hair, eating, getting dressed) and how they could be examined as art. The performances, or "happenings," were temporary and meant to be experienced through the moment, and not documentation. The article references that creative thinking should be applied to multiple facets of life, and not solely around the concept of a "fine artist" and a final, tangible work.

Cirque du Soleil. "Creative Process." Take A Glimpse Behind the Scenes | Cirque du Soleil. Canada. <https://www.cirquedusoleil.com/about-us/creative-process>.

Cirque du Soleil is an internationally known and respected circus arts group. Performing around the world for almost 40 years, they have put on numerous amounts of shows to entertain the world and to spread many important messages. They are proud partners of *The Circus Project*, a local circus arts community I currently train with.

Crane, Terry. "Why I Ran Away to Join the Circus." *TEDx Talks: Rainier*, 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6TIZThr27c>

Terry Crane is an international circus artist. His expertise has granted him opportunities to perform, train, and teach all around the world. His apparatus of choice is rope. I was given the chance to observe an intimate performance and briefly chat with him.

Dunn, Katherine. *Geek Love*. New York: *Vintage Books*, 2002.

Fictional work that follows a side show family. The story follows the family as generations of children are accepted and rejected for their "freak" ability and the lengths taken to stay within the freak family and to be the star of the stage.

Garzon, Martha. "Rebecca Horn: Body Art, Performance, & Installations." *Contemporary Art Installation* (blog). 2018.

<http://www.marthagarzon.com/contemporaryart/2012/07/rebecca-horn-body-art-performance-installations/>

Continually updated blog written by an adjunct professor in the Digital Arts Program at Stetson University. The blog is written for students to reference artists mentioned in lectures and is written for educational purposes only. It includes a limited amount of documented work, focusing on Horn's more well-known pieces. The author formal examines each piece and quotes Horn from cited sources.

Korn, Peter. *Why We Make Things and Why It Matters: The Education of a Craftsman*. Boston: *David R. Godine Publisher*, 2013.

This book is a first-person account from the author's point of view. He discusses his experiences as a craftsman working with wood. He defines craft in both verb and noun, viewing craft through lenses such as one-of-a-kind handmade objects, mass produced items, artists/performers practicing their craft, and the tradition of craft as trade (i.e. blacksmiths). His discussion questions why we make things, why it matters, and why or is there is a difference in craft depending on who makes it or what it is.

"Personal Art." In *Rebecca Horn: The Glance of Infinity*, edited by Carl Haenlein, 49-85. Zurich: *Scalo Verlag*, 1997.

This book is a dedicated oeuvre of Rebecca Horn. Contributing to the book herself, Horn and other contributors bring together all her works through 1997. It includes images of installations, stills from video, interviews and commentary directly from the artist. It provides third party insight and formal analysis of the work and examines the context of work within and outside their installation space. This section is laid out chronologically, with images of her work, dated with some including comments from Horn.

Russo, Mary J. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

The Female Grotesque examines Western culture's concept of gender identity and the grotesque specifically in relation to the perspective of identity. Looking at the relationship between gender and the grotesque, Russo looks to bring a new understanding of the grotesque, connecting the image of the "aerial" sublime with the feats of Amelia Earhart with comparison of the classical versus uncanny body within a cultural context. She uses a wide variety of theoretical, visual, literary, biographical, and performance texts and is a Professor of Literature and Critical Theory.

Talbot, William. *Ceramics in the West: A Walkthrough the Technical Aspects of a Teapot and Two Eastern Teas*. Portland, OR: PNCA BFA Sculpture Thesis, 2014.

PNCA graduate, Talbot raises the questions of why craft is on a lower plane than "fine art" and what it means to be a "fine artist" moving into the realm of craft. Through the creation of a functional item, teapots, Talbot explores the ways that the teapot can bring meaning to a utilitarian object.

The Circus Project, discussions with various Circus Artists and Performers. Portland, OR, established 2008. TheCircusProject.org

The Circus Project is a non-profit circus training company. Originally founded to help marginalized and homeless youth, the program has grown over 10 years to be proud partners with Cirque du Soleil to be able to provide scholarships and global opportunities to build strength, be creative and change lives through circus arts. They are a major support and influence to my work, and I actively and currently train, volunteer, and work with them.

Zilber, Emily. *Crafted: Objects in Flux*. Boston, MA: MFA Publications, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2015.

Crafted: Objects in Flux introduces international artists whose intent is to subvert our expectations of craft within contemporary art. It questions and examines crafts standing within contemporary art. Looking at craft from process, material, and techniques, it describes the connection to performance, space, and spectacle.

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SOBE SILVA







White Body Fan, 1972



Finger Gloves, 1972





Cockatoo Mask, 1973



Cockfeather Mask, 1973



The Feathered Prison Fan, 1978



Mechanical Peacock Fan, 1979-80



Egg Experimentations, 2017-19, wheel-thrown ceramic. (left) ~ 3" tall each, (right) ~ 6" tall



The Pour, 2019, wheel-thrown ceramic, glass.



Handstand Grip, 2019, slip cast, glass



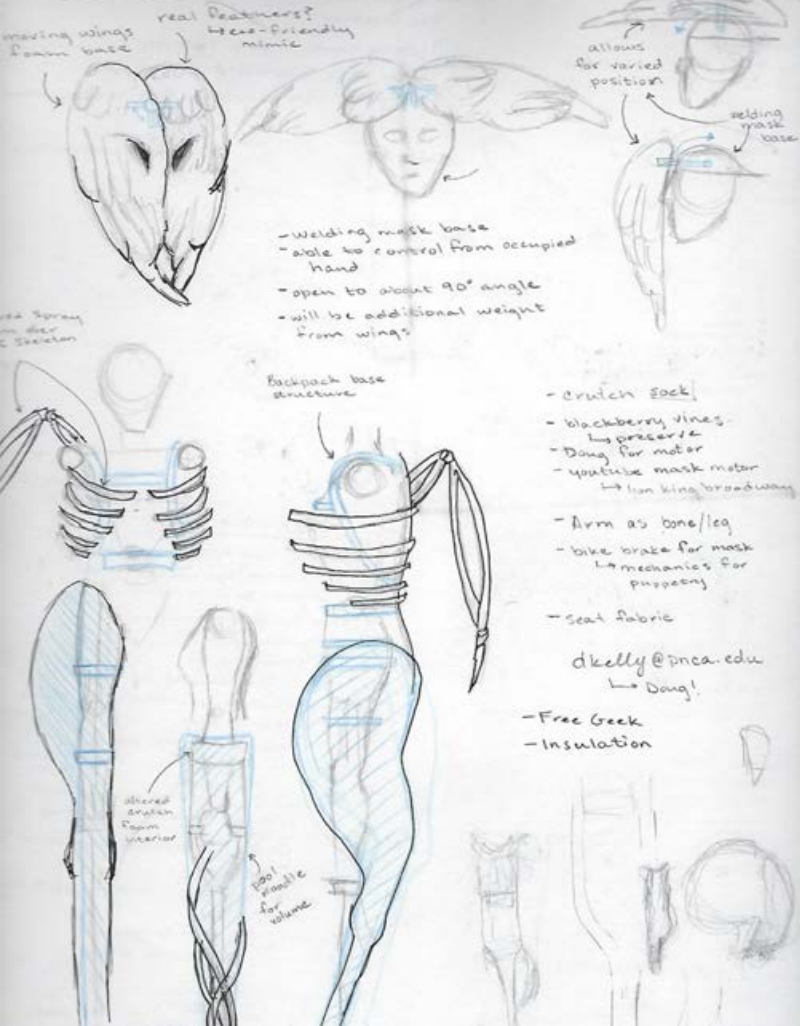


Mask Concept, 2018, ceramic





Mask of the Creature (on display), 2018, reused objects, feathers



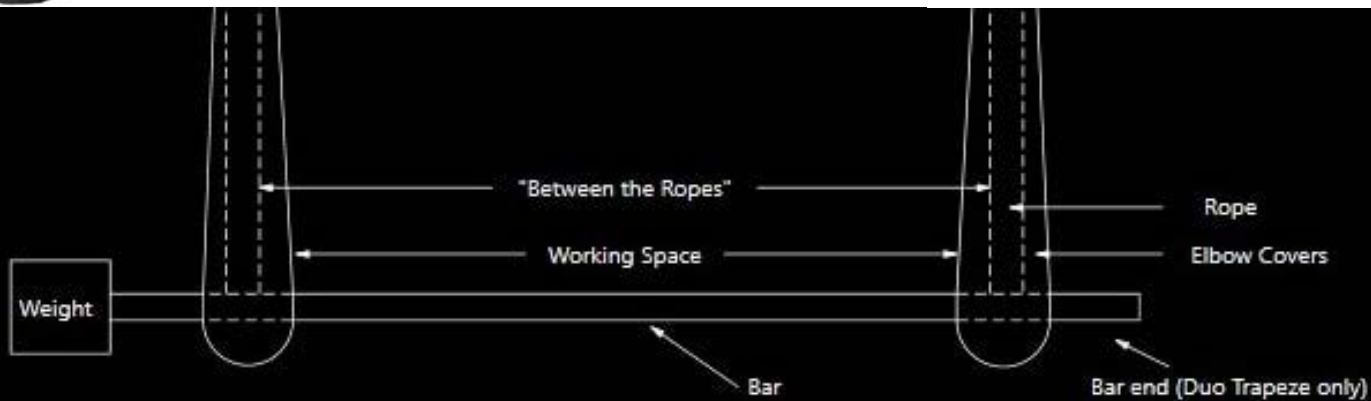
The Creature (and concept), 2018















WHERE EVERYONE IS
welcome





THANK YOU!

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Speech Transcript

Circus is a magical and unbelievable world of its own. Entrancing narratives and fantastic spectacles have drawn audiences far and wide for centuries. Generations of knowledge, skills, and experiences have been passed on to entertain the masses, pulling them away from a reality they may not want to inhabit. Mesmerizing shows put on by passionate groups, like Cirque du Soleil, perform internationally to spread a message: like *One Drop's* call for global drinking water, *Luzia's* adventure through Mexico's rich culture, and *Kuriosus'* heartfelt message to embrace our curiosities. Cirque du Soleil and countless other performance groups over the centuries have used entertainment to transcend verbal storytelling and break the barriers of spoken language. They challenge what we perceive as reality and substitute it with delightfully deceitful manipulations of the body, object, and space. These acts are the culmination of years of passion and training. Exploration, experimentation, successes, failures, and unfortunately, even death, have led to the development of more awe-inspiring and death-defying performances.

I have always been curious in understanding the way things work, and I say "things" because I mean all things, the want not just for knowledge, but for skills that can be activated in the world. My curiosity about process and technique has always been a key factor in my creativity. If I see something that intrigues me, I feel the need to know what it is, how it works, and is it something I can learn.

I came to PNCA for drawing and painting to continue progressing my skills while focusing on the body, but my curiosity got the best of me when I was introduced to facilities I didn't have access to before. Wasn't any surprise that my practice would shift direction and move into the 3D realm of sculpture. Rebecca Horn's early work was an immediate influence in this shift.

Her early work with her body was an easy connection to my previous costuming experience, but it was her continued process with feathers that intrigued me. Though the

final works are deep and beautiful within themselves, it was her iterations from one to the next that followed my line inquiry. Each project evolved from the previous, carrying over certain objects and materials, but changing and adapting the way they interact with the body, shifting from altering the body, to encompassing the body, to eventually removing the body's physical presence within the space altogether.

That same creative curiosity led me to the circus many years ago as I looked for ways to challenge my body and acquire skills that could be merged with my visual art practice. I look at my circus training and creative practice as parallel roads. I use my practices to learn new techniques to understand the best method for the project in front of me. Whether it is learning a new welding technique or a new aerial apparatus, my passion keeps me going after the failures and the dedication brings me back to learn more. I focus on acquiring skills and experiences, challenging myself to problem solve any situation.

As a performer, my skills range from aerial acrobat in training, a dancing eight-foot stilt-walker, fire dancer, and even bringing to life transformative character costumes. I am challenged during every performance and it's my skills and experiences that allow me to improvise and develop new ideas. Performance leaves room for endless possibilities, especially in the circus: fabricating stories, characters, props, even the way we move our bodies in space with and around objects that can make eyes widen in anticipation. Then there's the objects themselves.

As a circus artist I hone my craft on equipment and rigging; objects fabricated by individuals who have put the labor, handwork, and time into understanding what is required of it, usually from first-hand experience. Circus apparatuses are usually custom built and designed by experts in that performance area.

Being able to confidently and safely build an apparatus that someone is placing their life onto can be a daunting task. Bobby Bates of Bobby's Big Top, began his career with Club Med running circus programs, maintaining equipment and rigging, and producing shows. He also spent several years touring as a professional aerialists, stuntman, and trainer for many large companies including Disneyland and Ringling Brothers. In 1989, he founded Bobby's Big Top and is still one of the leading companies in custom circus rigging.

That kind of expertise is a craft. Like blacksmiths, electricians, and welders, it takes labor, handwork, and time to understand the possibilities and boundaries of a material or process. Materials like metal were originally taught through generations of families and apprenticeships together as part of a guild. Knowledge and individual experiences passed down, evolving with each iteration, and honing their craft. With the Industrial Revolution and the advancement of our technology, the human factor in making shifted to mechanical as machines became the worker to the craft. These crafts were, and still are, needed by society but it's the craftsman that tends to be overlooked.

Our passion is an invisible labor. Behind the scenes are countless hours of training and practicing, trial and error, failures and reiterations that aren't seen by the final viewer. All that effort is put forth to make the effort invisible, for the final work to be a flawless manifestation of creativity. Whether it's constructing a building or constructing a show, it takes numerous amounts of thinkers and makers collaborating their skills and experiences to produce the outcome.

An assortment of skills and experiences become crucial when the creative team is smaller as various projects require different problem-solving components. The ability to understand materials, processes, and techniques to the fullest extent is what motivates my creativity. Through the acquisition of various skills and experiences, I can perform within the world and also fully conceptualize, design, and fabricate a world of my own or someone else's.

My proposal comes directly from my passion and motivation. I am proposing I build what I train and trust my life on every time I climb up. An apparatus built around and for the relationship with performance art, a trapeze bar. To do so, I will have to improve some of my current skills and learn new ones in order to complete all the components required. These components include stainless steel welding, threading a steel cable through the rope as well as creating an eye-splice on each end, and stitching a leather elbow cover to finish it. I've also had to make new contacts to supplement my research since professional how-to blueprints haven't quite made it to amazon yet.

One of the biggest safety concerns is the quality of the weld that holds the bar in place. To ensure the safety I will continue to improve my welding skills. Through repetition and under the inspection of a local material specialist, I will improve my ability with the TIG and MIG welder, documenting my progress through hour logs and photographs. This repetition of welding reflects the repetitious training that is required to maintain my skills and progress further in both my creative practices.

My project will be presented on site at *The Circus Project*. A non-profit organization, *The Circus Project* was started by Jenn Cohen, a circus performer and process work therapist, who believed help could be provided to homeless and marginalized youth through the unique and unprecedented ways of the circus arts. Over 10 years later, they are proud partners with Cirque du Soleil and are the only company with training programs designed specifically for the homeless youth in the United States. A fellow circus member of that community will be collaborating with me for a demonstration on my work. The collaboration will include their own set of skills as well as training me in a new set. The work is not about the performance, it is merely a visual aid to demonstrate not only the work that goes into what we do, but the importance in the construction of the object of our choosing.

Circus has been an integral part of my life for over a decade. The various artist I have worked with constantly inspire and challenge my ideas of what we can do with our bodies and how these bodies can interact with objects in space. Their influence can be seen throughout my creative practice. We share skills and support each other, both physically and emotionally, and strive to see each other succeed. But our labor is invisible. Unlike the brush stroke of a painter or the ceramicists hand in the clay, we purposely conceal the handwork to inspire the mind to believe the unbelievable, to make the skill look effortless. An invisible labor of love.

