Life as a Tightrope: Weave, Walk and Fall

By GINGER DANTO

AMONG the disparate items occupying Janine Antoni’s Tribeca studio last fall were some 70 pounds of raw hemp in ceiling-high boxes shipped from Shanghai; samples of loose or variously knotted natural fiber; sketches of nets and rope-bearing structures; a portable tightrope; and a copy of the French tightrope walker Philippe Petit’s book “On the High Wire” encased in a plastic bag like a piece of courtroom evidence.

Over the winter, once several spinning wheels arrived, Ms. Antoni and her assistant, Melissa Martin, sat spinning for hours in scenes that, save for the occasional trill of a cell phone, recalled dioramas of 19th-century domestic life. Later the wheels were replaced by an antique rope-making device, with which the newly spun fiber was plaited.

Come spring, the coarse Chinese hemp was forsaken in favor of a silky brown version from the Netherlands. Then in July, the entire operation was moved to a rigger’s garage in Brooklyn to accommodate the oversize components, including two one-ton steel reels, that Ms. Antoni was assembling. The resulting structure — a rope pulled taut between reels perched on inclined planes — will be the conceptual and physical basis of her performance piece “To Draw a Line,” which takes place at the Lubrige Augustine Gallery in Chelsea on Sept. 5.

On opening night, Ms. Antoni will walk, balance and ultimately fall from the rope she wove from loose hemp.

Janine Antoni will tell a story, just once, about balance and the origins of everyday things.

the same material that will cushion her landing seven and a half feet below. She will perform only once, but the apparatus, including the handmade rope ladder Ms. Antoni will use to climb to her perch, will remain on view until Oct. 25.

With just one performance, what is there to see afterward? Evidence of the artist’s presence — a frayed stretch of rope where she has stepped, her body’s impression in the hemp — will remain as silent but eloquent traces of her passage. It is Ms. Antoni’s hope that viewers, most of whom will not have witnessed her
walk and fall, will bring their own imagination to the narrative she has spent more than a year creating. "I come from an oral tradition," said Ms. Antoni, 39, who was born in the Bahamas and nurtured by tales from her Trinidadian grandmother. "I learned that telling a good story means not telling the whole story, but leaving a space for the imagination." In "To Draw a Line," metaphor and medium mix, as Ms. Antoni uses thread as the essential material with which to lure her audience into the web of her design.

"I begin by researching an idea, and never know where it will lead," Ms. Antoni said last fall, still in the Chinese-hemp phase of the project. As she spoke, she wrung her long hair through her fingers, the way other people gesture with their hands, while explaining the trial-and-error process of her art. "This is how it always starts," she said, surveying the incongruous objects that lie about, vestiges of her investigation.

In developing ideas, Ms. Antoni follows the thread of her private thoughts, informed by instinct, experience and a stream of comments solicited from friends, visitors, even passers-by — including teenagers on her block.

Janine Antoni making rope for "To Draw a Line," in which she walks a tightrope stretched between one-ton spools. The equipment will be on view at the Lehman Augustin

Brooklyn garage-front sidewalk — in public space where she is working. She draws on myth, memory, prayer, fairy tales and those final fragments of dreams that rise to the surface on waking. (In the last months of "To Draw a Line," however, Ms. Antoni had only one dream. "After making rope all day, I went to sleep and dreamed I was making rope, over and over," she said wearily.) Finally, she scours esoteric publications — stacks of engineering data, a sailor's manual — for relevant facts.

For "To Draw a Line," she consulted, among others, a tightrope teacher, a structural engineer, a spinner.

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a stunt man, an experimental choreographer who told her that the central cord of a rope has been called the "soul" and a Delaware-based woman who tests military rope for a living and who advised, "You have to break something to know how to make it stronger."

Ms. Antoni said she finds beauty in the particular way things are put together. In her more involved projects, she has specialized in using old-fashioned forms of labor, like mopping or weaving, to call attention to the origin of ordinary items. "We have lost the connection of where things come from," she said, as if by reminding it, we also find ourselves.

While such motivation may seem quaint, Ms. Antoni has gained success as an artist because her work corresponds to many contemporary preoccupations, especially women's interest in — and anxieties about —
their bodies. She has made pieces about fat, about body image, about birth and about love. In “Loving Care” (1993), she washed the floor with her hair; in “Butterfly Kisses” (also 1993), she used her mascaraed eyelashes to trace patterns both dense and delicate onto a sheet of paper.

In her breakthrough work, “Gnaw” (1991), she bit off pieces of chocolate and lard cubes, spit them out and refashioned what remained as sculpture. Many critics saw “Gnaw” as a reference to a predominantly female practice of self-denial in pursuit of some physical ideal. The work’s Byzantine array of raw material played into minimalist currents in the art world, and the Bloomingdale’s-style display of derivative products (lipsticks made of the lard, for example), added a distinct note of feminist wit.

Ms. Antoni acknowledges her debt to female performance artists of the 1970’s, but she addresses similar intimate issues with somewhat less rancor than they typically did. Her investigations into these issues are expansive. As she sought the origin of common things (deriving into the practical science of manufacturing chocolate, cosmetics, hair dye and other consumer products), she also followed their trajectory into more universal ideas. In “To Draw a Line,” her most ambitious installation to date, that idea is balance. “Balance is this ideal state we have in our minds, we are always striving for,” she said, “whereas it is only a moment we pass through from a general state of imbalance.”

Ms. Antoni had this epiphany while pursuing what became for her a form of meditation: walking a tightrope. Having already focused on everyday acts like sleeping or chewing, she was perhaps due to take on the basic capacity for locomotion, along with its attendant fantasies — walking on air, the fear of falling.

One result was “Touch” (2002), a video sequence of her walking a tightrope against an ocean background. The rope functions as a horizon line between the low breaking waves and the wide cerulean sky of Grand Bahama. Exhibited last year at Luhring Augustine on a wall-size screen, “Touch” documented in sun-washed color a formative phase of the present theme. “As I learned to walk the tightrope, I thought I was getting more balanced, when I was actually becoming more uncomfortable with being out of balance,” she said. “I began trying to rethink this idea as a sculpture and realized it had to include a fall. What you should not do from a tightrope is fall. It’s the ultimate thing to offer.”

So she set about practicing under the supervision of an action-movie stunt man, who taught her to fall efficiently, deliberately, with the choreographic grace of an acrobat. Ms. Antoni has likened the enterprise, the risks and resulting bruises, to the creative process. “Putting yourself in that uncertain place,” she said, “it’s the only way for me to make interesting art.”

She is also attracted to the apparent paradox of using the same material to hold her up as to catch her. In the case of “To Draw a Line,” she asks that we follow the story of the rope, the long tail of which uncoils across the floor like an invitation, the successive forms of which — twisted, taut, spliced, wound, unfurled — it assumes as it travels through its oddly spare, walking support. As for the parallel “story of the fall,” Ms. Antoni suggests those who miss seeing it played out are in a better position to appreciate the work anyway. “It’s not important for people to see the performance,” she said. “It’s more interesting if they imagine it. Then it becomes their own story.” As in some ways, it always has been.