



**Justin Cooper: *Thread***  
an *At the Edge: Innovative Art in Chicago* project  
April 22 - May 31, 2008

**Performance:**

Wednesday, April 23, 6:30 pm

**Closing performance pitting  
preservation vs. destruction:**

Saturday, May 31, 4:30 pm

Justin Cooper prefers materials that are basic and a touch absurd: pumpkins, popcorn, axes, craft paper, cardigan sweaters, packing tape to name a few. Often he assembles the materials in masses that are more performative prop than sculptural matter. *Thread* is his first to resist bricolage and just sit still. For *Thread*, Cooper has produced a pared down sculpture using one material, garden hose, on a grand scale. Yet, its stillness does not contribute to a clearer definition of meaning or explanation of form.

When there is no definitive end in sight and all is jumbled, it is difficult to know where to even begin. Disagreements, lovers' spats, scribbles, politics, balls of string, trains of thought; with these, beginnings and endings rarely line up. Confronting these tangles, chances are you perceive what you are prepared to recognize. If you have a suspicious constitution, for example, every tick uncovers proof of ill-intentioned nature. It comes down to viewpoint. This fact is at the heart of Justin Cooper's *Thread*.

You won't be harmed. You will probably be harmed. There are no throttles in there. It's seamless, brands forgotten. I crept. Not solid and had never been. Creature, balancing.  
— Clark Coolidge, *Alien Tatters*

The rational does not like the individual viewpoint, it always desires instead a tidy beginning, middle and end. The temporal thrives on viewpoint, always wanting to spring beyond frame and nomenclature. In clearest terms, that is why this garden hose is relentless in the way it dives, bends, weaves and coils in the space. It wants you lost. It wants you to make your own ends. This garden hose clings to some facts (the columns, the ventilation ducts and water pipes) but otherwise curves, folds and kinks mid-air. The sculpture is an engine for meandering observation. The opening reception of *Thread* and the last day of the exhibition each feature a performance. The performances also stress observation, specifically interpretive engagement as events unfold. All requires talk. *Did you see...*

If one is prepared, abstraction, ethereal phenomena, and impossibility are observable everywhere. A shrub becomes Sasquatch, every

blur a ghost. Some can't see a thing through the thicket and must interpret sounds into images. A rustling becomes a rushing little green man. Cooper's work reminds us that interpretations of these types—of which there are many—make clear what is always present in our explanations: projection and causality. Clark Coolidge's book of prose poems, *Alien Tatters*, gathers a series of works using the language and syntax of UFO sighting and extraterrestrial abduction narratives. Tales of this variety are written by people with an excess of idealistic projection; rather than terrestrial drums pounding, they hear celestial chimes ringing. Throughout Coolidge's poems contradictions occur, descriptions hesitate, narrative voice lacks coherent place, and foreboding oozes from the shortest of phrases. These poems are crystallized views of language's behavior when we turn encounters into narratives that are not mirror images of our experiences. In his afterword, Coolidge writes,

All those trapped yet oddly illuminated voices, each clinging to its own elaboration of the tale. I had a huge desire to participate somehow. If I couldn't go, then perhaps at least I might learn to speak the language, and use it to take myself further in, or out, to what? The brain bred up a notch to apprehend things it can't identify? Or is this just the human again but seen through an alternate rift, given a different spin?

I would answer a resounding 'yes' to Coolidge's last question. I dare say Justin Cooper would as well. His attempts to fix identifiable material into unexplained energies through manic sculptures and to script ungrounded dialogues and loopy arguments between workers, friends and lovers in threadbare performances plot places where we elaborate. Cooper's protagonists are not us—they do not 'act natural', neither are they so beyond as to be classified as aliens or yetis. Self-identification is the only true measure we find to register the differences. So we end up in Cooper's sculptures and performances looking into reality's mirror and seeing ourselves twisted in the contradictions, the hesitations, and the unease. Each one of the performers and garden hoses of Cooper's constellation becomes, to quote Cole Porter radically out of context, "one of those bells that now and then rings / just one of those things."

— Anthony Elms, Gallery 400 assistant director

Gallery 400's *At the Edge: Innovative Art in Chicago* series annually commissions four new projects from Chicago area artists designers and/or architects. *At the Edge* aims to support experimental projects that might not find support elsewhere.