

Michelle Lopez's *Single Line* and its Chemistry

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There is a certain nostalgia that comes with objects of play, a delineation so precise in the memories and imaginations of our youth. Inexplicably vivid, inexpressibly secure, and initiated by tactility, they are memories we can feel. It was Michelle Lopez's *Shadow of a Doubt* (January 15, 2025–April 19, 2026) at the Tufts University Art Galleries that evoked one such memory from my childhood. As I stared at Lopez's first work in the exhibition, *Single Line* (2023), I recalled a distinct tactile sensation, a feeling in my hand: the Calico Critters of my youth. *Single Line* is a snaking, coiled metal rope; greeting visitors with its humble, fuzzy form, the surface of this impossibly standing structure is coated in floccose haze, the same material that encases the small form of a Calico Critter. The rope, no more than an inch in diameter, is covered in a thin layer of nylon hairs, so ultra-fine one would think it was velvet.

Flocking, the electrostatic application of fine fibers, gives both *Single Line* and the Calico Critters their shared texture. An adhesive coating is applied to the desired substance, the base "rope" in this case, and cut nylon fibers are applied using an electrostatic applicator gun. Lopez utilizes this complex process for a myriad of her gravity-defying rope works (including *Safety Dream* and *RopeHinge*). As she defines it, this "hyper-rope" defies its traditional "limpness and restraint" in search of "tactility of reinforcement and contradiction."¹ It is this defiance of expectation, this surreality, that causes one to question the form in front of them. How can such a process, that renders an everyday object suddenly unfamiliar, be better understood?

The feeling of surreality is not restricted to the final product but extends to the method itself. The flocking process is done with nylon, the colloquial polymer, which is reduced to fine, millimeter-long strands. Difficult to adhere, its repeating chain, upon observation, finds itself as its own "single line." The long, snaking polymer mimics both the form and emotion of the work, its monomer defying physical reason. Where one would expect nylon to coil and clump, it stretches and supports itself just as Lopez defies the typical bunching of a rope. Hidden under a microscopic barrier on Lopez's *Single Line* are millions of applied, coiled snakes of alkanes and amides, electrostatically charged to align and adhere onto the rope's glue-coated surface. With



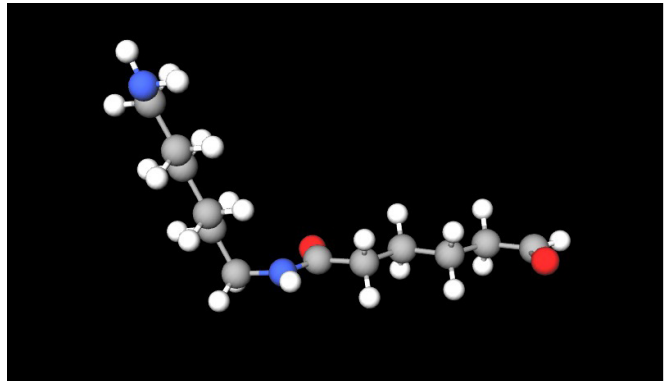
Michelle Lopez, *Single Line*, 2023, steel and nylon, 42.25 x 49.5 x 20 in. Photograph courtesy of Tufts University Art Galleries.

1 "LASSO REPRIEVE: Michelle Lopez," Commonwealth and Council, September 16, 2023, <https://commonwealthandcouncil.com/exhibitions/michelle-lopez/press>.

all charged ends sitting neatly in line with one another, the desired velvety texture is achieved, a fine fur application that shifts the texture of the sculpture's metal surface to align with the visual characteristics of rope.

But there exists another, deeper layer to *Single Line*'s uncanniness—one rooted in emptiness. The success of the electrostatic charging during the flocking process can widely vary fiber density; variables including surface geometry, concavity, and glue application are all crucial to maximizing the process. Even the best flocking oscillates between 8-10% of actual area coverage, meaning the resulting 90-92% of Lopez's surfaces are simply *air*.² Lopez, through the inclusion of empty space, is engaging with the tenets of minimalism. Creation from less and the mental excitation engendered by physical absence is at the heart of the minimalist movement. Lopez produces a vision of a simple rope, but uses flocking to cast an everyday object in a new light. The vocabulary of minimalism, absence and voids, are foundational to the very process that marks the unique texture of her work.

In a way, *Single Line* is a polymer unto itself, a chemical miracle of technical application consisting of endlessly sequential units. And beyond these units exists a deeper surreality, an emptiness of materiality that feels as real as any velveteen toy from childhood memory. Fostering space within lines within lines, Lopez's work defies expectations as much as it capitalizes on the very building blocks of nature.



Capture of Nylon-6,6 Monomer Molecular Model. Created by author using MolView Software.

² "Basics of Flocking," SCHNIER Flock, last modified 2026, <https://schnier-flock.de/en/grundlagen-der-be-flockung>.