

THESIS

DRAWN AND QUARTERED

A Bipolar Frame of Mind

Submitted by

Joel Armstrong

Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2001

NB
237
AVE
A4
2001
THESIS

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

April 1, 2001

We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under our supervision by Joel Armstrong entitled *Drawn and Quartered* be accepted as fulfilling in part requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Committee on Graduate Work

[Redacted Signature]

[Redacted Signature]

[Redacted Signature]

[Redacted Signature]

[Redacted Signature]

[Redacted Signature]

Advisor [Redacted Signature]

Department Head [Redacted Signature]

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

I spent the past two years erasing the lines of drawing, dragging my feet over the boundary drawn in the sand, stretching the limits, both in the use of medium and the format of the final presentation. Some significant installation pieces preceded *Drawn and Quartered* and influenced its execution.

Clothes Lines, my first installation, pinned all the senses of the viewers into the piece—visual and tactile with objects dangled in front of them, backyard sounds, sod, smell, and humidity. I gained a striking insight into my art from this work. I realized that I could take something very personal (a days worth of laundry)—and the viewers accepted it as their own personal stories. In other words, instead of them looking at my art, my art was looking at them.

Emersion) the Sign of Jonah, my next installation, also invited the senses into the setting but did not dictate a landscape as conspicuously. It was grander in scale with over 200 wire fish, a 12-foot boat serving as a light source for the 30- by 40-foot gallery, and gulf sounds and sand. It was a huge production that dealt, mostly, with memories of night-fishing as a child. Although I persistently unfolded and multiplied this imagery throughout the piece, the multiplication and duplication of images actually obscured the event portrayed by the installation. With this piece, I realized that I wanted my art to be sparser, give less direction to the viewer. That sparseness leaves spaces for the viewers to enter the installation, to participate in the work, to let the art tell their stories.

I'm incited into a high level of activity by a mind that races past sleep that never rests until it's exhausted, until it has exhausted all analytical and absurd possibilities of an idea or an image. Typically, this mind-play intersects and merges with the vivid memories dwelling within me to drive me into a frenetic outputting of work. After *Emersion)* opened, however, I suffered from long episodes of depression in which I seemingly produced nothing at all. At odd moments, frenzied activity intersected these depressive episodes. Most

mornings, though, it required effort to get out of the house. Keeping to the activities demanded from working at a full time job, and being a student, husband, father, and teacher overwhelmed me. After several panic attacks including losing my way home, I was diagnosed as bipolar (manic-depressive).

Drawn and Quartered shares what it's like to live with a hypervigilant, restless mind—to look “normal” even “well-adjusted” on the outside, and feel oppressed and overwhelmed inside—to be drawn to both living hidden in shadows and noticed in spotlights. This piece was sensually sparse, even visually sparse as compared to my other installations. I invited the observer more than ever to participate in the art, but prescribed and directed participation less than ever. In *Drawn and Quartered*, without touching the art, the observers could see only the shadows of drawing; they could not even see the medium. In *Drawn and Quartered*, the observers themselves are drawn into the piece to discover the drawing from its shadows.

As in my other installation pieces, art intersected life. Comments from observers and bystanders (what they told me in their own ways): Those who don't know, who offer platitudes, who become uncomfortable when they see a person's bipolarity overflow the dammed up recesses to be lived out loud, what happened to them? Some glimpsed behind the wall and gained some empathy. Many observers still kept their distance in art as in life. They did not touch, did not open up, did not understand. But those who know, who have experienced bipolarity, validated their experiences, told their own stories, made art of their own lives.

Joel Armstrong
Art Department
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523
Spring 2001

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. TEXT

Drawn and Quartered A Bipolar Frame of Mind1-4

II, COLOR PLATES

Clothes Lines5

emersion) the sign of jonah6

Drawn and Quartered7-12

DRAWN AND QUARTERED

A Bipolar Frame of Mind

**The more I am spent, ill, a broken pitcher, by so much more am
I an artist—a creative artist... a kind of melancholy remains
within us when we think that one could have created life at less
cost than creating art**

Vincent van Gogh (artist)

Bipolar. I'm completely unaware of how I produced so much work, completely unaware of how I produced anything. I'm a man of rapid cycles, surged with a myriad of ideas and emotions. As a man, I crave to be outgoing—everyone's friend, but more naturally I'm drawn into shadows. Shadows of solitude hug my social-side, but my solitary-side reflects into gatherings. I'm halved and halved again—quartered, behind masks drawn 'round me, yet drawn to being exposed. Not wholly present, not wholly absent. Feeling more than the whole of my life, feeling incomplete.

**I am almost sick and giddy with the quantity of things
in my head—trains of thought beginning and branch-
ing to infinity, crossing each other, and all tempting and
wanting to be worked out.**

John Ruskin (writer)

Manic. I'm more than Unaware. of how I work (So much) produced, hypervigilantly aware of everything (at work in and out of me). I'm a artist in Rapid cycles, R.cycles. Crushed Recycles. Rusted steel gauge electrified copper wound tight. Wired 'Round. filled with strayed images and echoes. The last four years, I've at random spoken (Honestly). of who I Am (and

Let my artwork reflect that. There are other times (like Now). I find it's hard, Am at a loss, to speak too openly—(So, what) I've offered to you, Viewer is shadowed. I've drawn a hard curtain of keys 'round restless juxtaposed icons surfacing beneath my wake/my slumber. Glimpse into so much stuff going on in your head that sleep's out of the question (most times) but sometimes, The safest place in the world (sleep) is an only haven.

**They who dream by day are cognizant of many things
which escape those who dream only by night. In their
gray visions they obtain glimpses of eternity.**

Edgar Allan Poe (writer)

Depressed. I am...severely unaware of how much work...I have produced...completely at a loss of where I've produced anything—a puddle of black bile...anxious at how I'd have the wherewithal to reproduce...to extract these...I'm a survivor of rapid cycling slowly...torn apart...drawn down...emptied into a morass of idle and erupture. For the largest part of my time...here...as a graduate student...I've questioned the idea of what a drawing is...or more so...what a drawing can be... What's out of the question...I was partial to questioning whether a drawing had to be sketched 'cross paper (why not in a drawer)...did it have to be hung on the wall (why not on the floor)...most of all, did it have to be drawn with charcoal...pencil...ink (why not rocks, sticks, or wire)...I ended up working with wire as a medium, because I found it most naturally translated me. I insisted on two-dimensional wire drawings to keep them from being considered sculpture...But it wasn't long before these two-dimensional drawings were gathered into three-dimensional environments...I became an installation artist...in need of sounds, lighting, and lots of fishing line to hang... the wire pieces.

**In these flashing revelations of grief's wonderful fire, we
see all things as they are; and though, when the electric**

element is gone, the shadows once more descend, and the false outlines of objects again return; yet not with their former power to deceive.

Herman Melville (writer)

Influenced. I'm becoming aware of how much work is produced by the bipolar. This fire purged work from many influential artists. My influences are the same as many artists. Literally the same—the chemical anatomy. Then number of manic/depressed artists is maddening. A list of considerable length. This chemical fire stretches and fragments me, draws and quarters me, drives me to the brink, drops and snatches me, lures me to the brink, drops and snags me. it's a phenomena, a science, it's a fluency, it's art, it's drawn and contained, fragmented and wired together.

Little by little the book will finish me.

Jacques Derrida (deconstructionist)

I found out early on that no matter how much planning went into an installation, the work of art began after arriving at the location. The few days given to installing were the most trying, most exciting, and most exhausting. In this piece, I've emptied wire drawings into a space quartered behind a curtain of white Plexiglas keys to create a massive drawing approximately 30 feet by 9 feet. The piece is backlit, casting shadows upon the Plexiglas. In four days, I installed into a drawing all these wire pieces, that I somehow produced, that I created—pieces that represent me, that bit by bit have created me, finished me off—drawn into my quarters—my rapid cycles of fragmented thoughts—a mind that never sleeps.

One goes down into the well and nothing protects one from the assault of the truth.

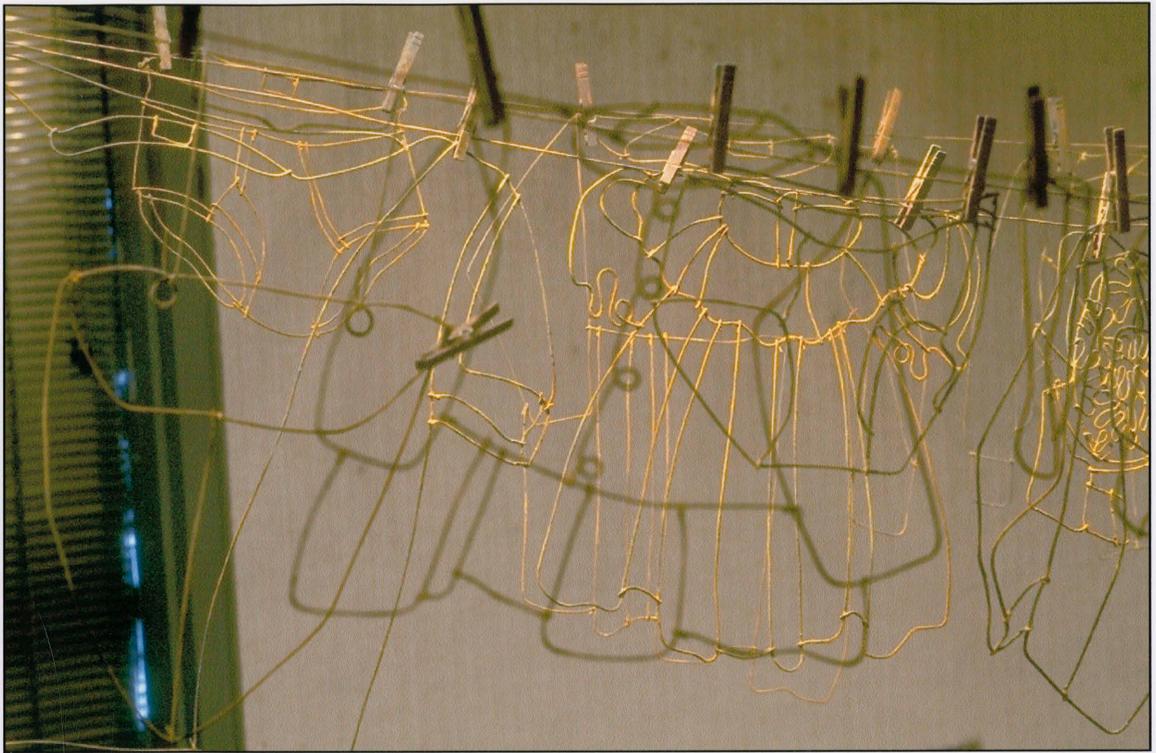
Virginia Woolf (writer)

So much perplexed preparing...then waiting, hoping someone would open the package, rip the bindings, touch the keys to finish this work. I should have known. Openings aren't for opening. We're scrupulously prepared. Brow beaten. "Don't touch!" Well-disciplined disciples of the hands-off tradition. What unknown father sired this "art opening" oxymoron? Recurring disappointment, but No surprise to me. I always feel more to offer. Let off too soon. Left off in mid... Leftovers. Greeted by people glancing sidelong at me, as though straightening themselves in a mirror, in lieu of seeing into me as through a window. Imagine their surprise if they found no preconception, no stereotype to rail along. Touch!—look over the edge with breathless vertigo—peek through the opening with heart-pounding daring—stare with insatiable curiosity—there's so much more to see. Behind the translucent Plexiglas wall lies the other half of me. See me, intensely brighter, clear and cluttered, painfully honest. The dream world of a reality apparently tactile, ready to touch if I dare allow it. I hesitate maybe, but would never prohibit. I'm prepared, I would dare disclose a story, of any given moment, for any given image found 'round or squared away.

The endless cycle of idea and action.

T.S. Eliot (poet)

COLOR PLATES



Plates 1-2: *Clothes Lines*, wire, clothes pins, steel pipe, sod, and sound.

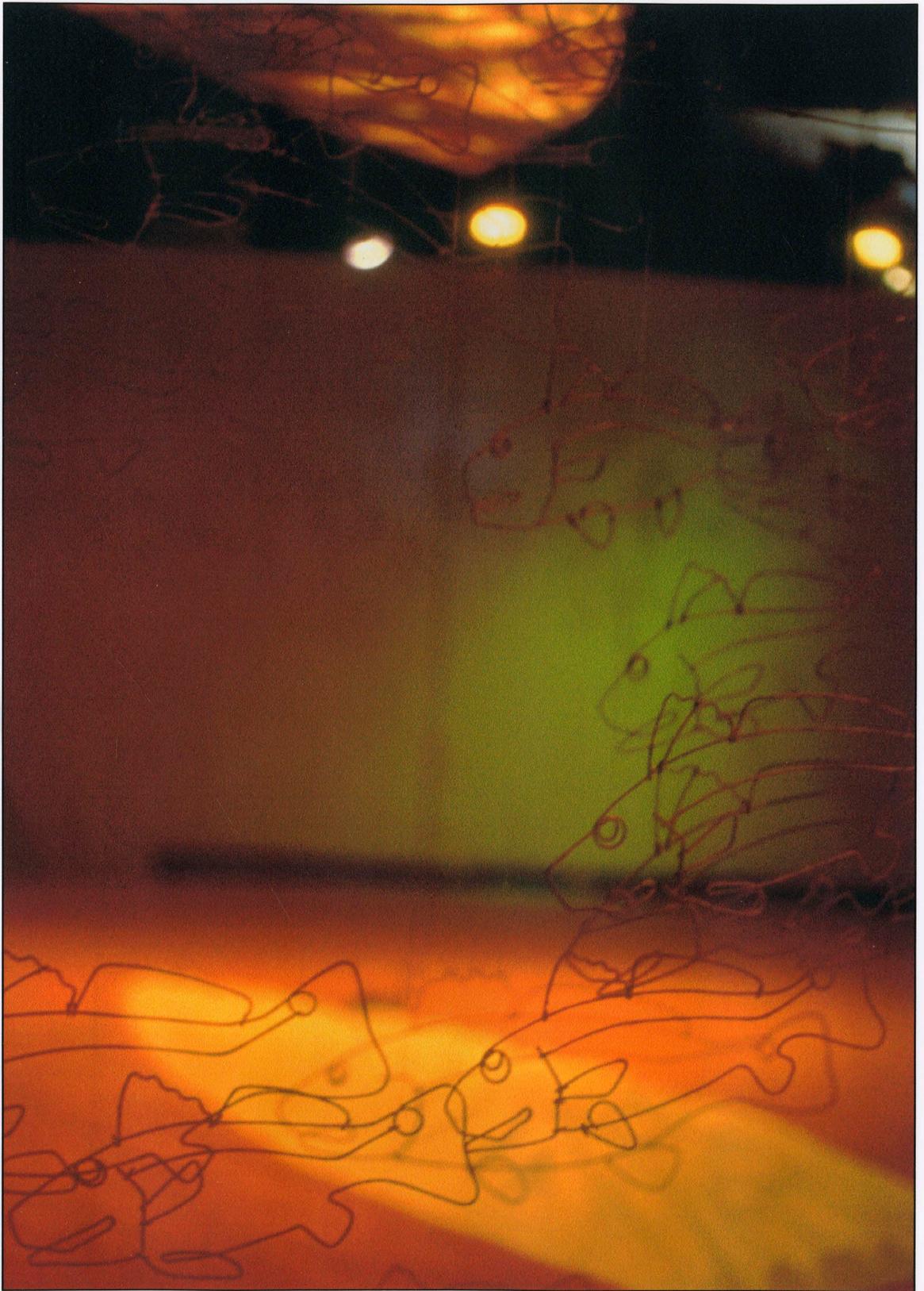


Plate 3: *emersion) the sign of jonah*, wire, sand, and sound.



Plate 4: *Drawn and Quartered* (left front view) wire, wood, plexiglass, and lights.



Plate 5: *Drawn and Quartered* (right front view) wire, wood, plexiglass, and lights.



Plate 6: *Drawn and Quartered* (closeup view), wire, wood, plexiglass, and lights.

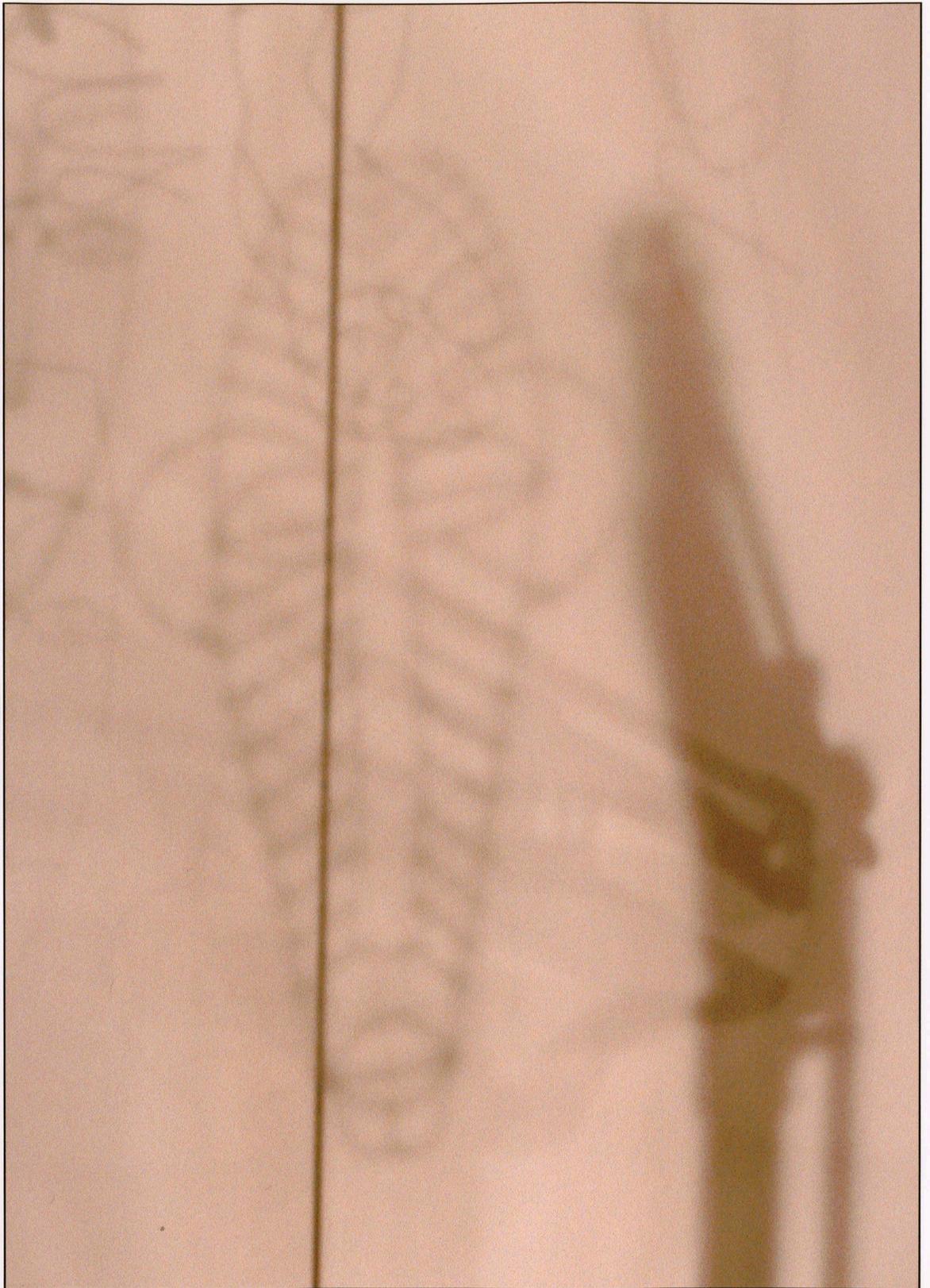


Plate 7: *Drawn and Quartered* (closeup view), wire, wood, plexiglass, and lights.



Plate 8: *Drawn and Quartered* (closeup view), wire, wood, plexiglass, and lights.



Plate 9: *Drawn and Quartered* (view behind screen), wire, wood, plexiglass, and lights.



Plate 10: *Drawn and Quartered* (view behind screen), wire, wood, plexiglass, and lights.