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Journey

A Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in the Department of Fine Arts

The University of Mississippi

by

Hosik Kim

May 2012

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ABSTRACT

My ceramic sculptures are about my story as well as the stories of all of us. Through these children that were born from clay, I find myself remembering and returning to the long journey that I have been walking all along. Memories are often the inspiration for my work, whether they are good or bad. In Korean, we call this 추억. I preserve these memories by carving into the surface of the clay, revealing a tattoo-like effect. In my culture, tattoos are taboo because of cultural beliefs such as Confucianism. We believe that we should not mark any part of our body because our body was given to us by our parents. However, I wanted to create something that could last so I tried to make my own tattoos through my artwork because tattoos have a story and stay forever.

My thesis speaks of my journey and my connection with family, home, and culture. It also addresses my disconnection and desire to reacquaint myself with the things that I have lost, such as assurance of my identity as well as the people who have passed away. My artwork speaks of the difficulty of living in a foreign culture and staying connected with my past. The stories that narrate my journey deal with loss, change, love, and dreams, some realized and some unrealized.

I combine two-dimensional drawing and printmaking techniques on a three-dimensional black space, in the form of a ceramic body. I carve my stories onto these symbolic vessels, which take their inspiration from Korean pottery. I have taken a traditional Korean shape which is the curve. Many aspects of Korean culture including the architecture, the art, and even the clothing

contain this unique feature. I have taken this concept and contemporized it to represent an all-embracing human figure. Each sculpture speaks and relates to the others by the similarities in their form, images, and meanings.

In addition to the works themselves, I also use mechanical devices to create motion in the sculptures that completes and further emphasizes the meanings of the artwork. This takes the form of changing lights, projected images, and movement of the sculptures in order to create contrast with the immobility of the actual figures. The motion helps to represent time, change, or a feeling of vitality.

In my thesis, I am experimenting with how multiple pieces can combine to form one body of work, one journey.

DEDICATION

Love has been a significant source of inspiration: love for my art, my family, and even my homeland. Most of my work shows faded and dimmed colors. Every time I look over my pieces, it is as though I am looking at black and white photos. They remind me of the past: my family and my life story. Even though my family may not really be here, every one of my pieces feels like family and gives me solace, a sense of peace. It is as if they surround me and constantly support me by the mere presence of their memory.

Most importantly, these works are dedicated to my father. In fact, the pieces that I have created are not so much creations of my past as they are messages. Each one of my pieces is like a letter to him, and I would not have become the person I am today without his constant encouragement and influence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The strongest influence in my life has been Hochul-Kim, my brother who is now a graphic designer in Korea. He and I grew up together and always shared everything. He was the one who gave me motivation to express my creativity and become an artist, though at the time I did not have any confidence to do so. Not only did he shape the path I walk today, he still remains a large part of it as if he continues to walk with me, hand-in-hand.

I would like to express my gratitude to the University of Mississippi as well as the staff and faculty of the Department of Art for supporting me during my time here.

I would like to mention a few specific faculty members for everything they have done. Thank you, Professor Matthew Long, for being a great teacher and providing me the motivation and support for me to continue my work. I would also like to thank Professor Sheri Fleck Reith, the Art Department Chair, for supporting my art and trusting me. She became less of a professor and more of a friend and even a mother. Katherine Fields, who teaches Printmaking, has been invaluable for her friendship, knowledge, and support. Professor Philip R. Jackson impressed me most with his kindness and understanding.

Finally, I extend heartfelt thanks to my friends, Wesley Ortiz and Martin A. Arnold. Thank you for friendship and for supporting me all the way.

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

What kind of life do you have? Does it seem happy or sad? Do you even know?

I know a fairly interesting life story. Although it may not be very long, it is out of the ordinary. Having said that, this story is not a grand adventure or an epic narrative filled with action, mystery, or suspense. But, it is unique. It carries a somber, sentimental mood, and talks about a boy who went on a journey. He was looking for something although he was not sure exactly what. He did not know if he would find it or what he would find, but he knew he had to search for it.

All of my artwork comes together to tell the story about this boy's, or my, journey. Every figure holds a specific story within its body. Each memory is unique to the individual and brings to mind different feelings that are both pleasing and painful.

It took hard work and many sleepless nights in order to transfer my memories into my pieces. Each time I finished a piece, I felt that I could revisit those times in the past but also wonder about the possibilities of the future. However, as I neared the completion of my artwork, I did not feel a sense of finality. On the contrary, it felt as though I have begun opening doors leading to more doors, and that my journey is far from over.

CHAPTER II BIRTH

I have always liked making things with my hands. Some of my most enjoyable moments in life were when I could create something on my own and shape something in my own way. However, when I went to a university in Korea, I studied the sciences and received a degree in biology. But in my heart, I always had this creative urge, a drive to shape and design.

Ten years ago, I arrived in the United States in order to improve my English. It was then that I decided to make a bold move and change my major to art. I felt that moving to a new place offered new opportunities so I jumped at the chance to focus on art.

As an undergraduate student in America, I became interested in the different mediums within art. My primary interest was in materials that I could shape with my hands. Most of my attention went to sculpture and black-and-white photography. I felt that these mediums were the best ways to express my concepts. Black-and-white photography helped reveal my emotions and inner feelings, whereas sculpting showed the power of expressions and hard work.

For one project in black-and-white photography, I was required to create installation art. This was my first exposure to this type of art. The idea that objects of different shapes and in a variety of mediums could be brought together into a meaningful space connected directly with me. Installation art took things that were very different and placed them together in ways that were meaningful and profound. In the same way, I felt that my story could be best described through installation art. It was as though the diverse and often conflicting aspects of myself somehow harmonized and pointed to a single entity: me. Installation art also fascinated me

because it appeals to every sensation, engulfing the viewer into a whole world created by the artist, which would normally be limited as a mere visual image.

My undergraduate thesis was an installation piece titled *Eruption of Ego* that used clay as its primary medium. Clay was the perfect material for my piece, and this was my introduction to the world of ceramics. I fell in love with clay and became interested in it not only because of its texture, but also because of its underlying meanings. I discovered that humans are like clay; they are molded, tempered, and formed just as humans are born, suffer, and emerge as stronger individuals. Their failures influence who they become. Coming to this realization, I was compelled to continue my education and enter the Masters of Fine Arts in Ceramics at the University of Mississippi.

CHAPTER III PAST AND PRESENT

As I began the MFA program here in the Art Department at The University of Mississippi, I dealt with clay every day. I truly fell in love with this material, although my past work is rather different from what I do now.

I knew from the start that my focus was to be a ceramic sculpture. The reason I chose to do sculpting as opposed to doing functional pottery was that it gave me a way to express my emotions freely and naturally because of its almost human-like properties. Like clay, people must be molded and shaped by what happens in their lives in order to mature into the people they were meant to be. Sometimes, our lives require suffering, and at times it will break us and leave us in pieces. However, if we manage to stand firm and emerge from the fire, we become stronger than before.

For most of my thesis work, I tried to use a combination of existing techniques such as sgraffito and press mold techniques. All my pieces look different, but at the same time they carry similar feelings as if they are all related to each other. I also combine ceramics with mechanical devices to create a sense of motion in the sculptures. This helps to give the full meaning behind my artwork through the contrast of movement of lights and images with the stillness of the sculptures.

CHAPTER IV
FIGURES

SCULPTURE

My Time was Dead, but I Must Carry On

My first installation work, *My Time was Dead, but I Must Carry On* expresses the painful memories that I wish I could reverse. The inspiration for the work comes from tattooing. People often attach a story or a memory to a tattoo. In the same way, each individual image is etched into the figures to tell my own story. These twelve sculptures show a child trapped within a ceramic vessel. Its chest holds images of things it recollects: home, family, love, longing. In addition, the boy figures are all black because they are trapped in time within their own memories. The color gives a greater impression and effect because it invokes a feeling of something stopping or even death.

Every sculpture contains recurring images of a boy, a bird, a moon, and a tree in different ways. Everything is black because it shows their silhouettes. We do not see every single detail; it is like we can only see the shadows of their existence. However, this takes away attention from the little things and allows us to get a feeling for the bigger picture.

Different images are shown on these figures, and they help emphasize a particular theme or expression. At times, the boy looks longingly at the bird or the tree and represents a manifestation of my desires and yearnings particularly for comfort, for family, and for home. The bird represents humanity, both for me as an individual and for people as a whole. A bird can fly wherever its heart desires, but we can only dream of being so boundless and free. In that sense, the bird also represents the unfulfilled desires within us that drive us forward. The moon is

a symbol for mother. It is not like the sun, which blinds us with its powerful light, but instead supports her children, so that it does not shine by its own light but gently reflects the radiance of her offspring. She appears in many forms, but she is always there, constant. However, even the moon is black. This is because it is also a silhouette and goes with the entire image. If it was any other color, it would be too different from everything else and seem unnatural. The tree represents home, and is the natural home for a bird. It symbolizes a physical entity as well as the longing that naturally draws us back to a place we call home.

The twelve pieces that make up the entire work are arranged in a circular manner, almost like a clock. Each individual vessel stands for an hour of the day and holds a specific memory. They are immovable, caught with a sad expression as though time has stopped. All of them face into the interior of the circle, which contains the projection of a clock. The clock ticks as if to show that, despite the motionless figures, time continues passing normally. It shows how time moves forward even if we remain stagnant, trapped in our memories. Without movement from the clock, time would merely be dead, but the clock shows the reality of life as time persists even if we do not want it to continue. We must deal with the changes of the present and look to the future despite the immobility of our past.

A few years ago, my family lost our father. We were not ready to say goodbye. It was a great shock for my family, and the hurt and grief became too overwhelming. After I lost my father, I felt as though everything stopped.

However, I now realize that in the same way that this artwork shows, we live our lives and inevitably experience the bad things. Even when we try to avoid it, our life is the very thing from which we cannot escape. There are times when the pain is so unbearable that we wish to

deny it. That is why it seemed to me that in the very moment I was hurt, time stopped just like it did for these figures, and I tried to banish all recollections of it.

Nonetheless, this artwork does not imply sorrow or misery; rather, it carries a message of hope. It is the hope that one day we will overcome our trials and hardships in order to live for a new tomorrow. That single moment of heartache is not final. Instead, it is the beginning of a new experience, a new life.

Figure I



My Time was Dead, But I Must Carry On

Mixed Media 2012

14 ft. height x 11 ft. width

Journey

It began with a simple question: What is my purpose? As clear-cut as this sounded, it soon led to other questions: Why am I here? Why am I doing what I do? What exactly am I looking for?

All people have their own answers to this question. Their lives carry their hopes and dreams. However, each person's desires are unique. Some want fame; some want success; some want a good family. These questions made me look at myself and wonder, "What is it that I truly want?" I wanted to find the answer.

This line of thought was the beginning for this piece. *Journey* features two boys facing each other. Doors with locks are carved into their chests. These boys are looking for the key that will open that door. Yet, they are submerged in a sea of moving lights and so cannot move freely. I projected light onto these figures not only to give the impression of water but also to give motion to the motionless. There is a strong contrast between the figures and the light, giving a sense of life, of vitality. It reveals our constantly changing environment. Even though the art tries to focus on a single instance, there is never truly a pause because the stillness of the figures is offset with the moving lights. Change becomes a constant and natural force.

There are numerous fish that surround each boy. They represent the people that are around us, our community. Even if the boys are individually searching for their own key, they are enclosed by the fish which represent an outside presence that influences us. Their presence, however, is not unnatural. This influence is not supposed to be unfamiliar or irrelevant. On the

contrary, the fish swim naturally in the water because it is their home; this is where they belong. In fact, each boy has a fish carved on one of his legs. Even as the boys remain distinct from the fish, they are not entirely different from them because this mark connects them together.

Figure 2



Journey

Mixed Media 2012

3 ft. height x 20 ft. width

Moment

There was a time when I struggled with a bit of melancholy and heaviness of heart. I found myself pulled in different directions concerning who I was and what it meant to live a happy life. It was as though my backgrounds were constantly at war with each other, unable to find any sense of peace or agreement.

That is the feeling that I wish to convey through this particular piece. Two identical heads are placed near each other. They are completely alike except for the etched carvings that cover them. One depicts images of my Korean background while the other expresses familiar scenes of Mississippi.

The Mississippi figure is placed on a pedestal opposite the Korean one. It has scenes that I have seen during my stay here. There are many natural symbols of Mississippi such as deer, the magnolia, and all manner of woodlands birds. This head remains unmoving and looks straight at the Korean figure.

The other figure depicts images that represent my Korean background. There is the crane, the national flag, the carnation which is the national flower, the zodiac, and many others. This figure is placed on a rotating platform because I feel as though Korea is more an actual part of me. My Korean self is the one that moves from place to place, trying to find a place to fit in, to find my identity.

As the Korean head rotates, it turns away from the other Mississippi head, almost as though the two figures refuse to meet eye-to-eye. But, there is a single moment, an instant, when they stare directly at each other. They are perfectly synchronized, a perfect moment.

Likewise, I search for that perfect moment. Which one is the real me? It is as though these two sides are constantly trying to overpower each other, declaring that only one of them is the true self. However, it takes only a second, only a single instance for them to find harmony with each other.

Figure 3



Moment

Mixed Media 2012

5 ft. height x 6 ft. width

Silhouette of Solace

Silhouette of Solace categorizes my emotions and manifests them within the images on my sculptures. They are made in the shape of plates. Plates carry many meanings, and their utility is to hold things. For me, these plates hold my memories, my stories using silhouettes of various images. They are not meant to be used as ordinary plates.

Like my other pieces, they contain the image of a bird, a tree, and the moon, although in this work the images have slightly different meanings. The images are like my individual fingerprints. Even though they look similar to each other, they were carved at different moments.

For example, birds do not only signify unfulfilled desires as they did in *Journey*. They show a connection to something that is somehow human, like us. They live together, build up their own society, and survive by supporting each other. However, this similarity only serves to accentuate how we are not the same; they have wings. They can fly anywhere they choose and use them in their own journey, but we as humans cannot. We can only wish, watching with envy and longing. It shows a faint bond linking us and the birds so that the art pulls us in but also emphasizes the distance between us, leaving us with an ache for something we cannot have. For instance, in one plate a boy is looking at the birds from a distance. It reminds him of what he left behind, whether it is family or friends. This scene evokes a feeling of being homesick and signifies the loss as well as the desire for something familiar like home.

Other plates show birds sitting on a branch or in a tree. It hones in on the scene that the boy is watching and gives clearer details about the birds resting in on the branches of the tree.

While other pieces of my work show instances or specific events from my life, these plates show a recurring image of the same scene but from different angles to help present the overall picture of the birds in the tree from a wide variety of viewpoints. In this way, it shows how despite the differences in the way we remember it, we clearly and continually long for the same feeling: to belong somewhere.

Birds also symbolize a personal memory between me and my father. When my father passed away, I came to feel that the bird was like a mediator between me and my father. It was as though his soul existed somewhere out in the vastness of the sky above, and the bird was a messenger between him and me. So, the bird had an even greater meaning for me because it was the only thing that connected me with what I had lost.

In other words, this work specifically talks about what I have lost and consequently a yearning for what is now gone from my life.

Figure 4



Boy's Memories

Mixed Media 2012

2 ft. height x 15 ft. width

Message in a Bottle

I made several bottles and tried to put my stories within them. They implement various designs and techniques in order to present different styles in order to tell the same story.

For example, *Bottle #1* shows a little boy sitting on the ground, thinking, as though he is trying to remember something like his family or his past. There are many birds perched in the trees that make up the background. A single bird is colored gold and is about to fly away so that it highlights this bird and also gives the impression that it is alive with vitality.

These bottles are mixed media pieces because they include branches extend through the top of the bottle so that it looks as if the tree branches continue to grow out of it. These branches help to symbolize how the boy's dream keeps growing even out of the bottle. I used a variety of materials to make these branches in order to see which of them fit the main body and the story. Some used natural branches while others were welded from metal. I wanted to see what shapes and medium would help produce the right balance.

All of these bottles have beautiful curves, which is characteristic of Korean traditional art. In a sense, they look like people, something human. The curve invokes images of a person's curved body and makes the bottles seem like an embracing figure, as if each vessel holds its own particular story.

Figure 5-I



Bottle Series(#1)

Mixed Media 2012

1.5 ft height x 3 ft. width

Figure 5-II



Bottle Series (#3)

Mixed Media 2012

1.5 ft. height x 9 ft. width

CHAPTER V

PROCESS

All of my artwork makes use of various clay bodies such as white stoneware, red stoneware, and porcelain. I use different clay bodies depending on which one I feel fits best. For instance, I use the red stoneware as the figure's base. I use coil building and press molds as my building techniques. I use coil building to shape the figure's base and then use plaster to make a press mold of this particular form (Nelson 44). I use plaster molds in order to reproduce the same form. Sometimes, I find objects such as mannequin heads that are used in my works and cast it in plaster to make similar molds. Once the desired shape was formed with the mold, I add details and expression to my work. Then, I apply a black slip into the piece. I use the sgraffito process to carve the designs onto the surface of the clay body. When the clay body is leather-hard, a cover slip is applied, and a tool is used to scratch the surface in order to make the desired patterns or designs (한길홍, 권영식, 박선우, 김종현, 이면사149). My work is fired multiple times depending on whether it reaches the desired result. All of my work first goes to Cone 08 (1751 F°) for a bisque fire (Nelson 351-354). Sometimes, after the second firing, I use a satin clear glaze and fire to Cone 6 (2232 F°) (Nelson 351-354). At times, I even fire it a third time, especially when I apply luster onto the surface and fire it to Cone 018 (Nelson 351-354).

Jeff's salt clay

| | |
|-------------|-----------|
| Gold art | 20 |
| Fire clay | 20 |
| Kaolin | 35 |
| Ball Clay | 10 |
| Flint | 15 |
| Feldpar | 15 |
| <u>Grog</u> | <u>20</u> |
| Total | 135 |

Black Slip

Amaco Velvet Underglaze – V Series (V-361)

Glaze Recipe

Amaco Matte Clear Glaze (Mid Range Fire)

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Every individual piece within this body of work tells one story. Several of the sculptures have different carvings like tattoos and convey a specific narrative about themes such as love, sadness, power, or vulnerability. In this way, each figure holds its own feelings and emotions, which are unique and unlike each other. However, they are all connected because they are part of something much larger than them. They may convey different messages, but together they tell the same story.

In the same way, our lives carry variety and diversity through race, language, religion, history, and purpose. We all have our own tales to tell, but there is something that we have in common: we are human. This is the one thing that ties us and brings us together in harmony. A person cannot live on his own strength. Rather, we must help and support each other because, like my art, our lives speak our own personal story but our existence is fundamentally the same.

When people look at my art, I want them to be able to recall their own life, their experiences, their journey. I hope that the emotions in my pieces resonate with their own past and experiences. My artwork was never meant to be powerful or overwhelming but gentle and soothing, inviting viewers to share in the experience by remembering theirs.

However, I do not merely wish for the viewers to be empathetic to my emotions. It is also my hope that they begin to face their own memories. In the course of creating my art, I had to carve these images into such small spaces and really begin to think about my past. I felt that by

doing so I was given a place where I could face these memories and emotions. I was forced to confront and eventually accept the memories that I originally tried to deny and forget. I hope that the viewers will begin their own healing process so that they may pause to look back at a moment that was especially hard for them but also realize the need to overcome these hardships and press on. These clay figures had to go through intense heat and pressure before they could come out as finished works of art. Likewise, we must face our sufferings so that we will emerge from the fire, more perfected and stronger than before.

My journey, or my story, has not been easy. But I wish to be like the boy from my art who discovered himself and found his dreams. He never stopped but persisted in his search, prompted by the passage of time, brought to life by his surroundings despite his own motionlessness. Like the boy's voyage, my journey still continues. This is not the end; this is just the beginning.

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VITA

Hosik Kim was born in Seoul, South Korea on June 20, 1975. He spent most of his childhood years in the city of Seoul and earned his Bachelor's degree in Biology, hoping to realize his goal of being a veterinarian. After completing army service for Korea, Hosik decided to come to the United States to study English in 2001. Once he had finished the English as Second Language program, he decided to begin studying fine arts at Hinds Community College in Raymond, MS. In addition to his aspirations of being a veterinarian, Hosik always had a passion for art, and his second dream was to become an artist.

After getting an Associate Degree in Fine Arts, he moved to Jackson, Mississippi and enrolled at Belhaven University. His main interest became black and white photography and sculpture. He finished his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and was accepted into the graduate program in Ceramics at The University of Mississippi in 2009. Even though he used many different mediums, Hosik's favorite and eventually his focus, became clay. This is why he applied for a ceramic major at the University of Mississippi even though he had no idea what was in store for him.

Hosik has participated in two solo shows at Belhaven University and a number of group shows at 121 Studio, also in Jackson. All of these experiences helped shape his interests and kindled his creativity and passion for his art.