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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School for American Crafts

In Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Metal and Jewelry Design

Becoming

By Danlin Zhao

04/28/2018

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Abstract

Life itself is suffering. Suffering is caused by desire. Because desire can cause humans to become obsessed and embittered, it has been considered one of the causes of woe for mankind. Starting with our first cries as newborn babies, desires and cravings are increasingly embedded in our growth. People are often trapped by their desire for something they do not have or by regret for something they have lost. With the increase in negative emotions and desires, people are gradually losing their true happiness. During our short and changing lives, many people prefer to dwell on the past or long for the future rather than enjoying the present moment. In fact, neither the past nor future exist objectively. The past exists only in people's consciousness, as it is gone, finished and unalterable. The future is unpredictable, which is only as an illusion. I believe life consists of thousands of present moments and happiness can be attained only if people concentrate on the time being.

I created a series of wearable sculptures to demonstrate the process of transformation which is a feeling of coming out of the past. In order to indicate my concept, many organic shapes and dynamic lines were utilized in sculpting my work. The goal of my thesis show was to present the 'becoming' process—from past to present. It is meant to awaken people to the possibility of regaining the primitive simplicity of happiness even in such a complex environment. The overall atmosphere of all the works in the

exhibition strives for a calm stillness, and each piece of my work shows an invisible movement of growth.

Discussion of sources and research

When I first lost someone close to me, I began to really understand death. I started thinking about why people are alive and where they will go after death. What is the meaning of life? Since we are ultimately turned into dust, what do people still live for? Everything is always changing: from an individual's thoughts and actions, to the society, the world, time, even the universe. Even thinking about these issues I felt fear and sometimes even cried. I was particularly at a loss when I thought of how small and short human life is. As I grew older I gradually realized that it was meaningless to think about these things. Figuring out how to be happy and have a good life is what people should pursue. Living in the present is an ideal state, otherwise people are influenced by too many emotions and desires. During my thesis process, I tried to let myself find such a state, to not be too persistent and eager for anything, to focus on the joy of the moment.

“Life is suffering.” This principle comes from Buddhism. It is one of the “Four Noble Truths” which are the basic concepts of Buddhism. This concept states that 'suffering can be overcome and happiness can be attained; that true happiness and contentment are possible. If we give up useless cravings and learn to live each day at a time (not dwelling in the past or the imagined future) then we can become happy and free.¹

¹ Thomas Bien and Lama Surya Das, *The Buddha's Way of Happiness*.

What does “suffering” means and where does it comes from?

Suffering means dissatisfaction, impermanence, and imperfection.² Dissatisfaction is the feeling of being unfulfilled when something happens that is different from what you expected. For example, dissatisfaction can occur when you receive negative feedback on a task you thought you did very well, or when your team does not make it to the finals. In each case, you expect a certain standard of quality, comfort, pleasure or performance that is not fulfilled. Dissatisfaction is a result of imperfection. Both of them signify the generating of negative emotions that issue from something that already happened. With the amplification of these negative emotions, suffering arises. Also, impermanence is the primary factor of suffering. Buddhism says, “Impermanence therefore suffering.” Everything is impermanent and changeable. One of the most typical examples is human life. The human life spans only a few decades. A healthy body cannot last forever, it will gradually become weak, old, sick. Death is the final destination for every member of the human race. However, that which one does fear cannot be death itself, because one has never died.³ The pain of death is not death itself but how people think about death. Also, one who is wealthy cannot maintain their wealth forever. Sometimes one may become poor. Power and status do not last either; everyone will lose them eventually. The ancient Greek philosopher

² Venerable Yin Shun, 'Teaching in Chinese Buddhism', Buddhnet: Buddha dharma education association inc. 6-83

³ Langs, R., 'Death anxiety and the emotion-processing mind', 2004, Psychoanalytic Psychology, vol. 21, no.1, 31-53; Fundamentals of Adaptive Psychotherapy and Counseling. London: Palgrave-Macmillan

Heraclitus said “There is nothing permanent except change.” He also said “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.”⁴ Things always change even if they look like the same. From this condition of changing and instability, although there is happiness and joy, they are not ever lasting and ultimate.

All suffering can be framed in terms of desire. Desire derives from the Latin 'desiderare', which means “to long or wish for”, which itself derives from de-sidere, “from the stars.” This suggests that the original sense of the Latin is “to await what the stars will bring”.⁵ Desires constantly arise in us, only to be replaced by other desires and thus they cannot be thoroughly eliminated. This is the paradox of desire. Because when people try for just a moment to prevent their stream of desires, even the desire to stop desiring is in itself a desire. Moreover, without this continuous stream of desires, there would no longer be any reason to do anything. English philosopher Thomas Hobbes asserted that human desire is the fundamental motivation of all human action.⁶

Desires can be divided into natural and unnatural desires. Natural desires such as those for food and shelter are naturally limited. Although those natural desires are difficult to eliminate, they are easy and highly pleasurable to satisfy, and should be

⁴ Heraclitus, *The Cosmic Fragments*. Kirk, G.S. (1954) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Neel Burton M.D., *The Problem of Desire- the psychology and philosophy of desire*.
<http://www.psychologytoday.com>

⁶ Reindorf O. Bempah, *The Winning Mind: How to Turn Your Stumbling Blocks into Building Blocks*. 2014. AuthorHouse. P44.

satisfied. In contrast, unnatural or vain desires such as those for fame, power, or wealth are potentially unlimited, which mainly cause suffering. The ancient philosopher Epicurus teaches that “unnatural desires are neither easy nor highly pleasurable to satisfy, and should be eliminated.”⁷ Those unnatural desires have their roots not in nature, but in society. Fame, power, and wealth can all be understood in terms of the desire for social status. Society also gives rise to destructive desires such as the desire to laugh as others fail, the desire to make others envy us, or, at least not to succeed as much as we do. We suffer not only from our own destructive desires, but also from the destructive desires of others, turning into the target and victim of their insecurities. As Schopenhauer writes, “What everyone most aims at in ordinary contact with his fellows is to prove them inferior to himself.”⁸ An excess of desire is called greed. Because greed is insatiable, it prevents us from enjoying all that we already have. Another problem of greed is that it is all-consuming, reducing life in all its richness and complexity to nothing, but an endless quest for more.

Nevertheless, getting out of suffering and becoming happy is what everyone pursues ultimately. Unmet desire is in itself painful, but so is fear and anxiety (which can be understood in terms of desires about the future) and anger and sadness (which can be understood in terms of desires about the past). Mindfulness—or put another way, living in the present moment—can give us better insight into the nature of desire,

⁷ Neel Burton M.D., *The philosophy of Epicurus :learning to master the hedonistic calculus*. Sep,2017

⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *the Wisdom of Life: Top of Schopenhauer*. Chapter 3.

which, in turn, can help us to disengage from unhelpful desires. It is only by mastering our desires that we can live life to its fullest. And it is only by mastering our desires that we might at last find some measure of peace. Just like philosopher Epicurus said, “If thou wilt make a man happy, add not unto his riches but take away from his desires.”⁹ By overcoming the desire to satisfy, please, impress, or one up others, we can start living for ourselves, free from unnatural and destructive desires. The past is gone and the future is not yet here. Now is when life is available. The true happiness is now.

⁹ By B. H. Boye, *Know Thyself: My Homage to Montaigne*. August 2, 2017, Lulu Press, Inc

Critical Analysis

After much reading and research, I decided to create a series of wearable sculptures.

Each of them has a connection and interaction with the human body. That even means that the human body became a part of my work. My concept is closely related to human's spiritual aspect which is much more subjective and abstract. Everyone has varying degrees of understanding about the same piece of work. Thus, when people view and incorporate themselves into a piece of work, they can better understand and feel the meaning of it.

In the second stage, I will demonstrate how the works approach my concept from three aspects.

1. Materials

I chose to combine a number of different materials including metal and other soft materials for my jewelry series. These materials were used because my concept was to express a transformation process: to break away from the past and live in the present.

By means of different materials, the first impression shows a transformation of the material aspect. This will lead people to understand my concept more intuitively.

Besides, different materials have different physical and chemical properties. Whether it is the hardness or the plasticity, each has its own uniqueness. And each kind of material contains its own emotional qualities, and conveys different stories. For

example some of them have their characteristic natural texture and natural color, which cannot be simulated. Even the use of some narrative material can voice the designer's emotions more vividly. Moreover, the effect of combining diverse materials creates a kind of contrast. Layering is particularly effective when there is a notable contrast in the shade or texture of two or more overlapping objects. This often presents a special visual effect and can give the audience a rich feeling.

2. Form

The inspirations of the forms came from the natural world. Plentiful organic shapes of plants and dynamic lines were used on my jewelry pieces. I chose these forms as a foundation for my works not only because these organic lines can better explain my theme, but also because plants have a special spirit. Although they are more simple than humans, they are involved in growth every single day. No matter how hard the drought or the storm, they never stop growing. Humans are the part of nature, but we are much more complicated as we are higher-order-organisms. At the same time, we have lost the pureness and concentration of life as it is experienced by lower organisms. Hence, the natural forms I used are meant to recover our original simplicity.

3. Display

My thesis work was ultimately presented as an exhibition. The arrangement and display was the first priority to consider. The order in which my works were displayed follows the developmental sequence of the transformation process that I want to express in my work. Because I was eager to show more about the manner of wearing and the intuitive effect of the jewelry on the human body, I decided to use a mannequin as the support for my work. Also, in order to diminish the visual effect of the mannequin and instead highlight the work, I covered each mannequin with a half-transparent chiffon fabric. Moreover, to give viewers a clearer and more direct understanding of my work, in the show I prepared photographs that show the body piece on a model.

According to the different materials and forms, I divided my works into three subseries. First, on the whole, the tonality of my work is black and white. The inspiration for this choice is from the symbol (1) “yin” and “yang” which belongs to Taoism¹⁰. Generally, yin is passive, oppressed. Yang, on the other hand, is active, bright. Managing yin yang is something that humans have to do all the time.

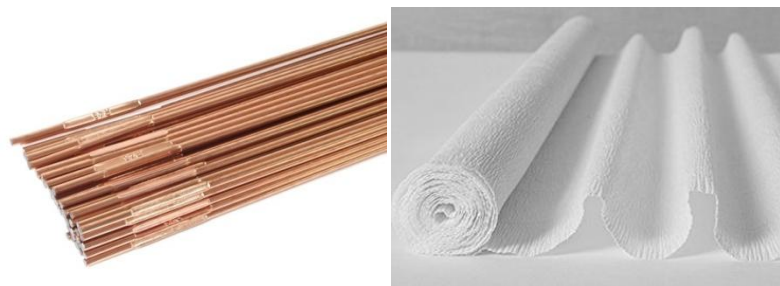
¹⁰ Yin-Yang Balance & You, <http://tao-in-you.com/yin-yang.html>



(1)

The symbol is in the shape of a circle and consists of two colors. The black color represents the yin energy, and the white color represents the yang. They are opposing qualities of dualism. In my work, the two-color black and white represents heaviness and lightness respectively. It is in relation to the heavy weight of the past and the lightness that can be experienced after its release.

Different metals were used including steel rods, copper sheets, silver sheets, and wire, along with paint, crepe paper, and paper pulp. It is worth noticing that the steel rods shown in (2) are copper plated, which makes them much easier to weld. I chose steel rods instead of another metal because they have enough tenacity and are easy to shape. Crepe paper contains information because of its unique texture and it is very soft and therefore easy to manipulate. The textures not only more closely reflect a natural form but also make the shape of my work more three-dimensional.



(2)



(3)

In this first subseries, I used a lot of black wire shapes that were similar to a flower form. That was inspired by the flower depicted in (3)¹¹. The botanical name of this flower is *Lycoris radiata*. The flower has another name and a legend. The name is 'Higanbana'. Since these flowers usually bloom near cemeteries around the autumnal equinox (the time to mourn the dead). Also, after the leaves of *Lycoris* fall, the flowers began to blossom and fall. The flowers and the leaves can never grow at the same time, which means they can never meet each other. Therefore, in the legend, these flowers are described as ominous flowers which bring sorrow and separation.¹² The pistil is very long relative to the flower itself. When a butterfly or bee lands on the flower to collect honey, it traps it in the flower like a cage. So I used this form as a metaphor for those pasts that cannot be relived.

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Red_Spider_Lily----Lycoris_radiata.jpg
<http://huaban.com/pins/538909301/>

¹² Chandler, Brian, Higanbana – red spider lily, 1999 – 2002 [2011-09-13]



(4)

In the work shown above in (4), I wanted to present a feeling that the process of “becoming” is occurring. I combined metal (a steel rod and copper sheet) with soft materials (paper and paint). The base of the piece is a shaped metal segment. I shaped and cut the copper sheet first to make it fit better on the body. Then I patinated the copper to black using liver of sulphur. After that I arranged the back branches first, which consisted of steel rods, bone, and paper. I welded steel rods on the copper piece to appear as if they are coming out from the body. Then I cut many short steel rods and forged some texture on them to make them more natural. During this process, the steel rods randomly became curving shapes. I welded them together and then attached them to the copper piece. I chose welding instead of soldering because there are lots of connections, and welding is much faster and easier. By wiping the gun metal solution on the steel, I made the steel rod turn black with metal luster. After all the hot working, I attached the paper to the rod and the paper pulp on the copper base. The final piece shows a feeling of flowing.

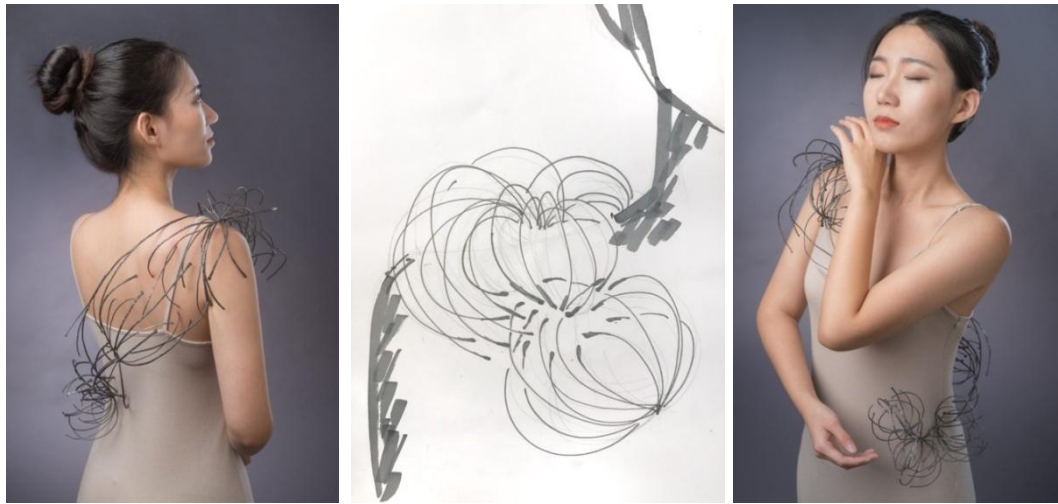


This (5) is a neck piece and sits on the shoulder. It clings to the neck and has some sharp points. My intention was to express the feeling of being choked. Sometimes when we persist in something too much, we are overwhelmed by it instead. “Red is an important sign of dominance for many primates. Also the red might intimidate the competitor – in the same way that

(5)

less dominant mandrills may avoid approaching their leaders with crimson faces. If you see red you’ll feel fear and your lower status, and your testosterone will drop.”¹³ Dark red gives people a nervous feeling and a sense of danger. The black, sharp, hurtful shape gives both the people who wear it and viewers a sense of constraint and discomfort.

¹³ David Robson, How the color red wraps the mind, <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20140827-how-the-colour-red-warps-the-mind>



(6)

When negative emotions and excess desires surround us, our actions hurt not only us but also others. This (6) is a back piece that extends to the front of the body as if it surrounds the body. Some of the teeth of the black flower shape are turned inward and some of them are turned outward. Therefore, it causes pressure and pain.



(7)

The earring and rings (7) are a jewelry set made out of sterling silver. They are showing a “rebirth” and “becoming”. The earring consists of a black wire shape with

a white egg shape in the center. The white, cracked shell surrounded by black wire is meant to appear as if something will grow from it. The ring set includes three different rings. The first one shown in my picture, on the thumb and index finger, is a double finger ring. The two fingers are restricted and cannot be separated when people wear the ring. Black wires entwined symbolize a complicated melancholy. It essentially chains the wearer, and prevents them from following their hearts. The next ring has a white rimous shell inside black wire shapes, indicating there is a new life going to sprout. In the third ring, something is ready to break through those black wires to become a fresh growing life. It is like a story on the finger telling of a gradual becoming.



(8)

In the second subseries of work I used paper pulp (8) for the main material. Paper pulp is an interesting material with various possibilities. It is very easy to sculpt and the work made by paper pulp always has a sense of volume. Because much of what makes up paper pulp is water, after it dries out its weight is very light, which makes it

easy to be worn. In addition, because it contains paper fiber, it can result in unique textures that have a rough and primitive feeling.



(9)

The inspiration for the work shown in (9) is from a quote from Dale Carnegie. He wrote “One of the most tragic things I know about human nature is that all of us tend to put off living. We are all dreaming of some magical rose garden over the horizon instead of enjoying the roses that are blooming outside our windows today.”¹⁴ This shoulder piece is more like a sculpture. It appears to be a flower-land to wear on the body and is designed to remind people to pay attention to those small elements of happiness that are within reach.

¹⁴ Dale Carnegie, *How to stop worrying and start living*, 1948 by Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press), Ltd., Bungay Suffolk (S.B.N. 437 95083 2)



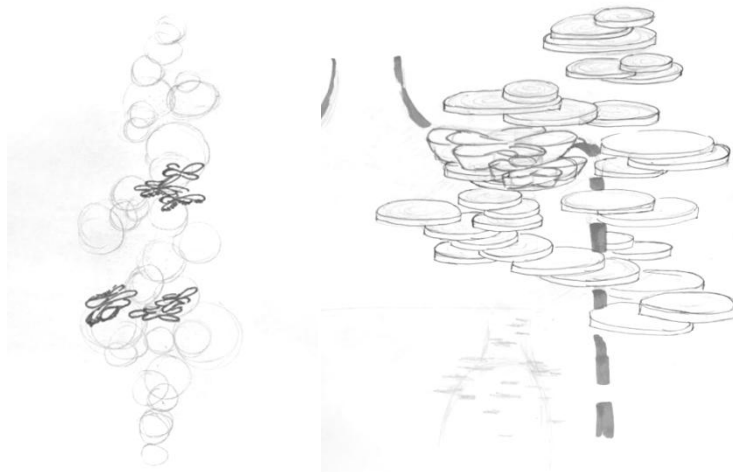
(10)

Number (10) is a wall piece that is composed of six parts. Each of them is on behalf of a different desire: for forms (lust after beauty), for sounds (long for praise), for odors (lust for fragrance), for tastes (desirous of dainties), for the tangible (lust for comfort), and for ideas (fame and fortune)¹⁵. These six desires are the most basic and also the most difficult to control. Only if people are no longer pursuing these and are able to not be obsessed with attaining them, will they feel happiness clearly.

My work utilized energy conversion between plant life as a metaphor for this becoming process. Woods and fungus are both living beings, but, fungus absorbs nutrition and grows on trees. That reflects a kind of energy conversion. I shaped the paper pulp into a board using organic wood texture and I painted a white to black gradient on the board. At the darker part of the board, I repeatedly used a shape shown

¹⁵ LongShu Bodhisattva, 《大智度论》:Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom

in (10) on the top of it. That shape evolved from the lamella of fungus, which is the most representative and important part of fungus. I poured the transparent resin on the shaped, half-transparent paper and then hung it as shown in (10). The flowing resin gradually drips and solidifies, which is a dynamic visual effect.



(11)

I continued using the lamella form to express my theme in the third subseries, where I added some actual wood slices as a medium between the human body and lamella to

better show the slow process of becoming. The wood pieces have the unique growth ring texture, which indicates the passage of time. The two pieces in (11) present a feeling of silent growth. The wood randomly clings to the human body and the white lamella form grows from it slowly.



Moreover, I added a new expression that conveys my concept to the work: Chinese characters (12).

Chinese is not only a language of communication, it also contains China's profound culture and heritage.

In the work, I quoted many stories and verses that describe and record past memories from the culture,

(12)

as well as a variety of negative emotions such as

sadness, remorse, sorrow, etc. Those small fragments express the entanglements of the past.



(13)

The head piece (13) shown above represents people trapped by voices of the outside world and by their past memories. It covers the eyes and makes people blind. It is like a tornado around the head, rolled up with the fragments (12). It is like various whispers that influence people's minds and give people spiritual pressure. I stitched the printed half-transparent paper and shaped and added red fiber paper to the individual ones. Red is the color of our blood and a vivid reminder of both life and death. It places an emphasis on the whole piece of work, and it casts a deep feeling of certain stories.



(14)

This shoulder piece (14) attempts to show the solid pureness of the soul. It is easier to be happy when people become more pure because such people do not think too much, do not have too many distractions, but enjoy the present moment. The piece was made with white Mylar and steel rods. Mylar is a half-transparent plastic sheet that has a matte surface and better tenacity than paper. The radial forms are evolved from the lamella of fungus. The piece emerges from the body and randomly covers up the body. The layering creates unique shadows. The steel rods follow the outline of the solid form which pop up from the whole piece.

conclusion

This thesis year has been like a long journey. I explored my work and myself at the same time. “Becoming” is not only a theme, but also a reflection of myself. I used to struggle with imperfection. I would judge and compare my experience to some imaginary ideal. That made me feel fear and I was never satisfied with myself. During the process of my thesis research and production, I felt that my attitude and method of doing things have also changed. When I was working on my thesis, at the beginning, I thought too much, which led me to a stalemate. I was afraid to make mistakes. At times, I was worried and struggled with something meaningless. Along with the research and readings, I became much more brave and willing to try. I found beauty in the mistakes. I became more engaged with my work and this feeling of focus on the moment made me feel happy. I also learned a lot, including about my own attitude towards life. I hope that others can feel this kind of understanding through viewing my work.

People can never attain what is a perfect life, because life is only lived once. No matter what, everything is the best. Life is not a sequel of our parents’s lives, not a prequel to our children’s lives. Life is now. I like this quote by Jiddu Krishnamurti: “Living in the present is the instant perception of beauty and the great delight in it

without seeking pleasure from it.”¹⁶ In my future life and work I will keep becoming,
and I will always uphold this belief and attitude.

¹⁶ Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Freedom From the Known*, Lutyens, Mary, ed. London: Rider Books. 144 pp. ISBN 978-1-84604-213-3. chapter 4

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