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It's There

by

Seojung Kang

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Art in Metals and Jewelry Design

School for American Crafts
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
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Thesis Approval

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Abstract

This thesis explores the true value of normalcy through repetitive production in order to redefine the importance of ordinary that is taken for granted.

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Introduction

We often mistake that we can have certain things without effort. After going through the pandemic, people started to realize how precious things they used to take for granted truly are. At the same time, ironically, the world we live in seems to expect everything to be more exceptional and rejects the ordinary. People in this world are becoming more intense about their achievements in life. They consider ordinary daily life and repeated routine boring, and exhausting, and look forward to the end of this mundane repetition. However, I believe the most important things in life are the ones that are common. My work is about the value of normalcy that people forget.

There were times when I also had boring daily life which even made me quite anxious. I hoped for these meaningless and frustrating times to quickly pass by. However, if I think about those periods of time again now, I realize that they were helpful and meaningful. They made me who I am right now. Moreover, those times were the most peaceful compared to the tough ones I went through. They might seem boring and meaningless when viewed individually, but they make small and valuable changes in my life when they are gathered together.

Context

Before I began my work, I thought about the meaning of the word, ordinary. Ordinary means “With no special or distinctive feature; normal”¹ in the dictionary. However, the criteria of determining something ordinary or normal would not be the same for everyone. I want to set my own criteria of ordinary first. To me, ordinary is any event or being that doesn’t cause any emotional change, such as air that we breathe every day, recognizing natural facts like the median number between 1 to 10 is 5, or repeating and familiar behavior in everyday life, such as eating, going to the bathroom, working, and sleeping. To others, it may be related to one’s job or country’s culture, such as writing, listening to music, or getting a year older on the first day of every year. In this work, I would like to describe repeated daily life as one of the common or ordinary things in my criteria.

I always wanted to be a normal person. A person who is neither extra special nor inferior, a person who is like a 5 between 1 and 10. Unfortunately, the growth of the world is much faster than the growth of myself, so that the world seeks smarter and more experienced people in order to adapt the changing times. According to *Trend Korea 2023*, we are living in a time where average has disappeared². As polarization accelerates and common life, ordinary opinions, and the standard of normal change, we are living in a time where we can only be winners or losers, which cannot be common.

From personal experience, people think that their life should be more special than others, and in South Korea, living a so called Godsaeng is in trend. Godsaeng is a newly coined Korean word that is a combination of an English word God and a Korean word life, meaning a diligent and exemplary life. On social media, people post as if competing to see who eats better, is having more fun, criticize well, and is popular. People post dramatic moments as if they represent their entire lives. Thus, I feel like, in this time, ordinary can be seen as inferior, and considered as cliché, not special. As I try to avoid being inferior and to meet the standards of the normal set by the world, I am becoming a person who unconsciously follows the appearance of this extreme time.

¹ Oxford Languages

² Trend Korea 2023, Kim, Nando, 2022

As if to criticize this world, the pandemic has hit our daily lives. The daily life of talking in person, the air I breathed comfortably, and the healthy body became no longer natural. It was a time when a lot of things that were considered ordinary became something special. However, many people were angry and denied the reality of not having the normal life as usual rather than recognizing the value of what they have lost even in these situations. In the early days of the pandemic, a small number of people who tested positive were treated with deep hatred by others in South Korea³. Meanwhile, as mask-wearing became more widespread, some people in the United States resisted, arguing that it infringed on their individual freedoms⁴. I also was overwhelmed by the disruption of my daily routine. Plans and conversations with my friends that I thought were normal disappeared a lot in real life and shifted to virtual meetings. I, who had never been seriously ill and had always lived healthily, found myself needing to wear a mask like someone with the flu just to breathe comfortably. Those ordinary days became precious and valuable to me, and I came to think about the value of things I had once taken for granted.

Now that the pandemic is over and people are regaining their usual days again, I want to think about whether we should only follow the world of extreme. In a time when individuality is growing, I am wanting to address the existence of my relationship to the simple, the nuanced, and the value of the ordinariness of our own life. Just as we don't recognize the importance of daily life when we lose it only for a day but come to appreciate it more likely after we've been without it for a long time, this will be a work that can show how meaningful and valuable a normal day becomes when a massive quantity of days is gathered.

I then thought about the way of expressing the importance of repetitive daily life. In order to intuitively show the meaning of the work, I thought of producing one small piece repeatedly in large quantities and forming it into one impactful group. Artist Beiliu Liu creates works that are also made with repetitive objects. After an interview with her, Kay Whitney said "the repetition in Beiliu's works creates a passionate metaphor for the singularity of an act or event."⁵ In addition, Allan McCollum's works that are composed of repeated elements also give stronger feeling as

³ KBS news

<https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/view.do?ncd=5059789>

⁴ McGill

<https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/covid-19-health/why-some-people-choose-not-wear-mask>

⁵ Sculpture Magazine

<https://sculpturemagazine.art/soft-persuasion-a-conversation-with-beili-liu/>

numerous small pieces fill the space magnificently. Their works gave me a positive idea that when objects are repeated, they have a stronger effect of conveying the meaning.

Evolution

While thinking about what to produce repeatedly, I wondered what an ordinary material would be for me. I think plastic resembles what it looks like in this time we live in. In an age when there is a flood of factory products made through mass production, plastic is one of the most relevant materials to making something repeatedly. Before everything was mechanized, mass production was solely labor that people had to do themselves. Now that mechanization is widespread, I wonder if we are getting used to the commonness of this era of mechanization and forgetting the value of the comfort that the common factory production gives us. Thus, I think plastic is the material that best expresses and resembles my repetitive work.

From the dictionary, plastic is “a synthetic material ... that can be molded into shape while soft and then set into a rigid or slightly elastic form”⁶. Additionally, the American Chemistry Council’s website explains the characteristic of plastic as “once the plastic is formed it can be heated and reformed repeatedly”⁷, which all connects with the idea of my work of repeated process. Plastic comes in a wide variety of types. For this work, I am using a plastic that I have used as a material before so that it is common to me. Filament is a type of plastic used in 3D printers. It is designed to be softened by heat, as per the definition of plastic, and then reshaped into a new form. This material allows me to create shapes with my hands and to repeat the process of softening and shaping it.

When preparing for the actual making process, I consistently kept in mind the importance of repetition. Understanding the significance of repetition in the creative process, I was particularly struck by how artist Wolfgang Laib embodies this principle in his work. Artist Wolfgang Laib

⁶ Oxford Languages

⁷ American Chemistry Council

https://web.archive.org/web/20100317004747/http://www.americanchemistry.com/s_plastics/doc.asp?CID=1571&DID=5972

collects pollen for his work *Pollen form Hazelnut*, a large installation work with pollen sieved onto the floor. “By collecting pollen every year since 1977 and from one plant at a time, his physically demanding activity involves notions of time, labor, ritual, and the process of art making are rethought”⁸. Just like the idea of daily mundane routine becoming precious when repeated and gathered, I want my work to be made up of repeated labor. Since filament is designed to be melted by heat to create different forms, I am using the same method but with a different way of applying heat, which is ironing. Instead of using 3D printers to melt and reform it, ironing allows me to conduct the entire process with my hands and to create shapes. Putting plastic on top of an electric stove and using an iron on top to apply heat on both sides is what makes each small piece. This becomes the crucial making process I use every day, which is to feel the mundaneness by keeping it a routine. Each day, I remind myself to focus on the positive value of routine as an integral part of the process.

Before I started making something, I wondered what an ordinary form would be for me. I sketch every time I make work, and I have a habit of drawing a circle to start with. Circle is a line that flows without angles, so I always feel that circle is a psychologically stable shape. Thus, I tend to develop all my sketches starting from a circle, which has become the most natural and common shape for me among universally basic shapes when I create something. I began to search for moments in life where there are repeated circles. I found an answer in nature, which people usually consider common in life. Circles appear in various moments when the sun shines and spreads. They sometimes look like dots when they are too small, and sometimes they appear large and clearly circular. The glimmering sunlight on the surface of water (figure 1) and the lights you see when your eyes are unfocused (figure 2) are moments when light appears as circles. I think glimmering sunlight shows the characteristics of ordinariness in daily life well. It is something that always exists around us and must exist but is not something we consider special, and we forget the importance easily.

⁸ Museum of Modern Art
https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_386883.pdf

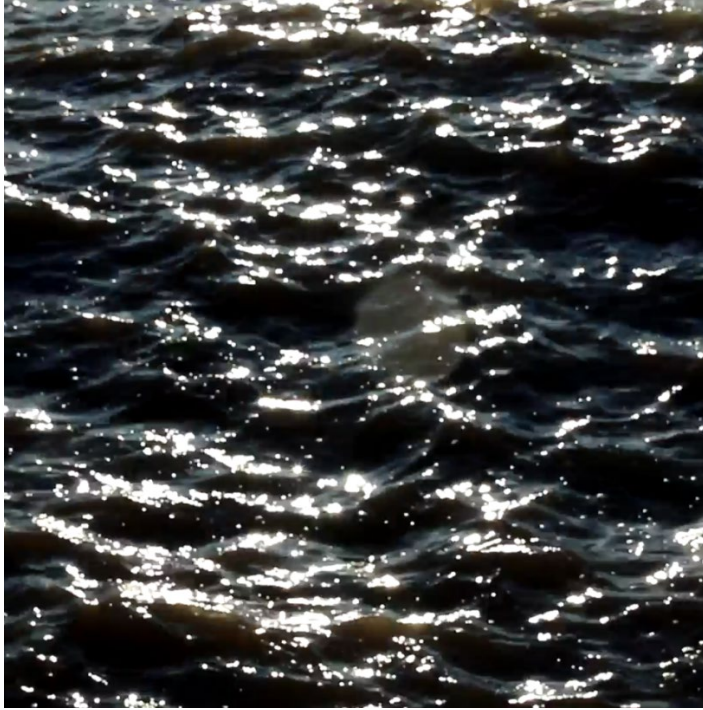


Figure 1

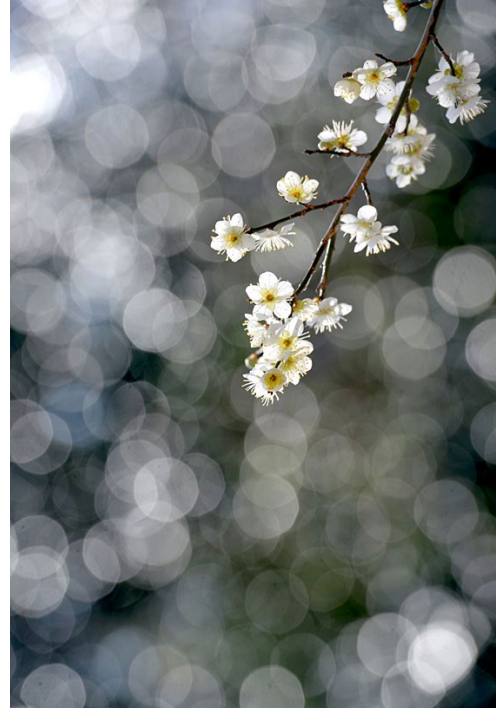


Figure 2

As an extension of drawing inspiration from sunlight for my work, I wanted to use colors of plastic that resembles sunlight. According to Stanford Solar Center, Sunlight is all colors mixed, which appear as white to people's eyes⁹. Even though the true color of sunlight is white, it appears in different colors at certain times. To ensure my work was best expressed, where small pieces became an impactful group, I aimed to position the work close to people's bodies. When thinking about what sunlight one can see and feel up close at eye level, I thought of sunset. Stanford Solar Center says that when the sun is low in the sky, it may appear yellow, orange, or red. Thus, the true color of sun, white, and one of the colors when it is at eye level, yellow, are the main colors of my work. To give a depth to my light-color work, I also used a little bit of warm brown, a darker color of yellow.

⁹ Stanford Solar Center
<https://solar-center.stanford.edu/SID/activities/GreenSun.html>

Body of Work

Bringing the ideas to life, the large installation piece, *It's There 1*, consists of more than 2,100 of plastic circles, which are in the air like the sunlight, filling the entirety of a designated area in the gallery. The installation measures 10 feet in width, 11.5 feet in depth, and 11 feet in height, creating a striking presence in the gallery space. Each circle features multiple lines, just like the circles with multiple lines in my sketches (Figure 3). The plastic circles are very similar to each other but with different details, just like the everyday life with similar routines but different details (Figure 4, 5). They are connected vertically with transparent nylon threads and when in a space, they look like they are moving individually and freely within the group. Circles can both be alone and overlap. Layering them is from the idea that the daily life is individual but becomes a precious group when number of them are gathered. Transparent circles among them better express the effects of layering. Light can penetrate through transparent plastics so that they resemble the appearance of overlapping sunlight. The viewer can also see through multiple layers behind the transparent material (figure 6, 7). This is represented even better with large holes in the middle rather than completely filled circles.

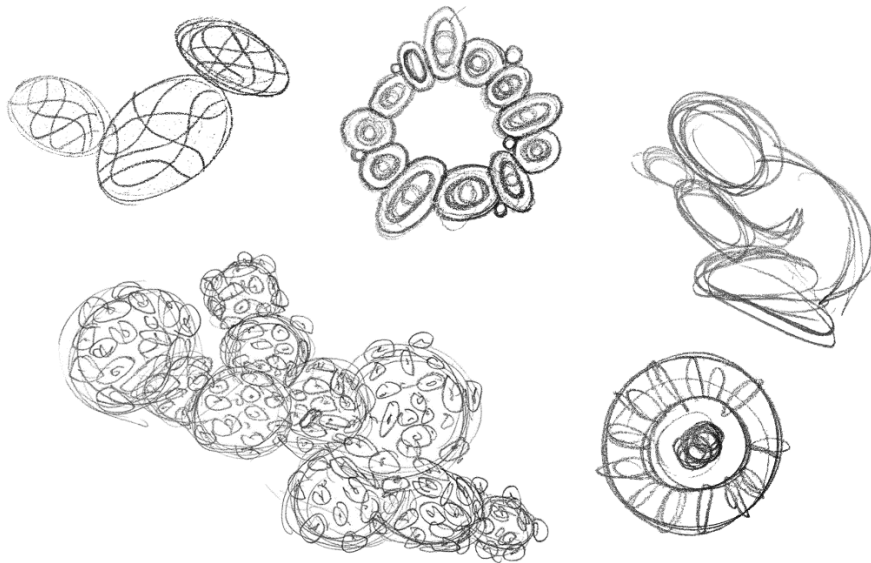


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

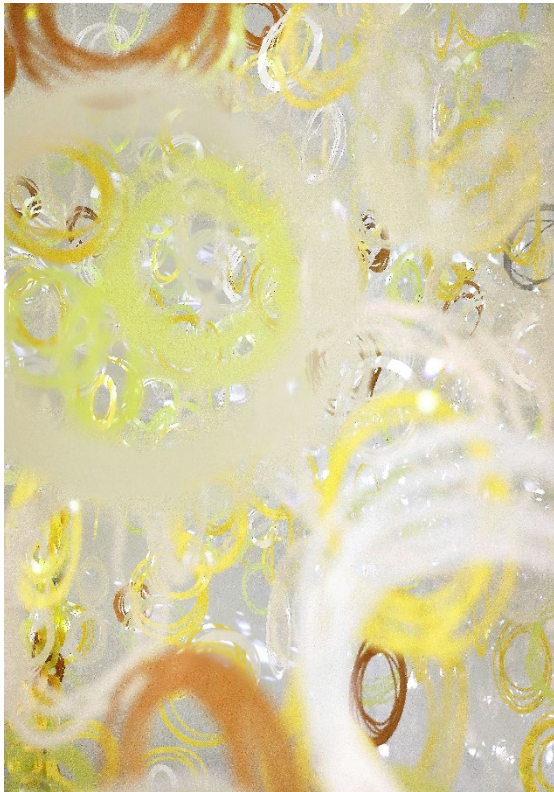


Figure 6



Figure 7

When there is light, there is shadow. My work contains both. Thousands of circles and thousands of shadows created by the light hitting the small plastic pieces become one piece when all of these are gathered (Figure 8). The purpose of using light in this work was to directly bring and utilize sunlight. To actualize it, I filmed the sunlight reflecting on the surface of water at Ontario Lake. I then edited the video to emphasize the sunlight and to make the water darker so that when I use a projector, it would only project the bright sunlight and not the background, water. By projecting the video onto the entire installation, it created the small dots of light all over the installation (Figure 9). The light later allowed the audience to feel like they are getting sunlight when they are in the middle of the installation.



Figure 8

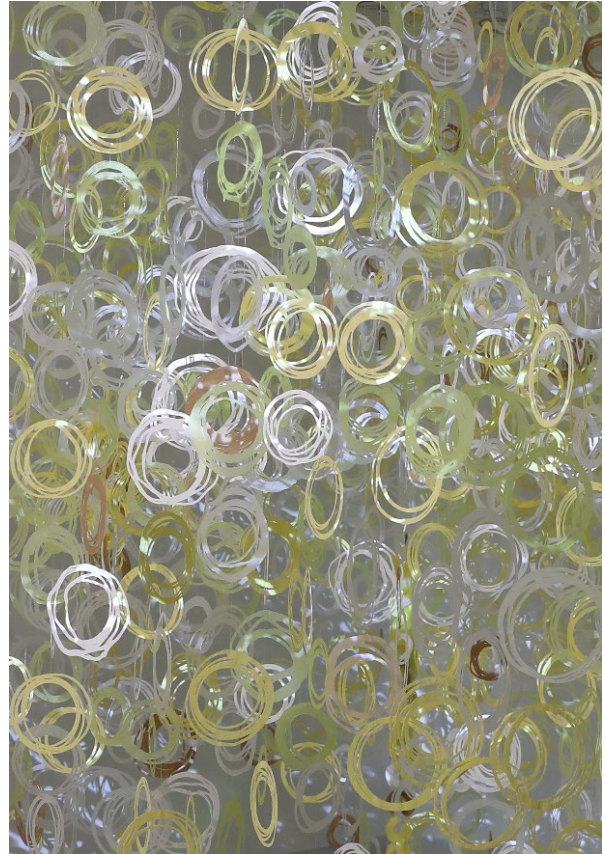


Figure 9

I planned the installation of *It's There I* in a rectangular cube shape to fit the size and form of the gallery space where the work is installed (Figure 10). However, the form can be adjusted

based on the shape of the installation space, allowing the final dimensions of the grouping of circles to be adaptable to various spaces.



Figure 10

I thought that the meaning of my work would be delivered better if these circles turn into something physically precious and become something that gives direct feelings to the audience. To do this, I connected the wearable pieces, *It's There 2* and *It's There 3*, which I think are the physically precious objects among the objects I created, to this installation of circles. The wearable pieces are in a form which looks similar to the circles in the installation so that it looks like a part of the installation but slightly different. They are also detachable from the installation piece, allowing the audience to separate the wearables from the installation and turn it into something they can put around their body, thereby experiencing the transformation of everyday life into something personally valuable. These pieces make me feel that however you define your own “normal” can just be a common thing nearby you all the time if you treat it meaningless, but it turns into something important to you the moment you value it. The size of the circles in the wearable pieces is smaller than those in the installation piece. These jewelry pieces are made in the form of a chain, the most mass-produced and repeated shapes among jewelry, a type of

wearable piece (Figure 11, 12). Making them into a form of one long rope allows people to easily put it over their bodies.



Figure 11



Figure 12

There is a walkway within the piece for people to walk through, aiming to allow them to physically feel the preciousness of everyday life (Figure 13). To create the walkway, I cut and attached vinyl stickers in shapes similar to plastic circles to the floor under the installation (Figure 14). These vinyl stickers have a certain level of transparency, so when overlapped, they serve a similar purpose to the plastic pieces. These stickers were applied only to the areas where the plastic pieces are located, excluding the walkway, helping to distinguish the walkway more clearly. They assist in enhancing people's recognition of the path, making it easier for them to enter and view the work inside.



Figure 13



Figure 14

On the wall next to *It's There 1*, I placed a monitor with a video showcasing the making process of each plastic piece, which is an important part of my work. In the video, I place a piece of parchment paper on top of a heated stove and place circularly rolled up filament on it. As I lay down the filament, I shake it to create natural shapes with the lines. As the heated filament is shaken, it irregularly sticks to the parchment paper, creating unique lines. Then, I place another layer of parchment paper on top and use an iron to iron the filament, allowing them to melt sufficiently and bond together into one piece. Afterward, I transfer the piece from the stovetop, still covered with parchment papers, and wait for it to completely cool and harden before removing the paper. This is the entire process of creating one circle piece, and the video continuously showcases this process, just like my repetitive work process (Figure 15, 16).



Figure 15

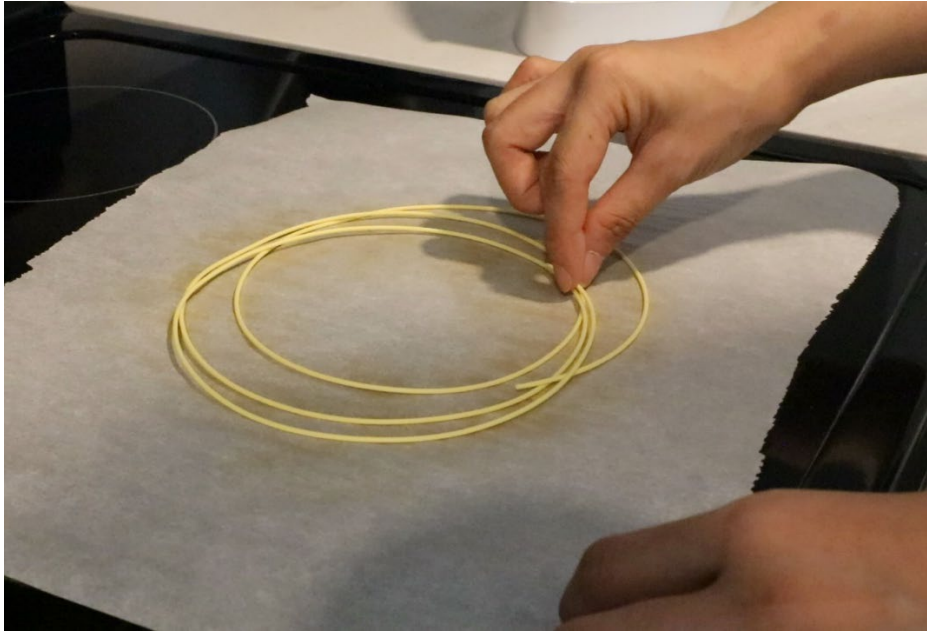


Figure 16

Conclusion

This work was a study of myself as an artist. It was a time for me to delve into my true interests, the thoughts deeply rooted within me that I want to communicate through my artwork. While studying about metals, I found myself unconsciously focused on jewelry and metalwork. However, as I began the work process, I questioned whether metal is the material to best express this work and idea and if jewelry is the most suitable form for it. I realized that I had limited myself to materials and techniques related to metalworks and decided to seek out a material solution specifically for this artwork. Additionally, since I was accustomed to creating relatively small-sized works in the past, I reconsidered if making the work small is truly the best way to express this work. The process of creating the large installation piece was a journey of challenging myself in every aspect to make the final work successful. *It's There* series involves pushing beyond my own boundaries of jewelry and metalwork by making larger artworks, allowing me to express my thoughts and ideas in the best possible form and experiencing significant personal growth in the process.

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