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Rochester Institute of Technology

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**Arts: An Interactive Medium throughout Utilizing
Abstraction, Simplicity and Harmony**

by

Hye-Jeong Ko

March 11, 2003

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Arts: An Interactive Medium throughout Utilizing
Abstraction, Simplicity and Harmony

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Introduction

“Looking is a part of psychological behavior that Gestalt psychologists understand as the interaction of essence of objects and observer’s true nature”¹

Interaction [ˌɪntərækʃən]:

1. A process by which two or more things have an effect on each other and work together
2. The activity of talking to other people and understand them

-Longman Dictionary 2002-

Throughout many years as an artist, it has been always challenging to question myself, “ Am I doing my job good enough to deserve to be an artist?” One of the most important duties of an artist is to communicate “aesthetic values” to people through Art. One of the principles that I take for making my art is to design for and realize the usage of art pieces in everyday life. Three-dimensional art works can maximize their artistic value when they can be used in a practical sense, even though art itself sometimes exists in intangible forms, such as music. Endowing every piece with specific roles as useful objects, I reinforce their functional value in my works. In addition, being functionally valuable, they show an intimacy with humanity and life because they have a concrete role in everyday life.

As a child does based upon her simple curiosity, people instinctively tend to reach out for things that elicit an emotional response in them. Being dedicated and interested in such an autonomous and unconscious human behavior toward the beauty and aesthetic values, I try to produce those precious interactions between my works and viewers.

¹ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (Seoul: Hosungsa, 1981), 10.

In this thesis, I interpret art works and their aesthetic values in terms of their interactive elements. Furthermore, I apply this interaction to the concept of “medium (Latin etymology: *medius*=middle)” throughout my metal works in order to interact with outside people with an appropriate medium for sharing and evoking emotional and aesthetic values. In other words, an artist lives within and exists between “values” and “people” as a messenger, utilizing different media. I suggest few main features, abstraction/simplicity and harmony in my metal. Furthermore, those features are explained to support the comprehension of my work issues in terms of art works’ universal and/or capability for mutual interaction. In addition, I appreciate the metal (medium) that I use for implementing the work issues, silver, for supporting its collaborative capacity in delivering the contents to people more effectively and authentically.

Mechanisms for Interactivity-Medium and Content

“Interactivity/self-reflexivity is the experience of a pure mind that floats above all concrete worlds in the ethereal universe of semantic possibility.”²

Today, many people are getting more involved in sharing information, communicating and entertaining themselves through interactive media including games, movies, video-on-demand as well as mobile chatting in their everyday life. For example, playing an online war game, one allied trooper shouted, “Give me the Aid now” and soon somebody passed on their own First Aid Kit to the miserably wounded ally located at a remote location to help them to recover from emergency situation. Interacting and cooperating with each other, the allied team wins the regional online war game match. It is one scenario out of a popular interactive MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) called *Lineage* that is very popular in Korea nowadays.

Moreover, scientists are already excited to see the final phase of development of a remote physical movement exchanging mechanism at the Tangible Media Group at MIT Media Lab.³ Upon completion, people can share emotional and physical characteristics such as their own body temperature and movement with other people at entirely different locations.

Ryan explains in her book, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, that interactivity appears on two levels: one constituted by the medium or technological support and the other

² Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality (Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media)* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 354-355.

³ Hiroshi Ishii and Brygg Ullmer, “Tangible Bits: Towards Seamless Interfaces between People, Bits and Atoms,” (1 February 2003). <<http://tangible.media.mit.edu>> (15 November 2002).

intrinsic to the work itself. She also mentions that all interactive media needs a “reasonably” interactive medium to make them mean something to people.⁴

Medium

Analytically speaking, like other interactive media, an art piece is created from medium and content. The medium means a method, interface or form used to convey and deliver the content from an artist to others. On the other side, the content conveys authentic meanings and values that the piece holds socio-culturally, educationally (both consciously and unconsciously), geographically and sometime ideologically. The two mechanisms form a correlated relationship to bring out a meaningful presentation of an artwork. What is a medium in terms of building a meaning? As a classical example in media industry, a newspaper article is the content and the paper itself is a medium. Accordingly, the same news might also take a form of broadcasting, journal, magazine or film so that it can appeal to different targeting audiences more effectively through various media. Therefore, it goes without saying that choosing an appropriate medium for conveying a message effectively is very crucial for media planners and artists.

As applied to other types of conveyance, an artist should be very careful when selecting a medium to deliver the content(s) effectively not only because it physically delivers the content, but also it cooperates with the content for clarifying the artist’s intent and messages. Therefore, it is quite important for any artist, to figure out what kind of medium will appeal to people when planning for a prospective art piece.

⁴ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 205.

Furthermore, there is another aspect in the function of media that I would like to add in supporting the importance of art medium quality, *the polar opposites of interactivity of medium*, the idea generated by Marshall McLuhan. According to McLuhan, there are two types of media: hot and cool. A hot medium offers “high definition”, which is well filled with data such as TV. TV provides much information, highly defined information, so that audiences do not need to “input” their own data to understand. Thus, the high definition of data in TV makes audiences follow the sequences of a soap drama even if viewers has not watched each previous airing to understand the plotline. On the contrary, telephone is a cool medium, low in its definition, because so little information is given through it to a listener and so much has to be filled in by the listener. Therefore, hot media are low in participation, no need for data input, and cool media are high in participation, completion by the audience (McLuhan, 162).⁵

Then, how about Arts in terms of their definition? No need to say that it is one category of cool media because no single art piece gives same meaning to every audience. As well, its true meaning and values are appreciated by each individual to be fully credited no matter what type of art form is involved. Therefore, considering the characteristics of an art object’s low definition and high demand for involvement, I emphasize abstractions and simplicity in terms of forms/functions. Furthermore, I mainly utilize sterling silver, which is plain appearance as a medium to emphasize forms/functions in order to make audience have more involvement and “fill” with their own thoughts and values.

⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 162.

Content

The other mechanism for forming a correlated relationship to bring out the meaningful presentation of an artwork is content. Content has intangible meaning in artworks. It might be possible to define the content as a story that shows a certain idea, ideology, philosophy and/or attitude. The story embodied in the medium has a unique quality that the artist interweaves into art. Therefore, it is acceptable to conclude that any work of art is truly “created into an art” by combining its content with an appropriate medium. In other words, content can reflect aesthetic value, ideology, philosophy, attitude and/or meaning in the object.

Also true to human life, no single content is identical with another. There are different types and characteristics of contents in various kinds of art pieces. However, there does exist a degree of “*universality*” in content. By the use of “universality”, I mean the depth and strength of content that can be effectively communicated to audiences. In other words, some art pieces could carry more typical, regionally limited, or traditional contents than others. On the contrary, some others would have more universally conscious and widely accepted views. Of course, no art piece can or should be singly evaluated by its universality. However, as an artist dedicated and enthusiastic in pursuing timeless aesthetic values, I am principally involved in excavating and creating art pieces that express universal themes. For the sake of validating and supporting the idea of universality across Arts in general, I will discuss the two different themes established by Edward Hopper (1882-1967) and the globally accepted art genre of Zen.

<The comparison of Edward Hopper and Zen as examples of content universality>

The first half of the 20th century was a time when major modern comprehensive ideologies, such as Western Capitalism and emerging Nationalism, were developed and later resulted in the two World Wars and the Great Depression. Especially, during the 1930s, the major themes of global history were the continuing efforts to resolve the problem of war due to the governing social atmosphere at the period which can be described as the restless ideological conflicts involving poverty and loss of humanity and its privileges.⁶

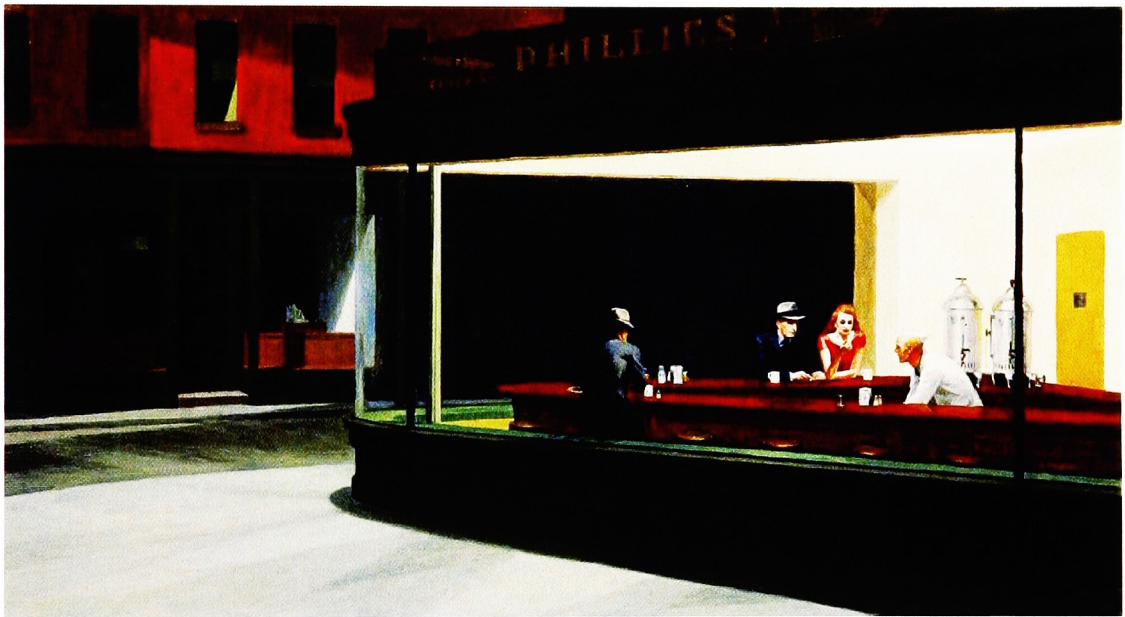
As a representative of an inter-war period realistic painter, Edward Hopper remarkably expressed and “reflected” the contemporary social aspects, attitude, dilemma and, more importantly, the state of people’s minds at this pivotal time.

Hopper is mainly known for painting American landscapes and cityscapes with a disturbing truth of depressed humanity and solitude, expressing the world around him as a cold, alienating, and lonely place. Every figure in a Hopper picture appears terribly alone. At the same time, this was something new in art, perhaps an expression of human hopelessness that came to characterize the Great Depression of the 1930s.

However, as seen in one of his well-known pieces, *Nighthawks* (1942), he not only painted the solitary and dark atmosphere of late night street cafés but also the innate tendency of human beings to pursue the values of intimacy, brightness and affection (*illus.1*). By illustrating some darkly dressed metropolitans, drinking a cup of coffee in the middle of the shadowy café at late night, the artist tried to reflect the values of the contemporary state of mind in this historically darkened wartime.

⁶ *The Encyclopedia of World History*, 2001 ed., s.v. “The Era of the Great Depression.”

illustration 1



Nighthawks (1942)

Oil 84.1 x 152.4 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago; Friends of American Art Collection, 1942.51

Another one of Hopper's examples of socio-psychological reflection is *Gas* (1940), illustrating a small gas station on the way to dark wooded road (*illus.2*). By portraying a man working in a late night gas station, he wanted to illuminate a solitary human being in the wilderness. However, in his paintings, he suggested the brightness of future through painting the lights which imply the eager and faith for a brighter future.

Considering the two paintings, *Nighthawks* and *Gas*, in terms of content creation and delivery, he remarkably linked the darkened social atmosphere with the human being escaping from it to the promised future and intimacy for the entire society. Experiencing and/or acquiring those artistic values and realistic perspectives of inter-war North America, people would tend to reminiscence about the past. In other words, they would experience a cultural context, content, consciously or unconsciously throughout paintings and his work issues. If thought in a psychological perspective (*Classical Conditioning Theory: Stimulus and Response Theory*), Hopper's paintings are basically unconditioned stimuli that are associated with conditioned stimulus (inter-war American socio-cultural atmosphere) to produce a conditioned response (reminiscence for the American legacy and history) in socially conditioned people's minds.

In terms of the people's reaction to Hopper's paintings, an art itself works as an interactive medium that delivers specific and typical messages to people. Thus, people react emotionally to Hopper's theme and find some messages embodied in the pieces. Of course, in the case of Hopper, we may need a specific worldview to fully appreciate the paintings, especially for those who did not experience or learn the inter-war period since those paintings produce different impressions to different people. For example, Asians

illustration 2



Gas (1940)

Oil 66.7 x 102.2 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.

who have never heard of or seen of Hopper's work would have difficulty in understanding and appreciating its content values and meanings. However, people within the same cultural context can appreciate social values associated within its own culture more easily than others from different culture. Then, a question arises, "Is Art universally interactive or only limited for a certain group within a certain cultural code?" Does it produce the same impression by showing those Hopper's paintings to Asians as it does to Americans even if both groups share a similar education in the Arts? Considering Hopper's paintings, it seems that Art is often understandable for a certain specific, limited geological, ethnic, traditional and cultural group. Therefore the Art of one such as Hopper is far from being categorized as being inclusive for all.

On the other hand, considering the aesthetic value of Zen (Japanese and Asian Buddhist Arts), this discussion could lead to a different understanding of interactivity. The Zen movement is already widely accepted and practiced around the World in various Art forms. Throughout the history, Zen has focused on the search for enlightenment through "emptiness". The emptiness, as mentioned and regarded as its most distinguished principle in Zen, is only possible by cultivating wisdom. The process of cultivating wisdom involves "learning to see clearly and exactly what one perceives, feels and thinks just as it is, without placing an extra layer of emotional coloring or intellectual interpretation on top of experience, as we normally do."⁷

As its philosophical view implies, the Zen movement is pure refreshment for civilized and super-complicated human life in modern days. Probably, the successful spread of the Zen movement is due to its tendency toward the most basic instinct and discipline residing in human nature. Keeping and developing the value of nothingness

⁷ Miriam Levering & Lucien Stryk, *Zen: Texts and Teachings* (New York: Artisan, 2000), 16.

and existence, Zen itself is enough to be fully appreciated for its numerous influences on enlightening socio-cultural and aesthetic values in various Zen Buddhist architecture and art forms such as Japanese Zen gardens, the most famous Japanese garden, being *Ryoan-Ji*. (illus. 3).

Also, here lies an interesting dialogue representing the essence of Zen philosophy:

When Tired

A student once asked his teacher, "Master, what is enlightenment?"

The master replied, "When hungry, eat. When tired, sleep."⁸

Considering both Hopper's inter-war realistic themes and Zen's endeavor for enlightenment, there remains an intrinsic question to be considered, "Is Art inclusive or exclusive?" Furthermore, is there a universal code for Art?

Probably, no one would possibly conclude that one prevails over the other to explain the principle and function of interactivity in the Arts. However, one thing is clear to affirm that the essence of "close-to-Nature", such as the spirit of Zen Arts, could penetrate deeply into people's unconscious minds and perception enough to let them relax and pause their restless complex life cycles. Highly motivated by the Zen influenced arts tradition of Korea, I am approaching from its structural elements of Arts, especially its fundamental aesthetic values embodied within a piece, Abstraction/Simplicity and Harmony which give influential and innate impression to all people. In other words, I am quite involved with what Arts can give and share with

⁸ Gunes Davenport, "When Tired," 9 February 2003. <<http://goto.bilkent.edu.tr/gunes/ZEN/zenstories.htm>> (20 February 2003).

people to experience a reflection of every aspect of living as well as nothingness to pursue the eternal theme of humankind and Nature.

illustration 3



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Abstraction/Simplicity

In my thesis works, I plan to demonstrate simple and abstract forms that possess spirit and energy. The images for my art are derived from nature. Nature is the ultimate source for artists. Unconsciously or consciously, people instinctively reach out for things that elicit an emotional response in them. Viewers tend to interact with my metal pieces both figuratively and literally.

For example, through *Candleholders* (illus.4), I combine the candleholders' classic function with a contemporary design. By using and looking at these candleholders, one will feel refreshed. Furthermore, compared to the stereotypical features of candleholders, which are vertical shapes, I designed these holders to be placed horizontally so that they can convey a deep sense of "calmness." The candleholders are more dynamic. Their odd numbers let people place each candleholder as they wish, allowing various visual compositions through this interaction.

In general, human beings tend to express what they see and feel. The intensity of the expression varies depending on personal characteristics. The Art that I create is not a simple imitation of nature. However, it is more a possibility for communication that interweaves emotion with what I observe. On the whole, structurally speaking, my works are much influenced by the concept of Piet Mondrian, "Nature to abstraction." He said, "*Nature is perfect, but an art man does not need perfect Nature...He [the artists] needs to represent what is inward. The natural appearance must be transformed to obtain a purer vision of Nature.*"⁹

⁹ Piet Mondrian, *Piet Mondrian* (Basel: M.Dumont Schauberg, 1965), 16-17.

It is always quite difficult to create a work that eliminates unnecessary parts and decorations from a working piece. The challenge is to simplify a work's form. Also the challenge is to interweave the aesthetic essence that the piece has been created for, while being temperate in ornamentation. Hence, I offer an unexpected variation within a piece's primary featured theme.

In my thesis works, *A Box* (illus.5), *Earrings* (illus.6) and *Bracelet* (illus.7) created in the early period of my study, the composition of leaf-shapes appears complex while the simple, lined, outer frames make the entire figures simple. From these pieces, I started to experiment breaking the frames and to keep figures simple in their design. The *Brooch* series (illus.8) are the initial jewelry pieces of the experimental process resolving the problem of being flat as found in my earlier pieces. In addition, in the *Bracelet* form (illus.9), I experimented more with three-dimensional designs. Being a triangular shape, the bracelet is contemporary but still functional design that speaks with elegance. Throughout my thesis works, I strive to make pieces based on function enabling the works to be acknowledged as “harmony of lines, curves and space.”

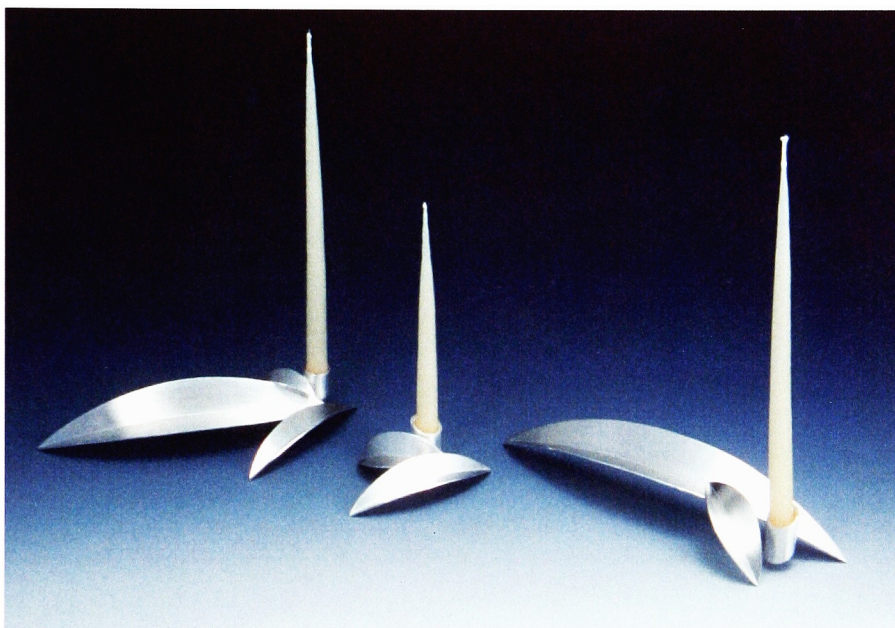
In addressing the forms, minimizing the color to the white of sterling silver, my works not only helps in abstracting the natural design but also focuses on simple compositions of form.

Silver has been used throughout history for rituals and ceremonies, for eating and drinking, for personal adornment and is now highly prized by collectors.¹⁰ All of my thesis works are made out of sterling silver. Sterling silver has always been attractive to me not only because of its whitish color but also because of its hardness. Sterling silver

¹⁰ Philippa Glanville, *Silver: History and Design* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 7

is more durable than fine silver and has been used for flatware, hollowware, jewelry and other daily functional objects for much of our history. However, although sterling silver gives a simple and direct elegance by minimizing color, my forms do need some color variation. Therefore, in order to address the variation in surface, I treat each object's surface differently by methods such as matting, scratched and polished surface. In addition, highly burnished edges contribute to the highly defined lines of the forms.

illustration 4



Candleholders, Sterling Silver, 4"x 3"x 1 ½"(Middle)

illustration 5



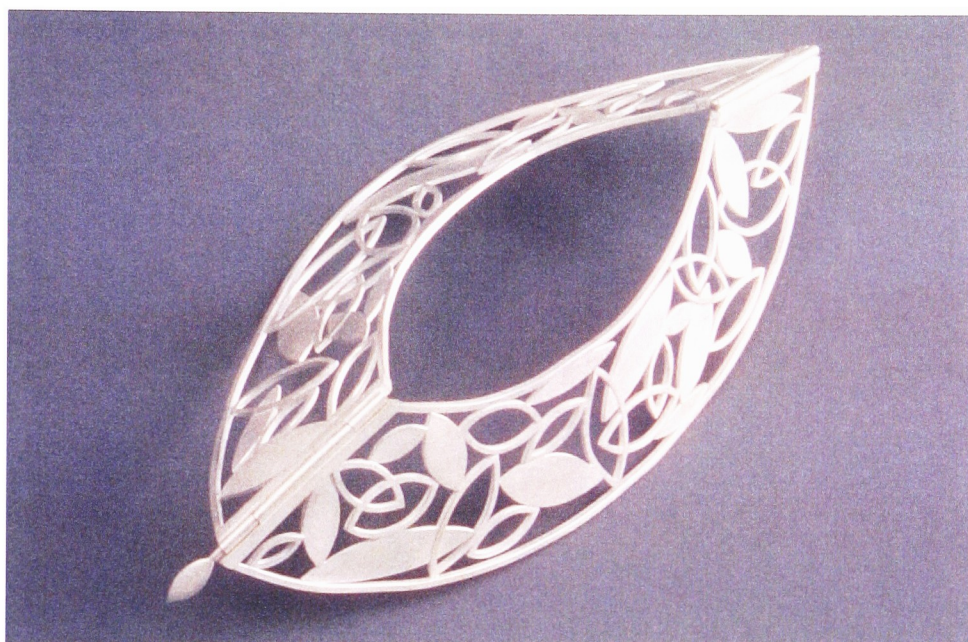
Box, Sterling Silver, 4 ½" x 4 ½" x 2 ½"

illustration 6



Earrings, Sterling Silver, 1"x 1"x 2 3/4"

illustration 7



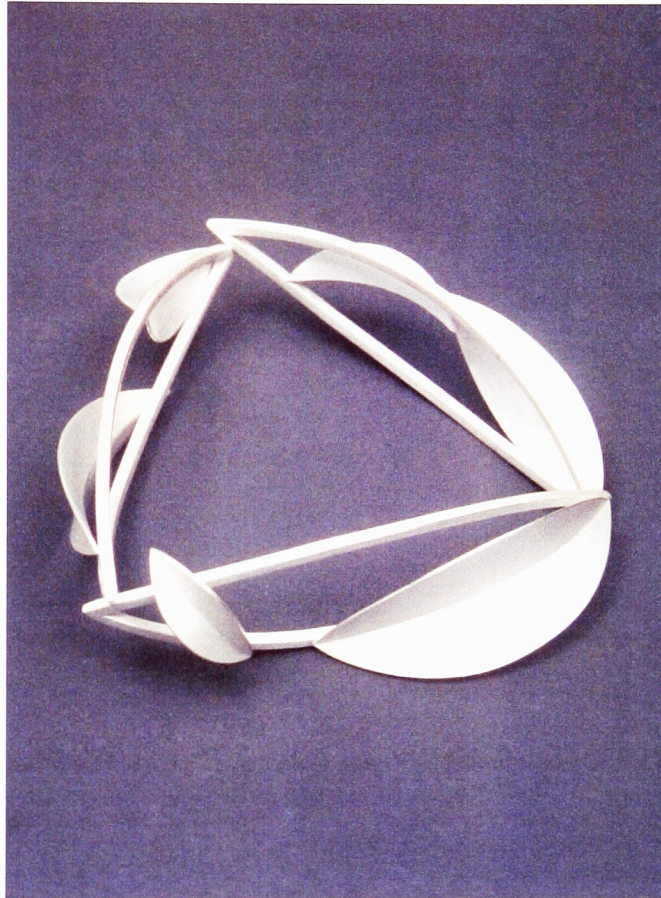
Bracelet, Sterling Silver, 7 ¼"x 3"x 2"

illustration 8



Brooches, Sterling Silver, 3 ½" x 1 ¾" x ¾" (Left)

illustration 9



Bracelet, Sterling Silver, 3 ½" x 3 ½" x 1"

illustration 10



Earrings, Sterling Silver, 1" x 3" x ½" (Left)

Harmony

Being in harmony with Nature, as one of the major themes of my work, defines aesthetic values throughout my metal work. Korean traditional architecture is characterized by its harmony with Nature. It has developed through the assimilation of various cultural elements learned from foreign countries such as China. However, being a traditionally homogeneous country for centuries, Korea has developed its own aesthetic values that are basically different from other neighboring countries. Typically in Korea, the importance of an aesthetic inclination towards Nature and enabling its people to adopt the surrounding environment has been addressed widely. From the early days of history, Koreans have held the belief “*HongIk Sasang*”, which advocates that the heavenly world is located in the high blue sky, representing the blissfully brilliant and eternal utopia. Consequently, Koreans have formulated their own traditional architecture that is rustic yet gracefully harmonized with its surrounding natural environment. In other words, the aesthetics of balancing with natural environment can be described as “the aesthetics of lines” matching with surrounding Nature.

As an example in the thesis works, *A Box (illus.5)* has oblique lines as its main frame as well as leaf-shapes inside the box. The work creates aesthetic values from harmonizing structure of the natural environment based on its simplicity yet traditional heritage from Korea’s distinct architectural style (*illus.11*). Furthermore, this work resembles a traditional Korean house. The entirety of the box creates a well-balanced image of a house which symbolically conveys comfortable and secure feelings. In

illustration 11



addition, structurally speaking, the top and bottom shapes are identically and visually balanced to enrich the essence of harmony.

Another feature of traditional Korean architecture is the widely adopted use of ornaments traditionally found in Korean arts, especially circular and tetragonal symbols for reinforcing the image of harmony in everyday life. Traditionally, those symbols have been widely used in Korean arts including architecture and sculpture. Mr. Dong-Hyun Kim, a renowned professor at the Korea Advanced Institute of Architecture, describes circular and tetragonal shapes as “the basis for Korean art’s heritage throughout the history that resembles the whole figure of the Universe.”¹¹ It is quite easy to find this traditional heritage in many Korean art forms such as the Korean national flag that has a circle in its center and a few tetragonal shapes (lines) around this central circle. The work expresses the principal meaning, which is the universal balance of human beings and outer natural environments.

Tradition lives in everyone’s thoughts and insights throughout his/her everyday life even though it is not always easy to articulate the traditional heritages via forms. However, in my metal work, I want to effectively demonstrate the essence of Korean aesthetic values using traditional forms and lines yet functionally enabling the pieces to be used practically in everyone’s daily life.

¹¹ Dong-Hyun Kim, *Techniques of Traditional Korean Wood Architecture* (Seoul: Korean Architecture Society, 1995), 82.

Conclusion

“Sharing is not only a basic pattern-forming process and an art; it is also a condition of life.”¹²

There is a short well-known proverb, “*Art is long and Life is short.*” It is commonly considered as a simple message for emphasizing that one cannot live long enough to have the whole world within. However, it means that Art is and should be authentically valuable enough to cherish people until they cease to exist. Certainly, it is the ultimate responsibility for any artist. It is a continuous inquiry even for myself as an artist all the time and it is the reason why I am so concerned about communicating the authentic aesthetic values with people for enriching their lives for their lifetime.

Over the centuries, the beliefs and dreams of countless artists have taken various forms, themes, ideologies, impressions and aesthetics to nourish, lead and represent cultures over different parts of the World. Regardless of their different values, they are exceptionally precious and deserve to be cherished and preserved by the virtue of their authenticity. Even if they merely represent the existing social values for a certain group of people or pursue the ultimate human nature to find the eternal values for all, every piece of art is precious for its values as a medium delivering a culture’s and people’s beliefs and dreams.

As I have gone through the thesis works and defense, one thing has always resided in my mind, an *interactivity* of works with people. By interacting with audiences

¹² Gyorgy Doczi, *Proportional Harmonies in Nature, Art & Architecture* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1981), 29.

consciously and unconsciously and letting them “participate in” a sharing of ideas, beliefs and dreams, an artwork then can help people to understand their true innate values.

Human beings have found the ways of living, creating tools to enable them to be alive and leave evidence of their findings for many generations to come, allowing them to face an uncertain future unrelentingly. As an imperative “messenger” for the social heritage and evolution, the artwork is no longer something just to look at, but a world in which we can interact and share the human legacy and our pursuit to spend an entire lifetime creatively and enthusiastically.

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