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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

NATIVITY

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

By
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will reveal the new inspirations, cultural influences, and techniques behind my current artwork. I discovered an important role that plant forms can have for my metal work. Human life and plant life have similar growth and life characteristics. The human nativity can be regarded as the sprouting of new life comparable to the blooming of a flower. From an atheistic point view, nature reveals the beauty of the eternal cycles of life. Nature reveals how rebirth transcends the tragedy of death. I see the flower as a symbol of creation, optimism, life, and magical power. Forms such as flowers, branches and tree trunks offer many possibilities for art created from organic shapes and natural figures.

Contemporary art reflects changes in the cultural traditions from past history and the challenges that new artists have to face in the world today. Despite the evolution of culture and art, tradition continues to play an important role in modern times.¹ Traditional Korean art is instrumental in determining the meaning of my work. Since childhood I was exposed to Oriental paintings. The paintings of the four gracious plants; plum, orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo were of greatest importance. I studied Oriental painting during high school and these classes helped me to understand the intrinsic meanings and expressions of these paintings. My affection towards the paintings of four gracious plants is reflected both naturally and unconsciously in my contemporary metal work.

My sculpture and jewelry pieces express desire, hope, and the power of life through organic plant forms such as flowers, tree trunks, and branches that are artistically rendered

¹ Nikos Stangos *Concepts of Modern Art (HARPER&ROW,PUBLISHERS, New York, 1974)*

in a simplistic and sophisticated manner. My art forms are abstract yet include realistic details. The jewelry pieces challenge the customary concepts of jewelry and offer people a new perspective on body adornment. When people wear these jewelry pieces, they take on a new image as viewed by other people. The jewelry pieces are assembled through the harmonic use of wires, gems, and pieces of metal creating, elegant, yet unusual visual forms. In addition, the importance of color for my art pieces symbolizes the feeling of hope, purity of nativity, and an immerging energy. Sculpture forms are developed using techniques that render expressive movement. These sculptures symbolize nativity through the integration forms reminiscent of pregnant women.

EVOLUTION OF THE WORK

-Aesthetic Inspiration-

My early artwork from Korea narrated memories based on solitary relationships with people and death. When I was young, several of my friends died, leaving me with feelings of anger and panic. Accepting young people's death was difficult for me and I was fearful of having deep and serious relationships. My view of life and death greatly differs from many people and this view is a result of living in Seoul, Korea. Living in a city provides people with many conveniences for everyday life, yet people often experience anguish and isolation. I was one of those isolated people and at that time I was unaware of my need to heal my emotional wounds. These tragic experiences were reflected in my early artwork by expressing emotions of sorrow, anger, and loneliness through human faces.

I have expressed emotions by creating human figures since I began utilizing hammering techniques for my projects. I have been comfortable working with the human form for many years. When I came to America I realized a need to utilize new forms. While I expressed many ideas through the hammering of these human figures, I needed to explore other natural forms to further narrate my emotional concerns. Realizing this fact, I pushed myself to further develop new work and to let go of old feelings. I was challenged to discover new subjects for inspiration and to develop my style. Overcoming my panic and forgetting painful memories was of great importance. This process caused me to lose my way for a while. It took time to get into stride during this confusing period in my life.

“Our sense of attraction, connection and the beauty we see in and feel about wild nature is not intellectual – it comes built in, deeply imbedded in the very structure of our mind and how it works. It is an intimate part of us. And yet many people have become disconnected from this part of them or have never even opened to experience it... Spending time understanding and feeling this relationship helps you reach a deeper awareness of who you really are. I believe connecting with the natural world is core to our being – a fundamental source for feeling the meaning and joy of being alive.²” - *Allan Hayes*

The above quote expresses how I felt when I began to discover new inspiration for my art work. When I came to America I felt uncomfortable with the endless natural scenery as opposed to being surrounded by the many buildings and people of Seoul in Korea. It took me one year to realize that nature is the fundamental building block and refuge of life. I needed to further understand nature in order to deal with the subject of life and death. Discovering the astonishing abundance of plants was a true inspiration. The internal images of tree trunks and leaves reveal elaborate geometrically shaped cells and uniquely repetitive structural patterns. The repetition and the alternation of cross section of plant forms inspire rhythmic movements. The patterns of symmetry, contrast, proportion and spacing on leaves or the surface of plants create congruency and unity.³ These movements and patterns give inspiration for spiritual creativity. People can learn the meaning of existence, achieve hope for life, and discover love from the creations of the earth.⁴

When I look at a blooming flower, I feel enthusiastic towards exploring the inner

² (<http://www.piecesoftheplanet.com/Pages/Nature,%20Art%20&%20Meaning.htm>)

³ Joan Murray, *FLOWERS J.E.H Mac Donald, Tom Thomson and Group of Seven* (MacArthur & Company, 2002) 6

⁴ Paul Taylor *Dutch Flower Painting 1600-1720* (Yale University, 1995) 31

mysteries of life. Dried plants have strong physical forms and in their special way reveal a deep sense of isolation. In order to bare fruit, plants must progress through many stages of life and different parts of the plants body are required to be sacrificed for the fruit. However, this sacrifice does not signify the end of life, but gives birth to new life. In doing so this process creates the eternal cycles of life. One leaf aides a plant for eternal survival. On earth nativity and death are important and must co-exist for the continuation of life. Nature in all its bounty delivers a message to all people, that life flourishes with sympathy and love.⁵

Experiencing a new culture influenced me to explore different aesthetic properties of art. My artwork evolved slowly helping to cure my emotional wounds. Spending time in nature renews the extrasensory connection with life, and reveals the eternal cycles of life. My view of nature created passion in my soul and was a major factor towards enabling me to transform my artwork. The natural world offers an awe-inspiring power for my new work. Discovering a new artistic theme helped me feel as if I was reborn. The nativity theme is revealed as sprouting plant growth and the blooming of a flower.

⁵ Joan Murray, *FLOWERS J.E.H Mac Donald, Tom Thomson and Group of Seven* (MaArthur&Company, 2002) 80

-Cultural Influence-

My Korean ancestors knew the importance of nature. They enjoyed using nature and landscape as subjects for paintings. When these artists drew natural scenery or plants they not only tried to express the spirit of nature but also the harmony revealed in it. Korean people of virtue opened their souls and cultivated their minds to hear the truths found in nature. Oriental paintings typically use a few simple strokes intended to convey the artist's deep feelings. Korean paintings have evolved steadily throughout history from the three kingdom periods, Goguryeo, Silla, and Joseon, (57 B.C. –. 668 A.D.) to modern times. Korean scholars of art assert that the Goguryeo paintings were dynamic and rhythmic. The 7th century Silla paintings are regarded as more meditative and meticulous, marking the golden age of Korean painting.⁶

I am most influenced by the *Four Gracious Plants* oriental paintings (fig.1). The Four Gracious Plants: plum, orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo, are associated with the seasons. Furthermore, they relate to the character of an honorable individual of virtue. The plum represents courage, which bravely blooms in the cold season to inform people of the arrival of an early spring. The orchid stands for refinement; this flower spreads its a faint fragrance in the deep ravines during the summer months. The chrysanthemum is a representation of constancy, blossoming during the late fall frost. The scent of this gorgeous flower fills the air. The bamboo signifies integrity, which is seen through the permanence of color in its leaves and structure of the trunks throughout the four seasons.

⁶ (http://www.korean-arts.com/about_korean_paintings.htm#The%20History%20of%20Korean%20Paintings)

Ancient Asian people referred to a person who had intellectual ability as an individual of virtue. Being virtuous was the goal of a noble person's life. Four Gracious Plants served as a symbol expressing their wishes and towards achieving intellectual and virtuous character. Thus, when artists drew the Four Gracious Plants, they portrayed the importance of deep spirit, personality, and the beauty of nature. The traditional oriental artist's profound emotion expressed during the creation of the Four Gracious Plants can be captured by using only a few simple strokes. This is accomplished because the simplicity of objects and the beauty of space are vital cultural concepts. Consequently, depending on the speed, placement, pressure, and movement of the brush, the artist's deep feelings are expressed.⁷ There are a number of similarities between the Four Gracious Plants paintings and my artwork including the use of nature as the subject. Furthermore, the movement and direction of lines and harmony with space on Four Gracious Plants paintings greatly influenced my jewelry and sculptural work. The fluid movements of the brush influence the movements of my hammers.

⁷ (<http://wscy.zcu.cz/wscy2003/papers-2003/G31.pdf>)

BODY OF WORK

- Sculpture -

“...I felt a tremendous urge to re-create a new world seen through my own eyes, a world which was entirely mine.”⁸ *Vlaminck*

Nature influences the way that humans think while also to providing basic needs. Humans are one with nature. Through the awareness of the connection between humans and nature, people can learn to live a creative life. Human artistic creativity is similar to the life of nature. Blooming of a flower or the sprouting of a plant can be compared to the birth of a child. While plants endure hardships beneath the ground during the winter, expectant mothers also must tolerate and experience anguish during the metamorphosis of their bodies during pregnancy.

My sculptural forms reflect the exaggerated plant figures that evoke a concept of nativity. My artistic symbolism of the nativity serves as a spiritual messenger for the eternal cycles of life. I hope to express the inner beauty of the plant forms rather than a realistic representation. The Sculptor Henry Moore said that “it is the artist who keeps people’s eyes alert and people’s mind alive to the meaning of nature and to the wonderful variety and synthesis of its shapes and forms.”⁹ I hope my artwork, which is inspired by nature, reveals the importance of nature’s healing powers.

Endurance, suffering, and patience often precede the birth of life. Nature seems to

⁸ Nikos Stangos *Concepts of Modern Art* (HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS, New York, 1974) 16

⁹ Henry J. Seldis *Henry Moore in America* (Praeger Publishers in association with the Los Angeles Country Museum of Art, 1973) 10

be dying during the winter season yet in reality life exist, protected by the ground. The sprouting of new life is reflected in the budding of spring flowers. My reflection of the everlasting cycling of nature is recorded in my artwork.¹⁰

The sculpture pieces engage the progress of growth and consequence of nativity. *Renascence from the panic* (fig.2) reveals the moment of relief as a result of overcoming death. The lower section of the sculpture takes on the form of a dried seed symbolizing desiccated life. However, spiritual life is expressed in the open space regenerating the form so it may give birth to another. Moreover, the sculpture conveys the importance of hope in our lives. *Renascence from the panic, Comprehended dread with self-control* (fig.3) symbolizes the throbbing moment of birth. Though the form of *Comprehended dread with self-control* is slightly transformed and exaggerated, its shape recollects blooming flowers. *Comprehended dread with self-control* shows the development of life within the body. This new life is protected from danger during creation. *Comprehended dread with self-control* (fig.3) symbolizes the sublime moment of a woman giving birth while demonstrating how the pain of childbirth can be a beautiful experience. From the biological point of view childbirth can only be experienced by a female. Though this experience, a strong connection is formed between women and the birthing of life. *Creature comfort* (fig.4) reflects the feeling of relief after giving birth. This work also expresses the warmth felt by embracing a child.

The copper sculptures encouraged the development of surface textures, welding,

¹⁰Kristen Hermanowski *The Liminal self, (Rochester Institute of Technology) March, 2000*

patination, and hammer techniques in order to create works of greater complexity. “Welding is the most common way of permanently joining metal parts. In this process, heat is applied to metal pieces, melting and fusing them to form a permanent bond.”¹¹ Developing tig welding skills for copper was required when I first began making large sculptures. Considerable practice of welding with the copper helped to generate new textures. In the past, I had only used textured hammers to make patterned surfaces. The combination of these techniques created new textural surfaces. Welding copper wires to the surface of the material helped me to draw lines freely on the surfaces of the metal forms. This exciting discovery expressed vitality on the metal surface. An example of this new discovery of surface texturing can be seen in the detail of *Creature comfort*.

The majority of my sculpture and jewelry pieces are formed by using various hammering techniques. When I consider my hammering skills, I can hear the voice of my professor reminding me to “come to know the hammer as a drawing tool, like a pencil or a brush.” Furthermore, he states, “My motive for using the hammer is to draw out the shape and movement of forms. This tool is an extension of my hand... I use the hammer technique for metal work and metal sculpture because of the direct and immediate response towards shaping the metal.”¹² -Leonard Urso The hammering skills allow me to create both sophisticated and simple organic works of art. The progress continually challenged my under-developed hammering skills. Hammering techniques have no limitations toward

¹¹ (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos226.htm>)

¹² (*Korean craft newspaper, may, 2001*)

expressing new forms. Hammered forms are light in weight compared with their size and volume and facilitate the creation of detailed gestural expressions.

In Korea I focused on creating jewelry and sculpture work using the chasing technique. Using steel tools like stamping punches, I selectively formed areas of the metal sheet creating patterns and images. However, after I came to America, I learned the new time-saving technique for hammer forming large sculptural forms. The sculptures are created from flat sheet metal patterns. The sheet metal is annealed and bent into forms after which the seams are welded. The seams and surfaces are then planished with hammers. A three dimensional form is made using raising techniques, which are both innovative and traditional sheet metal applications. Hammers and stakes form the basic shape of the object and the patterns being created on it.¹³ These forming techniques take time to develop for sculptural applications. For this reason, I avoided these applications when I created my early metal sculptures. This was a great learning experience toward the development of my metal artwork.

The sculptural forms of *Renascence from the panic*, *Comprehended dread with self-control*, and *Creature comfort* are formed using hammer techniques. The smaller elements are many small copper cups located inside and around the outside of the sculptural forms. I formed these small cups by cutting various sizes of disks from the copper sheet, forming them on a hydraulic press and bending them by hand. I then soldered each of these cups together forming a highly sculptured surface. The challenge for making these complex and

¹³Heikki Seppa *FORM EMPHASIS FOR METALSMITHS* (The Kent State University Press, 1980)

demanding sculptures tested my patience as though I was experiencing the difficulties giving birth, a challenge the sculptures must overcome in order to achieve successful result.

- Jewelry -

Jewelry and sculpture pieces reflect the transformed plant shapes that evoke a concept of nativity. The use of wires illustrates the linear transitions that continually developed between the decorative parts and main jewelry forms. Moreover, linear applications by using only wires were a consequence of a heightened sensitivity towards expressing organic forms. In the beginning of making the jewelry I found applying wire on the three-dimensional forms easier rather than creating three-dimensional forms using wire fabrication techniques. In my first jewelry piece, *Blooming* (fig.5), the wire had a specific function, enabling the jewelry piece to be worn on the body. I developed the use of wire further in the next jewelry piece titled *Nativity* (fig. 6). In this piece the natural movement of the lines no longer have a specific function. These lines accent the jewelry in an expressive and decorative manner. With time I became confident with the use of wire to create *Sprouting I, II, and III* (figs. 7, 8, and 9).

The influence of the Four Gracious Plant painting is reflected in these jewelry pieces. The changing thickness, movements, and patterns of the lines revealed in the wirework were a result of this influence. The linear qualities express growth and the flow of energy. Oriental paintings exhibit the brush strokes speed, direction, length, and pressure generating vitality for each line. These elements also combine to convey the artist's deep emotion and energy regarding the painted object.¹⁴ In my jewelry, lines symbolize flowing

¹⁴(<http://home.hanmir.com/~yousw/draw/dnan.htm>)

energy as it connects life and death. My jewelry pieces are primarily conceptual. These pieces imply nativity and the harmonization between humans and nature. The concept often is unexpected in the viewer's mind and they appear surprised by the unusual qualities of this jewelry work. When the jewelry forms are displayed on pedestals, viewers interpret them as small sculptures. However, when people wear the jewelry, a true relation is expressed through the connection of the art and the human being.

The series of *Sprouting I, II, and III* expresses vigorous movement, growth, and blossoming. From the aesthetic point of view, the intertwining wires exhibit vitality and imply the creation of giving birth. Oriental people believe that the hands can be used as a medium to extract energy from nature. *Sprouting I* and *II* are jewelry forms intended to be worn on the hands. The hands are symbolic of opening, beginning, and the serving of life. When people wear these jewelry pieces, the wires appear to be winding around the arm from the hand. This placement of wire symbolizes growth and a flow of energy towards the body. *Sprouting III* integrates the blossoming of flowers and seeds. *Sprouting III* becomes an independent life form created from the original bodies of *Sprouting I and II*. This work stands up existing as an individual in preparation for the gift of birth. *Sprouting III* is meant to be worn on the top of the head. I believe that the head is a center of the body. In *Sprouting I and II*, the gems that are incorporated in the jewelry form are representative of flower buds. The titles of these art forms reflect the vibrancy given my jewelry.

White is a vital part of my jewelry concepts that symbolizes the purity of nativity and development of new life. The color white also signifies a new beginning filled with both hope and fulfillment. This color helps me deal with renewing past memories. The

memories of friends and fear are abstractly represented in my current work. Most of my jewelry pieces use only the color white, but occasional parts of the form include variation in color through the use of stones and enameling. The colored jewelry parts reflect the energetic structure, which is found in the buds of plants. The color white can be illuminated in variations way to achieve lighter and darker tonal qualities. Strong movements and dramatic effects are illuminated by these tonal affects. The color of white has powerful characteristics and helps my creative art forms to be seen in a new light.

Glowing (fig.10) and *Blooming* are early jewelry pieces. At that time I struggled to change from my old subject matter, styles, and techniques. This change was scary for me. I became panicked, and lost my way. Addressing this feeling, I worked with scrap metal pieces and began to bend, solder, and rework them unconsciously. I wanted to go back to my former hammering technique and subject matter rather than explore new atheistic directions. However, I knew that I needed to develop a new vision instead of being held back by familiar concepts. I had to purposely avoid these for a while. This period of struggling resulted in the creation of the jewelry piece titled *Glowing*. From the beginning of this project I focused on creating a jewelry piece using wire. *Glowing* exhibits my desire to eliminate hammering skills. Each wire was individually soldered and then bent by hand. Through many trials and mistakes I finally succeeded in making seeds and petals shaped from copper and fine silver wires. The extremely thin colored copper wires created seed forms that are placed in front of this necklace. These wires were soldered and hammered in a dapping block, then bent by hand. The petal shapes made of fine silver on *Blooming* were also created in the same manner as the copper wire forms. When I looked at a seed I

realized that I had discovered a strong, heart felt representation of life. I have often unconsciously avoided observing the wonderful qualities of nature. Expressing the emotions I have towards nature through the use of seeds in the work *Glowing* helps to symbolize the origins of life. *Blooming* expresses the feelings discovered in those first moments of exploring my internal emotions. The blooming of flowers reflects indirectly the creation of art and the development of inspirational ideas. The wire techniques helped to create the new linear jewelry. Using varying thickness of wire creates a more dynamic, rhythmic, and sensitive jewelry form rather than only using the same thickness of wire. The making of tapered wire required rolling the edge of wire in a rolling machine, hammering the wire to make a round-cross section, and then filing, and sanding for refinement. Making tapered wires requires patience and is time consuming. *Sprouting I, II, III, Nativity*, and *Blooming* exhibit the development of working with the wire metal forms. Concentration on these duties resulted in the creation of beautiful and meaningful jewelry.

The power of assemblage is exhibited in life found in nature. The flower garden as a whole is more powerful than a single flower. Movement within the garden reveals a powerful, lively energy that has greatly influences my art experience. The small metal cup shapes which symbolize petals and seeds, were soldered on the surface of the jewelry and sculpture work. These forms, along with the wire, assist in narrating the story of the blooming and sprouting of nativity. These tiny grouped elements work together like flowers in the garden to become the expression of internal movements founded in life.

CONCLUSION

Each artist must pass through the gates that symbolize the challenges they face towards sharing their creative ideas and emotions. Artists face the task of putting their soul into their art and the work created with their hands and this is not easily accomplished. I have worked for over twelve years in metals to reach this accomplishment. Before I came to America, I was self-confident. However, with this confidence came fixed ideas and a set working style. I can clearly recall occasions when my professor expressed his frustration. I panicked as he suggested that I vary my work style and open up to a wider view of the world. I was confused as to how I should begin to change my way of thinking. Self-discipline enabled me to find a new perspective toward the aesthetic nature of my work. Fresh innovative experiences gave new meaning to my artwork, in the same way that nativity creates new life. Observing nature reinforces the importance and power of regeneration. Incorporating plant forms has allowed me to express new ideas through the use of metaphors.

As I look into my past, I feel that the grace displayed in the Four Gracious Plant paintings was unconsciously incorporated into my artwork. Now, I strive to convey the spirit of nature in my work. People often adapt themselves to the natural world and regard nature as their creator. Wisdom must reflect a deep understanding for the greatness of nature. Drawing plant figures and landscapes allows artists to use this wisdom to express their deep emotions and personality. My own work explores the natural movements and variations of line influenced by the Four Gracious Plants painting.

This important, transitional period opened my mind to nature's wonders. I used this discovery for my art. I realized that people need to listen to the inherent messages from nature by observing growth and all of its variations.¹⁵ I feel that a more positive view on life was gained through the healing power of the creation of this body of work titled "Nativity".

¹⁵ Paul Taylor *Dutch Flower Painting 1600-1720 (Yale University, 1995)* 29

Figure 1



Four Gracious Plants paintings

Figure 2



Renascence from the panic

Copper, bronze, fine silver

22" x 26" x 32"

Figure 3



Comprehended dread with self-control

Copper and enamel painting

12" x 12" x 27"

Figure 3



Comprehended dread with self-control

Copper and enamel painting

12" x 12" x 27"

Figure 4



Creature comfort

Copper and oil painting

19" x 10" x 12"

Figure 5



Blooming

Sterling silver and fine silver

4" x 12" x 2"

Figure 5



Blooming

Sterling silver and fine silver

4" x 12" x 2"

Figure 6



Nativity

Sterling and fine silver, pearls

3" x 7" x 3"

Figure 6

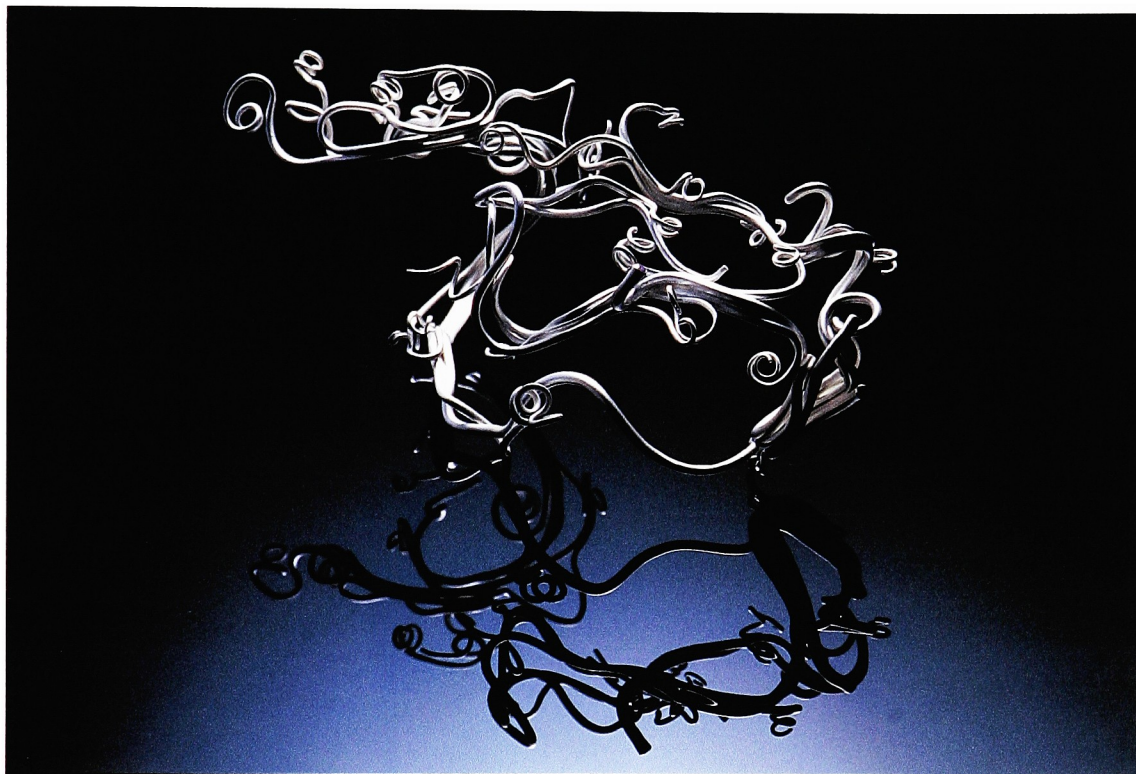


Nativity

Sterling and fine silver, pearls

3" x 7" x 3"

Figure 7



Sprouting I

Sterling silver wires and gems

3.5"x 6"x 3.5"

Figure 7



Sprouting I

Sterling silver wires and gems

3.5"x 6"x 3.5"

Figure 8



Sprouting II

Sterling and fine silver wires and gems

4"x10"x3"

Figure 8

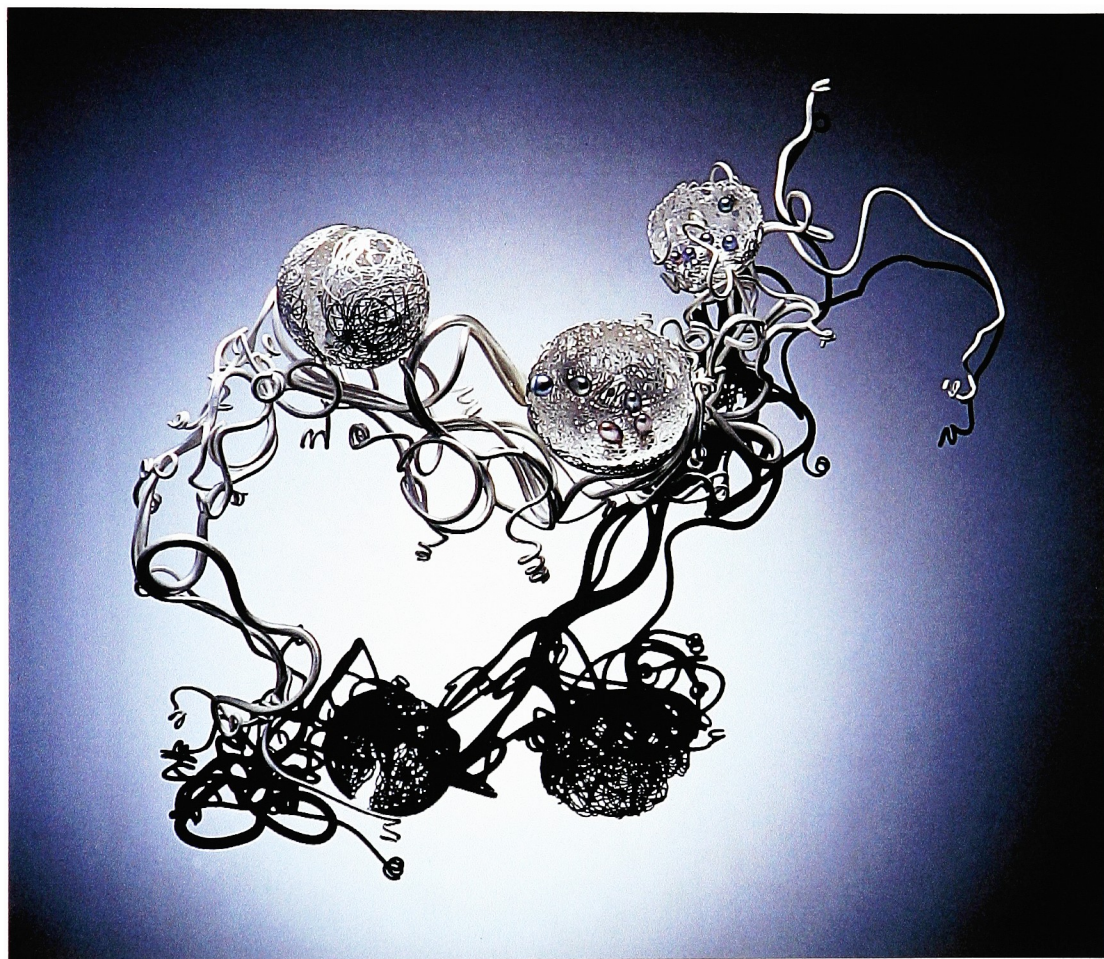


Sprouting II

Sterling and fine silver wires and gems

4"x10"x3"

Figure 9



Sprouting III

Sterling and fine silver wires and pearls

12" x 5" x 4"

Figure 9



Sprouting III

Sterling and fine silver wires and pearls

12" x 5" x 4"

Figure 10



Glowing

Sterling silver and copper wires and enamel painting

10" x10" x 2"

Figure 10



Glowing

Sterling silver and copper wires and enamel painting

10" x10" x 2"

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