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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Fine and Applied Arts  
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

STRUCTURAL METAMORPHOSIS

by

Soo Hong Jahng

May, 1985

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Date: May, 1985                      Soo Hong Jahng

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
List of Plates.....	iv
Thesis Proposal.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Concepts.....	3
Aesthetical Sources and References.....	5
The Work.....	10
Conclusion.....	14
Appendix.....	15
Bibliography.....	16



## LIST OF PLATES

1.	Tiles.....	15" High
2.	Platter.....	17" Dia.
3.	Sculptural Form.....	27" High
4.	Vessel 1.....	30" High
5.	Vessel 2.....	28" High
6.	Vessel 3.....	22" High
7.	Vessel 4.....	23" High
8.	Vessel 5.....	27" High
9.	Vessel 6.....	28" High
10.	Vessel 7.....	27"×18"×18"
11.	Vessel 8.....	34"×21"×13"

## THESIS PROPOSAL

The purpose of this thesis is to make a series of ceramic objects, which are related to structural forms. These forms are strongly connected to biomorphic forms, as well as architecture and the structures of certain machines. These objects might be either sculpture or vessel-related in shape. The clay itself will be treated as a strong but organic framework in which is expressed the objects' inherent vitality. In addition, certain qualities of clay, such as variations in color and texture, and firing methods will be explored in an effective way towards the expression of these ideas.

## INTRODUCTION

Two years ago I came here from Korea to study "new ceramics". New ceramics for me meant low-fire technique, Funk, Pop, flamboyant color, ready-made commercial materials, sensitive reaction to art trends, and diversity of expression. I was anxious to do something new in a new environment, in order to expand my art awareness. I worked in stoneware and porcelain for many years and they are part of a long tradition in Korea; so in this spirit I started working with earthenware.

In the United States I was surrounded by new techniques, new materials, new methods and new concepts. With intense frustration and self-criticism, I had a realization that my expectation of new awareness through new techniques was not possible. Art is beyond technique. The new is not discontinuous from the old. If it is possible "to make a pot that no one had ever seen before", (11:52)\* as if it were made by a Martian, is it meaningful? "Meaning is between the present and the past". (11:52)

Therefore, I looked to the past: my past experiences and works in ceramic history. I tried to find a common

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\*Numbers in parentheses refer to numbered references in the bibliography; those after the colon are page numbers.

thread between my past and present works, and to connect them with my new ideas and environment, and to visualize them in new relationships.

This thesis is a realization of a dialectical process which came about by conflicts between my past and present experiences, and by connections between my old and new perceptions of the visual and intellectual environment.

## CONCEPTS

"The two are the same, But after they are produced, they have different names."  
Lao Tzu (2:97)

Through all my thesis works, my main concern was how to materialize the process of change. Although nothing seems to change for God, everything in the world changes for me. Today's sun is no longer yesterday's. Children grow up and become adults. An old poet sighed, "From year to year flowers are same, year by year men are different."

Our culture has changed generation by generation. "Change is the tradition of society, no matter when or where in the world". (5:9) All things are subject to vicissitude. I am trying to change continuously in order to not stay the same. I am trying to find the changeable in order to find the unchangeable.

Egg/birth/life, a wriggling network of cracks, and color/texture of clay, those were basic elements of my work for years. If meaning is between the present and the past, and if I were a small tooth of a wheel in the universal law or social structure, then my sensations and art making should respond to the environment as it changes.

To me it is important that my work be innovative, but I am more concerned with becoming part of a continuum that reaches backward thousands of years and yet has vitality in the present". (8:22)

I analyzed and synthesized these elements to give visual and conceptual structure to the vessel. Texture became physical structure, while conceptually a pot became a vessel.

The contemporary vessel is an object that presents the formal essence of the pot exaggerated to reveal a personal artistic vision uninhibited by pragmatic issues of function. (9:39)

When texture became a structure, a second wall, separate from the inner wall of the vessel, there was a new space created between the two. This structure became positive space and included real space around itself. Through this structural metamorphosis, I tried to visualize its origin and its energetic gesture of life.

## AESTHETIC SOURCES AND REFERENCES

### 1. Ceramics in History

For years I have been interested in Korean Neolithic Earthenwares. They are plain and humble in shape, but they look natural and generous. They were made with minimal technology as we know it, but are informed by high spirit and insight. I love their earthy color and broad-minded shape.

Silla Earthenwares have open-cuts on their walls. The holes are decorative, but can also be seen as structural and spatial. Some incense burners of Koryo Celadon have double-walled structure with carved outer walls. With these cuts there occurs an ambiguity between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional. Upon first glance they can appear to be two-dimensional and decorative elements on the surface. The longer we look, one realizes that the pattern is a result of light and shadow as it plays off the edge of three-dimensional cuts through the wall. This use of the double wall was fresh to me.

Jomon Earthenwares' projecting parts have open-cuts and these three-dimensional structures are connected with relief patterns on the surface of the pot. This connection between



two-dimensional surface and three-dimensional structure makes a more delicate and complicated contrast of space.

## 2. Nature

As long as art is not an invention of novelty or newness, it must have its origin, root and ground.

Innovation in art is not a matter of new forms; it is a matter of new connections--new insights, new relationships, new thoughts--brought to bear on the timeless human condition. (8:22)

Nature is a treasure house whose door is always open to an artist if he has an eye to find it. Picasso's greatness is not due to his invention of African primitive arts but his eyes to find them. Henry Moore made a statement on the observation of natural objects as follows:

The observation of nature is part of an artist's life, it enlarges his form-knowledge, keeps him fresh and from working only by formula, and feeds inspiration. (1:95)

On the surface of mud, there is endless crack lines. Cracks always fascinate me. In the network of crack lines, there is no center and no direction. They are not at a standstill, they continuously move in all directions, they are alive. To me they are moving structures. They are living structures. They are changing structures.

Sea shells are a special gift of nature. Their variety of shape, color, structure, texture and modes of adaptation seems inexhaustible.



Shells show nature's hard but hollow form and have a wonderful completeness of single shape. (1:95)

For thousands of years the traditional representation of the birth of Venus had depicted the goddess emerging from the shell. Among sea shells, my work can be associated with cone shells. The shell's hard crust is more than a frame of bone. There is a reflection of life in its brilliant color and organic structure. Their forms are more than functional. Frank Lloyd Wright sums up his ideas about shells:

Here in these shells we see the housing of the life of the sea. It is the housing of a lower order of life, but it is a housing with exactly what we lack--inspired form. The beauty of their variations is never finished. It is not a question of principle of design. This multitudinous expression indicates what design can mean. Certainly Divinity is here in these shells in their humble form of life. (7: )

Beneath the surface of the sea a vast intricate web of structural remnants and promontories of living organisms offer other amazing shapes and colors of nature. The coral polyps make the rock come alive. In this aquatic world everything seems to be in motion. The web of promontories of coral reminds me of the network of cracks. They switch their roles in space with each other: from negative to positive, and vice versa. Also in coral we see an ambiguity of the two-dimension to three-dimension. Labyrinths of coral appear almost two-dimensional but it is the result of the building up of structure like coils.

Science makes us have a breathless experience of micro-world as well as macro-world. In the microscopic

world we can encounter the condensed forms of nature and fundamental structures of life. The molecular structure, the double spiral structure of DNA, or the geodesic structure of plankton has its own inevitable form, but how beautiful they are. By exaggerating, magnifying or deforming this microscopic world, we can be faced with a totally surprising structure which is not just a mere enlarged replica but has a different meaning.

### 3. Vitalism

Vitalism, based as it is on nonphysical substances and states of life, is a metaphysical doctrine concerned with the irreducible effects and manifestations of living things. It is the great discovery of twentieth-century sculpture. To vitalist aesthetics embodied in Henry Bergson's *élan vital*, the vital impetus, life is more than a state of material forces, and the sculpture seems not to be carved but to grow from an inner direction. Vitalists believe that behind the appearance of things there is some kind of spiritual essence, a force or immanent being which is only partially revealed in actual living forms. Jean Arp was actually aware of the organic formative processes. "Art is the fruit that grows in man, like a fruit on a plant, or a child in its mother's womb". (1:87)

Ibram Lassaw's rectilinear structures of encrusted lines are hauntingly organic, yet unlike any forms to be found in nature. "To find nature herself, all of her

likenesses must be shattered." (1:104) His 'Kwannon' was made in bronze and silver--very inorganic material, but he gave it life. It changes its shape and movement according to the angle from which we see it.

In this case nature becomes a skeletonized vision of fussed-over, liquified metal, oscillating Zen indeterminacy and a science fiction environment of crystallized plant life. (1:104)

## THE WORK

Before I first built the structure on my work, I was trying to find a clue of this structure from the surface of my pieces. In the geometrical piece (Plate 1), and the thrown piece (Plate 2), I was dealing with the space on the surface of pot. This concept of space was more positive than that of relief, but still dependent on the two-dimensional surface. In the thrown piece I started to cut and peel off the pot's skin and reached the inside structure of pot.

In Plate 3, I built and constructed a skeleton of structure. Its horizontal/vertical frames and surface scorched by the firing reflects the burnt ruin of a living organism. Its outer appearance looks like Gaudi's Casa Milla, but it is static rather than dynamic.

At this point, I was working seriously to find the connection between the past and the present.

The past gives the new its context; we can not know what is new, unless we know what is old. (8:21)

I looked backward to Neolithic Earthenware, cracks, and textures, and I found connection to the structure of shell, coral, DNA, and plankton.

I returned back to earthenware form with a wide rim and narrow bottom. I peeled off the skin and removed the muscles of the pot to reveal the skeleton (Plate 4). Oblique lines create movement, and open-cuts in the wall overlap and make an optical effect. Furthermore, at this stage, some structural and visual combinations were considered: form of a cone shell and texture of corla, structure of a shell and form of a fruit, geometric form and organic structure, as well as color contrast of inside and outside.

Plate 5 has cone shell's shape and coral's texture and worm-like open-cuts. As a whole, it has a smooth earthy color. But the fluorescent green color around the open-cuts gives them strong contrast and a dazzling effect as if the inner energy erupts to the outside through its wall. In order to get full effect, it is important this piece is lit from the inside.

In Plate 6 we see a deformation and mixture of a cone shell and a fruit shape. It is built with double walls. The outer wall is added with coils and later carved. The spiral structure whirls around the whole piece and dazzles a viewer's eye. Shiny and wet color of the inside suggests a living organ, while the earthy and dry surface of the outer structure suggests a protecting shell.

While making the two pieces above, I spent a lot of time trying to make a supporting base which did not interfere with the view of the completed piece. Partially, I



solved this problem by using a transparent plexiglass base. When I made it out of clay, it did not work well. Because it was impossible to make it transparent. Even if I carved a lot of open-cuts, the remaining ceramic structure blocked the view of the pointed end of the piece.

Leaving this problem unsolved, I considered ways of making self supporting structures. I made a piece with a horizontal axis instead of a vertical one (Plate 7). To avoid the appearance of a cross section of a sphere, I made the rim bumpy and uneven. This broad rim makes the piece look massive and conveys inner vitality to outer structure.

With Plate 8 I hoped the convex fluted form would express a sense of inflating. With thick red cracks of glaze of inside, this piece looks massive and full of energy. This mysterious energy spreads out through the trembling open-cuts and invites a viewer to explore its inner space.

In Plate 9 I tried a new solution to the problem of support. This base is not a mere support, but should function to enhance the movement of structure and energy of the whole piece. The big and horizontal hemisphere base absorbs spirits from the ground and a long vertical standing body emanates aura in all directions. Through open-cuts in the surface of the base, a viewer has an irresistible curiosity to see somewhat enigmatic transformation of energies from ground to space.

When several cone shapes are combined into one piece (Plate 10), what feeling do we have from this multi-structural piece? Each cone has its own spiral structure. Movement is best represented by helicoidal forms. Many trees grow in spiral fashion. Creeping vines twist along a helicoidal path. In this piece the structure is organized randomly rather than geometrically. Cones meet each other in opposite directions. The overlapping cones express unfettered energy.

The landscape-like angular forms of Plate 11 makes the inside of this piece a strong contrast to the curved and meandering outer structure. This landscape changes according to the point of view. At the bottom there are three open spaces. A viewer encounters the contradiction produced by these various depths of space. Unlike Wayne Higby's illusionistic landscape, I am dealing with a real three-dimensional landscape. But like him, I am interested in "imagery as a vehicle for my thinking". (10:35)

## CONCLUSION

In this body of work I tried to materialize the vitality of vessels in accordance with the transitional process of structures. I devoted myself to create "the true plastic metaphor" (6:188), not the conceit or mimeticism of nature. Beyond the works dealt with in this thesis, there lie many possibilities to be explored.

For me the materials and processes were new in fashion. This has allowed me to enter new worlds and to open new vision. At this very moment, I am still not sure that I achieved the awareness and realization in response to my new environment. Paradoxically, I enjoyed this painful process of my personal and artistic awareness.

I will keep on finding the changeable, and changing myself in order to find the unchangeable. "Everything accomplished is firm ground for another beginning". (8:22) Viewed in this light, a theorem becomes another hypothesis, and a tradition becomes another innovation.



## APPENDIX

### Earthenware sculpture body\*

Red art	45
AP Green	15
Fibrous wallastonite	10
Talc	10
Grog	15
Sand	5
	<u>100</u>
add: Fiber glass	1 cup

### White slip

EPK	25
OM #4	25
Flint	20
Talc	5
Zincopax	5
	<u>80</u>

### Water blue glaze

Frit 3110	77
Gerstely Borate	6
Flint	10
EPK	7
	<u>100</u>
add: Copper Carbonate	4

### Otto's crackle glaze

White lead	60
Custer	20
Barium carbonate	10
EPK	5
Cornwall stone	5
	<u>100</u>
add: Chrome oxide	6 for red
Lead chromate	4 for yellow

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\*All formulas pertain to cone 03-04 firings.

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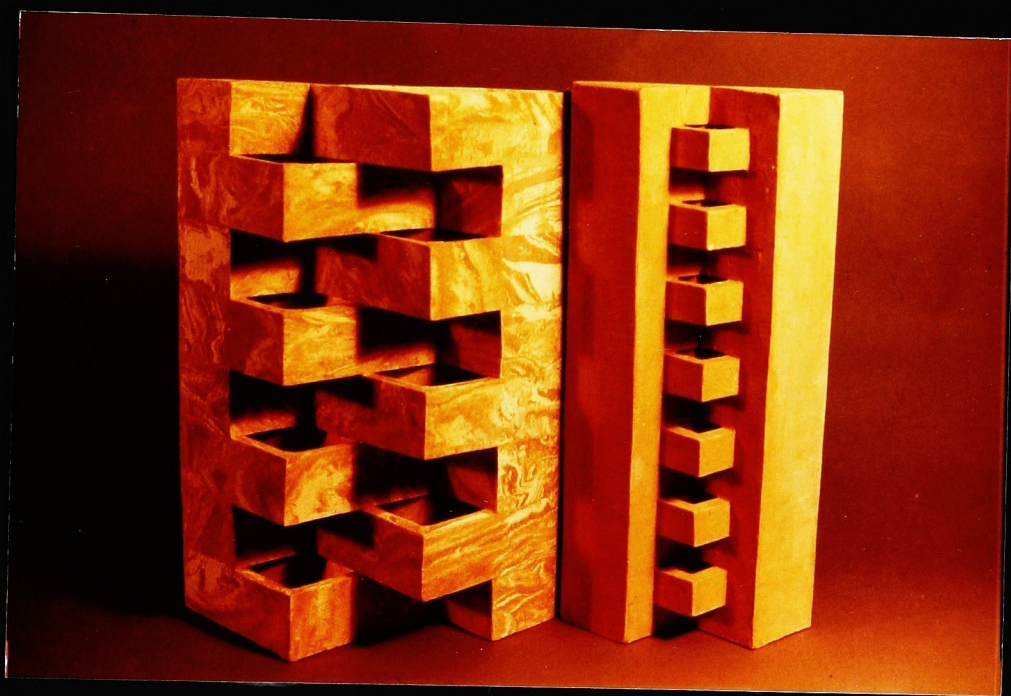


Plate 1





Plate 2

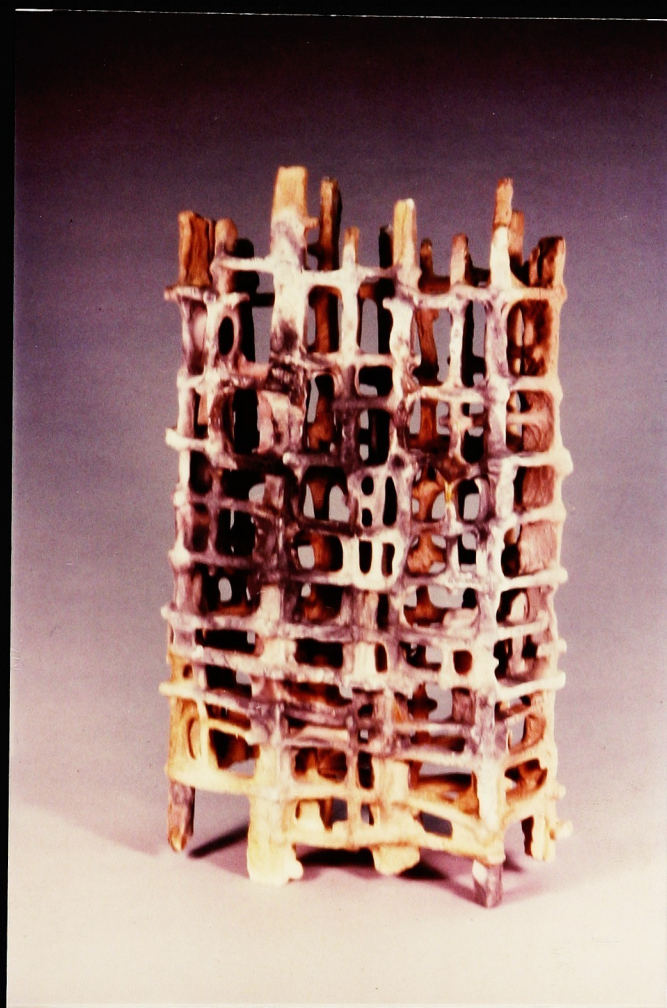


Plate 3



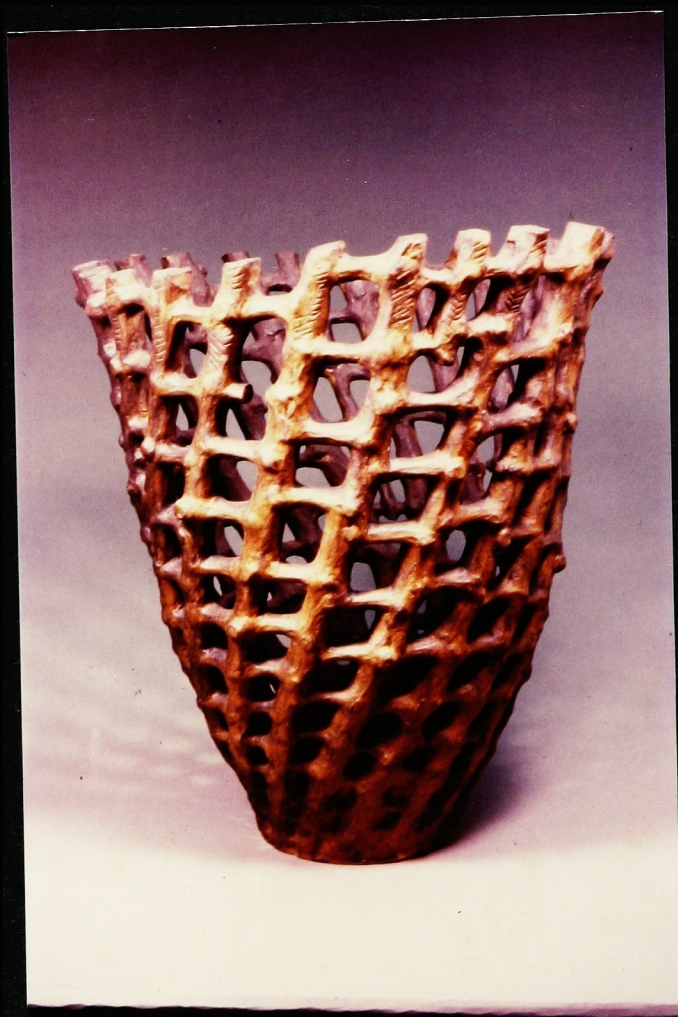


Plate 4



Plate 5





Plate 6





Plate 7



Plate 8





Plate 9



Plate 10





Plate 11

