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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

Conversation with my Art on Self- Expression

by

Yeo-Jung Chung

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my faculty advisers for helping me to discover myself. I also wish to thank my family for their continuous love and support. I remember my professor's saying when I went abroad for study; "Take yourself! Take what you have made and take what you have in your mind." These words have left a lasting impression on me and are in part the reason I feel compelled to create.

INTRODUCTION

“I am simple” is more than just a saying, it is a way of life. As a person, I try to live a moderate life. Simplicity in life does not however lead to a monotonous nor empty experience. Refinement, comprehension and balance can result from simple experiences. The spiritual experience helps me to create art that is untainted by unnecessary distraction.

My thesis body of work requires that I address my personal world at a beginning from where sensations lead to intellectual knowledge. This way results in the revelation of honest, simplistic detail drawn from life. These details help to reveal meaningful symbolic stories. Each work of art in my thesis is unique in regards to its situation yet shares a common objective as expressed through common everyday objects.

The creation art forms require that I demonstrate the mastery of a variety of metal craft skills. Techniques such as hollow forming, fabrication, surface embellishment and patination play an essential role in the magnification of my art forms.

Everyday objects are the inspiration for my thesis art forms. These objects are projected as functional containers from which symbolic message are revealed. These important messages convey the truth of my experience with a serious illness and help to generate a conversation between the artist and the viewer.

We often do not realize the value found in common objects. These objects are of special value, as they appear frequently in our daily lives. Seamlessly disappearing into the landscape of our everyday environment, I chose to transform this value into aesthetic and artistic importance.

The common objects that I choose for my art are seemingly trivial forms such as cans, envelopes, as a simple box or a lipstick container. All of these forms act as a container in which my personal experiences are made present.

I found revealing my personal suffering resulting from my illness to be most difficult. Art seems to be the best way to honestly address the truth of this pain. Making of my art

seems to fulfill a role for self confession. A confession that is resolved through the use of my hands.

THESIS STATEMENT

Personal growth and maturity accompany aging as a result of growing older; a person becomes empowered with the ability to better examine their situation. This self examination requires discipline and strength.

Aging is a journey along which we must make choices and embrace change. People empower themselves when they are able to overcome the fears that accompany introspection. Pain often accompanies us on this journey and as Benjamin Franklin says, "Those things that hurt, instruct."¹

In my life I have come to observe the beauty of everyday objects. As an artist I use these objects in my work and infuse personal symbolic meanings within the forms. Sketches and models of these common objects result in the creation of three dimensional sculptural container forms.

¹ www.wholefamily.com/aboutyourkids/bridge_pages/wisdom_of_the_ages.html

INTERPRETATION OF CONTAINERS

From the human Stone Age to the present day variety of containers have occupied a central role in our culture. Historically, jars, boxes, chest and jewelry forms have been created by craft artists for these purposes.

Earthenware, stone and natural container forms in the early years of our civilization were used to perform spiritual rite, storage and carrying liquids. However, “when humans learned agriculture and settled in one place, earthenware has developed not only utility but also beauty of sculpture.”²

The crafting of container forms has evolved and differed over time. The hand crafts are present in early forms. We can observe through time an evolution towards manufactured forms from which many everyday objects now result. The container has also experienced the adoption of a variety of materials such as clay, wood, paper, metal, glass, plastic and synthetic fibers. Each material contributes unique characteristics to the way that containers are colored, shaped, embellished, valued and used.

The importance of a container function is essential for my work. When I was a young child, I would keep valuable things in a special box. I cherished this box and would wrap it as though it were a present, thus enhancing it with special feelings. These feelings conveyed for me a sense of wonder. I am not alone in how I view special containers as all cultures and individuals often place special value to these forms in my art works as interpretations of everyday objects. Expectantly, I long for discovering what strong senses I have in my art world.

They are many reasons I have decided to create art using container forms as a vehicle to express personal feelings and my illness. Containers have served both a personal and artistic purpose in my life. In addition, they have played an important role in the evolution of my metal craft.

²O-Young Lee, Things Korean, (Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1999) 128.

I have gained a better understanding of metal techniques while crafting these container forms. Techniques such as hinge making, modeling, surface decoration, fabrication, soldering and measuring have required that I achieve greater accuracy with my hands. I was also challenged to find better engineering and finishing solutions so to adequately depict a strong likeness in the metal forms. Surface embellishment played an important role in helping to generate a meaningful symbolic language on the surface of the forms. According to Tim MaCreight, “we might admire a candle stick simply by looking, but we are compelled to pick up a box or locket and open it perhaps it is the toy-like action of a catch and hinge, or the mystery of wondering what might be inside. Perhaps our fascination comes in part from other experience”³

Everyday objects are the subjects that I have chosen for my container art forms. Many of these objects are themselves containers from which their original function plays an important role in my art.

³ Tim MaCreight, Boxes & Locketts, (Madison, Wisconsin: hand books Press, 1997) 6

POP ART

I strongly believe that pop art was the most extraordinary art innovation of the 20th century. Pop culture has prompted me to create my current art work which is meant to engage both the maker and viewer. In addition, I was stimulated to address the relationship between art and business.

As a student, I have given consideration to both Neo-Dada and Pop art philosophies. They are similar in that they both use popular imagery and forms with a “Ephemera”⁴ of everyday life. Both art forms rebelled against an accepted artistic style as a result brought art back towards a reflection of everyday life. This image of life reflected a popular culture. A television, comic and magazine culture from which people remained in touch with current events.

Neo-Dada and Pop art, though similar, had different perspectives. Pop art “instead of rejecting mainstream understandings of mass consumption, or seriously undermining them.”⁵ took its own unique path.

Jasper Johns created *Flag on Orange Field*. (Fig. 1) to which Time magazine reported in 1959 ‘His heart belongs to Dada’ and “John’s ironic paintings raised questions about the sanctity, and integrity, of this US symbol and by extension, the nation itself.”⁶ Is this a flag or a picture of a flag? Does this painting symbolize freedom or repression? The position of this work underscores the critical artistic concern of Neo-Dada.

On the other hand, Andy Warhol, a pop artist, used popular images descriptively on the canvas. His *Campbell’s soup* series (fig. 2) clearly depicts his artistic position. His repetitions use of a popular image defied any uniquely original characteristics. Andy Warhol treated art with a pleasure directed towards and derived from recycled daily

⁴ Adam Gopnik & Kirk Varnedoe Modern Art and popular culture, (New York: Abrams in Association with the Museum of Modern Art, 1990) 154

⁵ Gopnik & Varnedoe 154

⁶ Gopnik & Varnedoe 143

products. This denial of spiritual or philosophically endowed art forms created a new form for artistic expression.

Pop art is an art form made recognizable to the common person. The viewer can easily reflect upon everyday images. Art culture at that time defied the position for being revered as a status symbol. Referencing middle-class symbolism one collector remarked in the mid 1960s that pop painting and sculptures were 'like IBM stock...'⁷

As a result of these artistic influences I made the decision to address the contemporary art form through the use of common objects. I accept that my new work denies tradition. I am now able to close the gap between life and art. Common objects allow me to create a personal expression that is accessible. The use of distinctive images such as cans or envelopes which are products of mass production has created vehicles for my art subjects. Ordinary subjects carry a great deal of aesthetic and artistic value, thus allowing me as an artist to connect real life and art.

⁷ Gopnik & Varnedoe 155

INSPIRATIONAL ARTISTS

I create containers representing common objects from everyday life. I am inspired to choose simple common objects as vehicles of expression stemming from the influence of two artists, Claes Oldenburg and Wook-Jin Chang. These artists create art as both sculpture and painting responding to their immediate recognition and familiarity with common forms.

The work of Claes Oldenburg, a master artist integrates everyday objects in themes that communicate the relationship between life and art. His art serves as an inspiration for the aesthetic evolution of my art forms.

Perhaps more than other contemporary artists, Oldenburg has defined our notion of public art. He has taken familiar objects and transformed them into monumental sculptures which often generate controversy. As a result, the public frequently comes to enjoy, question and embrace the art works. Oldenburg's the fifty-one-foot-long "Spoon Bridge and Cherry" (fig. 3) in Minneapolis and thirty-nine-foot-tall "Inverted Collar and tie" (fig. 4) in Frankfurt, are examples which encourage my whimsical feelings transformed by familiar objects. I think that Oldenburg's large scale everyday objects address the dynamic aspects of popular forms so that people can easily develop a connection to the art. My art work is not as large as the scale of Oldenburg's work yet I also choose to reflect the importance of common everyday objects.

In 1995 as a freshman in college, I went to visit Wook-Jin Chang's retrospective art exhibition in Korea. This was the first time I had seen his paintings. While looking at Chang's work, I became attracted to his world of charm, and his conceptual paintings left a deep impression on me. His paintings are similar to children's books without being redundant or overly expressive. Chang's pursuit was to achieve spiritual freedom relating to life. Through my art I would like to reflect upon a simple honest philosophy on life. My art work should project a somewhat naïve and unsophisticated approach like that of Wook-Jin Chang's.

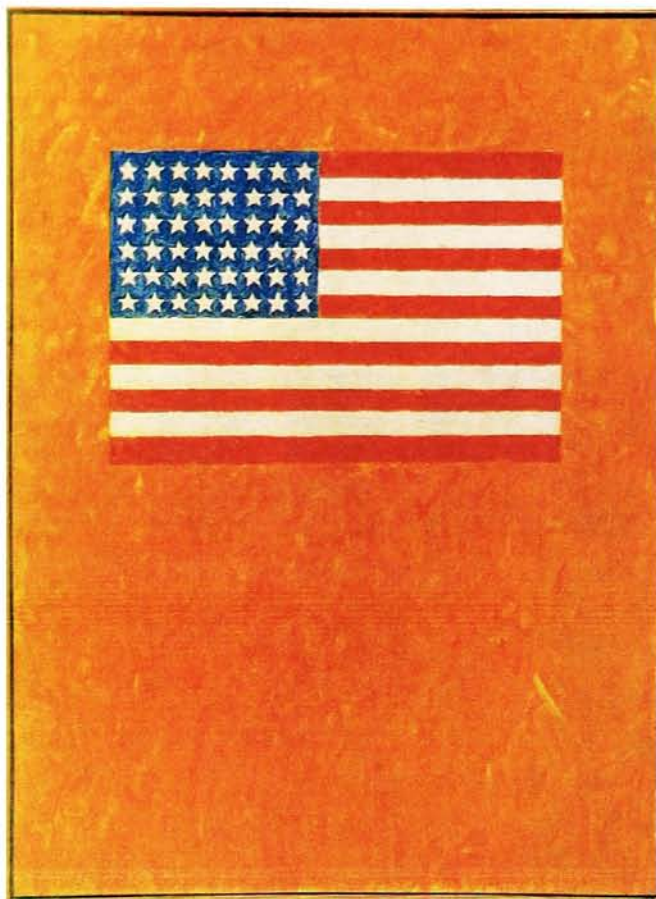
I think that “*Face*” (fig. 5) and “*Green tree*” (fig. 6) express Chang’s thoughts of a pure and simple life. “*Face*” exhibits the highest accolade of simplicity and represents a child’s large open face, utilizing red and pink as the painting’s primary color. Chang expresses his desire to fly like a bird as he refers to reflecting time. Round tree and bird images are his trademark I see these symbolizing a way of life, reflecting the Buddhist belief regarding reincarnation. The Buddha’s concept of reincarnation and human life repeat the life cycle of birth and death. The circular shaped round tree arouses my sympathy with Buddhism. Chang was quoted by a journalist saying, “I do not have any greed because my own body is heavy enough, why should I burden it with wishes? I prefer lightness.”⁸ I am eager to live a simple life, one with my spiritual life. I desire that my art be untainted by distracting thoughts.

⁸ Hyung-Kok Kim Chang, Wook-Jin (artist who would like to be a bird), (Seoul: Namoo, 2003) 3.

RECOLLECTION

I died and somehow returned to life. Although I am only 27-years old, I have already come to view life as a long journey. Five years ago, I suddenly felt a stabbing pain in my lungs and bronchi. Up to that time I lived an active life and I frequently went mountain climbing. Suddenly I contracted an unknown life debilitating illness and my doctor made a wrong diagnosis. From that point, my life has totally changed. I was hospitalized often and forced to stop all my studies for one year because of this unknown illness. The doctor asked my parents to pray for me. I desperately fought to survive. For a while, I allowed fear, horror, and grief to take over my life. Although I was constantly in pain, the greatest difficulty I suffered was the fear of death. The doctors could not diagnose my disease. This trying experience allowed me to reach a truly optimistic view of my life. I tenaciously sought life with my conviction. Thankfully from this journey I have learned to embrace life and all that life offers especially the seemingly trivial things.

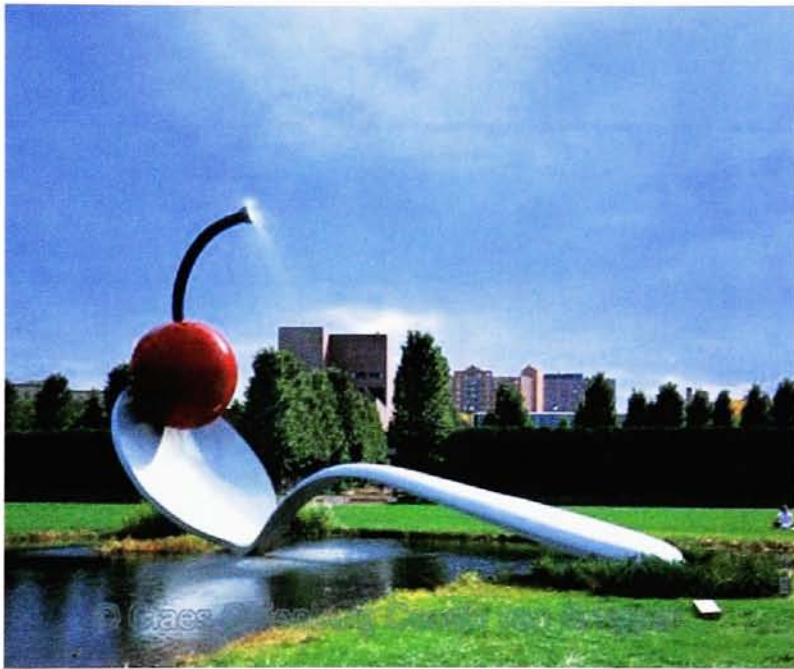
As a result, my art works portray how my life changed from a negative to a positive experience. Channeling this gift of awareness born from my past illness, my work is the result of both the pain and joy I have been fortunate enough to experience. Often a tragedy provokes insight. In my situation, the illness I endured allowed me to question the obvious. I had allowed myself time for reflection and meditation. Appreciating not only life itself but commonly overlooked details that make up this life. My experience was a humbling passage. When I decided to go abroad for studies, the doctor objected because he said that I may become seriously ill again. After two years, I sent an e-mail, "I am still alive."



Jasper Johns
Flag on Orange Field
Encaustic on canvas
66X49 inch



Andy Warhol
Campbell's soup
35"x23"
Screen print



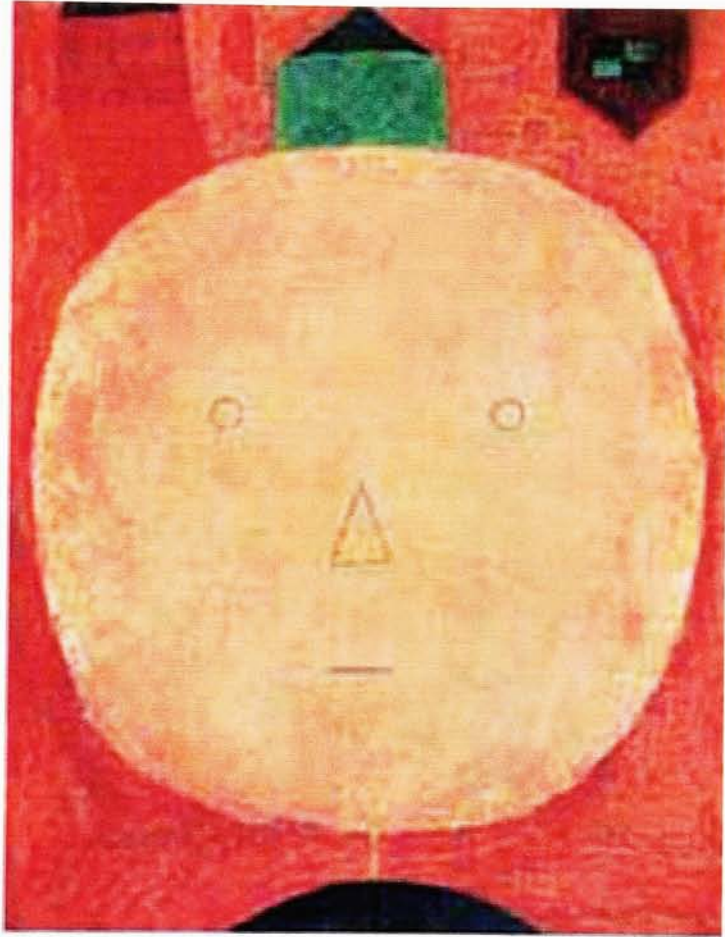
Claes Oldenburg
Spoon Bridge and Cherry
29 ft. 6 in. x 51 ft. 6 in. x 13 ft. 6 in. (9 x 15.7 x 4.1 m)
Stainless steel and aluminum painted with polyurethane enamel



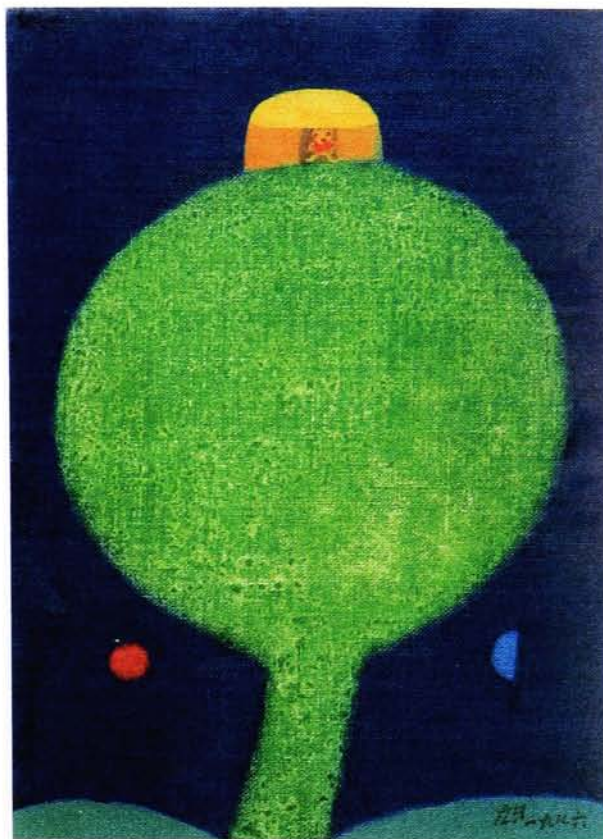
Claes Oldenburg

Inverted Collar and Tie

Steel, polymer concrete, fiber-reinforced plastic; painted with polyester gel coat
39 ft. x 27 ft. 9 in. x 12 ft. 8 in. (11.9 x 8.5 x 3.9 m)



Wook -Jin Chang
Face
Oil painting
4X4 inch



Wook- Jin Chang
Tree
Oil painting
3.35X2.44 inch

PAIN AND DREAMS

This work portrays my recollections of continual hospitalization, suffering in the institutionalized environment and hospital diet. Meal times were difficult as all of the patients were sat facing one another as they ate. I found it impossible to enjoy my food. Sometimes, I dreamt about eating a large dose of medicine off my plate rather than rice.



PAIN AND DREAMS
SILVER, COPPER, NICKEL SILVER
5X5X4/3, 1.5X1.5X2 (INCH)

IRONY

Lipstick has traditionally held many sexual connotations. I had to be sure this perceived image was not a distraction from what I was expressing in this composition. Women apply lipstick and color their lips for several reasons. I considered this use an easy way to disguise what was happening inside my mind.

I created this lipstick intending it to represent a very private object. Due to my illness I am restricted in my breathing. I like so many others am tempted and intrigued by that which I cannot have, no matter how illogically destructive something may be. Therefore, the lipstick acts as a camouflage vehicle for a hazardous vice or habit. In this case hidden are the cigarette and candle.



IRONY

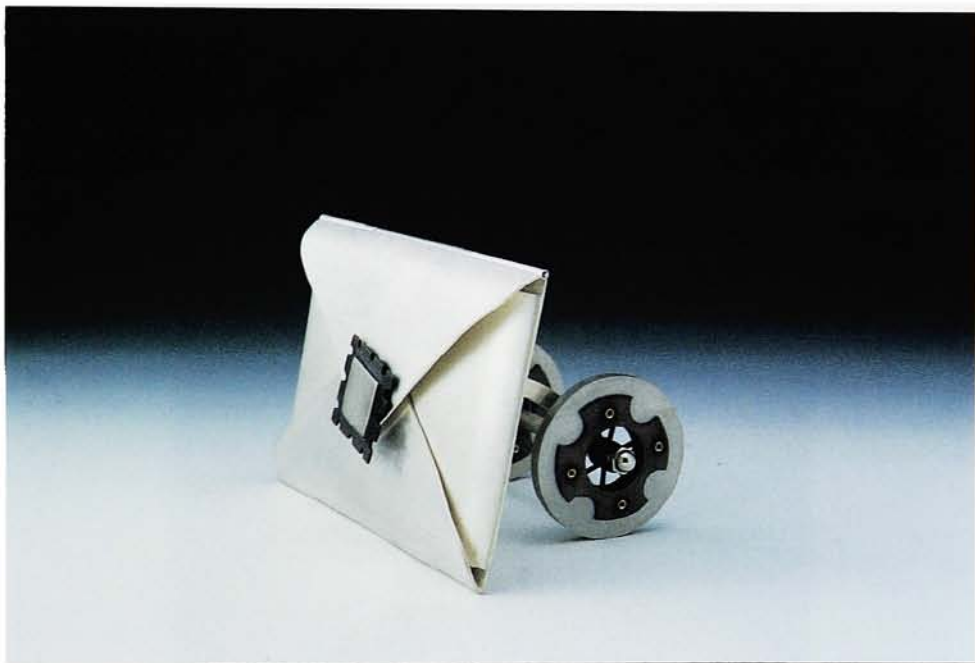
ALUMINUM, STEEL, COPPER, SILVER, BRASS, GARNET
1X1X3, 4/3X4/3X3.5 (INCH)

DESIRE

In my art the envelope represents a priceless life and reflects my mother's long cherished desire for my good health. I have come to realize the power of my mother's prayers and come to view the characteristics of the simple way in which an envelope is folded with great regard.

The envelope is a sectioned sheet of paper, folded over onto itself, shaped with resilient corners. This envelope might deliver hopes, dreams, and promises sent across the world. I consider the envelope a perfect design for transporting information. On a personal level my family's prayers, good energy and spirit were the messages delivered in this folded form. A letter or message sent in an envelope is guaranteed to arrive safely, escaping damage while in transport.

The vehicle of the letter is based on the fact that letters carry a message, often that of good news. The leaves in this composition symbolize energy and life sustaining water as they help me breathe and help me to recognize that I am alive. As I only wish to send good news, I have enclosed a charm and meditation beads similar to the ones my mother prayed with during my almost fatal illness.



DESIRE
SILVER, COPPER, ALUMINUM, BRASS
2.5X5X4 (INCH)



DESIRE
SILVER, COPPER, ALUMINUM, BRASS, PEARL
5X3X3.5 (INCH)

PESSIMISM

My favorite leisurely activities were watching cartoons and reading comic books. Through this work, I represent useless, nominal life. The empty tin can and leftover fish bone are viewed as waste. Fish live under water and breathe through their gills and though I breathe air not water, I sometimes feel as though I am like a fish out of water. Nevertheless, I try to deal with my illness lightheartedly because I don't want to be pessimistic towards my life. I also incorporated medicine, symbolizing a mental refuse from the bad memories I associate with being ill.



PESSIMISM
SILVER, COPPER, ALUMINUM
2.5X2.5X4, 3X3X2 (INCH)

REVITALIZATION

Desperate to try any and all remedies, I drank many herbal teas so as to take away the pain in my body. Antioxidants found in tea leaves aid in oxygenating the tissues in the body. On each element, various herbal symbols are carved on the surface. Tea revitalizes the body allowing an alternative to chemical remedies.



REVITALIZATION
SILVER, COPPER
1 4/1X1 4/3X 4/1, 1 8/1X1 8/7x8/1(INCH)

NIRVANA

Up to this point, I have reflected upon what little control, disappointment, frustration and the physical limitations of my illness. However, in this final composition, I refer to the old saying “A misfortune turns into a blessing.” I presume that perhaps my situation was a chance to discover myself.

I entitle this work Nirvana⁹. During my suffering, I discovered faith as a way out. According to the Buddha, the concept of reincarnation of humankind endlessly repeats the life cycle of birth and death. One existence in life is defined by our behavior. In other words, it is Karma¹⁰ that we are born in the world of good and evil by virtue of good and evil. I started reading the Sutra and learned more about Buddha and reflected on my way of life and Buddhist principle. Buddha says, “No possession on me” in the book, “the Maha Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra.” while reading this book I realized how foolish my ideas on life have been.

There is a bird in this composition which represents my rising above the world, eager to enter Nirvana as defined by Prajna Paramita¹¹, thus attaining Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi¹². I no longer worry and I am not pessimistic towards myself or others. Simply, I live the best I can until I am finished with this and then I will join the other world and dwell in Nirvana.

⁹ Nirvana

There are two definitions from Buddhism and Hinduism

First, the ineffable ultimate in which one has attained disinterested wisdom and compassion.

Second, an ideal condition of rest , harmony, stability, or joy

¹⁰ Karma

The total effect of a person's actions and conduct during the successive phases of the person's existence, regarded as determining the person' destiny.

¹¹ Prajna Paramita means completion of wisdom

¹² Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi means the highest state of enlightenment.

The Maha Prajna Paramita hrdaya Sutra

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva¹³
 when practicing deeply the Prajna Paramita
 perceives that all five skandhas are empty
 and is saved from all suffering and distress.

Shariputra,
 form does not differ from emptiness,
 emptiness does not differ from form.
 That which is form is emptiness,
 that which is emptiness form.

The same is true of feelings,
 perceptions, impulses, consciousness.

Shariputra,
 all dharmas are marked with emptiness;
 they do not appear or disappear,
 are not tainted or pure,
 do not increase or decrease.

Therefore, in emptiness no form, no feelings,
 perceptions, impulses, consciousness.

No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind;
 no color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch,
 no object of mind;
 no realm of eyes
 and so forth until no realm of mind consciousness.

No ignorance and also no extinction of it,
 and so forth until no old age and death
 and also no extinction of them.

No suffering, no origination,
 no stopping, no path, no cognition,
 also no attainment with nothing to attain.

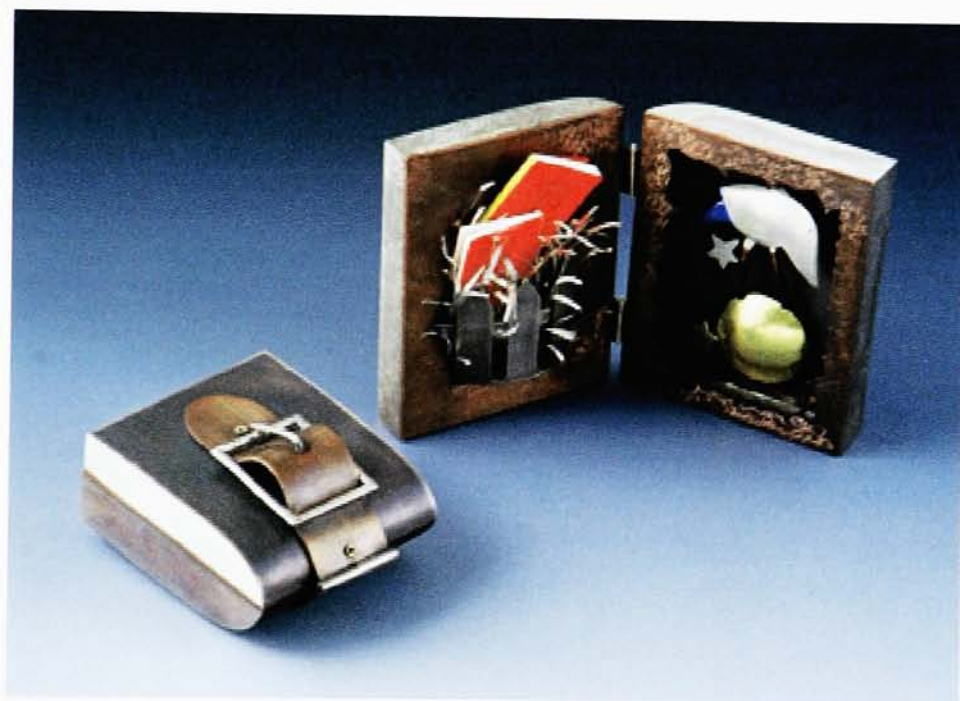
¹³ Avalokitesvara: Goddess of Mercy

The Bodhisattva depends on Prajna Paramita
 and the mind is no hindrance;
 without any hindrance no fears exist.
 Far apart from every perverted view one dwells in Nirvana.

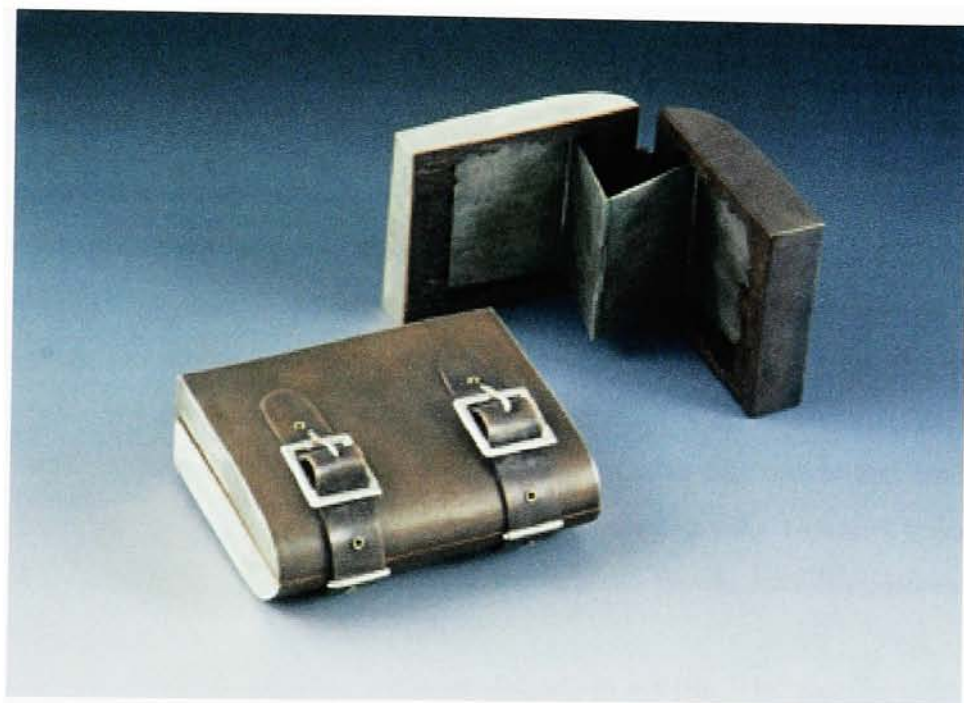
In the three worlds
 all Buddhas depend on Prajna Paramita
 and attain Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi.

Therefore know that Prajna Paramita
 is the great transcendent mantra,
 is the great bright mantra,
 is the utmost mantra,
 is the supreme mantra
 which is able to relieve all suffering
 and is true, not false.
 So proclaim the Prajna Paramita mantra,
 proclaim the mantra which says:

gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha
 gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha
 gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.



NIRVANA
SILVER, COPPER, BRASS,
4X3X1, 2.5X2.5X1 (INCH)



NIRVANA
SILVER, COPPER, BRASS,
4X3X1, 2.5X2.5X1 (INCH)

CONCLUSION

“I am simple” is a statement that fundamentally defines my life goal to live an unadorned life. My philosophy is to represent simple observable facts and realistic details. I am eager to achieve simplicity in my art work by excluding extraneous elements. My objective is to reveal the common everyday experiences. This insight inspires me to live in this world. Though my art works lend themselves to a wide range of interpretation, there are several significant motives. One of my major concerns is to depict spiritual ideologies that I have gained through life experience.

A common thread found throughout this body of work is the use of everyday objects depicted as containers which faithfully engage life through art. Through the study of common objects, I discovered that trivial forms can be valuable assets for art. I choose one of my common forms in order to encapsulate my feelings and experiences in life. These containers manifest themselves as my art forms.

My work responds to the influences of pop art, influential artists and my medical illness. Denying customary artistic applications elevates everyday common objects as an art form. It is along these lines that Claes Oldenburg and Wook- Jin Chang act as spiritual supports, inspiring me to pursue the truth.

Each of my art pieces reflects a different episode in my life. The specific value of each piece is determined by what I place in the containers. Examples of these special inserted details are my mother's rosary in an envelope, inserting useless medicine in a can, or useful herbs in a metal tea bag, and a cigarette or candle in the lipstick container. Every work takes on a different self-confession which I visually realize through the play of my hands. These works portray how my life changed from a negative to a positive. Again, my goal is to live an unadorned life. I would like to exhibit the simplicity found in nature, the influence of culture, artists and spiritual experiences. Expressive artistic acts are difficult to perform because they are acts of confession.

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