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Mapping of Memories

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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School for American Crafts

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In Ceramics

Mapping of Memories

by *Yoonjee Kwak*

May 14th, 2014

Thesis Abstract

In this thesis body of work, I will explore the relationship between the medium of clay and myself. I will use clay to represent and record the traces of my memories. Clay allows me to tell the story of my memories that are left behind from diverse and unpredictable relationships between myself and others. In my work there is a direct relationship between the forms I construct and the inspirations behind the work. For example, I clearly remember when my father was in hospital toward his final stages of illness. I had always remembered him as being physically, a very strong person while in front of me, he was getting weaker and weaker.

I will be making vessels(containers) that capture my emotional memories from this time. My memories will be expressed by using precarious and fragile forms. These memories can be represented in my work through exploration of the duality between weakness and strength. The body of work is composed of sculptural vessels. I use this form to represent human beings as iconic symbols of the Korean culture. In Korea, when people talk about someone's personality, we often use "*vessel(container)*" as a metaphor of one's spirit of tolerance. For instance, when we talk about someone who is very generous or broad-minded, we say, "His *vessel* is big". The structure of the vessel that gradually widens from a narrow base symbolizes human relationships; people can have deep or shallow relationships, or have both relationships at the same time. I will explore this theme through forms that are derived from minimalism, nature and geometry. I will use hand-building techniques, because the marks left by the fabricating process is very direct and leaves evidence of my physical interactions with clay.

Thesis source and research

My work started with my father's influence on me. He was the most broad-minded person I have known and an ideal role model. Both in his private and professional life he was an exemplary person; he was greatly admired by his family and colleagues and respected for his diligent nature and strength of character. As the Managing director of an influential electronics-manufacturing firm he was a reliable man who remembered every person's name and took care of his staff. Although he was passionate about his work, his first priority was his family. He was particularly close to me and we bonded through the years. As our relationship developed we became more like friends than a parent and child. He always listened to me and helped to quell my anxiousness of academic concerns. He taught me many lessons about how to best live in this world. He especially focused on teaching me how to maintain neutrality and objectivity in thought, and he demonstrated the essential importance of keeping good relationships with people. At the close of all our conversations, he would always say to me, "To be a great person, you should strive to have a big *vesse/* and learn how to use in proper way." In my childhood, I could not understand the meaning of what he said, but as I grew older, I began to understand the meaning of the sentence. I have realized today that my family and I had been protected by a *vesse/* we knew as 'father'. Thanks for my father's sacrifice, my family and I could live an affluent life and learn many wise lessons for living in this world.

One day, my father who seemed endlessly strong and eternal to me, suddenly fell ill because of a stroke while at work. Due to the stroke, he was unable to speak a word and became dramatically feeble and passed away in a week. At the huge shock of the unexpected death of my father, I could not even cry, but tried to accept the reality by just seeing my father's cold body who was always warm, physically and mentally strong. While I looked down at his body, my mind was flooded with thoughts. I saw strength deteriorate into weakness in a very short time, and I saw the shell of emptiness. The absence of my father gave me a feeling that the connection between my life and the world was cut off. Did my father feel the same feelings like me as he died? How many people lost their connections and relationships in their lives due to the absence of my father? From that moment, I started to think more deeply and differently

about human relationships, their impact as well as their unpredictability and impermanence. The more time passed, as I started to have a social life, I met a lot of people and naturally I continued to experience human relationships. The relationships that I saw or directly experienced were really diverse. It was not my original intention to investigate and study relationships that I experienced. However, as more time passed my level of perception grew. Moreover, I came to understand and remember the sentence that my father said to me, "To be a great person, you should keep a big *vessel* in your mind and learn how to use in proper way." My curiosity grew as I began to see the *vessel* in other people and assign and attribute shapes and sizes through my eyes and mind. In addition, I saw people who did not use their *vessel* in the right way, and people whose vessel had transformed by both nature and nurture. While I was interested in other people's *vessel*, I began to wonder about myself. "Do I have a good *vessel*? What is the size and type of my *vessel* how is it projected into the eyes of others?" This process altered my perception of the world, in many ways it became a motivation to explore my self-development.

In the Asian culture, when people discuss the nature and character of a person, they use a *vessel(container)* as a metaphor. For example, if someone has a really generous and broad mind, they say to him "His *vessel* is really big and wide." In contrast, if someone has a narrow mind, they would say "His *container* is too small." According to my research, the Asian origin of using a vessel as a metaphor for the nature of a person, was derived from the oriental philosopher Confucius. He espoused the importance of aesthetics and cultivated the moral sense of his followers and those who perceived truth as people who have big *container*. He also advised people to be a magnanimous person through saying '君子不器 (Person who only accepts things that are proper to his *vessel* size and purpose cannot be a great person)'. His philosophy was passed down through generations in my culture, and today the concept of a *container* is used as a symbol of a person's nature and character. (Naver Encyclopedia, n.d.)

The concept of the container is classified into two categories, a closed and an open vessel. If the vessel is open, an entity that can be found outside of a vessel can have an interaction with an inner entity and give positive or negative influences. In addition, because the vessel is open, the vessel does not act as an obstacle to the movement of the entity. Conversely, if the container is closed, the outer entity cannot

have any connection with the inner entity. Consequently, it is not possible for inner entity to be influenced by the outside, or have any stimulus for change. Based on this logic, for example, there are expressions that indicate the moods and emotional states of people; 'spill over with joy', 'full of hope', 'emptiness in mind'. Generally speaking, 'suffusion' signifies the positive and 'emptiness' connotes the negative type of person. Similarly, individuals can be categorized as those who have open *container* or closed *container* in order to reflect their state of mind. (Eunmi Choi, 2012, p.17~p.20)

People are influenced by their environmental relationships and their responses. In their lifetime, they store their memories and experiences in their *container*. While absorbing those memories and experiences into *container*, they sometimes remove things from their *container*. A response to these changes is the growth of their *container* which also becomes more resilient. However, as a negative aspect, the *container* can be cracked, rusted away and weakened. For me, a *vessel* shows the true nature of the human being and also serves as a metaphor for expressing the essence of relationships between people.

Critical Analysis

Ceramic work is very sensitive to change and responsive to external variables. There are many factors that exist at the point of first touching the clay which affect the completed work. Each point in my decision-making process allows for a divergence that manifests like a butterfly effect. Environmental conditions, proportion of ingredients, kiln atmosphere and many other factors can also affect the result. In addition, clay has a material characteristic of absorbing physical memory. It reflects the impressions of the artist hands on its body. For example, the influential artist Hans Coper, “He felt as though he was in a naked confrontation with a single material that would show one’s every mistake and mark. In order to gain a satisfactory end product, most potters are manipulating several facets of their craft at once, usually to their advantage by allowing one to take over from the other in times of difficulty: clay, glass or glaze and the kiln itself make a composite whole.” (Tony Birks, 1983, p.30) Furthermore, it can convey through surface the feelings and the emotions of artists at that time. For me, working with ceramic material has many similarities to interpersonal relationships; relationships with people can be sensitive and unpredictable, leaving lasting memories. Ceramic work and social relationships are not perfect. Although both have their anomalies, they strive for improvement through trials and experience.

In my thesis work, I have focused on the theme 'My memory is based on the diversity of human relationships' and expressed it through creating abstract sculptural vessel(container) form. I have applied three main elements that encapsulate these meanings and concepts into my work in order to express my theme.

First, my work has taken the form of sculptural vessels. Now the work incorporates organic and architectural elements into the structure of my open vessels and uses the shape as a metaphor for people who interact with their external character. I believe when the vessel of a person is open, they can have true connections with their environment. Therefore, my open vessel shaped pieces indicate various depths of personal relationships. In addition, through employing the natural and organic arboreal shapes, I intend to demonstrate relationships with nature. I use these natural occurrences in nature as metaphorical and literal references to represent human relationships. As nature cannot exist without the interaction of its many component

parts, man cannot exist alone. In this sense, human relationships resemble the laws of nature.

I have utilized the inverse cone shape with a really narrow bottom and wide top in many of my sculptural pieces. Through this precarious shape, I express the duality of unstable human relationships and also the stillness and tension that can be found in precarious situations. I use centered weight and the wall thickness differentials to create balance. With this process controlling the balance of the work, I represent people who are struggling to keep the balance of their relationships and mind. In addition, the shapes of works, from narrow to wide and wide to narrow, show the characteristically unsettled nature of human relationship; how people can be close as well distant.

Second, focusing on the surface of the pieces using the forming techniques of pinching and coil-building. When I work with clay, my interactive conversation with the clay is vital to the process. While I slowly build up clay coils from the bottom, my hand marks remain on the surface. It records elements of movement, time and my feelings. This is in concert with Barbara Hepworth's words, "Her desire was to get straight to the truth of the material. To feel its give and take. To be in direct and immediate contact with the work at hand." (Chris Stephens, 2003, p.15)

The attractive characteristic of coil-building is that it allows artists to observe progressive growth through the process of the work. The process is very similar to raising a plant from seedling to blossoming. As a plant needs water, sunshine and time to grow, my works need patience and time. The process of building up the blocks, memories of patience and time into the pieces, I am able to create a meaningful record of my practice.

Third, I make structured voids in my work. These express a variety of temporal and spatial connections through the shapes of organic holes or tunnels based on the inner structures that form bridges. In Korean culture, "People understand holes as a spatio-temporal concept. All spatio-temporal things have connections and interact with each other." (Jungeun Yang, 2012) The sculptor Barbara Hepworth believed that, "Holes were not gaps, they were connections.", "Hepworth's holes are also tunnels or worm-holes making a route through time. Art connects us to the past, not only by

reminding us of where we have been, individually and collectively, but by renewing in us the creative energy that all humans share, across time. The hole is a way back and a way forward. the hole is also the space occupied by the air we are breathing now, by the sunlight that has taken eight minutes to reach us, and by the starlight that is two thousand years old.” (Chris Stephens, 2003, p.19) For example, variations of time and atmosphere affect the audiences as they experience my exhibited works in space. In this situation, the holes in my pieces act as connection tunnels from one side to the other. Therefore, audiences can communicate with various of elements of the work through the hole.

“This is liberating. This gives sculpture a fourth dimension, because we know now that space and time are not separate, but have to be considered as space–time.” (Chris Stephens, 2003, p.19).

The holes in my work have neither a start nor an end, but circulate the passage of time and space. Moreover, the hole is a method of observation. The hole provides a lens through which audience members can observe other participants and pieces and see the exhibition as a whole. Through this “peeping” process, the audience has an opportunity to indirectly participate in my experience of creation and observe interpersonal relationships.

With regard to color, I employ a monochromatic palette to highlight the powerful textures and forms of my pieces. A monochromatic palette emphasizes the organic and architectural qualities of the work. Additionally my pieces benefit from the dramatic effects created when they are lit properly in the appropriate setting. My visual scheme express the calm demeanor in human beings who struggle to maintain stability in their mind and in their relationships while trying to conceal the conflict beneath the surface.

Conclusion

body of work

Link (I, II)

This series of works has similar forms and they are linked together in harmony. Because they depend on each other both physically and visually. Each piece is in precarious balance individually, but stands securely together. These likely shapes represent unsettled social relationships that people are struggling to keep stable. Upon closer inspection, audiences can experience two pieces communicating together. In my working process, I progressed carefully and slowly to control the center of gravity. This process is directly related to my theme.

Potential wave (I, II, III)

This series shows diverse types of interpersonal relationships through contrasting widths, depths and shapes. Uneven and rugged textures on the surface also represent the relationships that are not completely smooth, but have undergone many changes and hardships.

Moment of empathy

This work is about my memory of my father. I tried to portray the duality of human beings who simultaneously have strengths and weaknesses. Through the large scale and employing tall straight dimensional shapes, I want to evoke the memory of my strong father to the audience. On the other hand, through using thin wall thickness and narrow forms, I expressed feelings of weakness and emptiness that I felt just before my father died. Moreover, through an installation in an individual space, I tried to represent not only the memory of my father from each piece, but also create communication between the audience and space to allow them to experience a universal concept of time and relationships.

Close

This series of works is composed of five pieces that are installed on a wall. The audience is able to appreciate various shapes of each piece through changing their vantage point. In the work, I tried to express diverse interpersonal relationships by giving dynamic changes on thickness and forms. Each piece has a narrowly closing lip in literal relation to the title 'close,' and it represents people who are only having superficial, insincere interactions. In this term, my title 'close' can be interpreted as two meanings of 'near' and 'shut', in reference to proximity and accessibility.

This and the previous three series of works were fired to Cone 04. I used a monochrome glaze palette to allow the audience to see these forms and reinforce my themes. I also used terra-sigilata to seal the traces of my hand and records my memories and interaction with the piece. This also allows the piece to have meaning beneath the surface.

Vessels of you (I, II, III, IV, V)

This series of works are derived from the simple questions "What kind of vessel do I have, what does it look like?" The title of 'Vessels of you' evokes audiences to wonder these same questions about themselves. Through this series of works, the audience can have an opportunity to question and look back themselves. Moreover, unlike other pieces, by using porcelain and transparent glaze, enhance qualities of apparent fragility and accessibility.

Implications for the future

My works are sculptures that utilize the structure of the vessel. I prefer to create sculptural objects rather than functional pieces and I will continue working on sculptural forms in the future. I will investigate the convergence of traditional and modern aesthetics as a contemporary ceramic artist. For the setting of my work, light and space will produce a variety possible applications, and strengthen the themes of my

work. The interplay of light and shadow will dramatically influence the mood as it interacts with the negative spaces and organic forms of my work. As the things that I expressed through my thesis work were records of my memories as a positive aspect, I believe I could represent a negative aspect as well through other works that would contain vessels that are deconstructed and altered. Additionally, I would focus on creating authenticity and depth in my works that are critical of human relationships in current society. As the elements of complication and change in society rapidly increase, people do not allow themselves the time for self-reflection and reflection on others.

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Documentation of the works

Title : Link (I, II)

Dimensions : (I) W 25" X D 9" X H 35" , (II) W 23" X D 8" X H 27"

Media : Earthenware, Cone 04





Title : Potential wave (I, II, III)

Dimensions : W 18" X D 18" X H 34" (average)

Media : Earthenware, Cone 04



Title : Moment of empathy

Dimensions : W 10" X D 10" X H 67", W 10" X D 10" X H 61", W 12" X D 12" X H 50

Media : Earthenware, Cone 04

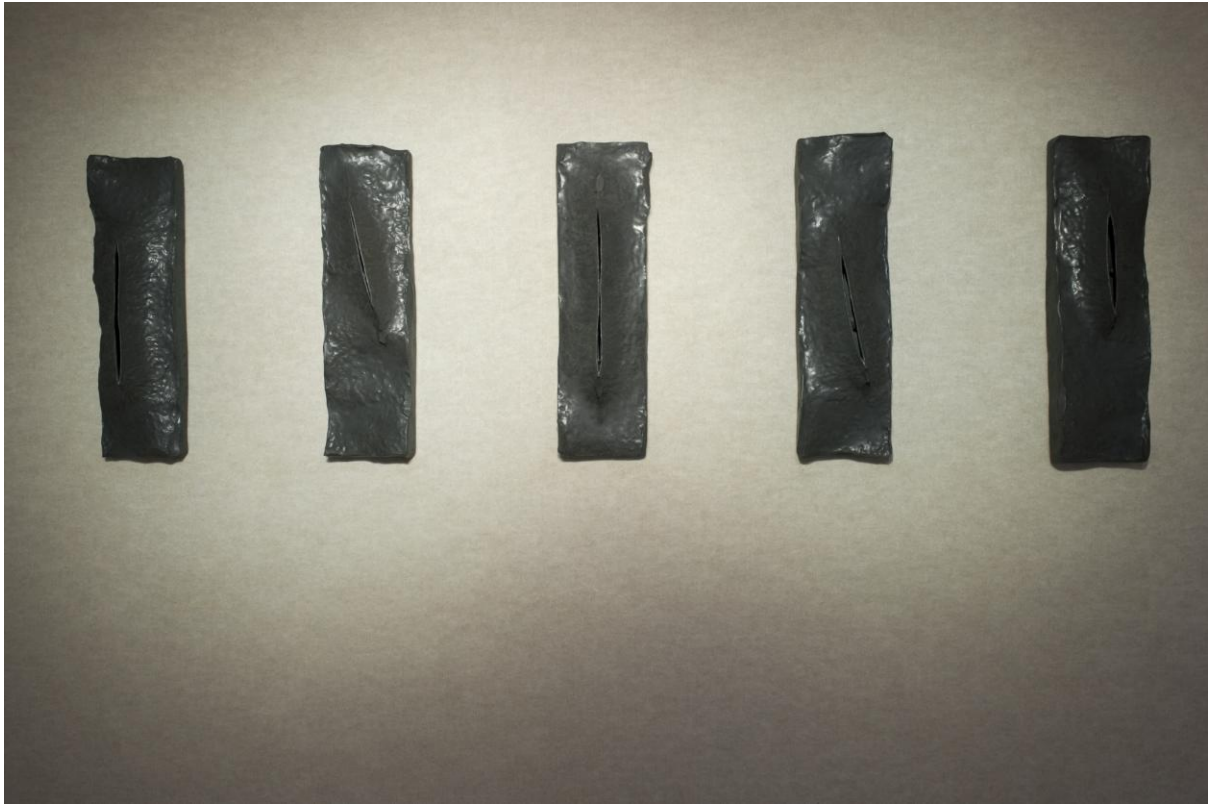


Title : Close

Dimensions : W 8" X D 28" X H 5"

Media : Earthenware, Cone 04





Title : Vessels of you(I, II, III, IV, V)

Dimensions : W 7" X D 7" X H 11" (average)

Media : Porcelain, Cone 6





