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# For the absent

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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

For The Absent  
by Jae hyung Lee  
7/3/2013

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## **Abstract**

When faced with trauma we often do not recognize the importance of taking time to heal. The purpose of my work is to heal myself from my past. The process of making pieces can ease agony and create hope in my mind. My design concept will be developed through the creation of my work, and I hope to begin healing from the trauma of my father's death.

I have reflected on the post-traumatic feelings that are associated with my father's death eight years ago. I realize that I still feel anger, sadness and grief. To confront this reality and work to begin healing myself. I thought about how I could overcome the trauma positively. I decided to do so through the creation of this body of work.

The beginning of this process of healing takes form with the making of four distinct pieces: a stool, a bench, a coat rack and sculptures specifically for him. Before my father's death, I had promised I would create furniture for him. Unfortunately I was never able to fulfill this promise, and the guilt has remained with me to this day. Although it is too late to fulfill my promise, I realized that this body of work is the best way for me to honor my father for his dedication, and will in turn help me overcome the unresolved feelings that I still have surrounding his death.

Each of the four pieces relates to the memory of my father, and has a specific connotation, implying self- reflection, self- complacency and/or recollection. It is important to maintain a balance between utilitarian concerns and sculptural form to communicate with him. The utility is a way to keep the promise with my father. Adopting sculptural forms allows me to explore and create a strong metaphor, which exposes the hidden meaning of my relationship with my father. This interaction of utility and sculptural metaphor makes the work more powerful through the balance of these two contributions.

The objects I create act as a medium to connect with my father. They may also possess another meaning beyond function. In my case, the role of symbolic function is very important, and determines how I see the form. As a result, this perspective continues to inform and develop my design sensibility for objects. I am convinced that everyone has the ability to overcome trauma, and must be guided by his or her own unique way. I intend to apply this process in an effort to heal myself.

I want to use my design approach (for the absent person) to better understand my relationship with my father. The ambiguity in my work represents the irony of making a functional object for the absent. My process is to find the intersection between the two elements: my absent father, and the functionality of furniture. The goals for my design process goes beyond physical/functional concerns and seek to open furniture to more than a utilitarian experience. I hope to reconcile this unconscious relationship through the metaphorical function of furniture.

## Discussion of sources and research

“ Art as a Healing Force will immerse me in the field of art and healing. By art, we always mean storytelling, poetry, music, dance, visual arts, painting, sculpture, and everything that is usually thought of as creativity. I believe that art and healing are joined together to become one. As art and healing merge, the field of art will be changed and the field of medicine will be changed. For many of us, healing art is a spiritual path, a transformational process, and a way of being. “(Samuel, par. 1)

The start of my design process is different from traditional points of view because the furniture that I make is for someone who no longer exists. Every design decision and working process is targeted towards that goal. This perspective can be found in traditional cultures, which still exists in Korea. For example, food is regularly prepared on a well-made table for a deceased individual. This kind of activity can explain how objects can work and impart a new meaning to healing because most people can feel self-satisfaction through these ceremonies. Additionally, while they prepare food, they share many stories about the deceased. I believe that these ceremonial processes are used for healing, and strengthens the relationship between the living and the dead. For me, this point of view is directly related to my process.

" Once all of these steps are completed, feasting with food and wine (or Cumbok) by the family members followed. Consuming the ritual food and wine was considered to be an integral part of the ceremony as it symbolized the receiving of the blessings bestowed upon the family." (Korean Embassy. Korean Memorial Service. par.8)

Having experienced this ceremony, through the loss of my father, I adopted this traditional memorial service to my creation process. Each process in the ceremony has its

own meaning to connect between the deceased and the family. A lonely object, an empty seat, an empty glass, chopsticks, a big table etc. are prepared for the deceased and all the steps for the ceremony are done through the sharing of food and memories. In this case, utility works as a healing mechanism for the bereaved because the whole process of the ceremony replaces their unmet responsibilities for the deceased.

" The cultural revitalization piece is important and artistic models are so integral to traditional culture. People feel connected, reconnected through the arts, whatever the modalities, with culture it's healing in itself. People respond. I think there's a resonance with their traditional way of life whether it's being rediscovered or not. Art is a traditional mode of expression and so it resonates. (Jill Goodacre, interview, 13 May 2010)" (Linda, Dewar 17)

The process of making is the way that I connect with my father. I recollect memories because memory is expressed through form and is why I make all my work for him. I have been thinking about the possibility of utility relating to the connection between body and mind. Complementary relations exist between body and function. Also, this relationship is a very important factor in how design is achieved because comfort can be felt through a harmony between the body and good design. As such, I wonder how mental reflections interact with form. The form of my work has a physical role and mental role. In other words, creating furniture object for my father will give me peace through the metaphor of function for the absent.

"Symbols and metaphors are central features in the stories and teaching of Elders. In this regard, traditional healer Janice Longboat also includes language: "Our culture is

based on what we call symbolic literacy, meaning the symbols we use relate to life, what we see, feel, hear, taste and touch, and to what we intuit” (interview, 10 May 2010). American art therapist Bruce L. Moon (2007) states that in therapy, visual metaphors “foster opportunities to support, inform, engage, offer interpretations, provoke thought, and gently confront clients in ways that are potentially safe and psychologically non-threatening” (p. 15). Cultural, mythical, and spiritual metaphors are recognized as especially powerful.7" ((Linda, Dewar 18)

" The benefits reported above suggest that people who participated in creative arts activities as part of a healing program gained confidence, learned new skills, were more relaxed, open, and creative, and generally felt better about their lives. These are positive outcomes. Expressive arts therapist, philosopher, and educator Stephen K. Levine wrote, “There is in the use of art a capacity for self-expression that is desperately needed by those who suffer intensely” (Levine, 1997, p. 4). The next section looks at what respondents have said about the contributions of creative arts to healing the longstanding traumas associated with the residential school legacy. " (Linda, Dewar 11)

The interaction of making and healing is the most significant benefit as a result. As I overcome my trauma by making pieces and healing myself this process affects how I will lead my life.

## Critical analysis

To be actualized by my unmet promise to make work with well chosen materials, is the significant and an essential purpose of the creation of body of my work. In order to achieve this, I decided to use wood as a material because wood is the most appropriate material for me. Historically, wood was the basic material to use for carving, it allows us to express our feelings, and I chose to create these four works exclusively in wood. People are naturally absorbed by wood in art because wood is one of the oldest materials in art making.

In addition, my mastery of skills will help me discover new possibilities in woodworking. Exploring joinery techniques to make form allows me to explore how this conceptually relates to my ideas. I will also gain new insight into how making furniture and healing are related, and how I derive meaning from my work. Although my work is for someone who no longer exists, I don't completely exclude utility in the manifestation of the pieces.

In "Fatigued man," the small handle whose purpose is not apparent is a symbol of the unfinished promise between my father and I. I remember that he struggled to put on his worn down shoes using a shoehorn in a standing position every morning. Run down shoes represents the history of how he had lived. He must have been going through a rough time because of his career. He had to go to his company very early in the morning and he usually had stayed on construction sites for the purposes of supervision. Making a stool with a shoe rack and hanger for a shoehorn expresses my admiration for his commitment to family. However, I am also using this visual symbolic element for its potential to provide a healing experience.

For me, I make pieces by adopting utility. Function has value within the limits of utilitarianism. However, when combined with symbol and metaphor, it can work as an element of sculpture charged with operating as an organic form for healing. In my work, utility is an important device that intermediates between me and my father and the next generation. Attaching value to an object plays an important role in the collision of structure and utility. Utility can connect a concept with a function. Function is not limited to utility, but extends to connect people to each other, even with those who are not necessarily there. Utility can be made to work towards conceptual ends; it is unrestricted. For me, function is one of many ways to tell a story, or to connect with others.

In “Recollection”, I pay homage to my father’s nostalgia and love for his birthplace near the sea, where we sometimes spent time together. As I remember how eager he was to spend more time with family, he would always tell me about his childhood. At the same time, when he told me about the past, it seemed as though they were banal stories. I felt that he was dreaming of the blue sea and white clouds from a time that could never to be recovered. Now, I also dream of that time I shared with this nostalgic place. The process of making this sculpture was like finding some space of lost sources for the nostalgia. This piece is not only his wish but also my hope that I discover what I couldn’t know about him and, finding traces of shared memory between us.

In “Bench”, a connection to a melting down form from the top edge symbolizes the loss of my father. His absence is a big emptiness for me since he passed away. When I sit on the bench, it is as if I am sitting once again with my father. As time goes on, his absence will become faint like this melting down seat. However, I still want to leave an empty seat for him. By sitting in the seat instead of my father, I will substitute my experience for his, and will feel what he was eager for, what he had been living for, how he had lived. I

too will grow old, so the seat will continue to function for future generations as it did (will) for my father and me.

“Unburden” came about through cleaning out my father’s closet after he passed away. Looking through the closet, I found a heavy thick coat. I remember the thick coat that he sometimes wore when he went to work. This work expresses his unknown burden that I couldn’t realize. It might be a symbolic connection to the responsibility for his family and life. Making the coat rack is a self-reflection about how I couldn’t unburden him. Unfortunately, I was never able to understand the reality he was confronted with as a father because it was something he never shared with me. But I realized later it was there. So, I made a small element, on which his coat can hang, and it functions as a metaphor to help me unburden his responsibilities and also serves as a metaphor of my unmet need.

The coat rack has a profile that comes out from the main structure and the small projection is beside the profile. I had been thinking, what was the real image of my father? I couldn’t recall my father’s exact image. It seems so vague, dim. To see him in my mind is like seeing his profile in silhouette. All of my memories of him are as a fatigued man because of the burden of life.

## **Conclusion**

After making this body of work, I realized that the whole process of making created three kinds of positive results. First, I realized that my making process and the work were not only for my father but also for me. Although my father won't be able to use these pieces, I felt that I was getting comfortable during their creation. Each piece has its own personal element, like the handle for shoehorn, melting down edge and small coat rack. I think that these images and memories are significant healing methods because those things made the pieces conceptually more strong and strong elements powerfully worked to relieve the burden of my incomplete promise.

The process of work is helpful in my healing because I found that I was concentrating on my own work experience and my heart will gradually lead me to feel more comfortable from the trauma. While I worked, I thought about whether this is a reasonable process. My father won't be able to sit on this bench with me. However, I realized that my focus was not on his absence anymore. I was just concentrating on working without any concern. Furthermore, I felt satisfied after finishing every single piece. In other words, the whole process gave me a chance to rethink my father because I had to visualize my engagement for him. The experience was a really valuable opportunity to understand him through making pieces and putting my heart and soul in the work. Eventually, I found and understood the word "sacrifice" from that fatigued man who did everything for his son.

Secondly, using wood as a material was the best choice to advance, not only my healing, but also my individual technique. To capture my ideas through sculptured wooden forms led me to a more enthusiastic and challenging process. It made me rethink craftsmanship in the contemporary art world. I believe the territory I explored by adopting

specific functions like a bench, coat rack and stool could be how craftsmanship works not only in a utilitarian way but also by creating narratives.

This observation made me think about how I create new spaces through my work, which can actualize a new paradigm of craftsmanship in wood. I found it very challenging to use utility and sculpture as a healing process. In order to reveal certain memories, I needed a well-made object, which incorporates particular metaphors that could represent my father. For this reason, the interaction between these elements was essential and critical to the process. I believe that this point of view will extend into my future and the conceptual work that I make. Function with sculptural form can bring individuals not only utility in his or her life but also engage their mind. The narratives in this work play a role that contributes to a kind of healing.

Finally, I strongly believe that the thesis was a successful experience, which was helpful in my healing. During the process, I had to trace the relationship between my father, this new work and myself. I made a place for him to sit, a coat rack to hang his burden and a stool to give him comfort. In order to make these pieces, I have recollected all of my memories as best I could. I realize that he is still a big part of my memory and that these memories inform my life. These creative processes provide me significant opportunities to extend my own work in the future.

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