Web of Life

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Rochester Institute of Technology

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School for American Craft

In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Metals and Jewelry Design

Web of Life

By

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Abstract

The inspiration for my artwork comes from the emotional relationships that people have with family, friends and their social environment. In addition, the ecological food chain influences my art forms. After research, analysis and development, the triangle shape has become the main element in my thesis work. The triangle form helps me to ideate the infinite cycles, connections and links that create a complex web.

This thesis work includes jewelry, installation and sculpture. Different forms of this work emphasize distinct themes about the relationships. In terms of the techniques, along with utilizing traditional techniques such as soldering, painting and stitching, I invented a new technique of casting resin and exploring cold connecting to join individual parts according to different materials’ characteristics. Triangles and webs will be displayed in two dimensions and three dimensions. Material application, in particular, can be explored in three dimensions.

The thesis work reveals the importance of relationships for every living being and the triangle figure plays a significant role in the balance of life. Meanwhile, the webs in our lives are huge, and become more complex when we realize that every unnoticed even every tiny link in each web cannot be replaced.
Sources and Research

One Triangle

The figure of the triangle exists in many places. In a nuclear family, children, father and mother are three junctions in a triangle. In a large family, three generations, grandparents, parents and children also build a triangle. So each point of the triangle can be seen as a person or a group. Meanwhile, the general diagram of a workplace shows a pyramid state. For example, an owner of a company usually stands at the top of the pyramid, then follows a few outstanding directors and managers, and then more common employees, who stay on the base. The rule is the same as in the food chain, from plants, herbivores and predators to humans, showing the law of the jungle. On the surface, there is no direct relation between plant and human or owner and common employee. But without the base, the upper part of the pyramid would not exist. Every part in the triangle figure plays a significant role in the balance of life.

Extended Web

Relationships in the food chain can be shown in two types of charts. It is easier to find out how living beings are sorted in a pyramid chart but it cannot list all the different types of animals. However, a web diagram can point out each animal and clearly show the relationships between each animal and provide more specific information. As the picture below shows, it is not just the snake that eats insects, but also some herbivores. At the same time, it shows specific insects and herbivores, which is information we cannot gain from the pyramid food chain.
The web does not just exist in the food chain, but also in other situations. If I start with a word such as “transportation,” for example, what is associated will be vehicle, permit, license, drivers, gas, Hybrid, carbon dioxide, global warming, plants, etc. These issues form a radial shape in which the associated words can link with each other, creating a web. When we pick any of the above words as a starter, there will be another web created, which is a brainstorm that a designer or artist draws in order to get more inspiration. Hence, any keyword acts as a tiny dot in a web and also it can be a new beginning in another web. When the web keeps extending and offering more detail, some parts from different branches can link to each other, building a denser and more complex web.

**Element of Lines**

The common ground of a triangle and a web or a characteristic of the combination of triangle and web is lines. This keyword, “line,” brings my memory back to an exhibition I visited in Birmingham. The show, titled “Lost in Lace,” was exhibited in Gas Hall at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, UK, in 2011. The whole
exhibition was full of the line element, even including magazines for visitors to browse that introduced related work. Twenty intentional artists presented an idea of lace in different materials and scales of work. The work of three artists in particular impressed me. The artworks are made of various materials and the different arrangements of lines bring specific concepts and distinct visual effects.

When I was reviewing the photographs I had taken at the exhibition, I begin to think and understand their works as based on the concept of “relationship.” For example, Tamar Frank specializes in utilizing luminous structures in a dark space to present a sense of space. She displayed an installation, “A thin line between space and matter” in “Lost in Lace,” which used phosphorescent threads and LED lights in a dark room. Each thread actually is stretched tightly and fastened on a main wire support. But the rotated [unclear: explain briefly] placement of the threads produces an illusion that the straight threads seemed to be curved. The construction is simple but it still brings to audiences an imagination of space. The artwork led me to think about the relationship between the jewelry and the wearer or between the line and the space where it is located in several aspects of concept and vision.

*A Thin Line between Space and Matter, 2011*
I was also influenced by Maurizio Anzeri’s work. I read an article about him in an issue of *Craft*, which was in the back room of the exhibition where magazines were displayed on tables. His work consists of embroidery on found photographic portraits of strangers. Anzeri stitches unique embroidery using colorful threads to refresh each vintage image. The basic techniques and the two-dimensional photo-sculpture form attracted me. His work makes me consider whether presenting exquisite metal craftsmanship plays the most important role in my work and whether three-dimensional work can bring more visual impact than two-dimensional pieces.

*Above left: Bernard, 2010  Above right: Giorgio, 2010*
Among the 20 international artists who participated in the show, there was one artist who impressed me the most, Chiharu Shiota, who was born in Osaka, Japan, and currently is based in Berlin, Germany. Her work explores the possibility that relationships exist in both visible and invisible aspects.

In “Lost in Lace,” Chiharu presented an installation, “After the Dream,” which was composed of old dresses and an intricate web. To the artist, the dress can be regarded as a person’s second skin. Strings were interwoven with each other to replicate the look of lace. Visitors saw the dresses looming through the dense web that were the people who have worn the dresses in a dream. The title “After the Dream” means the dream happened and is over already. So the moment of the audience seeing the show was appreciating “the past” and making a conversation between present and past. Furthermore, when I am telling my memory about “Lost in Lace,” the time line between past and present is created again. Besides the line, which we could see in the show, the memory of line was produced invisibly and unnoticeably. Everyone has his or her own memory and experience creates a unique person.
Researching Chaiharu Shiota’s other works, I found the definition of relationships could be raised to a higher level. Along with the essential element of her installation, thread, other objects she uses are very familiar things such as a chair, shoes, a key and dresses. Some of the objects are donated, which for the artist means that they also carry former owners’ memories. The installation “Over the Continents” is one of Shiota’s masterworks. The artist got inspiration from her own experience: when she tried on a pair of old shoes, which she had not worn for a long time, she realized “they fit, but they don’t fit me anymore.” She could wear the shoes, but they didn’t fit her style anymore, which made them become the past tense. In the installation, very red string was stretched to a point on a back wall that can be regarded as the relationship between the artist and about 370 shoes’ owners.
Lines are produced again here, memories and object, artist and shoes’ owners, audience and artist, past and present. The two ends of a line in this work are not only relationships between people but even more are related to invisible things. The line could exist between the past and present or present and future. When we list every single thing that is related to us, these links to related things again creates a web. This web contains many aspects of our lives. This is why I think it is an incredibly huge web.

*Over the Continents, 2008*
Critical analysis

Brief

My thesis work is composed of four themes: “One of Them,” “Relationships,” “Map” and “Triangle.” These works are respectively shown as jewelry, wearable installations, a wall installation and a sculpture. The series emphasizes several aspects of the “Web of life” through presenting individually featured visual effects using different techniques and materials. During the process, I explored a new technique of casting resin, which can integrate web construction and triangle figures into the resin and I also gained new experience in welding. In addition, many skills are very basic, just like Maurizio Anzeri’s embroidery, but these still can transfer information to my audience. Utilizing various kinds of materials and techniques for the same subject did keep the work fresh to the audience when they are looking at the complete work above and beyond the consideration of concept.
The Work

*Web in Life: One of Them* (Figure 1,2,3)

The collection is named “One of Them” to present the idea that a person lives in the world as a unique triangular pyramid and also as an indispensable connection in a network. In other words, a human is compared to a resin piece in this work, who also has personal character and special relationships in his/her life.

In this collection, metal rods, resin and thread are the material, which build triangles, triangular pyramids and webs. It is easy to see that the resin part, which has more detailed work, is a highlight of the whole piece. This is to emphasize the concept of the unique unit. At the same time, the thread structure in the resin can attract viewers to observe “the person’s relationship web” curiously in close range.

Inspired by Tamar Frank’s work, I am trying to build a space for thread triangle structures. Taking advantage of the reflection created by high-polish resin can bring an imagination of space to viewers. On the aspect of technology, resin challenged me a lot. I was interested in casting resin before starting my thesis, especially encapsulating thread sculptures in resin, which were incorporating intersecting lines, radial lines and twist lines. Based on the technique of casting that I had mastered, I continued to experiment in order to build a complete triangular thread structure and a web in resin. Each resin in the jewelry pieces presents differently. These unique pieces are applied with yellow acrylic for the brooch, used metal balls as the points of a triangle for both necklace and ring and are finished with either a clear surface or a matt surface. Those different appearances highlight that each individual is the one and only.
Web in Life: Relationships (Figure 4, 5, 6)

In October 2013, I attended the runway show of Fashion Week of Rochester, where I saw the jewelry worn by models and shown on the catwalk. The outline, color and scale of those jewelry pieces impacted my design. This experience made me review my previous works, which were small and some of them even delicate. So I decided to challenge myself to create a large-scale jewelry or body piece that I had never done in the past.

All the pieces in this collection can be displayed or imagined as installation, but they can be worn as an arm piece, a brooch and a neck piece. Each piece connects to the wearer’s body by taking advantage of the structure of the piece itself. It cannot be recognized as a piece of jewelry until it is worn. The unnoticeable function presents that relationship webs exist everywhere and relate to everyone naturally so that also can be assumed as a part of body.

Considering the weight of jewelry and concept, stainless steel rods and nylon thread are suitable materials. The strong stainless steel construction represents our main path guide in our lives and nylon represents the line we draw through different experiences.

Web in Life: Map (Figure 7, 8)

My work doesn’t only show the relationships between people, but also objects, living beings and planets, even things that we haven’t discovered yet, which influences
human life unnoticeably. The metaphorical web is incredibly huge and infinite because it refers to all in our lives. Every single triangle can be regarded as one thing and the viewer is invited to consider these relationships the piece evokes.

Influenced by Maurizio Anzeri, I utilized very basic techniques to “draw” the Map, such as stitching, coloring, soldering and polishing. The cold connection is the main technique to connect separate triangle pieces together, making them parts in the web. One cold connection I explored is from a traditional embroidery wood frame that is composed of two sizes of frames, one larger than the other. It can hold fabric between two frames and fix it tightly by adjusting a screw. Then I developed the technique further. I replaced the two wood frames respectively with a wood sheet and a metal frame. The wood base can flatten the canvas well where I stitched and the metal frame has more possibility for finishing, such as high polishing and spray. Beside the triangle figure and web structure, no other element is necessary. I hid rivets under the canvas, which connect the wood sheets and acrylic sheets.

The triangle elements I created using acrylic, metal, wood, thread and painting are in different sizes and angles and the pigment I painted on canvas and metal also are in different hues that symbolize every unit as distinct.
Web in Life: Triangle Sculpture (Figure 9, 10)

The sculpture is combined with different shapes of triangle. The yellow inner color and black surface present a strong contrast.

The piece started with building up big numbers of paper models, then I enlarged the sizes of some preferable pieces to me and compared them and selected one for the final design.

The sculpture required exact dimensions and every angle could be matched with each other, so laser cutting was the best option, which I also finished with a nice eagle. I utilized TIP welding and MIG welding to connect separated sheets then grind the joints and surface. Finally, the sculpture was colored by powder coating in the factory. In this project, the processes of laser cutting and powder coating were outsourced. The appropriate machine and service can raise
working efficiency and finish the project closer to expectation for the final piece.

The particularity of structure provides the viewers different angles as seen from various directions. It also offers the audience an imagination for space by contrasting color and hollow structure.
Conclusion

My thesis is embraces of triangle elements and lines creating a web that we can see anywhere and anytime, but that also exists and tightly links to human being invisibly. I present this view through jewelry, wearable installations, wall installation and sculpture, utilize mixing media materials and different sizes.

A triangle keeps the balance of our lives, whether especially in ecology, a family or career. Lines symbolize relationships, not only in the aspect of interpersonal relationships, but also the links with hobbies, objects, memory, imagination about the future and so on, all of which builds the characteristic of a person. Person’s specific thought and individual experience builds a distinctive web. Over time, the web is going to be larger and more complicated. At the same time, we also act as tiny junctions in a web that ensures the society and ecology in an environment remain balanced. So the complex web forms not only an individual, but also the universe.

The exploration of the relationships in our lives is endless. My work will be continued after the thesis. I am going to present how the ubiquitous web can be represented by even smaller and more delicate jewelry with elements of webs and triangles or I could create a large sculpture or space with lines, which allows audiences to walk into and experience how we actually are involved in the web.

I believe the art work I created for my thesis shows relationships that an audience needs to stimulate their collective imagination which will help them to understand the links in their life.
Figures

Figure 1. Web in Life: One of Them- Brooch

Figure 2. Web in Life: One of Them- Ring
Figure 3. Web in Life: One of Them - Necklace

Figure 4. Web in Life: Relationships - Brooch
Figure 5. Web in Life: Relationships - Arm piece

Figure 6. Web in Life: Relationships - Neck piece
Figure 7. Web in Life: Map

Figure 8. Web in Life: Map (Detail)
Figure 9. Web in Life: Triangle Sculpture

Figure 10. Web in Life: Triangle Sculpture
Endnote

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ii Maggie’s Science Connection, *Food Webs*

iii Minimal Exposition, *A Thin Line Between Space and Matter*, Tamar Frank


vi Shiota, Chiharu, 1972, Artist. *Chiharu Shiota: The Hand Lines*


viii Goukassian, Elena, *Chiharu Shiota’s ‘Over the Continents’ at the Sackler Gallery Finds Beauty in Old Shoes*, The Washington Post, August 28, 2014

ix Shiota, Chiharu, *Over the Continents*, 2008

x 12" Wood Embroidery Hoop With Round Edges