Inside and outside

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In Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts,

Ceramics Program

Inside and outside

by Dan Xue

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Abstract

In this thesis, I will focus on sculptural ceramic vessels. I regard the vessel not only as a physical object but also a container carrying memories, imaginations, and emotions. I use the vessel as a metaphor to relate to one person, one object, and one phenomenon, the way I see it.

The thesis aims to explore the connections between what has happened in the past and what is happening now for a fuller understanding of self. Memory is an important subject matter for me. I believe life is not chronological, while the memory of what happened in the past and what is happening now is continually intertwined and profoundly leading each other. With my vessel sculptures, I want to take the viewers on a journey of how life passes through with the gain and loss, known and unknown, seen and unseen in life experience. Those experiences good or bad make who we are and who we will be.

Many of my vessels result from the human figure and architectural language. Through exploration of the form and my aesthetics, organics profile, geometric structure, light, and shadow all work together to express a form language that has come to define the character of my work and communicate my ideas with the vessel.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of Source and Research</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Analysis</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation of the works</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion of Source and Research

My interest in this topic started with my study in industrial design. At that time, I formed a habit of observing real people in real-life situations to create a database, consciously and unconsciously. When I meet a person, I quickly have a sketch of him or her and focus on their unique actions, such as tone of greeting, a frequently-used object, or thought. During those years, those rich drawings and distinctive images of each person has built a gallery in my mind. There are no two identical images in this gallery. The differences come from experience. I found it thought-provoking in those connections between what happened and what happens.

As I came to the United States for my MFA ceramics study, I realized that realizing the intention of making and keeping my theme consistent helps to develop my ideas. The realization began with William Daley’s geometric vessel sculptures, “Oval Chamber” (Figure 1). The synthesis of precise skills with incredible control of rhythm on both exterior profiles and interior space builds an exquisite three-dimensional world. The unglazed stoneware surfaces of those large-scale sculptures show a keen sense of architectural perception. I found myself drawn into quiet meditation, a myriad of thoughts flowed from his complex sculptural forms and continued to build an imaginary space in my mind. I decided to use the vessel as a metaphor to speak of human experiences and their impact on development of our personality. Vessels can be containers holding memories, imagination, and

Figure 1 William Daley, North American; American, born 1925, (Artist). 1986. Oval Chamber.
emotions, symbolizing growth and experiences reflected in their forms. From then on, in my mind gallery, two-dimensional sketches turned into three-dimensional vessels.

**Vessel**

As I started research of the vessel, Ruth Duckworth’s brilliant exploration on figurative sculptures inspired me with the structure of their forms. Her refined vessel form was an interpretation of nature. Her works have variety with scale and clay materials, inspiring the sensitivity of balance on shape, proportion, and interior space. I was drawn to the small and delicate white porcelain vessels with slab elements, “Untitled (Five Porcelain Forms).” It showed me how elements could combine with others in a vessel. The foot slightly lifted supported a large volume body, while the thin lips carried uninterrupted attention from naturally smooth surface between the exterior and the interior. The clean and seamless slabs brought attention back to outer, forming dramatic profiles, and inviting me to focus on shape contrasts from different angles. I also found the balance of order compelling in her works, “Untitled” (Figure 2). In this wall piece, she covered fragile thin blades with soft arced slabs. The tension and complexity with light and shadow on the reliefs, contrasting with solidity and delicateness of flat surface, left a
space to breathe for reviewers. The organic slabs visually gave a continuation through the whole piece and made me wonder about the entire story underneath.

Richard DeVore used a variation of vessels with one basic structure, with an intention of seeking purity of abstract form and surface. “His signature form is a vessel with an undulating rim, a flat or rounded base, and sometimes with a doubled or trebled interior floor into which one can peer through amoeba-shaped excisions. .... His works can be compared to a crowd of people, recognizable as a species but amazing in their variety.” For example, “Untitled (#403) Vessel” (Figure 3) is a simple tall and open vase reminding me a swelling human body. Richard DeVore terminated the rim with a dancing line and some sharp cuts, balanced the spare vessel body, and create a focus on the boundary of interior and exterior. The matt glazed, soft, uneven finger-touched surface, and dry crackled, earth tones interior, made a harmony of the whole piece.

**Geometry**

My previous major in industrial design has prepared my geometric aesthetic sensibility. I was drawn to the possibility in combinations of the triangle, a basis of the geometric structures. The
Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar (Figure 4), designed by architect IM Pei, impacts me the most. The Muqarnas, the most classic Islamic architectural features, is a ceiling with traditional patterns in the central atrium. It takes the acute and radical triangle as a primary form, symbolizing irreconcilability, radicalness, and contradiction. With repetition, stretching, piling up and gradient, I find the triangles balanced in the association, and forming a dazzling and massive structure with a dynamic rhythm and the beauty of interaction.

I met Lauren Gallaspy during her stay as a visiting artist in our ceramics department. In her sculptural work, the delicate forming process with the hand-building technique of bent slabs and fragile coil-built structures gave me a chance to witness and understand new potentials for incorporated geometry. She said in her artist statement, “The fundamental contradictions of the ceramic vessel and the human body are the same: they are objects of both strength and fragility, though, in the end, the ceramic object will always outlive us.” In her works, the geometry is applied to wireframes and spaces. I am inspired by the contrast of a solid surface, an improvisational sculptural structure, and movement of negative spaces. The depth of negative space is heightened by light and shadow on complex coil constructions. I appreciate the delicacy of details on the intersections of plane and curves.
Critical Analysis

In my thesis, I have focused on the influence of life experience and metaphor of true self with the abstract sculptural vessel. My vessels consist of traditional vessel languages and geometric structures. The smooth vessel surface presents the general process of growth, while geometric structures are the abstraction of significant memories which make who we are.

Growth and Vessel

Most of my pieces start with a small and round shape. I visualize the pointed and small foot of the vessels as the start of life and weakness of its beginning. The foot is vertically directing upward from the plane of the table, narrow but standing steadily, visually lightening the weight of vessels. As the vessel starts to grow, life experiences impact the vessels and become an intangible pressure pushing the outer profile from inside. The walls are constructed with coil hand-building techniques, allowing me to seek the naturally soft, subtle finger-touched and smooth profiles. The coil building technique gave me the chance to build a thin wall, which naturally shows the trace of my finger touch on the clay. The subtlety of textured surface corresponds with the unconsciousness of instinctive habits and memories, not readily noticeable but creating a record of life daily. The personal and connotative profile illustrates thinking process and a lyrical expression. The profiles are created to symbolize the human body. The vessels represent postures of a standing figure with various characters. In piece “Marks on you(ⅡⅢ),” I have a military posture vessel, with the V-shape body erect, broad-shoulder, arms at the sides, and heels together, verses an ample, pear-shape maternal vessel. These two different profiles act out the story of masculine and feminine characteristics. In piece “Another day,” I describe it with a bewildered look. The drama of the extra narrow foot and profile
expansion with extreme tension makes an illusion of precarious gesture. There is a tight and vertical midline in the vessel body keeping the balance of volume and guiding a static posture.

Marks and Geometric structure

In this body of work, geometry structures represent the memories that influence or even tug at the track of life become icons of that person. Those memories are vivid, impressive and indelible. I am significantly involved in the repetition of triangles, a sensation of balance and a dramatic tension on the architectural structure. The triangle is sharp and unstable individually. With the repetition, the interaction between triangles builds a visual impact. I build the geometric structures with thin slabs, delicate edges and clean surfaces. The structure looks like the cutting off from the vessels, embodying the loss and gain. There are three kinds of geometric structures in my vessels. One is massive and encircles most parts of the vessel. In piece “Mirror of myself”, I have geometric structures covering the entire front. Because this piece is about understanding myself. I know all the life experience, and the butterfly effect on me. The structures are growing from a small triangle from the lower point, spreading out upper, cutting into the vessel body, and leaving a dramatic dancing line on the rim. It provides viewers different images from different angles (Figure 5). Another one is a small and shallow structure which can only be seen in the

Figure 5 "Mirror of myself" photo shoot in different angle
vessels, presenting a highlight in the image that I identify people with. The structure consists of six or seven triangles, thin and centered in the vessel. It visually keeps the viewer’s eyes in the midline. The third one is negative to create contrasts that visually focus our attention to the rim and its potential as it stretches to the air.

**Present and the Finish**

The vessels reach the top, approaching the stage of the present. Most of my vessels finish with an open rim and delicate edges from a soft finger compression. In piece “Marks on you (III), the rim with the closed lip is an unbroken and slightly bent arc, naturally completing the profile.

While in piece “Another day,” the horizontal lines combined with short and straight cuts apply rhythm to the vessel. From the cuts by geometric structures, the attention is brought from exterior to the interior.

In my vessels, I emphasize the contrasts; the simplified and elegant vessel surface versus sophisticated, complicated, geometric structure; the natural, organic profile with straight edges of the geometries; a pointed foot with an open lip; and a heavy solid form turning into something fragile and airy. With those elements, the geometric details become an eye-catching focus. For example, the piece “landscape” aims to draw attention to the geometric structure, like the lines of mountains peaks upon the horizon. The oval shaped vessel body in the front provides a landscape horizon like space while the exterior on the back elevates the rim providing a backdrop, leaving a dark horizon line represented by the geometric structure.
I use white and black on my vessels. Black and white are the polar opposites, both having a significant simplicity, with no hue and pure properties. The simplified tonal choice give the vessels opposing artistic expression, the geometries are enhanced and have a powerful voice as the edges become the focus compared to the subtle gradations on an even surface. When the light reaches the geometric structure, it features the edges, creates shadows, and gives the depth. My vessels come to life dramatically.

**The body of work**

**Mirror of myself**

This piece is a personal story of my growth. I have a peaceful, grown-up environment, which sounds ideal. My theories and personality are based on what I saw from the age I started to record these experiences, which were highly satisfying. In my vessel, the foot is a perfectly round shape, delicately and gradually increases to the rim. In inner me, I pursued everything to be perfect to maturity, and naturally believe it will materialize. When I stepped into a broader environment and met more people, I found that it was more complicated, or to say, not easy to achieve in every situation. This reality started to affect me adversely. These complex geometric structures are the records of impressive experience, incorporated in the vessel body and subtly affecting the forms. When I felt pain, I was still able to appreciate the lessons which were able to make me a unique me. Sorting out the context and logic of my personal growth is a way to live better today and for the future. I believe there always two sides of a coin. The ideal mature environment gives me the power to stand even after many defeats. I started to see this critically and try to get balance in my life.
Marks on you (ⅠⅡⅢ)

As we remember what impresses us, cheerfulness, drama, tension, contradiction, tragedy, beauty, and love, all give us a mark on life to establish who we are. Recording the marks on surroundings is the way I know people and reassess my feelings about being a part of this society. It is like the Find the Difference Game. Mirroring the marks on others, I try to find some part of me which might not be given attention, and get further understanding of myself. So in the name, when I say “you”, I mean “me”.

Another day (ⅠⅡⅢⅣ)

I believe cognitive growth depends on a reminiscence of what has been recorded in the past. It has a strong influence on the present you; determines the behaviors; makes a direct leading on preference. And more importantly, memory is a map. It takes us to the course of future. In this series, I focus on the dynamic movement of the geometric structures, and build wireframe of geometric structures to continue the vessel to the air.

Microcosm

In this series, there are 29 sculptural cups. Each one consists of cup body thrown on the wheel, geometric marks building with thin slabs and delicate coils made from extruder on the lip. These 29 cups illustrate the group of a wide variety of characters, which is unusual and impressive for me. When I came to the United States four years ago, I needed to make new friends. I began to get touch with the group and realized that the situation was entirely different with the one in China. I usually hang out with people whose personality matches me in my home country, which leads my friends' group to be monotonous. To the contrary, I found it challenging but more
beneficial to my friend group here. As I get to know the different person, I found myself in many ways that I had never expected.

**Landscape (I II III IV)**

I started to put eyes on not only people but also objects. This series is about nature and nostalgia. I tried to use the language I learned from the west to describe the landscape in China, as I compare my experiences and feel the gap between my homeland and the country I am living now.
Conclusion

Through thinking and material exploration, I have achieved the goal of capturing the subtle but diverse process of growing up, and interplay of relationships between people and materials. As a metaphor, my sculptural vessels fully emphasize my understanding of how the life experience makes and changes us.

This series body of work gives focus on figurative vessels and geometric structures. Those two elements drive one another: geometry is built on the vessel body, and in turn, the vessel is affected by the form of geometric parts. It is an active visual balance involving a mass drawn by lights and shadows.

In my thesis show, I shared my opinion on this general theme and harvested diverse and personal stories from the audience, which helps me further understand myself. It becomes a way I communicate with others. My pieces are not about forcing viewers to agree with my understanding but give them an entrance to their own inner world. I would like to see their audience standing in front of my piece lost in thoughts.

Implications for the future

To continue this body of work, I am interested in thinking about life experience theories critically and emotionally. I believe I could create interesting dialogues with some specific phenomena. For example, the stability of false memories and how reality and false memory influence each other. Those fictional and bizarre stories, mixed the real ingredients are created to seem more reasonable when we encounter things that are inconsistent with our own experiences.
Through the study of these people, I gradually understand the gap with what is said and what happens and distinguish between reality and illusory.

Except for the latest pieces I made (Microcosm and Landscape), each of my pieces is an individual. I would like to explore a set or series to open up a dialogue between pieces. For example, a geographically close couple who have gone through thick and thin, is there anything related to their vessel images? It is like pouring the same liquid into two different containers; the shared experience makes relationships between two objects.

I also want to develop the scale. I have middle size and cup size sculptures. Since my vessels are related to human figures, I think a large form, human-sized sculpture would create a different language for me to dig into the volume and details. At the same time, I would have the chance to adjust the thickness of the wall and create more textured surface.
Documentation of the works

Title: Mirror of myself

Dimensions: W8” × D9” × H11.5”

Media: Stoneware, Terra Sig

Cone 04
Title: Marks on you (I  II  III)

Dimensions: (I) W7” × D7” × H19”

(II) W17” × D12” × H26”

(III) W16” × D11” × H19”

Media: Stoneware, Terra Sig

Cone 04
Title: Another day (I II III IV)

Dimensions: (I) W17.5” × D11” × H11”

(II) W11” × D11” × H13”

(III) W15” × D15” × H17”

(IV) W15” × D15” × H28”

Media: Stoneware, Terra Sig

Cone 04
Title: Microcosm

Dimensions: each cup varies from W3” × D3” × H4” to W4” × D4” × H5”

Media: Stoneware, Terra Sig

Cone 04
Title: Landscape (I II III IV)

Dimensions: eight pieces average  W13” × D7” × H7”

Media: Stoneware, Terra Sig

Cone 04
Bibliography


