Origination

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ORIGINATION

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Abstract

My thesis is focused on progressions found within the human life cycle, specifically on the acts of creation, birth, and growth. I am inspired by the idea that all new life contains a certain potential, yet to be fulfilled. Some of the sculptures are a series of parts, which represent a change and movement over time. Color plays an important role, visually and conceptually using a pallet of whites to create a sense of purity and freshness associated with the beginning of life. I see my sculptures as a microcosm of the human life cycle, which symbolically represent the various types of growths that we undergo.

The two direct influences for this body of work come from my observations of the natural world and my interests in the human body. Both of these influences have generated my interest on life cycles and the continual changes which living things go through. The experiences that I’ve had working in gardens and on farms have prompted the organic forms found within my work.

I enjoy using the medium of clay because it is a material found in the earth itself and is a part of its own cycles within the natural world. This material has been used for thousands of years to express ideas about birth and creation, which is what I am using it for today.
Body of Work

Transition of Ideas

When I began working on my thesis, I knew that I wanted to work with the figure as the basis for my sculpture. Unfortunately, throughout the duration of the year leading up to my thesis exhibition, I changed my direction of work a number of times. It began with my first thesis proposal that I submitted in the fall of 2007. I proposed a theme centered on the body and its relationship to our natural environment. This was the original proposal:

“I feel that the sculptor, Ana Mendieta, put it correctly when she said, “we are born of the earth, buried in the earth, and reborn in the mother: earth.” For my thesis I would like to explore the relationship of the body with the earth. For instance, figure-forms encased within masses of clay. Through these sculptures I hope to reconnect myself to the rhythm of the earth at a time when our society is greatly divorced from the natural environment.

Out of all figurative sculpture, I am most drawn to the archetypical figurines of the Neolithic period from Greece and the Island of Cyprus. My interest is focused on the way that they minimalized and exaggerated certain features to focus on the essential natures of the human body. Their stylized renderings of the body were made at a time when humans were closest with their natural and religious environment. The figures were created not by observation, but by relying on an internal knowledge invoked by their own cultural and spiritual beliefs. One of my contemporary influences whose philosophy and aesthetic I have been attracted to is Steven De Staebler. He is described as a man who “addresses the loss of our primitive sense of being human, in effect our primitive sense of ourselves.” I would also like to tap into his interest of finding the “rawness” within the human body. In a sense, reducing the body to a more primal being, which he also does in response to society’s increasing use of technology.

The figures will be carved and/or built out of larger pieces of clay in a way that will be symbolic of landscape and will appear as if it they are a natural occurrence, similar to how a river gouges out bedrock as it flows through time. I use clay because of its enormous potential for
personal expression and its capacity for a wide range of physical characteristics. I would like the sculptures to be an assortment of sizes from life-sized work to smaller, intimate pieces. They will be hand-built out a variety of low-fire clay bodies such as paper clay or a highly grogged white stoneware. I will be using an array of surface treatments ranging from glazes to direct applications of pigments.”

At the time of this proposal, I was greatly influenced by Manuel Neri’s emerging figural sculptures. The relationship that his figures had with the space they were contained in was something I wanted to explore in my own work. My personal interpretation of Neri’s work is that he creates emotional atmospheres for his figures in which they were emerging either in or out of that space.

The first maquettes that I made were full figures emerging out of a flat clay surface. The immediate problems were that the space was ambiguous and the figures were not anatomically correct. After my first critique, my thesis committee decided that I should make molds from my own body. This way I could work faster and instantly representational on a life-size scale.

The process of mold making gave me a vast knowledge of other materials, which I had never explored before. What I eventually decided was that the most time and money efficient method for body casting was using pre-plastered cloth strips to create a shell of my body. I took this cast and created a firmer backing by layering plaster on top. After I completed casting my whole body, I began using the molds and made clay body parts. Instead of having clay body parts emerging only out of clay, I wanted to incorporate other materials. The next step was to test other materials, which I would use to have the body parts emerging out of.

By this time, I had come to the realization that our environment is no longer very natural and that my everyday surroundings consisted more of brick, concrete, pavement, and other industrial materials. For the first sculpture that I completed, I used blue dyed plaster in a rectangular format to create the “matrix” for a white clay hand. This was an interesting start, but not at all dynamic. Out of all of the experiments, the most successful one was a hand emerging out of amber colored rubber.
After using this methodology for a while, I was unhappy with the sterile and static feeling that the industrial materials were giving off. It seemed far from the original intent that I began with.

I was frequently thinking about Kiki Smith’s work, as I had seen her retrospective one year before. What I drew from her work was how she explored ideas of death and birth by using fragments of the body to create narratives about life cycles. Unsure of how to steer more in Smith’s direction I made some organic, abstract sculptures that were more similar to my work in the past. I created them so that they were visually evolving in a cycle. After a very unresolved and unsettling committee meeting, I concluded that I wanted to work with the idea of showing progressions within the female body.

I wrote my last proposal to clarify for myself and for my committee exactly what I wanted to do. The final proposal was stated as this:

*Cycle:* An interval through time in which something is occurring and often repeating. It is an event that takes place in an order.

*Progression:* The act of moving forward.

“My interest in life cycles began at an early age when I experienced events of death and birth in my immediate family. Overtime, I have realized that no matter how mundane our bodies might be, their existence over time should always be valued as a part of who we are. As humans, we are constantly progressing in ways that are unique or possibly shared universally. I have always been fascinated by the idea that we are continuously advancing not only through time, but as individuals within our own life cycle.

For my thesis exhibition, I would like to create sculptures, which visually explore various progressions during a life cycle dealing with the life, growth, and death of the body. Each piece will contain a narrative about the body and will consist of multiple parts. Some of the work will be cyclical and others will have a clear beginning and an ending as each piece changes throughout the sculpture.

The work will be of fragmented parts of the body that will be made out of clay. They will be semi-representational, slightly reductive, and with exaggerated scales. The finish of each piece
will range accordingly, but will include glazed and painted surfaces. The coloration will be mostly monochromatic and the texture will play a role throughout each series including satin glazes and rough, matt glazes. They will be displayed on the wall, pedestals, and on the floor.”

Eventually, I narrowed this even further to focus only on progressions within the beginning of the human life cycle. This was where my work transformed from the body emerging from space, to ideas about life emerging from a woman’s body. The cyclical nature of life and the infinite progressions within a human lifecycle became the conceptual basis. None of my sculptures were based on specific events or people, but on the ideas of birth and growth in general.

One of the most important aspects of making this work was the choice of color. The minimal palette that I chose to use was a last minute decision, which I believe allowed the work to cohere as one installation. I was having difficulty trying to find a glaze scheme, which would look appropriate on such a large scale. Having too much of one color was very overwhelming to the work especially the pink, which was what I was leaning toward. A committee meeting’s suggestion to use all white with highlights of pink was a turning point for me. I have always enjoyed using color, but white was the most appropriate, visually and conceptually for this body of work.
Influences

Eastern Philosophy

I began to study ideas of Eastern Philosophy, more specifically Zen Buddhism about four years ago. There are two important elements found within my sculptures, which I obtained from reading Eastern Philosophy. These two are the concepts of the emptiness and the idea of the void; the other is the continuity of life through the arising and cessation over time.

Some of the readings I enjoy the most are from Nargarjuna. Nagarjuna was a Buddhist Philosopher who first wrote about the ideas of emptiness and the void. As translated by David Ross Komito, he explains the terminology of arising, enduring, disintegration and cessation of life-

“Arising or production means the fresh arising of an identity of a thing from causes and conditions. Enduring refers to the abiding of the former continuity of a thing. Disintegration refers to that which does not abide in the second moment of a thing. When the process of disintegration has reached completion and the initial moment of a thing has changes into the subsequent moment of a thing, then the thing has ceased; it has gone beyond the limit of the original moment.”

The idea of Samsara, or the “cycle of continuity,” is something that drives my work. My sculptures relate to the idea of impermanence and cyclical natures by how everything is constantly evolving. Although the sculptures “Emergence” and “Culminate” are represented in a linear progression, they are still a reflection of a greater cycle. Even more directly related to my work, Komito writes-

1 Komito, David Ross (127)
2 Rahula, Walpola (34)
“One can find many moments of the existence of a thing and that a continuity is maintained over these moments of a thing…For example, in the case of a seed producing a shoot, a continuity of the first moment of a seed is maintained over the moments between the cause, the seed, and the result, the shoot. He explains that because the shoot in its turn can serve as the cause of something else in a moment subsequent to it, so a continuity of the initial moment of the seed is thus maintained.”

Anish Kapoor

An artist that has influenced me and who also shares an interest in Eastern Philosophy is Anish Kapoor. There are three direct elements that I have derived from his work; his use of monochromatic color, his minimal, reductive form, and the way that he references the womb as symbolic of the void. In Thomas McEvilly’s book, Sculpture in the Age of Doubt, he writes about Kapoor’s choice of color-

“White was its purity, its chastity as against the bloodily sexy red, its attempt to negate or escape from the fluidic fates of the body."

Some of Kapoor’s work is also about the body in an abstract way using fragments from the body. His sculpture, “When I am Pregnant,” was the most influential for me.

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3 McEviley, Thomas (225)
Illustration 1. “When I am pregnant,” by Anish Kapoor

Illustration 2. Neolithic “Violin Figures”
This work was also monochromatic white and displayed as a part of the wall in which the space became the object itself. After I finished my thesis show I was able to see this work in Boston at his retrospective, and it was breathtaking.

McEvilly also wrote in reference to how Kapoor uses the idea of the womb in his sculptures. I tried to express this same idea through my own work. He writes-

“The womb that releases into the world becomes the tomb which receives them at the end… the emptiness with the source or container, or as the blankness of the picture plane, is the void of potentiality from which forms arise and into which they are segmented again after their momentary spurt of self expression.”

Neolithic Figures

“The one feature that all these ancient figures have in common is that they do not present a realistic image of the human form. Without exception they all show some kind of deliberate modification of the natural object on which they are based.”

This quote from, The Art of Ancient Cyprus, has inspired the way that I modify and abstract from the body. Since my undergraduate studies, I have been researching and collecting images of Neolithic figures mostly from Greece the Island of Cyprus. I believe my sculptures were subconsciously influenced from looking and reading about these ancient objects over time. It was these figures that I believe inspired me to focus on the idea of birth and fertility in relation to the female body. After reflecting on what I found the most attractive about these figures, I decided that what appealing to me the most was their sense of femininity, how the figures were swelling with life. The sense of femininity

5 The Art of Ancient Cyprus, P. 116
that these forms hold isn’t a flowery, whimsical appearance, but one that I see as powerful and bold, despite their primitiveness.

These small sculptures contain an abundance of information regarding how femininity, fertility, and birth were viewed during their time. The figures explored these themes through their stylized shapes, exaggerating parts of the female body such as the breasts and the stomach. My work is exaggerated in this way, especially in the use of fragmentation. The form of the sculpture, “Becoming,” was directly influenced by the reductive Neolithic depictions of a woman’s body specifically the “violin figures”6.

**Yves Klein**

Yves Klein’s International Blue and his ideas about color have influenced my decisions about color. When I was presented with the idea of using a palette of monochromatic white during a critique, I immediately agreed that it was the most cohesive option to resolve all of the work as one exhibition. I instantly thought about the previous readings that I had done on Yves Klein’s philosophy about color. His monochromatic blue paintings were used as a means of conceptual expression.

Illustration 3. “Das blaue Schwammrelief” by Yves Klein,

Illustration 4. “Untitled” by Donald Judd
“For Klein, the color Blue always held associations with the sea and the sky, where the phenomena of vital, tangible nature appear in their most abstract form.”

I wanted all of my work to be associated with one concept as well, which was to represent the beginning of life. The color white is the one most commonly associated with creation and purity throughout history. The accents of pink in the sculpture represent the blood and flesh of life, but in a subdued way.

**Donald Judd**

One artist that I always find myself turning to is Donald Judd. When I saw his “Untitled” wall sculpture series, in which metal bars decreased in size as they progressed forward in space, it became my first inspiration to create work in a series. I have been attracted to his minimal design even though his work is mostly geometric, by the way that he can pare down his forms to their essential properties. During my undergraduate studies I was assigned to research Judd and to create a sculpture, which was influenced by his work. It inspired me to create a wall sculpture, which was based on the growth of an abstracted pod-like form. I decided to revisit this idea for my thesis as a way to show the progression inside a womb for the sculpture “Culminate.”

**Eva Kwong**

Eva Kwong’s wall sculpture, “Bacteria, Diatoms, and cells,” which I was able to view at NCECA (the National Conference for the Education of the Ceramic Arts) in 2007, influenced me

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7, Weitemeir, Hannah (28) *See Illustration 3.*
through her colorful forms and how they were displayed. I was also inspired how she represented her ideas about cells and bacteria in a non-scientific way. I discovered that she was greatly influenced by studying natural objects and I knew why I had an affinity to her work. Although she works with a different concept focused on ideas of duality, her forms and surfaces still visually interests me. David Jones writes about her work in his book, *Firing: Philosophies Within Contemporary Ceramic Practices.*

> “Her work references the fascination of her youth when she worked in a “lending library,” of plants and natural objects—it is a fascination that has never gone away. She talks of her Chinese grandmother folding a leaf into a grasshopper form—a memory of changing one material into another. Now she performs such transformations…”

**Andy Goldsworthy**

Andy Goldsworthy’s book, *Time,* has influenced me by making me more aware of how things change in nature due to natural processes. Studying change in nature helps me to find ways to make forms, which look like they are evolving in a natural way, avoiding a look of being too contrived. Goldsworthy’s piece, “Stick Hole (Spring into Summer),” is a good example of this where he created a nest-like structure, which sat in a field and over time the environment around it completely grew in and covered the whole sculpture. In the past I have made work in progressions, but were less successful because they were not evolving in a significantly interesting way. Now I have realized that not only do the forms change, but so does their environment, sometimes color, scale, and many other transformations which I am now cognizant of.

9 Jones, David (114)
10 Friedman, Terry (32 and 33) See Illustration 6
Illustration 5. “Bacteria, Diatoms, and cells” by Eva Kwong
Kiki Smith

When I first began my thesis and was working with fragmented parts of the body, realistically and to scale, I was literally just arranging the parts in space. When confronted with the question of what was I trying to say with the body in my sculpture, I really didn’t know the answer. I had been so process oriented and had lost sight of why I was actually using the figure. I began looking at Kiki Smith’s work frequently; I had been to her retrospective a year before when I had seen her work for the first time. I was researching Smith’s work to reflect on what she was trying to say when I noticed some of her work involved cycles of the body.

I became interested in how she specifically represented fertility and femininity. Her two different sculptures both titled, “Womb,” influenced me greatly. One of her sculptures is a womb represented with a child inside it. The other is of an empty container displayed open as two halves and hinged together. Not only did these actual pieces influence me, but I was also influenced in an even greater sense of how the body can be used symbolically.

Illustration 6. “Stick Hole (Spring into Summer)” by Andy Goldsworthy
Illustration 7. “Womb” by Kiki Smith

Illustration 8. “Womb” by Kiki Smith
Illustration 9. Overview of Exhibition
**Individual Works**

**Emergence**

Emergence\(^{12}\) is about the act of giving birth. This piece was the first one I made for this body of work. I wanted it to represent the way that something forms and grows inside another form. Also how life finds a way to emerge into this world after being created. Although this series of pieces was visually inspired by an illustration of a dilating cervix and a baby’s head during birth, I was also inspired by the way that a sprout of a plant springs up out of the soil. As I mentioned before, my experience in gardening has furnished my sensibilities of growth and organic form.

The main shape that I repeated was abstracted from what I conceived to be a generalized vaginal shape. I used the shape of the vagina, but I also juxtaposed a swelling belly to show that something was growing. Using a fragmented part of the body to explore my concept was a result of looking at Kiki Smith’s work. Creating this part of the body in a large scale was important for this piece because I wanted to make a simple change and movement appear as a dramatic event. It was technically difficult for me to create such large sculptures and also to find a way to hang them on the wall. After the learning experience I had with making molds earlier in the year, I knew how to tackle this problem more efficiently and I decided to use a plaster press mold to create the three identical shapes.

I had a difficult time coming up with a glaze color for this piece, because the pinks that I was experimenting with were to bright for the eye to stand. In a discussion of which glaze color to choose for this piece, the decision of using a white palate to unite the whole body of work was made. The turning point for me was when I thought of how Yves Klein uses the color blue to connect his work about air and atmosphere, therefore I wanted to use the purity of white to unite my work.

\(^{12}\) See Illustrations 10 and 11
Illustration 10. Emergence

Illustration 11. Detail of Emergence
Becoming

Becoming is about the female body as a vessel for growing life. When reflecting on the beginnings of a life cycle I immediately associate it with a woman’s body. I created the pink interior of this piece as a metaphor for a woman becoming a mother and providing for new life, in a sense creating a nest. The body protects the growing egg and the soft folds create a sense of comfort. I wanted the viewer of this work to interact with it as if it were a person in scale. This piece is slightly different from the rest of the body of work because it is not one part of the life cycle, but it is representing various aspects of a cycle all in one.

For this piece, I used a stylized, hourglass shape to represent the female body. The form I chose came from my research in Neolithic figures. The stylized shapes used to represent women and fertility has always attracted me because of their bold and primitive nature. When I first saw images of the figures I couldn’t believe that they were so small in actuality, because they seemed so powerful.

My original intent for this piece changed dramatically as I constructed it. At first, I was going to have my thesis be about every aspect of the human life cycle. This piece was to represent the end of a woman’s life as the folds of skin become increasingly wrinkled as piece moves to towards the top. When I realized that the task of representing the whole life cycle would take years, I centered my focus on the beginning of the life cycle only. Eventually with the addition of the egg form, the piece came to be about the woman’s body as a protective place for the new life it created. This piece was important in helping me pinpoint a core idea to base the body of work around.

13 See Illustrations 12 and 13.
Illustration 12. Becoming

Illustration 13. Detail of Becoming
Culminate

Culminate\textsuperscript{14} is a nine piece series based on the idea of growth in the womb. It represents the creation of life, how it swells, and then releases from a woman’s body. At the beginning of the series, the first egg shape is small and simple. As each piece progresses they enlarge and morph to the abstracted shape of a fetus. In the final sculpture all that remains is an empty shell with a soft pink interior. The last form was inspired by the idea of an empty shell which shows that what was inside has now been released and is no longer within a protected area.

I wanted this piece to be recognizably about the stages of fertilization, but I felt that by making the last piece open, it could have more than one interpretation and perhaps not as literal as it was becoming. Living near the seacoast, I have always collected shells and I felt a connection between a discarded shell and an empty womb. Even though an empty shell is most likely caused by the death of something it is metaphorical of how we are born and eventually have to return to nature.

The void is also a metaphor for the womb representing from where life originates and may eventually return. In “Culminate” I wanted to represent the beginning, the forming, and the leaving of life within the womb over time, which as I was researching eastern philosophy became synonymous with the Buddhist idea of beginnings and endings.

\textit{“We say true existence comes from emptiness and goes back again into emptiness. What appears from emptiness is true existence.”\textsuperscript{15}}

The pedestals that the sculptures are displayed on became an important asset to the work. The pedestals themselves also progress in width, but remain the same height of three feet. The pedestal’s

\textsuperscript{14} See Illustrations 14 and 15
\textsuperscript{15} Suzuki, Shunryu (106)
increase in width greatly affects the work to heighten a sense of growth. The basic idea of a linear progression through space was initially inspired by Donald Judd’s “Untitled” wall sculpture. If you viewed the pedestals without the sculpture, it would have the minimalist appearance of Judd’s work.
Illustration 14. Culminate

Illustration 15. Culminate (back view)
Rudiment

Rudiment\textsuperscript{16} was the final piece that I made for the exhibition. I created it to show growth on a microscopic level. It is inspired by the initial cluster of cells, which grow and multiply at the beginning of fertilization; the piece itself is a freeze-framed moment of this action of growth in time. Although this piece isn’t as directly feminine as the others, I view fertility being associated with femininity. It represents the way in which all living things develop, by growing and dividing.

I chose to hang this piece on the wall, as it would grow attached to the wall of a uterus. The display was also influenced by Eva Kwong’s wall installations. I enjoyed how her sculptures appeared to grow all over the wall and although some pieces were small they still contained a strong presences as they hung over and around the viewer. Admittedly, if I had more time, I would have liked to make multiple clusters of these forms at various stages of growth, in random placement, as opposed to a linear context. I feel that it would have been a more complete representation of growth as an action if there were more of them. I included this piece anyway, because I felt it was important to account for the earliest stage of growth to complete this body of work.

\textsuperscript{16} See Illustration 16.
Illustration 16. Rudiment
Conclusion

For me, the most successful piece was “Emergence.” The scale of the forms and their placement on the wall was more effective than I had expected. I believe that it is abstracted enough to have many interpretations centered around ideas about birth. As for the display, the lighting enhanced it greatly, giving each form three shadows, making the work appear larger than it is. “Culminate” was also successful for me, especially with the pedestals increasing in width and their spacing, which brought the sculpture through the entire length of the exhibition space.

The least successful sculpture for me was “Rudiment,” because it felt unfinished. If I had had more time I would have made that sculpture with multiple segmented forms displayed as a group of cellular structures.

If there was a piece which least belonged in the show it would be “Becoming.” As previously mentioned, it began with one concept and ended up with a completely different one. I enjoy this piece, but I think that it would be more successful among a different body of work.

Overall, I would say that my most difficult task was choosing and staying with one idea for a body of work, which was clear, and visually present in the sculpture. By the time that I had decided on the concept that I wanted to use, I had a short amount of time to create the work. In the end, I felt that the work was a cohesive exhibition, which for me was a difficult task.

I see my work fitting into contemporary ceramics as object oriented sculpture. The sculptures exist as themselves and work as a series, but are not dependent on each other. To categorize my work I would call it post-minimal organic abstraction. Other ceramic artists that I feel I belong with are Leigh Taylor-Mickelson, Eva Kwong, and Martha Russo.

In the future I would like to make work about the idea of birth and growth in a general sense and not as focused on the female body. I would like to continue on the same concept, but revisit my earlier
interests in the natural world. For new works, I would also like to reintroduce more color where necessary. As far as the forms themselves, I would like to explore arranging sculpture in an actual cycle, which would directly show a return to an original state.
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