Sculptural life forms

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Sculptural Life Forms

by

Jaiik Lee

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Abstract

The purpose of my art is to express the mystery of life. Through the shaping of material mass, I induce my work to influence space and time in an attempt to discover special meaning about the life phenomenon of all creatures from the beginning of time to their present manifestations today.

The origin of life has been the subject of numerous debates including those pitting creationism against evolution and churchmen against scientists. There remain, however, discoveries and artifacts like ancient fish fossils, that connect features of our humans ancestors with other living organisms. Perhaps this is a riddle that will never be solved and an assignment that cannot be completed. I cannot define what truth is in regards to this issue and can only guess that the beginning of life started somewhere along the line. I can, however, define the process for seeking the truth about the nature of life without hesitation: It is ‘Evolution’, part of the title for my work ‘Evolutionary Stream’. Evolution is a metaphor for life and also a paradox of life at the same time, because it reveals that many historical debates and controversies are useless. Most important to me in relationship to this issue is the facts that we are now living and breathing beings who have developed as one of the great creatures of our universe and that we
continually struggle to evolve and develop our life’s future. The different sculptural forms depicted in my work show the mysterious nature of life, Not only of human beings, but of everything that is alive. My desire was to create a dynamic yet harmonious relationship between form and surface, and capture the critical moments of any creature’s efforts to live and move forward.
Alchemy is something that I have been attracted to for many years, and it was essential in the development of the concept for my thesis. My fascination with alchemy traces back to the allure of Islamic architecture, whose development was triggered by advances in mathematics and studies in alchemy.

Alchemy was practiced in Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt, Persia, India, Japan, Korea and China, in Classical Greece and Rome, in the Muslim civilizations, and then in Europe up until the 19th century. Its beliefs and practices were promoted through a complex network of schools and philosophical systems that operated over a span of at least 2,500 years. In the history of science, alchemy refers to both an early form of the investigation of nature and an early philosophical and spiritual discipline, both combining elements of chemistry, metallurgy, physics, medicine, astrology, semiotics, mysticism, spiritualism, and art as parts of one greater force.

Gyeongju, one of the ancient capital cities in Korea, is home to many relics including the Bell of King Seongdeok, also called the Emille Bell. This grand and the graceful Bell is said to have been made in A.D.771 and a legendary tale of alchemy surrounds its production. The legend tells of a small child who was poured into the boiling molten
metal so that the resulting bell would produce a beautiful sound. While sounding brutal, it indicates the commitment of the people, who were ignorant of both the composition of iron and modern-day smelting processes, to achieve their goals even by devoting themselves to (or committing a cruel act of) murder.

The history of alchemy dates back to Aristotle’s time and it was prevalent throughout Europe and the Arab states. Aristotle saw water, fire, air and soil as the fundamental elements of life and the source of all creation. Alchemy embraced the now discredited belief that matter holds different properties according to the mixed ratio of the four elements. The overarching purpose of alchemy from the ancient times down to the Middle Ages, was to find a means of turning common metals into gold, by experimenting with varied ratios of elements. Although greatly distanced from science and logic by contemporary standards, even men such as Rene Descartes, the French philosopher who was a major figure in the development of the concept of continental rationalism, was infatuated by alchemy during his youth. Issac Newton, the British physicist and father of modern mechanics, is said to have
indulged in alchemy during his later years.

The infatuation with alchemy withered away in the West with the emergence of modern science. In China, the renaissance of Buddhism and Confucianism also contributed to its decline in the East. Men of public standing like Isaac Newton, once enamored by alchemy, turned away from it and made biting remarks about it once his own scientific theories became popular. The belief in alchemy and the alchemic tradition in chemistry were replaced by the French chemist Antoine Laurent Lavoisier’s modern chemistry. Although inevitably seen as both superstitious and unscientific, alchemy has nonetheless had an important impact on mankind.

What motivated me to develop an interest in alchemy is not the seemingly ridiculous quest to make gold out of copper but the many attempts made along the way. Some alchemists who likened the creative power of alchemy to that of an animal’s ovaries are said to have endured extraordinary pain or even death to produce new materials: They believed that creation could not be perfected without pain, just as birth could not be achieved without pain. Their research in various fields marked by their suffering and pain gave birth to a tremendous amount of evolution in science, math and culture in general. Their quest for truth was part of a quest to find the true meaning of life.

The role of alchemy in the history of science can be likened to the story of a man
who tells his son that he buried gold somewhere in his vineyard. Digging up piles of soil in his search, the son failed to find the gold but later enjoyed a rich grape harvest thanks to the many grape seeds planted during his quest.

In short, people who tried to make gold were the fathers of so many valuable inventions and useful experiments. Today, alchemists camouflaged as magicians, scientists or even ‘aliens’ entertain us with their stories full of creativity and wit. I personally believe that the alchemists’ rather reckless pursuit of truth is also mirrored in the pursuits of artists like myself as we try to illustrate the different aspects of life through our craft: like alchemists mixing elements in special vessels, attempting to understand the meaning of the life of living things.
Influences and Inspirations

As an artist, my fascination with alchemy naturally drove me to reflect upon the alchemists’ thoughts and values in my art. I chose the ‘study of life’ as the theme of my work and tried to represent the different aspects of life through metal forms. I thought deeply about picking specific motifs that would accurately describe my theme of life and finally reached the conclusion that it might be a good idea to allow any form that I felt was authentic to serve as a motif. My goal was to create motifs that would illustrate emotions as abstract forms. These motifs crystallized moments of struggle experienced by all living things in their pursuit of survival.

This may stir some controversy among theists who believe in Creationism but I personally believe in humankind’s evolution over a long period of time. The motifs I selected capture the essence of animals, and fish in particular. Fossils work in much the same way, capturing the essence of living forms that we can experience in museums, books and the Internet. This easy access can lessen our appreciation of these forms by mistaking them for similar forms that can be easily made. That fish are frequently discovered as fossils is evidence of the rich life found in the oceans over a long period of time. Unless, however, these living organisms are instantly buried by soil after they
die, they will decay, oxidize and disappear. Only the process of burial under the soil will make them less vulnerable to chemical decomposition by bacteria, CO₂ and carbon.

The speed that this process had to take may be a convincing explanation of why fossils of pterosaurs often look as if they are ready to fly away. We can also explore the evolution of living entities by comparing fossils. Evolution is a powerful and lengthy struggle by both humans and other living things to survive in an environment. Humans desiring to achieve goals, both big and small, helped build new civilizations, and made mankind more fit for survival over a long period of time. The phenomenal advances accomplished by humans would not have been possible without the human imperative to win the competition against other carnivores to endure against the mighty force of nature. I sought to model such primitive yet theoretical aspects of life in my works.

As an artist, I am attracted to the streamlined shapes of fish that are free from any unnecessary details. Fish fossil specimens are ideal for sketching primitive life motifs. It’s not clear why I like the shape of fish, but my memories during my childhood years have had an impact on me. I was born and raised in a big city, but moved to Pohang when I was six. I lived in this port city in the southern part of Korea for one year. I remember marveling at the many kinds of fish swimming in tanks at sushi restaurants lined up along the coast and drawing fish in my sketchbooks.
There are many artists who get inspiration from the beautiful curves of fish including Frank Gehry, the leading figure in deconstructive architecture, who is famous for his lights series designed in the shape of fish. His structures juxtapose contrasting materials and use fish-shaped curves to give off a primitive voluptuousness.

Constantin Brancusi also relied on various living forms to create symbolic and abstract works. His bird series sculptures, in particular, are famous for preserving the identity of his materials while simplifying and abstracting the bird forms. This approach maximized the power of the forms and breathed life into the works. Birds are not the only subjects that have influenced his work: Fish, which can be seen as birds of the underwater world, were also subjects that interested Brancusi. He created fish series from 1922 to 1930 but his forms are hardly reminiscent of actual fish shapes. Compare
the ‘fish’ and ‘birds’ among his refined works and you can never imagine for even the slightest moment that they reference different species with different names. His minimalist pieces are composed using deft lines that look as if they could slip freely and fly from your fingers without leaving any traces as they disappear into the skies or into the water.

Lee Bontencou’s works were also a great source of inspiration to me in thinking
about the forms for my project. Her abstract works up to the late 1960s were flawless representations of human's vulnerability, violence, war and fear. Later, her works took a more concrete form associated with natural shapes of plants and fish. Her work further evolved into even more abstract forms that were significantly different from her earlier works. Her latest works are mostly mobiles hanging from the ceiling decorated with ceramic beads, wires and pieces of thin silk whose shape is reminiscent of a disassembled organism. Although untitled, this evolving work metaphorically and powerfully embodies the values that she is trying to present.
Lee Bontecou, <Untitled>, 1968

Lee Bontecou, <Untitled>, 1969

Lee Bontecou, <Untitled>, 1998
Sculptural Work

In this body of work, I desired to express the flow of time as it might be manifested in a rapid river, quite tide, or even an intense torrent of water in my art. My work can be seen as an expression of the history of the human race, and also as the movement of animals and their struggle for existence through adaptation: the law of the survival of the fittest. This is also my story.

Although each of my sculptural forms resembles an animal form, I didn’t intend to create specific animal shapes. Rather, I likened their shapes to the flow of human history. I also titled each piece with Latin words to reflect the many aspects of flowing, moving and streaming forms because I did not want to forget the idea of the origin of living forms. I also chose this language because it was the language of the ancient alchemists, who profoundly influenced the work in this series.

Viscus (Figure 1, 2, 3)

*Viscus* means ‘organ’ in English. This sculpture is made from copper and applied ammonia patina. It has a style that is somewhat different from the other forms, being made with a highly accurate and calculated process, ensuring the precision of lines and
angles. My previous works from Korea tried to combine an industrialized way of making with traditional metal craft. I intended to make extremely geometric art pieces with the possibility that they could be mass produced. These forms have something in common with each other with regard to their use of regular lines and planes. *Viscus* is actually the last piece of my previous body of work and plays an important role as the bridge between previous and current ideas.

**Fluo (Figure 4, 5, 6)**

*Fluo* means ‘stream’. It is made from copper, fine silver and an applied heat patina. I consider that this was first step towards changing my visual style. I was inspired by the shape of a whale and used the hammering process to create an organic body shape. As I had not hammered for almost 10 years, I was nervous about using this method. It was, however, the correct process for creating forms that referenced living creatures and brought me back to using these techniques. The regular lines and planes of my previous style were transformed into irregular curved lines and flexible, sea animal like forms.
Navigo (Figure 7, 8, 9)

*Navigo* is the first hanging sculpture, and it is made from copper, 24K gold leaf and applied liver of sulfur patina. The title means ‘slow swimming’ or ‘sailing’ and was inspired by a fossil fish image. I consider *Navigo* to occupy an important position among the pieces in this body of art because it is the beginning of the creation of new style. I tried to capture the calm and quite mood of streaming water. The process introduced a new method for creating the general structure of the forms as well as the detail and surface decoration. The organic body of *Navigo* is united with many small, hammered copper pieces that I spot welded to show irregular cracked lines which make it seem more primitive.

Amnis (Figure 10, 11, 12)

*Amnis* means ‘torrent’ in English. This piece is made from copper, 24K gold leaf and an applied liver of sulfur patina. Unlike the peaceful, calm and flowing *Navigo*, I wanted this piece to show the fierce and violent moments of life. I have associated the image of the splashing water of a waterfall with this sculpture.

I left my hometown and came to Rochester NY in 2006. Living in different country as a foreigner and communicating in different language have always been a big challenge
to me. Therefore, personally, *Amnis* is my favorite sculpture for the reason that it reflects my own situation of living in unfamiliar world. Like *Navigo*, however, *Amnis* is organized with three, separate masses of copper linked with small, individually applied pieces of copper.

**Aestus Estus (Figure 13, 14, 15)**

*Aestus Estus* means ‘tide’. I wanted to create an image of a tidal wave on the ocean. *Aestus Estus*’ length is over 72 inches and I used 10 gauge copper sheets in its construction. It was definitely a big challenge because I had never made a large sized sculpture before with hammering techniques. While I was making this piece, it was physically strenuous and painful work necessitated by its large size. I was, however, already skilled at this process through the work that I had done making *Navigo* and *Amnis*. This experience with techniques and processes enabled me to master the creation of its curved bodyline. My focus was mostly on making a stable structure. I produced the head part and the lower body parts separately. When I joined them by welding, copper wires 150mm in diameter were added inside of the connecting form which helps to sustain the weight of the head and prevents the entire form from being transformed by gravity.
Navigo II (Figure 16, 17, 18)

Navigo II is made from copper, 24K gold leaf with an applied heat patina on the surface. This is the last work of the living creature form series. For the other pieces, I placed the emphasis on the expression of various kinds of streaming images with many decorative factors such as exaggerated lines and shapes. This time, however, I was going to create something simple and understated flowing off of a natural draft reminiscent of primitive forms of life at the beginning of their existence. As a result of this desire, the shape of Navigo II seems very fluid and flexible in spite of its lack of superfluous decorations.
Figure

Figure 1 - Viscus
Figure 2 - Viscus

Figure 3 – Viscus (detail)
Figure 5 – Fluo (detail)

Figure 6 – Fluo (detail)
Figure 9 – Navigo (detail)
Figure 12 – Amnis (detail)
Figure 13 – Aestus Estus
Figure 14 – Aestus Estus

Figure 15 – Aestus Estus (detail)
Figure 16 – Navigo II
Figure 17 – Navigo II

Figure 18 – Navigo II (Detail)
Viscus
8"H x 7.8"W x 7.8"D
Copper

Fluo
9"H x 10"W x 24"D
5"H x 4"W x 12"D
Copper, Fine silver

Navigo
8"H x 10"W x 42"D
Copper, 24K gold leaf

Amnis
26"H x 13"W x 60"D
Copper, 24K gold leaf

Aestus Estus
64"H x 36"W x 72"D
Copper

Navigo II
14"H x 9"W x 39"D
Copper, 24K gold leaf
Conclusion

This thesis seeks to reveal the mysteries and origins of life and show how these have evolved to become part of what life is today. The issues surrounding the origins of life are forever wrapped in a mysterious fog, creating a riddle that may perhaps never be solved. Of the many theories that deal with the origins of life, those generated by the scholars who theorized about the development of nature through evolution, have come the closest to unlocking the mystery. Overtime, countless discussions about the origins of life have been repeated. For me the discussions are of little significance, as I am most interested in the fact that human being are alive and prospering.

I have tried to reflect the beliefs and visions of ancient alchemists who searched for answers to the questions about the origin of life. The most important aspect of this quest remains for me the fact that human beings have evolved to become one of the earth’s great creatures as we constantly struggle to adapt to our changing situation. My art work exhibits this life phenomenon, not only for human beings but for all creatures. I tried to create a harmonious relationship between sculptural forms and unique surfaces, which depict the evolutionary stream and movement that all creatures must undertake to survive.
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