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Life force of nature

Sooyoung Kim

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Rochester Institute of Technology

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Life force of Nature

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Table of Contents

Abstract

I. Inspirations

1. The connection to Nature

2. The Coexistence of Nature and Man-made World - Green Design
   The Harmony of Nature and Man-made World
   Green Solution

II. Aesthetic Concepts Represented in My Pieces
   Life Force Originated from Mother Nature

III. Body of Work

   List of Illustrations
   Color Photocopies

IV. Conclusion

V. Bibliography
Abstract

My work strives to illustrate the bond between Mother Nature and human beings. Primarily, I seek the harmony created by balanced compositions of natural and man-made objects. Any accidental visual conflict arising from this pairing is also a subject matter I find myself exploring within the execution my pieces.

In our high-speed daily lives, we often find ourselves unsettlingly disconnected from nature. Stephen Harrod Buhner describes this feeling as “a loss of connection to plants, to the land, to Earth, [that] leaves the holes with which we are naturally born unfilled,” and proposes that “the solution is reconnection to the natural world and the living intelligence of the land” (231). According to him, humans all possess vacancies that are only filled by the living things that have evolved on the earth with us for a million years. I seek to create an answer to this dilemma with my art, creating work that draws from the refreshing vitality of nature.

Reflecting the principles in Taoism, a philosophy of harmonious human life with nature, Mother Nature proves to be an abundant inspirational resource for the creation of art. Certainly, humans’ appreciation of nature and its sublimity has been expressed in many different forms of art throughout the ages. It is not my goal, however, to simply mimic the outside visual features of nature. Paul Klee said, “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible” (Chipp 182). Through the human element that is my thoughts and experiences, I seek to transform the superficial features of nature to an expression of its inner values.

I find the plants growing in urban settings to be some of the most intriguing objects. In the artificial surroundings of busy cities, I observe the struggle of plants as they attempt to survive and sustain their lives amidst the chaos. Despite the often squalid conditions, the plants successful growth speaks to a strong life force that rivals their counterparts growing in
the pristine wilderness. Through the exploration of various media: silver, cotton, fishing line, steel, copper, concrete, plastic, and ceramic, I attempt to illustrate this contrast of nature and the industrialized world.

In this thesis, I intend to reveal the inspiration derived from nature, and how these influences and motivations are manifested in the execution of my artwork. Adopting the vitality of nature as a major motif, my jewelry and sculptural pieces serve to express this idea in a tangible form. As an infinite aspect of life, I am convinced that the unlimited energy and vitality of nature could remain a solid foundation for my continuous working process.
I. Inspirations

1. The Connection to Nature

As humans, we are aware of the fact that we not only are living within the natural sphere, but are also faced with the fact that we are the offspring of her, Mother Nature. The highly industrialized and modernized world in which we live, however, often acts as a wedge, separating humans from their natural birthright. It often becomes necessary to purposely seek out and reconnect with nature. As I hike through the nature trails on mountains, I find myself becoming a part of the nature surrounding me. Naturalist artist, Haesim Kim, expresses this return to oneness in the performance “I still feel the world is filled with sunshine with my eyes closed”, which took place in London Modern Hall Park in 1999 and is shown in the images below. Kim began her work in the woods in 1986, and has since presented over 60 works with Yatoo, an organization founded by Korean nature artists in 1981.

Through my work, I try to illustrate the concept of ‘being one’ with nature, creating a visual manifestation of the ideas that are found somewhere in my unconsciousness. My
emotions and approach to art reflect the thoughts of Susanne Langer, who compares the experiences of viewers of her art to being immersed in nature.

On a windy day, I am standing in the center of an urban paradise garden; I close my eyes and feel the movements of plants with my fingertips. I don’t hear any noise. I only hear the rustling sounds of plants which sound like music. I feel peace and quiet. I expect my audience to feel the same when viewing my work. I think, “Art is the creation of symbolic form of human feeling” (Langer 49).

Nature has always been an integral part of humanity, providing the foundation for life itself. Humans could not exist without nature, and its presence fills our world with energy, and often joy. In our daily lives, even the smallest reminder of nature, a flower pot by our window or a speck of cloud over a high-rise building’s skyline, seems to bring some peace to our busy minds. We often seek nature as an answer to the chaos of daily living. As John Muir said, "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of Autumn" (Teale 311).

Throughout history, nature has provided a rich source of inspiration for artists. Employing a variety of means, these individuals sought to express the many nuances of the natural world, and in doing so, joined the pantheon of art.

For a millennium, Western art that reproduced nature was considered the highest achievement. Even Dryden called art "Nature's handmaid." And during the apotheosis of the Western paean to nature, the Art Nouveau movement, the prevailing belief was that nature is not only the subject of art, but the source as well, expressed in decorative arts from ironwork to wallpaper to textile design. As a noted text of the time proclaimed, "We look... in ornament for the order, rhythm, [and] harmony of natural growth" (Day, 70).

The following are artists who work with nature, and with whom I found a kindred spirit.
Andy Goldsworthy

Goldsworthy said, "All forms are to be found in nature, and there are many qualities within any material. By exploring them I hope to understand the whole. My work needs to include the loose and disordered within the nature of materials as well as the tight and regular." (Goldsworthy and Friedman 163)

Goldsworthy utilizes various natural objects that can easily be found around us. He employs things such as leaves, stones, wood, grasses, water, sand, clay, snow and ice, items already given by nature, to construct his work. Seasons and weather are also other natural sources of material and become his canvas. Without preconceived ideas of what to create, his subject matter is determined by the environment. He channels the energy he feels from nature into a visible form of art.

Claire Morgan

According to her statement, Morgan said, “I feel a close connection with the natural world which I hope is evident in my work, but our clumsy, often destructive relationship with nature, and the 'artificial' world we have constructed are of equal significance.
Ultimately I find myself focusing on areas where the boundaries cannot be clearly defined” (Morgan, par. 10). Her beautiful hanging installations, though composed of many small elements, truly mimic nature impressively in a large scale. In the works Garden, and The Fall, Morgan uses the spatial distribution of leaves to compose cuboids, into which she places living organisms such as birds, insects, or a fox. Morgan’s work seems to take the immenseness of nature and dismantle it, piece by piece, into a series of miniature elements. She is particularly interested in the changes of nature over time and the passing of seasons, often utilizing the falling and scattering of leaves to mark these variations.

3 Myeongbeom Kim

Kim believes “Nature has a soul,” and truly embodies this in his work as an installation artist. He seeks to commune with nature through deep meditation on the modern world, interpreting these discoveries into own his story. As shown in the untitled images above, his story is both surreal and doleful, an ode to the loss of nature in modern life. He represents the exclusion of nature from our industrialized society.

Myeongbeom Kim produces otherworldly installations and sculpture works that juxtapose man-made elements with nature to create surreal dream spaces. Although this breaking down of the boundaries between artificiality and nature would generally engender a sense of unease, conveying the decline of natural phenomenon at the hands of manufactured goods, from Kim’s artistic perspective there is a rather a peaceful
coexistence of these two binary opposites. It is a beautiful thing to behold (Velde, par. 1-2).

Kate Macdowell

“In my work this romantic ideal of union with the natural world conflicts with our contemporary impact on the environment. These pieces are in part responses to environmental stressors including climate change, toxic pollution, and [genetically modified] crops… In some pieces aspects of the human figure stand-in for ourselves and act out sometimes harrowing, sometimes humorous transformations which illustrate our current relationship with the natural world (Macdowell, par. 2).”

Among many other artists who employ nature as a motif, Macdowell’s work truly reveals the complicated and irreparable relationship between nature and human beings. She hand sculptures each piece out of porcelain into realistic figures, which make us reflect on nature’s victimization due to our indiscriminate development.

Like the artists I am drawn to, I seek to express nature in my work. In my case, I am interested in presenting the continuous vitality of nature within urban surroundings, a feeling I gained through careful observations. When I see a wildflower blooming from the gritty
pavement in a city, the blossom looks so vulnerable, and yet at the same time exhibits an almost perfect beauty. I see these tiny plants as “poignant encounters [that] are emblematic of nature’s struggle amongst the restless detritus that blows about the gutters… the [natural] and man-made world are inextricably linked in [the] contemporary era” (Ewington 4).

I frequently see flowers and plants growing through the cracks of concrete blocks in cities. These sprouts leave me in wonder, questioning how they manage to grow out of the minute cracks in man-made structures. It is amazing that those little plants keep growing and blooming, even though humans trample them down and cover the ground with concrete. Fig.15 is an example of my work that truly embodies this feeling of awe.

Within our daily lives, we face harmonious scenes of nature mingling with the man-made world. For humans living within it, nature is an endless challenge that requires constant effort. The relationship between nature and human beings is a repetition of control and adaptation. By controlling nature, we maintain our lives in the degree of comfort that we wish, creating for ourselves an abundance of resources. At the same time, by adapting nature we find ourselves living as part of it. Nature is the source of our thought, the source of our life, and our very origin.

Human beings, throughout most of their habitation of Earth, have been so completely interwoven into their environment that, until recently, there was no separation between them. This understanding is reflected in information shared by the majority of indigenous and ancient cultures: They did not experience themselves and nature as separate entities. The intimate interweaving of humanity with the rest of life throughout evolution means that the entire development of the human species as a distinct species cannot be separated from the landscapes in which it developed. Such deep interconnectedness to environment is so fundamental to us as a species that, ultimately, it is not possible to understand ourselves as human beings without understanding something of wild nature itself. (Buhner 56)
The Harmony of Nature and Man-made World

The harmonious coexistence between nature and the man-made world can be easily found in modern architecture. Among many, I found the following two places as the most inspirational.

① The Getty Center, Los Angeles, CA

When I first laid eyes on the Getty Center, located near downtown Los Angeles, I was struck by the view of the site. Truly, it is a utopia for the coexistence of the man-made with nature.

The Getty Center, designed by architect Richard Meier, and positioned on the top of the Santa Monica hills, is enriched with a tremendous collection of art, splendid architecture, and views overlooking Los Angeles. Drawing inspiration from the surroundings, such as the Pacific Ocean, the San Gabriel Mountains, and the cityscape, Meier created a structure that marries the beauty of natural curved lines with the matrix pattern of an urban city.

Complementing Meier’s structure is the Central Garden at the Getty Center, which is the work of artist Robert Irwin. Irwin was quoted as saying that the Central Garden “is a sculpture in the form of a garden, which aims to be art.”

As I walked the garden, I found myself in a meditative mood in surrounding myself with flowers, trees and grasses that were vigorous, colorful and abundant. My breathtaking experience in the garden became a trigger of my early thesis work.
The Central Park in New York City

One of the most exciting experiences I have had in the U.S. was visiting New York City. When I was walking along the streets in Manhattan, Central Park captured my attention. Surrounded by skyscrapers, Central Park is located in the heart of Manhattan. The huge scale was beyond my imagination, and I was amazed by the beautiful nature creating an urban paradise such as those seen in movies.

Back in 1850s, the Central Park was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux as a response to the New Yorkers’ campaign to reconstruct the city. Due to the careful plans and efforts devoted by the city government of that time, the Central Park could have been providing a ‘paradise garden’ where the tourists and the New Yorkers release their stress and tension in the middle of the busiest city in the whole world. (“America's Most Visited City Park”)

In questioning why people seem to flock to Central Park, I am once again reminded of the powerful role nature plays within human lives. The modern world is full of complications, leaving many of us with feelings of confusion, isolation, and symptoms of depression. We all seek an escape from harsh realities, and often we find an ultimate peace whenever we return to Mother Nature. The park provides us with a source of fresh air and relaxation, serving as a natural sanctuary in the city.
Green Solution

For a significant part of the industrialized “modern” era, the close relationship between nature and humankind has been lost as people have sought the advancement of our civilization and to improve the convenience of human life over everything else. Our activities estranged ourselves from nature, resulting in environmental crisis and devastation of human life. Recently, this crisis led to our self-awakening and introspection on our actions. The renewed concept of coexistence with the natural world made us begin to seek eco-friendly or “green” solutions to be applied within our whole society. Green architecture was one of the movements begun in the mid-1980s in the wake of this environmental concern. Its core idea is that in modern architecture, besides providing aesthetic and functional value, a structure is also considered to be part of ecosystem. This marks a shift from formalist architecture into ecological architecture. The essential goal of ecological design is to provide places, products and services with minimal use of non-renewable materials, to minimize environmentally destructive impacts, and to relate people and their lives to the natural environment. Ecological design is also known as sustainable design. This movement serves to rectify the loss of nature within the modern urban life, improving life quality through the modification of life style.

The following three examples, as seen on “inhabitat.com,” exemplify principles of green architecture. Each structure is covered with lush green vegetation, providing a close link to nature within the very dwellings of humans, while still allowing for all of the functionality demanded by modern life. These buildings truly serve as a harmonious link between the often conflicting natural and man-made worlds.
① ACROS Building is a Mountainous Green-Roofed Pyramid Planted with Trees

The ACROS Fukuoka building in Fukuoka City, Japan is a successful example of green design. Integrated with park, the building was constructed on the last remaining green space in the city center. The huge terraced roof contains an array of that provides space for meditation and relaxation from the congestion of the city. The green roof reduces the energy consumption by providing natural insulation, captures rainwater runoff, and supports the local bird life.

② Kaohsiung Port & Cruise Centre Blanketed in an Undulating Planted Roof
The *Kaohsiung Port and Cruise Service Centre* symbolizes the significant effect of balancing economic and environmental interests in architecture. Planted with a lush vegetative carpet of vines, bushes and trees, the building is a representative of Taiwan’s study in green architecture. To reflect the local culture at its best, the undulating form of the roof structure is used to mimic the verdant hills for which Taiwan is known. The vegetative carpet of the roof insulates the inside of the center, creating a micro climate beneath it, and cutting energy usage.

③ **Patrick Blanc’s Vertical Gardens**

French botanist Patrick Blanc creates gardens on the walls of structures, such as the vegetated exterior wall of *Musée du Quai Branly* in Paris (shown in the picture). His vertical garden system brings both plants and buildings together in harmony. Besides its visual interest, benefits of the garden are many: natural insulation, improved air quality, creation of a cooling effect, and low energy consumption. A soil-free self-supporting system, which consists of a PVC layer, felt and a metal frame, makes this green solution possible to be implemented anywhere: indoors or outdoors, and in any climatic environment.
II. Aesthetic Concepts Represented in My Pieces

Life Force Originated from Mother Nature

The vitality nature possesses is one of the most important and basic elements for its survival. In the arc of life, nature recognizes the time to grow, to maintain, and even to terminate itself in an effort to preserve resources for the next generation. In my quest to capture this vitality in my work, I have adopted natural imagery from wildflowers, trees, grass, and seeds. While some people may see these images as very vulnerable and weak, I view them as emblems of the unlimited vitality of nature. Despite the obvious hurdles placed in front of them, they survive and thrive.

The sculptor, Henry Moore once said, “It is the artist who keeps people’s eyes alert and people’s minds alive to the meaning of nature and to the wonderful variety and synthesis of its shapes and forms” (Seldis 10). The following artists seem to capture the essence of natural vitality in their work.

1 Linda Huey

“Resembling a concrete block, Remainder's red brick-colored perimeter is a conglomerate of what looks like encrusted hardware and junk. Breaking through from the inside is an aqua-colored fresh flower -- a contrast to its container.” (Calabria, par. 8)
Huey’s work contains images of conflict between the natural and the man-made, and yet also illustrates coexistence between them. In it, while I observe nature struggling among the remnants of human refuse, I also see it growing and persisting with a tenacious hold on life. In *Four Flowers*, each unique flower seems to flourish as it blooms out of the soil of fossilized trash. In *Strong One*, which is not illustrated here, the dun-colored ceramic blossom appears as a struggling survivor, growing out of what looks like a mass of human waste. This graceful plant represents the strong vitality of the natural life force.

② Dale Chihuly

In speaking of the vitality of nature, I would be remiss to leave out my favorite glass artist, Dale Chihuly. I remember my utter astonishment upon seeing his marvelous piece, *Fern Green Tower* (2007), exhibited at the entrance of the Corning Museum of Glass. The energetic, seemingly animate large-scale glass tower represents the true value of natural vitality in the form of sculpture. I had never seen such a strong sculptural expression full of life, and truly marvel at the masterful evocation of emotion through color and form.

Chihuly’s most recent botanical garden work series is the perfect example of how one’s artwork can become a part of nature. Views of his breathtakingly colorful sculptural show them deeply embedded in the natural landscape. One of the keys to the success of these spectacular creations built in nature is that his work appears to draw breath, carrying its own life force that works symbiotically with nature. “The resounding popularity of the gardens and other Chihuly environments demonstrates the importance of, and need for, the aesthetic
experience, the experience of moments of beauty, revelation, and transcendence that are the antithesis of the everyday” (Oldknow, 12–15).

③ Sue Amendolara

Until 1990, the main motif for Amendolara’s art was the image of barren land and urban development. Once she started to pay attention to the natural world losing footing within the urban landscape, her subject matter shifted to nature, with inspiration drawn especially from plant life. In her works Jungle Tree and Jungle Patch,
Amendolara depicts the energy and vitality of heliconia, a flowering plant that was of particular interest to her. The harmony between the sharpness of metal and the soft curve of a plant is a prominent feature of her work.

According to her artist statement, Amendolara “is attracted to and draws from the distinctive blossoms of heliconia, bird-of-paradise and acacia and the leaves of various plants. Healthy plants are strong living organisms yet their forms can be delicate and intricate. It is this contrast between delicacy and strength which Amendolara finds to be a compelling element of nature” (Amendolara, par. 4).
III. Body of Work

I consider my jewelry pieces, Fig.1-9: rings, brooches and necklaces, as small portable sculpture pieces that stand on their own, as well as being worn on the human body. The wall pieces and floor pieces were the latest addition to my oeuvre. All are the fruit of my efforts.

My main intention was to create harmony within the strong contrasts of nature and the man-made. As these two subjects have few common factors, it was a difficult task to resolve the conflicting issues that arose as I brought these disparate inspirations into a single piece.

In my work, both organic and geometric shapes were utilized to express different nuances of my inspiration. When I attempted to represent the natural sphere, soft, flowing lines, and organic shapes offered many possibilities. For the man-made world, I found geometric shapes to be an effective method of representation.

I further sought to emphasize the visual contrast between nature and the man-made world through the implementation of different materials. Natural elements were fabricated in silver and organic cotton, with fishing wire used to create floating free forms in the air. These elements were juxtaposed with representations of the man-made world, crafted from industrial materials such as rusty steel, rebar, and copper, mixed with ceramic and concrete, to resemble human constructions. By incorporating these various elements into a single piece, I sought to illustrate the inextricable link between the natural and man-made worlds.

My sculptural rings, Fig. 1 - 3, and the brooch in Fig. 4 illustrate plants growing out of rusty steel pots which serve as representations of the man-made sphere. Each individual egg-shaped, grainy-surfed bud possesses a powerfully persistent life force inside, a 'juice
of life’. The cotton within the flowers has a delicate look, mimicking dandelion spores waiting for a gust of wind to transport their seeds from place to place.

In Fig. 1-4, the silver rings and steel pots were fabricated out of geometric shapes to represent the unique aesthetic of modern architecture. I thought the soaring forms of architectural structures would translate well into free-standing rings.

For all my steel pots, I began by drawing planar figures onto a sheet of 20 gauge steel, and then cut them out. Using a three-square and a square file, I deeply scored along my lines where the flat sheets needed to be folded. I repeatedly sprayed the steel with water to create a coating of oxidation. To the rusty steel sheets, I riveted small copper pots that contained fabricated silver plants. The steel was then folded and closed into the pot forms, surrounding the copper. I let the plants flow freely through the slight openings that remained after folding, to give the impression they had grown out of the steel pot. To further capture the essence of nature, I utilized a number of silver wires and fishing line to create the effect of plants waving in the wind. While Fig. 1-3 were conceived as rings, and thus have rather voluminous pots, the steel pot in the brooch in Fig. 4 was designed to lie flat as a pocket on a blouse. Worn on the breast, the silver plants growing from the steel pot seem to represent the blossom of joy and hope within an otherwise soulless heart.

For the brooches in Fig.5 and 6, I utilized fishing line to create weeds, employing the delicate, yet strong nature of the material to show the tenacious hold on life these tiny plants have in the harsh man-made world. By using rusty steel to fabricate the lifeless form of a pot, the vitality of the natural form is further emphasized. Fishing line is seen growing
profusely through the gaps and holes. As shown in the detail image in Fig. 7, the tip of the fishing line was melted into a ball and painted with a bright, lively gold-colored enamel paint to contrast with the rusty, inert steel.

In Fig. 8-10, clay, a symbol of earth’s soil, is the chosen material for the growing plants’ foundation. The circular shape of the foundation represents our earth, and the union of nature and human beings. Heart shaped petals represent the overflowing love of Mother Nature.

Using a utility knife and coarse sandpaper, pink foam was carved into a doughnut shape. Then, a thin layer of gesso was applied to the surface and smoothed with fine sandpaper. From the foam form, I made a two part mold out of plaster, as shown in the image above. Using a rolling pin, I shaped a mass of iron-rich red clay into several flatten pieces. After greasing the two mold halves, I meticulously covered the inside surface of the mold with the clay pieces. The two halves were then joined together to complete a hollow doughnut shape. Once the doughnut clay had set hard, and the mold was removed, and the clay was dried and fired in a kiln to nearly 1945°F.

As shown in the images to the left, gold-colored enamel paint was lightly applied to the terracotta and
burned with a torch flame over and over to make a richer color.

In my two wall pieces, Fig.10 and 12, I sought to capture the essence of spring, my favorite season, and the new life that emerges after a long, harsh winter. The silver buds, blossoming from forged copper tree branches, serve as an illustration of the continued vitality of nature after the barren winter. Copper rods, half an inch in diameter, were hammer forged into elements that varied in thickness, and were welded together to form tree branches. Silver buds were then soldered individually onto the copper branches. Various colors of enamel paint were then applied to branches.

As shown in the detail images Fig. 13, 14, the geometrically shaped copper pot is filled with a mass of rusty steel, which serves to represent barren soil.

In Fig. 15, *On a Gritty City Pavement I, II*, I tried to express a more realistic view of natural life persisting in the man-made world. Geometrical cuboid shapes, cast in concrete with rebar running through the center, are miniature representations of gritty city pavement. The lively flowers rooted in the concrete are symbols of nature’s life force. For me, the flowers are a source of relaxation, and their presence makes me feel pleasant and happy. Whenever I encounter them growing on city pavement, they revive me from the exhausted tedium of
daily life. Even for the people living in a fast-paced world, flowers can bring a peaceful element to our emotions.

I can breathe in the freshness of nature’s life force through my metalwork. My work is an attempt to create a small world in which the natural and the unnatural environment lie down together in an ‘Urban Paradise Garden,’ constructed of ambiguous shapes and substances through contemporary techniques.
List of Illustrations

Fig.1 _On a Windy Day

Fig.2 _In Beautiful Bloom

Fig.3 _Tiny Blossoms

Fig.4 _An Urban Paradise Garden

Fig.5 _Amongst The Gutters of The Implacable City I.

Fig.6 _Amongst The Gutters of The Implacable City II.

Fig.7 _Fig.6 Detail image

Fig.8 _The Cascade of Tiny Blossoms

Fig.9 _The Energy of Nature

Fig.10 _An Emblem of Nature

Fig.11 _Fig.10 Detail Image

Fig.12 _A Poignant Encounter-momentary Life

Fig.13, 14 _Fig.12 Detail images

Fig.15 _On A Gritty City Pavement I, II

Fig.16 _Fig.15 Detail Image
Fig. 1. On a Windy Day. Sterling Silver, Steel, Acrylic, Cotton
10”x8”x17”, 2007
Fig. 2  *In Beautiful Bloom*  Sterling Silver, Steel, Acrylic, Cotton
9”x8”x17”, 2007
Fig. 3 _Tiny Blossoms_ Sterling Silver, Steel, Acrylic, Cotton
7”x6”x12”
Fig. 4 _An Urban Paradise Garden_ Sterling Silver, Steel, Acrylic, Cotton, Fishing Line
6.5”x3”x7”, 2007
Fig. 5, 6_Amongst The Gutters of The Implacable City I. II._ Sterling Silver, Steel, Fishing Line, 5”x3”x6”, 2008

Fig. 7_Detail Image
Fig.8 The Cascade of Tiny Blossoms. Sterling Silver, Ceramic, Acrylic, Enamel Paint, Fishing Line, 10”x5”x12”, 2008
Fig.9 _The Energy of Nature_ Sterling Silver, Ceramic, Acrylic, Enamel Paint
6”x4”x10”, 2008
Fig.10 An Emblem of Nature_ Sterling Silver, Ceramic, Copper, 31”x10”x25”, 2008

Fig.11 Detail Image
Fig. 12  A Poignant Encounter-momentary Life  Sterling Silver, Copper, Steel Wool, Fishing Line, 27”x16”x45”, 2008
Fig. 13, 14: Detail Images
Fig. 15. On A Gritty City Pavement. Sterling Silver, Concrete, Reinforcing Bar, wood, Fishing Line, 31”x10”x25”, 2008

Fig. 16. Detail Image
IV. Conclusion

I am interested in the phenomenon of the vitality of nature, and have examined ways to express this in my work. I sought to not only address the superficial substance of nature, but to express the values and nobility of life that is hidden. My explorations also led me to the complicated relationship between nature and human beings, and the affection and competition that exist between them. My research has led me to believe that as art develops in conjunction with our society and lives, it may become an integral part of the artists’ work to reflect issues related to the natural environment.

It has been acknowledged that while human beings are a part of the universe and live accepting the order of nature, they also exert their influence on nature, inevitably altering it. As long as we humans live as part of nature, activities such as the creation of art cannot be totally free from environmental matters. Humans need to reflect not only on the positive elements we can gain from nature, but also the losses caused from the advancement of civilization into the natural world.

As a result of my investigation of nature in urban surroundings, my goal is to produce more interesting metal pieces embodying the concept. I tried to mix and match various media within my explorations to best communicate my ideas. I believe that any challenge can turn out to be a blessing or a curse at the end, depending on my own perspective. Throughout this process, I have been on alert for new challenges and prepared to search out new sources of design whenever I ran out of inspiration. Moreover, I also have been learning to let go of my fears and anxieties, so I can achieve a precise execution and clear presentation of ideas in my work.

Through the investigation process in support of this thesis, I have had an opportunity to learn how to evoke the refined sensibilities which had previously been dwelling inside of me. I also tried to explain how my works could deliver the concept of “Nature’s Vitality” to the
minds of people who are tired of their repetitive and tedious daily lives as a result of our modern society.

Personally, it was meaningful to learn how to follow certain research procedures to explain my subjective point of view about my metal pieces. This kind of experience will provide me with further positive benefits as I continue my journey of creating refined works of art. Furthermore, it also helped to broaden my scope in analyzing natural objects as sources of inspiration. Most of all, it has renewed my resolve to sharpen my abilities and continue to produce more insightful, meaningful metal works reflecting my new-found deeper internal sensibilities for the concept of “Urban Paradise Garden.”
V. Bibliography

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Articles


**Internet Sites**


**Photographs**


