Sculpture in space

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“SCULPTURE IN SPACE”

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INTRODUCTION

Coming from Taiwan, Republic of China, I studied Fine Arts in a conservative environment. For cultural and political reasons, fine artists were never considered important to my society. Even today, the contributions that artists make are still minimal. The learning process was in isolation from Taiwan's society as well as the Western World.

Much of my knowledge on Western Art came from the textbooks which I studied during my former college years. Not until the fall of 1989, did I finally have the opportunity to actually see the original art, when I came to the United States. The result of my encounter with the "New World" has given me a whole new perspective on my position in art.
ART BACKGROUND

After studying two years of painting in high school, I passed the National Test and entered the Fine Arts program in Chinese Culture University. In the art program of my school, it is required that all undergraduates participate in general art courses during their freshman year. After the first year of school, all students had the chance to decide the specific majors which they are interested in. The majors were Oil Painting, Chinese Brush Painting, and Graphic Design.

Given the chance to choose, I started out as an Oil Painting major. During that time, being a painter was the most idealistic thing I could think of. With a goal of exploration, I found myself disappointed by the fact that the Oil Painting major was rather traditional and very conservative. It provided little freedom for students to really create an expression of their own. In addition, the method of teaching in my school heavily emphasized painting skills rather than concepts and ideas. Like the art academies of Europe during the ninetieth century, we also learned to draw from the plaster statues and models in the class. Most of my instructors did not encourage students to develop their own style.

Before my sophomore year, I was at my lowest point because I began to lose confidence and interest in my major. Then, nine classmates and I formed an art group in our sophomore year to
protest against the "lifeless" teaching method that school had offered. The goal of the group was to share ideas and to contact other contemporary painters off campus. Our group had a total of six exhibitions in galleries around Taipei and our school. The group was an inspiration for me. It encouraged me to continue my interest in art.
COMING TO CERAMICS

My encounter with ceramics was an accidental occurrence which I never expected. Before my junior year, I was able to take electives in ceramics, where I learned some basic skills like throwing pottery. From that point on, I realized the versatility of ceramics. It opened up a new kind of possibility in achieving the three dimensional effect in a way that painting could not. With clay, the material is not fixed or finite. It was exciting to make an object which I could touch and control. After 1984, I decided that I would use the clay as my art material.
COMING TO THE UNITED STATES

After military service in 1987, I was working in a clay studio, making functional pottery. The studio was limited to functional pottery, and I was desperately seeking other ideas. I thought the immense possibilities of clay were yet to be explored. In creating a new concept for my work, I immediately realized there could be a strong relationship with my western painting experience. For this reason, I decided to come to the United States to further develop and study.
FINDING MY ART WORK DIRECTION

Started in Wall Pieces

In the beginning of my study in the United States, I started out with the idea of making slab wall pieces which would incorporate my painting experience. The building process with slabs helped me to handle the clay and to understand its plastic nature. At this point, the work was monochromatic and two-dimensional.

The Influence of The Modern Art Concept:

The Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting:

Learning about abstract expressionism in the winter of 1989, I was immersed in exploring ways to transform my work. I found my Eastern culture conflicted with the ideas of Abstract Expressionism. My major concern during this period was to absorb the Western ideas and still preserve my own tradition. The wall pieces which I did in the beginning seemed inconsistent and contained no subject-matter or content. After some intellectual struggle, I started to read about the Abstract Expressionist painters, and the way they used color and composition to explore their idea on the canvas.

In the following way:

The 'cone, cylinder, and sphere' of Cezanne fame have persisted in much twentieth-century painting. Even where these forms are not purely represented, abstract artists have tended toward a compilation of separable elements, form has been treated as discrete entities, whereas
forms are few in hard edge and the surface immaculate....The whole picture becomes the unit; forms extend the length of the painting or are restricted to two or three tones. The result of this sparseness is that the spatial effect of figures on a field is avoided. (Arnason 1986, 678)

I started to reduce my forms as an experiment to try to unify content and geometric shape. What I discovered was by utilizing geometric shapes I could create the illusion of form with shape.

**Minimal Art**

Minimal Art makes a clear statement about the nature of reality. Its apparent simplicity was the result of rigorous focusing, the elimination of distraction. It was neither simple nor empty, cold nor obscure. Minimal artists reordered the art values. They located profound experience in ordinary experience. For me the minimalist approach provided a vocabulary of simple forms, to carry out these new attitudes and artistic possibilities. *Minimalist art proves itself not by preserving a range of aesthetic values against the ravages of history and human forgetfulness, but by its power to keep us mindful of art and its meaning as creations of the social order, not just of gifted individuals* (Baker 1988, 21). After learning those art concepts, I realized that my concern about art was not social or political, but about art itself. I wanted to make art that deals as directly as possible with visual reactions, and incorporates my definition of art.
DEVELOPING OF MY OWN AESTHETICS

To me, clay was simply a material for personal expression. Therefore, I believed that I could use clay as the basis to build sculpture. However, defining my own aesthetic would be the next step.

In developing my own sculpture, I believed that it was essential for me to temporarily pull away from my traditional Chinese Art background (which often times I tend to take for granted). For that reason, using clay to make sculpture was a different task for me. I found myself fascinated by the developments of Western Art, which were both a challenging and provocative. It inspired me to experiment with ideas and forms, thus radically changing my perspective about what clay was.

In what way is the art object different and where does its meaning reside? What is the role of the artist (must he have unique skills, special insight, natural talent?). What is the role of the viewer; what kind of experience should he expect, and indeed, what does it mean to understand a work of art? (Biggs 1989, 5)

Those were all questions that I expected to think about, taken up with renewed vigor in order to develop my aesthetics and concepts.
SCULPTURE IN SPACE

The Thesis Pieces:

Ideas:

There was a total of two sculptures in my thesis show. (plate 4-9) Both of them were conceived to interact with the wall, floor and the gallery itself. I was interested in the natural intrinsic qualities of clay. However, I was also exploring other ways to use this material. My sculpture incorporated light and shade, color tonality, and positive and negative space to create illusion of form and shape. I was trying to encourage the dialogue among forms, light, and defined space.

Space:

The major concern of my sculpture was to incorporate space as the main part of the composition rather than just the form itself. I made massive geometric forms, primarily in triangular shapes, to conduct the sculpture’s dialogue with its surrounding environment. The constant blend of nature and the sculpture was the entire basis for the work. With the utilization of light and shade, the whole piece became much more meaningful (the idea of interacting with one of nature’s most powerful resources - light). I considered my sculpture as an inner space using light and shade as the reflection of the outer environment. Therefore, the gallery became no longer just a place to display art -- but rather it became a three-dimensional canvas. Through this arrangement, the viewer could realize the powerful presentation of these objects.
**Colors:**

Color was one of the most important elements in my sculpture. I used color as one of my devices (along with form and shape) to further define the message through visual impression. For example, the green and orange colors used on my corner piece (plate 8) were to create a three-dimensional effect, making the bright orange triangle visually stand out from the more somber green of the clay “frame.” The color on the center pyramid triangle was a perfect example of how I used colors like green and orange to contrast and interact with the interweaving of bright color and dark shadow. The other piece on the floor (plate 9) was painted in ocean blue terra-sigilatta which gave the viewer the experience of cool and abysmal feeling.

**Scale:**

Both of my thesis pieces were considerably large (larger than human scale). It was necessary to make my works large in order to get more real space involved with the gallery. It forced the viewer to feel the object and space at once.

*The kind of scale that acts as content is not simply a matter of size and proportion, it is the function of the way the forms appear to expand and continue beyond their physical limitations, acting aggressively, and compressing it. The intrusion of these forms into the surrounding space and their interaction with the architecture force the viewer to consider the environment in which they are placed in the context of the structure.* (Battcock 1968, 20)

I had two specific reasons for using large-scale in my sculpture: One was its relationship to the environment, and the other one was its monumental feeling that incorporated the viewing.
Form and Shape:

I chose geometric form and shape because of its purely non-objective nature. I wanted form to be form made of space and light, not material. There was no symbolic meaning within my triangular shapes. The triangular shape that I preferred to use was one which stressed the true experience of a three-dimensional art form and one which could really provide me many ways to explore various physical relationships between the self and the object. I expected that the spectator must walk around my work, and by doing this each time they were always seeing something different. Therefore, the triangular shape became my personal preference in pursuing my concept of space.
CONCLUSION

My thesis work gave me the confidence I needed to pursue my art direction. It ultimately changed my perception of what art is all about. An instructor back in my college in Taiwan said to us that the real essence of art is to invent an entirely new and different idea. He said, “the first person who came out with the new idea would be called a genius, and whoever used the same idea would be worthless.” His point of view limits the possibilities of art making. I was feeling “worthless” in my own art until I came to the United States and experienced a whole new thinking about art. From my earlier experiments with two-dimensional wall pieces to the latest three-dimensional geometric sculptures, the work I have done for the past two years at RIT helped me break away from my misconception that true art must be “new” and “different.” For me, art is a continual process that evolves through time, and every new idea is made possible by looking through the examples of different art work.

Being a graduate student was absolutely necessary for me to study other people’s work and absorb as much knowledge as possible from them. The most valuable thing I have learned from my professors at RIT is that I needed to open up myself in many ways. It is important to keep an open-mind and see art through different perspectives.
WORKING WITH INDOOR LARGE SCALE SCULPTURE, I NEEDED AN APPROPRIATE CLAY BODY. THIS CLAY BODY NEEDED STRENGTH FOR LARGE SCALE CONSTRUCTION.

THE CLAY BODY THAT I USED CAME FROM CHANG, CHING-YUAN'S RECIPE. THIS RECIPE PROVIDED A LOW SHRINKAGE AND PLASTIC MATERIAL TO APPROPRIATE FOR EXECUTING MY SCULPTURE.

**THE RECIPE WAS AS FOLLOWS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narco</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawthorne</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Art</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyanite</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35m Grog</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100m Grog</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total shrinkage of this clay body was 3% fired to cone 04 (1060°F). The absorption was more than 25% at cone 04. There were two pieces in my thesis show. One was in the corner, the other was on the floor. The corner piece was 9 by 9 feet. There were no electric kilns which could fit the scale, so I separated it into seven sections to fit into the oval electric kiln. The inside triangle of the corner piece was 4.5’x4.5’x3.5’. Because of the scale, I had to use the gas kiln to fire it.

To achieve the quality of the color, which demanded the absolute solid-look, I decided to use terra-sigilatta. I glazed the surface with green, orange and blue terra-sigilatta and fired to cone 04.
The recipe of the terra-sigilatta was:

**Green:**
OM#4 Ball Clay............30%
Water......................70%
Calgon....................a pinch
Add:Chrome................8%
   Yellow Ocher.........2%

**Orange:**
Red Art....................15%
OM#4 Ball Clay............15%
Water......................70%
Calgon.....................a pinch
Add:Red Iron Oxide.......4%
   Yellow Ocher.........2%

**Ocean Blue:**
OM#4 Ball Clay............10%
Frit 3124...................5%
Water......................65%
Calgon.....................a pinch
Add:Blue Mason Stain.....15%
   Black Mason Stain....5%

Because of the geometric shape, both of my sculptures were made with a plywood mold. It was a good method to control the
size exactly. Concerning the corner piece, I used pipes to join each section together. My original idea was to make the sculpture without a pedestal. Because of limitation in the gallery’s floor space and the fact that it is made with red brick, I decided to build a low plywood pedestal to separate the sculpture from the brick floor.
REFERENCE LIST


PLATES

Plate 1. Frank Stella, Valparaiso Flash and Green, 1963.

Plate 2. Frank Stella, Delphine and Hippolyte, 1959.

