11-1-1994

A Cube as form

Jeoung-Eun Lim

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

A CUBE AS FORM
by
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Date: Rochester, November 30 1994
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisers, Prof. Judd Williams, Prof. Kathy Vajda, Prof. David Dickinson, Wendy Low, and Zerbe Sodervick, who proof read my papers, my instructors and friends at Rochester Institute of Technology for sharing their knowledge and experiences with me.

Especially, I own an inestimable thanks to my parents, whose support made my education in the United States possible.
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INTRODUCTION

Today science and technology has created a mechanized society for all of us. Often I feel alienated by the people around me. This lack of human compassion often casts my spirits into a state of frustration and despair.

My work deals with my personal isolation and memories, and with how these entries are boxed-in or enclosed in ways that are ambiguous. Perhaps they can be interpreted as abstract, representational, two-dimensional, three-dimensional, or even, in their distortions, hint at unperceived dimensions.

Future, past and present are not parts of continuously flowing time, but they are rather three directions or three dimensions into which the posture of man can stretch. We are not guaranteed the realization of our ego in the future.

My working with combinations of different printmaking processes, computer graphics, and glass, is a direct result of these thoughts. My ideas are visually expressed through an exploration of both artistic processes and art media.
Part I

ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON

If we define art as means of expressing our true selves and making our lives more valuable, we first need to look at ourselves truthfully. I recognize that in our present, mechanized society it is easy to lose our real self and respect for others. Therefore I try to express my imagination and record my world in a series of works called “A Cube Form Seen Through An Empirical Image,” using all kinds of memorable images accumulated throughout my life time, along with some select objects which symbolize the present time. By doing a series, I try to confirm my own existence in this uncertain world. I would like to establish a view of my theoretical base for future works by comparing and analyzing the works of other artists. In this way, I can more fully understand how my created art has developed and what influences have most impacted my personal directions.

I will compare my art with work by two highly recognized contemporary artists. Joseph Cornell provided me with the idea of boxed preservation of memories. Robert Rauschenberg, like myself, uses juxtaposed photographic images within geometric divisions. Moreover, I will also analyze where my works fit in the evolution of Cubism and Constructivism.
Most of my works are recorded memories, such as the print “Last year-Memory I” (Fig. 3) which is a diary of my whole last year. The placing of the memories within cubes was inspired by the work of Joseph Cornell who put objects from his childhood into display boxes. “Fascinated with flotsam and jetsam of our lives...he preserved these precious items as carefully as any curator protects his collection.”1 In a similar way my work records “precious” memories. However, rather than mounting real objects carefully, I drew over modified photographic images. Like Joseph Cornell, I have kept boxes of childhood objects to recall pleasant memories. However, in my art my memories were precious for the sake of honest assessing who I am and where I am going as an artist, more than for nostalgia purposes. To me, another difference is that, while Cornell’s boxes are actual wooden display spaces, my boxes are symbolic of the spaces and time frames within which I have lived my life. Never the less, Cornell’s boxes may also be symbolic; as McShine says, “Perhaps it was Cornell’s measuring of time by his own perception that allowed him to create an infinite number of atmospheres within a small space.”2

At first glance, my work may look like it should be categorized as Cubist or Constructivist based on the presence of geometric shapes. Like most Cubists or Constructivists I see point and line, or cubes as underlying all visible shapes. However, the cubes in my art “Last Year-Memory I” (Fig. 3), “Farewell 101992”

1 Kynaston, McShine, Introducing Mr. Cornell (New York: The museum of Modern Art, 1980), 10
2 Kynaston McShine, Introducing Mr. Cornell (New York: The museum of Modern Art, 1980), 11
(Fig. 4), “Man; In a Shade of Green” (Fig. 5), “Inner Space I” (Fig. 7), “See Myself” (Fig. 8), “Staring I” (Fig. 9), “Sudden Calamity” (Fig. 10) are prisms through which to see my life or spaces within which time moves. I am not creating them as subjects of geometric study; they are merely containers for memory. Cubists rendered visible reality into underlying geometric form. Then constructivists dropped all concern with objective reality in their studies of pure form. Like such contemporary artists as Robert Rauschenberg, I used geometric spaces as divisions for enacting a narrative of juxtapositions. That is why the work can not be characterized as cubist (it does not dissect visual reality form into its underlying forms) nor constructivist (it does not exclude representation and see form itself as the whole subject). Understanding those definitions, it is clear that the formal aspects of my works owe a great deal to Cubism and Constructivism; however, neither philosophy totally justifies my work and ideas.

As Le Corbusier has said: “The ‘play of forms in light’ is here realized in at once the most literal and most sensitive of manners. It is only through light, and the movement of light, that the forms come to life, and, through them, the space also.” 3 As previously stated, my boxes symbolize spaces and time frames. My life time is moving and disappearing within geometric shapes which have permanence. The same can be said of my works as Rotzler said of constructivism: “Such geometric allusions are no doubt employed to symbolize something that can not be directly depicted, the powers that be, for instance, or

conceptions of time." 4 Among contemporary artists, the formal aspects of my works have the closest resemblance to Robert Rauschenberg’s combination prints and paintings. Like Rotzler, Rauschenberg is famous for his incorporation of photographic images in prints. I add elements of drawing to photographic images, in the context of abstract forms. Both Rauschenberg and I are printmakers who avoid “The flatness or easy readability of graphic art that characterizes both pop and geometric painting.” 5 However, Robert Rauschenberg has said: “I don’t want my personality to come out through the piece . . . . I want my paintings to be reflections of life, and life can’t be stopped.” 6 I, on the other hand, want my personal life and personality to be shown in my works. I want to isolate, frame, and draw attention to captured moments.

I regard Cornell’s work as the main artistic source for the meaning of my works, and Rauschenberg’s art to be the greatest influence on my forms. My art reflect concepts closely resembling Rauschenberg’s, the Cubist ideas of representing essential forms which underline life, and Constructivist concepts pertaining to geometric division of a picture plane.

4 Kynaston McShine, Introducing Mr. Cornell (New York: The museum of Modern Art, 1980), 7
Part II
DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIMENTATION

Most of my works are photoetching prints. Photoetching, is the transfer of film images to zinc printing plates; it is a complex process capable of subtle effects. For a recent photoetched print I decided on a theme of recording my experiences of 1992, and establishing a visual design of cubes with photographic images on the planes. This concept was based on a previous installation, by the same name of "Last Year-Memory-Installation" (Fig. 2) which involved plexiglass cubes covered with photographs. The print "Last Year-memory I" (Fig. 3), like the installation, was inspired by my desire to record a gloomy period of my life, the year of 1992. In addition to realizing the concept and design of the piece, I attempted to strengthen my skills involving the complex process of photoetching. It was necessary to first make transparent photocopies of about twenty photographic images from my snapshot collections. When I wanted to change the images, I made negative images from my snapshots. This work was done on a Macintosh Computer and used Adobe Photoshop software.

Then I used K. P. R. 3* a photo emulsion chemical. However, later I found a

* K. P. R. 3: Kodark Photo Resist Type 3
new technique; I transferred photo images onto the plate by using Colorless Blender makers. In 1993 I was uncomfortable socializing with friends and acquaintances and was further isolated by the boundaries of my daily work. My desire to record those memories of alienation and the memory period of my life became the stimulus to start “Staring I”(Fig.9). This piece was the visual diary of my emotion. I also included scripture from Psalms 21-23, Old Testament, which gave me strength and emotional support.

I hope to overcome my isolation among people. Unfortunately, I still sense a personal separation of myself from popular society. I often feel frustrated and I attempt to capture this on going despair visually. Therefore, cubes, the form of my works, are produced. Time goes on and on. And once it passes by, it will be lost in my faint memory. However, I always want to capture my painful memories in some confined form so that they will last forever “See Myself” (Fig.8). I encoded my sorrowful diary into the cubes, as if word by word.

Since the Renaissance perspective and shading have described most Western art, with the advent of Cubism much experimentation occurred, surfaces and compositions became more complex and many new directions in technique and media were developed. Moreover, Cubism uses different kinds of color and compound surface compositions. Perspective and shading have characteristics basic to Cubism. Also, cubist printmakers used a wide range of materials, the most significant explanation of the new style is reflected in the feverish activity that characterized this revolutionary movement.7

In order to express three dimensions-future, past and present-through a

language of planes-past-present grooves are hollowed out in a plexiglass or sandblast on a glass surface. Ink is rubbed into the grooves or the sheet is screen printed. Finally the grooves create shadows as light shine on the print to expression the future “Memory USA I” (Fig.1), “Farewell 101992” (Fig.4), “Hey! Francis” (Fig.6). The cubes represented the packaging of my life. Maria Jolas says: “The image of the house in the solid representation is folded lengthwise.” Often I saw my life as a housed structure. Even though my life appeared secluded and boxed in my prints, the work is both dark and light as the title “Memory” implies. Especially in 1992, I wanted to escape from society, and remove myself from all things that were restricting me from conducting a search for visual expression. Still, there were also significant areas of light.

CONCLUSION

The concept behind my work is recognizing the opportunity to challenge or resist society’s demands. Simultaneously, the essential limitations of human abilities are also emphasized in my prints. By the juncture of this opportunity and these cubes, the structure of my works are produced.

Having compared my own works to that of Joseph Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg, Le Corbusier, Cubism and Constructivism, I feel that I still am searching for new, more effective ways to visually express my ideas. I hope to expand my world and construct new solutions for describing my personal experiences. I also plan to incorporate mixed media and multiple processes into my prints and push beyond traditional printmaking techniques.

In art, as in life itself, today leads to a future stepping stone for essential development in endless time.
Figure 1. Memory USA I
Figure 2. Last Year-Memory (Installation)
Figure 3. Last Year-Memory I
Figure 4. Farewell 101992
Figure 5. Man; In a Shade of Green
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