Absent

Shu-Jin Huang

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.
Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The college of Imaging Art and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

ABSENT

BY
Shu-Jin Huang

November 2002
APPROVALS

Chief Advisor: Richard Hirsch

Date: 01/27/03

Associate Advisor: Julia Galloway

Date: 2/4/03

Associate Advisor: Joyce Hertzson

Date: 01/27/03

Chairperson,

School of American Crafts: Rich Tannen

Date: 2/16/03

I, Shu-Jin Huang hereby grant permission to the Wallace Memorial Library of RIT to reproduce to my thesis in whole or in part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.

Date: 01/18/2003
Table of Contents

Title ................................................................................................................................. i

Approval ....................................................................................................................... ii

I. Introduction ............................................................................................................... 1

II. Insight into the Artist ............................................................................................. 2

III. Previous work .......................................................................................................... 4

IV. Body of the Work .................................................................................................... 10

V. Style .......................................................................................................................... 13

VI. Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 19

VII. Technical Note ..................................................................................................... 21

Reference ...................................................................................................................... 22
Introduction

Inspired by the Romantic Movement, many artists have studied ‘self-exploration’ as I am doing now. Being uprooted from home and moving to a completely different culture can really influence a person. I am lucky to be exposed to a different culture and this leads me to examine myself in a different light. Who am I really and what makes me unique? In this thesis, I explore the concept of my work, ‘Absent’, its development, characteristics and the themes of the movements which influenced me.
Insight into the Artist

When I first arrived in America, I thought language was the only problem I have to face, however, I was unaware of the intrinsic relationship between a language and the culture from which it comes. It was in 1999, when I moved to Rochester, that my understanding of not only English but also American culture began to deepen. At the point, I encountered the biggest conflicts and challenges of my life.

Identifying oneself is not as simple as going to a DMV and getting a new ID card. It is a process of acceptance and rejection of one's values and beliefs. For example, one day, I was in a class and after my lunch, I let out a loud burp in front of the whole class. The world went silent after that! They all turned and wanted to know who had committed such a rude and uncivilized act. At that moment, I learn a big lesson on American etiquettes. All I can say in my defense was that I had no idea it was a social taboo. After many such embarrassing moments, I started questioning myself. Just what is right and what is wrong? Had I been taught a wrong set of rules? Is there ever a right set of rules? Moreover, having been exposed to two sets of social rules, which one should I follow?

Thus, I started on a never-ending journey of self-exploration. I will not be the last to walk on this path.
There are many examples of successful artists who possess unique ethnic backgrounds and have integrated their cultural heritage into their work. One of them is Jun Kaneko, my favorite artist in the field of ceramics. In an in-depth interview, he was asked about the conflicts between the cultures of his native country Japan and his adopted one, America. Kaneko answered, “I wasn’t even conscious of crossing over between two different cultures, because what I am is definitely resolved from spending my childhood in Japan, as well as spending most of the time, after twenty-one years of age, in this country... All of that really formed my life and became as one.” For him, it is no longer easy to draw a line between American and Japanese culture. Time has already washed away the line. It is very important for me to acknowledge the differences and decide on what to adopt and/or reject. Even after three years of constantly shifting between Taiwanese and American culture, the vast differences between these two countries is still an unresolved issue. My hope is that I can come to a manner of thinking that these cultural differences are no longer severed as a handicap (limitation) of my life. I wish these two cultural experiences will assimilate with each other and function as a whole to achieve a better self.
Previous work

‘Absent’ is the result of a series of self-examinations. Before the arrival of ‘Absent’, there is a series of studies that address the same topic as ‘Absent’ — Self-exploration. There are in fact four projects before ‘Absent’: ‘Shu-Jin Huang #1’, ‘Shu-Jin Huang #2’, ‘Taiwan, America, and I’, and ‘Soda Can’ series. Each of these works represents a point in time and bring me a step closer to the perfect equilibrium.

* Awareness of my own identity (myself)

‘Shu-Jin Huang #1’ is the first project after arriving in America. It is an large-scale artist’s thumbprint. By setting these puzzle-like ceramic pieces on the grass, it marked my unique existence and symbolized the arrival of me – Shu-Jin Huang.

Unlike most of the ceramic objects, ‘Shu-Jin Huang #1’ remains a two-dimensional expression. It is clear that artist intention is more focus on its concept not the actual appearance of this work. It is not important to exam the very detail of this work such as the glaze, texture, composition, proportion, and so on. For me, its importance is in the understanding of the artwork and it’s symbolic nature- one’s identity, the very basic notion of oneself.
Awareness of my own identity (cultural aspect)

The second piece is call ‘Shu-Jin Huang #2’, also an enlarge thumbprint. Similar to the puzzle like first piece, I cut my thumbprint into many squares and set each of them on top of ceramic cubes. This manner gives the work another dimension. Unlike the unglazed ‘Shu-Jin Huang #1’, it was glazed in celadon to represent my origin. The decision is made in reaction to the new self-awareness that was triggered
by living with Americans. It is the first time in my work that I acknowledge my differences from Americans in my artwork.

*Recognizing, Distinguishing, and Consulting.*

Recognizing the cultural differences, I was still unable to distinguish clearly which direction is more appropriate for me to adopt. In this next piece, there is a major change in technique. I used decals to copy the exact image of a cola can. This technique allowed me to imitate the pattern of a real coke-cola can (in both Chinese and English on ceramic cans.) The image plays a major role in helping the viewers to catch the meaning behind these realistic ceramic cans. One of the cans is in Chinese, one is in English, and the third one is a painted thumbprint to represent myself. These
three cans, carefully positioned, symbolized the middle ground where I stand – in between American and Taiwanese culture and not knowing where to go next. By comparing these two cultures, it opened up another viewpoint, that I wasn’t aware of.

There is not just only one way of looking....

*Adopting and Reject – Clashing and merging

In this soda can series, the porcelain cylinder was made as a shape of soda can. Each of them was pouchcd and shaped irregularly. The pattern on the surface mimics Ming and Ching Dynasty blue and white ware. By integrating these two symbolic images, the typical organic botanical Chinese ceramic-pattern and America Pop culture icon – a soda pop can, my intention is to create a mixture of emotion as the viewer experience the same cultural impact that I have endured.
As I struggle to fit into this new society, American culture has shed a new light in re-evaluating my life. It has given me a very good opportunity to truly explore my identity, not just from one narrow point of view but a wider spectrum of life. In Taiwan, people mostly follow what they been taught and never question about it. Discouragement is the policy toward people with curiosity. Just like a product from a massive production line, individualism doesn’t exist. There is no surprise but predictability! Everything is already planed for you and all you have to do is follow! However, on the other hand, the United States has given me the freedom that was never there before. It encourages people to try, to dream and to reach the outer limit of
oneself. Believe in yourself and reach for the sky. That is American spirit, and that is what I admire the most.

After all these projects of self-awareness, slowly the idea of 'Absent' emerged. In no mean that "Absent" is the end of the searching of my own identity, it is merely a landmark. It will be a continuous journey.
Body of the Work

Food is always a very important issue for Chinese people. This ceramic piece, “Absent”, is about a kind of food that I used to have in Taiwan: beef noodle soup. I missed beef noodle soup very much during my stay in America. It is one of my favorites. I still remember the time when my sister cooked beef noodle soup for me when I visited her in Utah. It had been a long time since I last had a taste of home. That day, I ate almost three times more than I usually eat. The emotion brought on by eating noodles with my family gave a new importance to this food.

Robert Rauschenberg once said, ‘If I was going to survive, I had to appreciate the most common aspects of life.’ To me, the most common aspect of life is food. Nowhere in the world beef noodle soup is exactly the same. The ingredients change depending on the location in which they grow. Of course in the United States, everything, the water, the noodles, the beef, the vegetables and even the spices were brought locally. As I ate this food outside of Taiwan for the first time, I felt that, although the basic taste was the same, it will never be the same bowl of soup as I have in Taiwan. This unique bowl of beef noodle soup that cannot be duplicated anywhere else is the perfect representation of the unique nature of Taiwanese culture where I belong in the past 24 years.

“Absent” is an unglazed earthenware ceramic sculpture. It is composed of
an assemblage of enlarged Chinese style bowls that contain beef, noodles and vegetables. These thirty-two bowls are installed on a pedestal, 9' x 66” x 19"H. The pedestal is the same color as the unglazed earthenware bowls to unify the whole piece. Each bowl lies propped inside the next at 30-degree angle, winding around and almost completing a square similar to a circuit of fallen dominoes. Viewers should begin reading this piece starting from the right side of the space created by the absence of one bowl. Each bowl is constructed of an earthenware clay body, 11”*11”*4”H. The slip captures the moment just when the soup is spilling, thus creating a tension between the soup and the bowl. Each ingredient, the beef, the noodles and the vegetables, has a specific place and arrangement within the soup. Although each bowl of soup is minimally realistic, its representation is essentially symbolic.

The Taoist master Lao-tzu said, “The most useful part of a cup is not the cup. It is the space within the cup that holds the water which makes the cup useful.” In my work, the notable negative space is the gap left by one missing bowl. However, this empty space is one of the major factors that completes this work. It symbolizes the insecurity and emotional emptiness.

From where did this emptiness arise? Perhaps from the necessary changes I made in myself in trying to assimilate into American culture. Despite the overwhelming positive aspects of the time spent in America, the most significant
being personal growth, I nevertheless experienced the feeling of losing part of who am. I am in some way no longer one hundred percent Taiwanese. My value system, lifestyle that I truly believed in for the past 24 years have been shaken and critically questioned. This consequently led to question my most basic beliefs and ultimately to a crisis of identity. Was I taught with the wrong set of values? As the new experiences I have in America sank in my mind, the feeling of betrayal and doubt in which set of values I should adopt, Taiwanese or American, created within me a question I could not answer and a space I could not fill, a void, an absence.

This thesis exhibition, “Absent”, creates a portrait of myself. A portrait in which my past and my present are explained. As Jun Kanako had said, “What we are about is not the information but the accumulation of experiences that makes us who we are.” It is my hope that this installation accurately represents my personal accumulation of experience.
Style

Basically, my style of work could be categorized into two art movements. One is Pop art and the other is Minimalism. These two art movements were popular in mid 20th century and their influence is continuous. My work is influenced by these two.

Pop art used the common-ordinary object as subject matter. As Roy Lichtenstein once said in an interview, “Outside is the world; it is here” (History of modern art: painting, sculpture, architecture) For Lichtenstein, ‘outside’ means the surrounding environment. Pop art is based on the urban environment. For this reason, Claes Olderburg, basically took the figures, signs and objects commonly on street and adopted them as the subject for his exhibitions.

Pop artist deals with the subject matter in a very special way. They insist that the comic strip or soup can or whatever is simply an object, rather than the subject of the work, as perhaps an apple might be in a Cézanne still-life. Pop artists use their objects in a non-traditional way. This unconventional method of handling these objects engages the viewer in a way not seen in other art movement.

The object plays a huge role in the creation of my work. The first task that comes to my mind in the creation process is what kind of object can best present my idea. An object from daily life can become the subject matter of art. Beef noodle soup
is a dish that one can get anywhere in Taiwan. However it is an unfamiliar dish for most Americans. Thus, I have to convey my audience not only the underlying meaning of the piece, but also on the most basic level what the object is which they are viewing. My job is to help them understand one small part of Taiwanese culture. Despite the difficulty of this work, beef noodle soup was always my first and foremost choice of a motif because of my love for it. The relationship between a beef noodle soup and Taiwanese culture is similar to that between the Coca-Cola and American culture. They are inseparable. Beef noodle soup represents my background and hence my identity on the most basic level.

In *Modern Art – Impressionism to Post-Modernism*, it states, “Pop art has three major distinguishing characteristics. First, it is both figurative and realist…..” (David Britt, P. 305) I attempted to make people wonder what is real and what is not. The ingredients in my clay noodle soup were handled in a semi-realistic way, because I want to challenge all the physical senses of my audience. My intention is to make my audience to believe the ingredients are real. I want them to feel that they could almost smell and taste the food or even touch it. On the other hand, the “clay-food” is clearly not edible. In this way it is a total reversal of the very notion of food. And so the focus is not on the food itself but instead on the meaning of the food.
The other major influence on my work is Minimalism. It is characterized by the unmistakable attempt to create a unity, integrity, and simplicity throughout a piece. I still remember my reaction the first time I saw a picture of Donald Judd’s work, ‘Untitled’, 1965 (Galvanized steel). It was like a punch in the stomach. Its unmistakable manner, hierarchical order, simplicity of form and clarity are all the characteristics that I desire for my work. Since first having seen Judd’s piece, I have strived to follow this line of awareness.

The goal of Minimalism is clearly that simplicity of form and clarity of ideas in the creation of either painting or sculpture should be comprehended in its totality at a glance. I still remember that when one of my friends saw my work, he said: “Wow! Is that your thesis project? Just a beef noodle soup?” Indeed, this piece is simple; merely a circle consisting of thirty-two bowls of beef noodle soup. The work itself is less about each particular bowl and more about my attitude toward the creation of art.

Using a small module to create a complete work is one of the common characteristics of Minimalist art. In *Modern Art: painting, sculpture, architecture* by Sam Hunter, Hunter states “owning to a manifest taste for such simplified geometry as regular polyhedrons and the frequent use of industrially fabricated elements, the pieces produced by Minimalist sculptors have often been call ‘primary structures’ or ‘primary forms.’” Donald Judd was searching for an absolute unity or wholeness
through the repetition of identical units in absolute symmetry with each other. To be able to create the primary forms, the identical bowls, that I wanted, I cast them within a mold. Moreover the work is unified by the repetition of each identical object. A sense of clarity and simplicity unity brings together the whole piece.

Richard Serra shows the basic but important voice of a material in his artwork, Belts(1966-1967). He created their forms by simply hanging rubber loops on a wall to show the nature of the material. His concept integrates and exploits the natural form of the material itself. In ceramic, glazing is usually the finishing touch for pottery, but this time I felt it was necessary to leave out this step in order to respect and reveal the voice of clay. In fact, one of the most significant features in my work is that none of the bowls are glazed. It gives the audience an opportunity to analyze what clay really looks like as to its raw color and texture. It is important for the audience to experience the true beauty and enchantment of unglazed clay. An artwork as simple and pure as it can be. This attitude follows the core idea of Minimalism that "less is more." Donald Judd’s work has raised a fundamental question, which ‘concerns the nature and even the validity of the work of art, the nature of the aesthetic experience, the nature of space, and the nature of sculpture form.’ (H.H. Arnason, P591) It is artwork in its most basic form and as such it asks the viewer to consider the value of art itself.

above:*Roy Lichtenstein. Bedroom at Arles.* 1992. Oil and magna on canvas, 10’ 6” × 13’ 9 1/2”
above: Donald Judd. *Untitled*. 1965. Galvanized iron, seven boxes, each $9 \times 40 \times 31''$

(9'' between each box)

Conclusion

This assemblage of white earthenware bowls was shown in Spring, 2001 at Beverly Gallery Thesis Show. In this installation, “Absent”, one gap was purposely left between the bowls to represent the culmination of my experience in America, in which I realized that I was caught in a conflict between two very different cultures, both of which I love. However it is also symbolizes a wish to fill this gap in the future with more fulfilling experiences. My journey of self-exploration began four years ago when I arrived in the United States, however it has by no means ended. It is my hope that through my installation “Absent” I have not only expressed the difficulties I have encountered but also my desire to continue to explore my own artistic possibilities. There are times in everyone’s experience in which they feel incomplete, empty or as though something is missing. It is my goal and deepest wish that through the continuation and further mastery of my art that I am always growing and getting closer to the completion of such absences within myself.

Since I have first hand experiences living in these two cultures, I am able to combine these differences within myself. They will slowly all become part of me melting together. The American influence will stand strong in my belief of freedom, the freedom to choose. I can choose what I want to be, believe in what I think is true and be happy with all my decision. It is my hope that after I am back to Taiwan, this
influence will not only show in the appearance of my work, but in the attitude and manner in which I live my life. In the end, it is my hope that my work not only expresses this concept by its appearance but also communicates with viewers in a deeper level with a more internal voice.
Technical Note

Green ware making –

A. Mold casting 32 large Chinese bowl

B. Adding clay ingredients on top: noodles, beef, vegetables, and green onions

Firing-

one time firing, no glaze

Installation-

A. Pedestal 9’*66”*19”H, creamy white

B. Lay each bowl down at about 30 degree and Leave one gap in the end of the circuit of bowls
## Reference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modern art: impressionism to post-modernism</td>
<td>London: Thames &amp; Hudson, 1999</td>
<td>Britt, David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern art: painting, sculpture, architecture</td>
<td>New York: H.N. Abrams, 1985</td>
<td>Hunter, Sam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magazine Title</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Article</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ceramics Monthly</td>
<td>JUN 1984, Page 49</td>
<td>JUN KANEKO Baral Kaneko &amp; Schonlau</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>