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Transmutation of object

Jiyong Lee

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TRANSMUTATION OF OBJECT

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ART

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is the result of years studying art and design. I felt fortunate to be introduced to glass during the past two years. I spent most of the first year developing ideas, exploring process and avoiding functional and pragmatic issues. Those are important elements for designing an object but thinking about my own unique approach was more important. The other goal of the first year was gaining experience with glass as a new material.

Before I started my second year, I recognized concepts that had been recurring in my works for the past few years. I found an inseparable relationship with vessels not as historical objects nor as artistic ones but as daily objects, which are functional and artistic enough for everyday enjoyment. Vessels are daily objects that have a long history that is parallel with human history. They have a variety of values. Some of them are unimaginably fascinating and some are very ordinary. Even though most vessels, like plates, cups, vases and glasses in our homes are not valuable as historical antiques or famous design brands, they are important in our lives. To me, reviewing these objects is thinking back through my life and studying human history.

As a sculptor who was a ceramic product designer and potter, I wanted to carefully reconsider humanity through vessels as humble objects. I have
attempted to visually display my meditative thoughts through these sculptures that are transposing existence. Through this method I could consider the concept more. Most of the objects I have used in my exhibition were ordinary totally touchable things but by transposing their existences they became untouchable or unusable objects. This main purpose is primarily visual.
ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Since I started studying ceramics design as an undergraduate I went to museums to look at the great ancient works. Fortunately I lived in Korea which has excellent historic collections of ceramics, I also had great opportunities could visit China and Japan to see each countries ceramics. I remember always stopping in front of utilitarian ceramics or other crafts that were hundreds years old. Those beautiful functional objects always fascinated me. I thought one of the reasons the objects became more fascinating was because the display kept us from touching them. If some of the objects in museums were just set in our house, they could pass as an unnoticed object in daily life. But when they are brought into museum and placed in a glass box, they become precious property.

I found British artist Tony Cragg’s work to be the most influential. I had a chance to view his work in an exhibition in Korea eight years ago, and was overwhelmed by the sense of association between motif and life. Cragg’s works, particularly liquid containers such as the mass produced, molded plastic narrow necked, screw top bottles (Figure 1) have formed the basis of his work. His work also includes mortar and pestles, bowls and jar like forms. One of the
created objects was described as "the mortar and pestle, carry strong historical and cultural associations: as tools, they are identified with learning and healing, both ancient and modern. The various types of chemists' beakers carry other distinct sets of associations—both about scientific analysis, testing and measuring on the one hand; and about power, manipulation and control on the other."¹

Howard Ben Tre’s work proved to be another strong influence on my work. In the late eighties, he returned to the idea of glass as a vessel or container such as 8th Figure (figure 2). Those vessel shape works are described as changing "the meaning of ordinary objects—vases and beakers—by drastically changing their scale and context. Like the Columns, the Bottles are not functional, yet they seem like they should be. Playing with irony and paradox, Ben Tre makes bottles that cannot hold things because there is no access to the opening or passages on the inside and they do not connect."²

Cragg’s and Ben Tre’s works are important to me because they showed me how a simple everyday object can be transformed to a powerful sculpture. Their work also helped me observe and think about the visual aspects that are part of everyday life.

Figure 1. *Bestückung*, Tony Cragg, 1987/1988
Figure 2. 8th Figure, Howard Ben Tre, 1988
DISCUSSION OF THE SCULPTURES

During most of our life, we do not appreciate what we have. Some of the things we have are priceless like air, water or freedom. Besides these things there are also many priceless things around us that we do not think about. Many poets wrote poems on unnamed wildflowers in mountain pathways. If we do not see them or cannot find beauty in the flowers they may mean nothing to us. If somebody brings those trifling wild flowers to a botanical garden, we will look at them more carefully. The theme of my work concerns the reviewing of our lives through metamorphosis of an object. The forms are very familiar shapes we find all around us. My sculptural works are about vessels in everyday life. They are not only about the vessels but also about sub-conscious attitudes in our daily lives.

The Meditation on Glass I, II, III (figure 3,4,5) contain the most direct and literal representation of metamorphosis of glass objects. Each work is formed by stacking clear glass blocks with hollow forms in the middle. Each interior form of the blocks is comprised of three parts which form the cup, stem and foot. All together they are viewed as goblets in glass boxes. The inside forms of the blocks are negative shapes that create three-dimensional
Figure 3. *Meditation on Glass I*
Figure 4. *Meditation on Glass II*
Figure 5. *Meditation on Glass III*
structures of glass. They are developed with the positive form around the vessel shape.

By metamorphosis of an object, I attempt to direct the viewer to think about what they are looking at once more. Wineglasses are, light weight, paper thin and beautifully shaped but ignored. We are surrounded by them and never notice their beauty. The casting series *The Meditation on Glass I, II, III* can be thought as glass goblets in a glass display case in museum. They can be seen as objects inside but they are not really there. Therefore we must start thinking about the objects because they are untouchable.

*Meditation on Object* (figure 6) addresses a similar theme. It is a greenish glass bottle about forty-two inches high and sixteen inches diameter with rippling optical illusion texture. It is built with more than one thousand pieces of quarter inch thick plate glass one-inch long. The sculpture is laminated with UV glue piece by piece from the bottom to the top.

*Meditation on Object* is the antithesis of an everyday bottle. The optical illusion prevents one from seeing inside of the bottle. There are a few peepholes that must be located to see inside the bottle. The peepholes reference the transparency that a bottle usually has. Each piece has fairly sharp edges, enough to cut someone when they touch. The shape looks like an enlarged liquor bottle. The sharp edges present lifting or touching it. From mass produced to hand built with a thousand pieces, from convenient size to gigantic size, from smooth surface to jagged and sharp. The idea is also about
Figure 6. Meditation on Object
rethinking our attitude through creating a situation which is beyond real life. When confronted with these sculptures for the first time we have a moment of reflection and think about an object we have been using for decades.

*Memory on Object I* (figure 7) consists of a wooden structure surrounding glass box containing a vessel. The black wooden box has a negative space which reveals the vessel inside. Through a slight gap, the viewer can observe the interior of the box. The vessel is submerged in the water which is full of rising air bubbles. The sides of the glass container are lined with gold leaf.

This sculpture contains more thought about past history. The black box implies prosaic realities of life but in contrast the bright inner gold room stands for past beautiful memories. The vessel shape gap symbolizes the path into the gold room in other words our memories. To create time and the past I chose water. To me a water stream implies the passage of time. To imply flowing water, I used rising air bubbles in the water to imply that the inside vessel appears to be drowning. The drowning vessel is vanishing from our memory.

*Memory on Object II* (figure 8) attempts to create a moment. The idea is to give more freedom to the viewer’s imaginative meditation. This sculpture focuses on viewers’ interpretation more than the object itself. It is a wall installation sculpture made up of nine cylinders. Each cylinder is fourteen inches high, five inches in diameter, and contains different objects such as wineglass, wine bottle, Coca-Cola bottle, baby food jars, liquor bottle, martini glass, tumbler, syringes and light bulbs. The cylinders are filled with different
Figure 7. Memory on Object $I$
color liquids.

I tried to create various aspects of life with the content of the cylinders. The baby food jars represent a starting point from early childhood. Wineglass and wine bottle carry cultural changes of times, from a symbol of high society culture to one of middle class culture. Coca-Cola bottle carries ideological aspect, as a symbol of liberalism to communist countries. It is a symbol of America to anti-Americanism countries. Syringes, as tools, are identified with healing and drug abuse. Light bulbs imply the new era of science and modern life with invention of electricity. Liquor bottle and martini glass imply an intoxicated life and can be seen as morally and physically abusing alcohol, and social or personal corruption. At last a tumbler leads us to back to ordinary day to day existence. The objects are collected as remembrancers in life are meant to evolve the viewer’s memory.
Figure 8. *Memory on Object II*
CONCLUSION

My intention is to create work that reminds the viewer of a more introspective life. Society is preoccupied with mundane issues, and people are losing an understanding of beauty, of simplicity, of their past history. Many people think the past too sentimental. Society is preoccupied with a search for the new. I feel that not enough respect is given to history and its contribution to the present. My work is about an homage to the interaction of past and present. Studying history is not only a subject in school. It is here, all around our lives. As I made this series of work, I considered how important the past is and how much it can be transmitted through the objects we interact with daily.
The process used for Hollow core-casting

To form the hollow shapes inside of Meditation on Glass I, II, III (figure 3, 4, 5) I made core forms with 50% of molding plaster, 50% of silica (325 mesh) using a metal plate template and turning box. I used 10mm Pyrex rods, which have a higher melting temperature than Sprucepine batch. The rods helped form a core so the shape can withstand the firing temperature.

The molds are made of two layers. Each layer is about one inch thick. For the inside layer, I used the same mold material as the form core (50% of molding plaster and 50% of silica) but for the outside I mixed 40% of molding plaster, 40% of silica and 20% of Mizzou Castable. Mizzou Castable is very strong refractory based material which can be mixed with plaster and silica. It has worked successfully in many experiments but it is expensive. For smaller molds, Mizzou Castable is not required therefore I used 45% of molding plaster, 45% of silica and 10% of medium size grog. Mizzou Castable and grog must be kept from contacting the surface of the glass because the coarser grains will
cause a rough surface, stick to the glass and contaminate the surface.

Hot casting processes are different from warm casting processes. To pour the hot glass the furnace temperature should be sent up to 2200°F. It is about 100 degree lower than sand-casting. The molds were preheated for one day and slowly brought up to 1500°F to prevent chemical water reaction that creates steam bubbles in the molten glass and cracking in the molds. It is brought down to 1300°F. Hot glass was introduced into the molds by ladling and using a gathering ball.

The process used for Bullseye frit sand-mold fusing

The technique used for Memory on Object I (figure 7) was influenced by the Italian glass sculptor Joan Crous who I met at The Studio of The Corning Museum of Glass.

It is possible to use almost any type of sand. For casting glass I found play sand works fine for this type of work. After the sand is weighed and added between 4 and 7 percent by weight of bentonite. This increases the viscosity of the sand. This mixture of sand/bentonite will harden when subjected to high heat. I made a box with 16 gauge steel plate to place in the kiln. The form template was constructed from Styrofoam and pressed into the sand then removed. After pressing the template into the sand, I sprinkled coarse (no. 3)
frit about quarter inch thick, into the mold. After firing the pyrometer reads room temperature. The sand continued to hold the heat so the sand temperature must be checked before removing the piece from the sand. The fused glass frit was very fragile so patience was needed to take it out of the sand. The temperature I used for this work was 1430°F and it was soaked for 5 hours.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


