Reflections

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Abstract

In order to tell my story, I learned how to express myself by making art, using metal. Through this creative process, I listened to my inner voice and found what I really wanted to say for my thesis. My body of work is a reflection of my faith and symbolizes my appreciation for God who gave me this precious life. It is a story of how my life has been changed after I received Jesus Christ as my Lord and savior. When I look back on my life, I know that it is truly God who has been guiding me, and who will lead me into the future according to God’s plan. It is my life’s purpose to praise God who saved me and gave me eternal life through the blood of Jesus Christ.

I see God’s reflection in the beauty and power of water. This inspired me to create eight experimental metal forms depicting water in its various forms, textures, and colors. Certain Bible scriptures and the work of James Nares and Susan Derges were important influences. Also, I was encouraged during some initial trials when I found similarities between my first year graduate work and Yoshiko Yamamoto’s metal art pieces. Experimentation, observation, and intuition were important elements in my creative process. Using these elements, I was able to find my vision. I wanted to use my talent to make art to glorify God.
Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to present eight different forms of water exploring form, texture, and color, utilizing various metal experimentation methods. This work is a reflection of my faith and symbolic of my appreciation for God. In my work, water serves as a metaphor for my personal reflections. I have attempted to present water's majestic forms.

The moment I see myself reflected in water is an opportunity to reflect on my soul and spiritual life, based on the words of God. The reflection of light in water and its dynamic display of color moves my senses. The sounds of water comfort me and help me meditate. As water flows, it is like God pouring his grace on me, flowing inside of me and fueling my creative process.

Because I am drawn by the beauty of water, I wanted to express its power in my work. Seeing my reflection in water inspired me to visualize the layers of metal I would use to make up my body of work.

The initial idea for my thesis came when I read Genesis, Chapter 1. This chapter describes the scene of creation, and inspired me to think of the beginning of my life as well as the beginning of my creative process. I then tried to follow my inner voice through the different elements of my creative process. Biblical and visual influences guided me along the way.
Sources and Research

Biblical Influences

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Genesis 1:1–2

There are many interesting structural elements in the Bible. For example, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell the story of Jesus Christ, but each individual Gospel offers a different perspective, and so the best reading will consider the Gospels as a unit. Another example of Biblical structure is the two parallel accounts of the creation of man in Genesis.

As I learned about these structures in the Bible, I saw similarities between, for example, the beginning of my own life (and my creative process) and the account of the first day of creation in Genesis 1. These similarities inspired my idea for my thesis work.

I found a parallel between Genesis 1:1–2 and the beginning of my life in my mother's womb. Like the Earth, the womb is a dark place full of water, where I began to form and grow until I was ready to be born. This interconnected relationship between life and water captured my attention. The existence of water
in Genesis emphasizes the significance of water: that it is one of the essential elements in life.

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

Genesis 1:3–4

Genesis 1:3–4 reminds me of how my creative ideas arise, and how they are fueled by the creative process. As an idea of mine begins to form, it brightens my dark, formless mind and continues to grow until it is ready to be born. The vital power of an idea brings artwork to life. Upon discovering these parallels, I was motivated to execute my concepts visually.

**Artistic Influences**

While the scriptures were the primary starting point for my ideas and my work, some visual references also influenced the evolution of my body of work. I was captivated by the artwork of James Nares and Susan Derges. Their work spoke to me and inspired me to visually interpret my own images of water, and to seek the essence of beauty in my life.
This painting of James Nares reminds me of different waveforms, even though he was not inspired by any forms of water in creating his work. His paintings were a result of his efforts in creating his own identification—with his own homemade brush set and his personalized paint, painting method, and painting surfaces.

The simplicity of his characteristic brush stroke was a result of his dynamic and powerful movement on linen, his chosen painting surface. The power of this motion reminds me of the vital power of life. His use of vibrant colors and simple brush strokes gives his work depth and vitality. Learning from his painting style, I was able to visualize the way I wanted to depict water in my work *Wave in Life.*

James Nares was born in England in 1953 and he is a musician, filmmaker and a New York artist. His paintings are elegant and graceful. It was inspiring to learn that he wanted to find his own identity in his art and express himself in a beautiful manner.
Another British-born artist, photographer Susan Derges, has been making images of water for the past 27 years. Derges is best known for her pioneering technique of capturing the movement of water by immersing photographic paper directly into rivers or shorelines. She first became artistically aware of the fragility and preciousness of water when she lived in Japan in the early 1980s. At that time she also explored the potential of water to serve as a metaphor for a holistic approach to human beings creatively participating in the workings of the natural world.

When Derges moved to Devon, England, in 1992, the Devon River became the location of her experiments and study. She set up her subjects so that an onlooker would feel like he or she was viewing the scene from inside the water forms.

Susan Derges, *River Taw, 23rd November 1998 (Cascade)*

The *River Taw* series (1997–1999) is a set of photographs, which embody the dynamic flowing patterns of water. Derges placed sheets of photographic paper in a
large aluminum slide just below the surface of the river at night.\(^5\) The Cibachrome photogram was the method she used for exposure. The image of water was captured when it was exposed to a microsecond of flashlight. Derges explained that ambient light, which ranges from blue at full moon to green at new moon, greatly affects the color of the Cibachrome (color positive) images. Using this method, she was able to record the path of the river, in its dynamic movement, with beautiful color.

I was very impressed by how Derges visualized beauty, which would have evaded most observers. After reading how Derges sets up her environment, I decided that I also needed to meditate on how to capture different forms of water. The beautiful patterns beneath the water in the River Taw series gave me the idea to represent reflections of my life in faith through my body of work.

Another big influence on me was the work of metal artist Yoshiko Yamamoto, as photographed in her book Quiet Ripples. At first, it was a struggle for me to get my ideas into a concrete form. Studying Yamamoto’s work gave me confidence and helped me to accept my own talent in the area of metal art.

My initial thesis idea was to depict the relationship between water and life. I began working in September 2011, and even by the following February, I did not feel comfortable with the topic. I wasn’t sure I was going in the right direction. My committee members and friends agreed. One of my problems was that I was afraid to talk about my faith in front of people. My work was not progressing and I didn’t have a clear vision. One of my committee members, Leonard Urso, told me to trust myself, but it was hard to do. Unclear vision and doubts kept me stuck at the first stage of my work for a long time.
Front cover of *Quiet Ripples* by Yoshiko Yamamoto, showing the process of creating Yamamoto’s work *Garden Tray*

In February 2012, my good friend and bench neighbor Wenyao Jia found an advertisement for Yamamoto’s book. She recommended that I look at it because the book’s title was “*Quiet Ripples*.” On the cover, a female Asian artist is kneeling on one knee and hammering a large crimped sheet of metal with a plastic mallet. This photo grabbed my attention, and I became very interested in Yamamoto’s work.

Born and raised the city of Kobe in Japan, Yamamoto came to Boston in 1968 to study art for two years. She ended up staying longer, both studying at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and completing a BFA at Tufts. Her early work
from the 1970s already demonstrated her interest in forging and crimping. Her piece *Big Pumpkin* reminded me of my own early work from the first year of my graduate program at RIT. Her work inspired me to develop a metal technique to present the surface of water.

So, after struggling to find my way, by the grace of God, I read about Yoshiko Yamamoto’s creative journey. She had lived near a coastal city, she was an international student from Asia, a woman, and a metal artist, all of which resonated with me. I began to clarify my own vision as an artist who glorifies God with my talent. From this time, I experienced a lifting of the pressure that I had felt to make “good” art. I started to work as a child does, a child who draws his or her parents with joy, not with fear.
Big Pumpkin, 1985, by Yoshiko Yamamoto

Painted copper, 17¾ x 11 inches

Study of Vessel, 2010, by Sooja Lee

Copper, 4½ x 5½ inches
Garden Tray, 1972, by Yoshiko Yamamoto

Painted copper, 22-inch diameter

Study of Water Drop, 2010, by Sooja Lee

Heat patinated copper, 5½-inch diameter

Study of Water Drop (side view)
Critical Analysis

Elements of My Creative Process

The three elements in my creative process are experimentation, observation and intuition. These elements were very important to me in the process of making my body of work. Each of these elements was discovered and developed during my study of Metals and Jewelry Design.

I found that most of my work begins when I experiment with new forms through the hammering process. After spending a lot of time observing the transformation of metal through hammering, I was able to understand some fundamentals of metal movement, which helped me come up with ideas such as stretching and overlapping metal surfaces. In fact, failing to create a certain form that I had wanted opened the door for opportunities in developing a way to portray various forms of water.

*The Seal* was the result of “collapsed” experimentation, which I found to be one good way of generating ripple forms. It happened when I did not know how to create a depiction of water, and just started pounding a sheet of aluminum until I tore the surface of the metal. Then I flipped the metal and hammered it again on the other side to close and hide the hole. I discovered that it actually looked like the surface of water. I had been trying to recreate a scene I had in mind, an undulating surface of water, and this technique that I stumbled upon worked very well.
Robert and Michelle Root-Bernstein explained my second creative element, observation, in their 1999 book *Sparks of Genius: The Thirteen Thinking Tools of the World's Most Creative People*:

Observing, and rendering what we observe in some way, is indeed a function of the mind. We cannot focus our attention unless we know what to look at and how to look at it.9

Observing, one of my strengths in the creative process, plays a key role in being able to express an idea. By observing ripples of water, by touching water and listening to it, I was able to see the power in its form, texture and color. These different senses of water inspired me to make my own images. As a result, I was able to express myself through the transformation of metals. My observation of water generated ideas in my mind about water, all while I was actually working with the metal.

I believe that it is the ultimate goal of the artistic process for the object being represented to evoke a narrative that the artist intends. Upon finding a direct connection between my idea and the physical form of my work, I can begin to respond to my intuition. That is to say, in my case, when the object I was working on started to take the form of water, I suddenly became inspired to use various metalworking techniques that had been simply academic before the moment of intuition. For example, when I formed the undulations of water using aluminum, I
was thinking of the peaceful moment when I saw a river flowing gently, and by trial and error I discovered just what to do to get the effect I wanted.

**Concept Development**

As water reflects the face, so one’s life reflects the heart.

Proverbs 27:19

The title ‘Reflections’ came from Proverbs 27:19. The beauty of water inspired me to reflect my ideas and thoughts in my work. My Korean name, Sooja, means “child of water,” thus water has always been a huge influence in my life. When I look at various forms of water such as rivers, oceans, raindrops, and springs, I am encouraged to contemplate various times of my life.

My concept was to create a narrative body of work that would reflect my life and faith through the forms of water. My work represents gratitude for my life and echoes my faith.

This appreciation for life stemmed from my personal experience. At the age of 24, I was diagnosed with pre-cancerous tissue. By grace of God, it was found an early prognosis and two surgeries improved my condition. During this challenging time, the uncertainty for my health and my future greatly affected me, but at the same time, my faith grew stronger.

When I discovered my ailment, it became even more important for me to learn life’s lessons, and to think about the value and the purpose of my life. I learned that this life is a gift from God, and to this day I greatly appreciate how my
circumstances offered me a new beginning. All these revelations made me think of the transformation of my life by the passionate love of Jesus Christ. He sacrificed his life to give me eternal life, and to help motivate me to live according to God’s purpose.

**Material and Processes**

In presenting my concepts visually, I considered the relationship between life and water in further experimenting with form, texture, and color in different methods that would represent my ideas. The reflection of light emphasizes the motion of water, and dynamic displays of color on water mirror the beauty of nature. My senses enjoy observing these aesthetics, and I wanted to express water’s power of form, texture, and color in this study.

I acquired an understanding of movements in metal through experimenting with metal forms. I used different hammers, such as a raising hammer, bordering hammer, and pear-shaped, plastic head mallet to try to make ripple forms. This technique made it possible to present different visual characteristics of water. And experimenting with different hammers led to further experimentations. For example, using a sandbag instead of an anvil to support the hammering of the metal made it easier for me to work on a larger surface, and produced interesting effects.

The evolution of my metal work continued. While drinking from a water fountain, I noticed glimmerings of different water patterns. To reproduce this pattern, I made one permanent template and then freely located and re-located it on
the metal to create the idea of individual segments of water. Searching for new patterns of water helped me to develop my observation skills.

I am amazed by how the colorless quality of water can reflect the light and images of nature. This observation helped influence my choice of color in my work. However, I was limited in my presentation of color when I used the traditional patina, Liver of Sulfur. By switching to Dye Oxide Patina, I had a greater choice in bringing the entire body of my work under one united theme.

In this unique technique, I had to prepare teeth on the metal surfaces, and provide heat in order to have the color stay on the metal. I used a sandblasting method to create teeth on the metal and a heat gun to provide the heat. Dye Oxide Patina is water-soluble, so it has the characteristics of both watercolor paint and transparency. Happily for me and my work, this enables the Dye Oxide Patina to reveal the innate characteristics of metal as well. After I finished my work, I applied wax to it in order to preserve its condition.
Body of Work

Figure 1. *The Seal*  Aluminum, Faux-Gold powder

32 x 23 inches
Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

2 Corinthians 1:21–22

In *The Seal*, the “golden impact,” located in the center of the frame, captures the dramatic disturbance in water. This work represents the moment of recognizing the existence of God from reading the Bible. The water itself symbolizes my spirit. The impact represents the word of God, which the evangelist John describes as God Himself in John 1:1. As the impact creates the wave, the word of God touches my heart and enables me to believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Because of the word of God, I believe God set his seal of ownership on me as His child. The gold color accentuates the importance of the impact and symbolizes the light and word of God, which brightens my spirit. It also symbolizes the spiritual seal, which is the power of God.

This two-dimensional presentation of water is a 32 x 23-inch sheet of aluminum. To make the ripple, I started by placing a sheet of aluminum on a metal rim. I found that hammering on the surface of the aluminum would sink and stretch it. After hammering it, I placed the highly stretched side of the aluminum on the floor and hammered it again, so that the stretched part would be crimped.
In this work, three shell forms are surrounded by gently flowing water. The work explains how my spirit was born again after believing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The water symbolizes the love and power of God that works in my life. The shell forms represent the vessel of my soul. As these seashells live in water, my life lives with God from the day I was spiritually born again. Being surrounded by water also
reminds me of my baptism, where I sunk into the water—symbolizing spiritual
death and rebirth, and receiving the Spirit from God.

To create these beautiful shell forms, I raised different sizes of copper bowls,
and then started to raise and shape the shell forms. As I was working, my eyes
followed my hands while I experimented with the movement of metal. The three
shell forms are coated with a layer of heat-patina to give a mysterious color and
highlight the characteristics of metal.

The base of the work, which depicts flowing water, was made out of an
aluminum sheet. I hammered it from behind to give it volume, and then textured it
using a bordering hammer from the front to show the path of the water.
"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."

John 7:37–38

The wave in this piece was inspired by John 7:37–38. This “living water” symbolizes the Holy Spirit. This work interprets the concept that only God’s power will quench my spiritual thirst. Using a vibrant, cool hue reminds me of the vital power in water—different depths of color create dimensions in the metal painting. This work captures the “living” power of the wave, and interprets how I feel when I am filled with Holy Spirit.
Working with metal takes time. The artist has to be patient in order to achieve what he or she wants. While I was preparing my thesis work, I had the pressure of knowing that I needed to make high-quality work even though I had very limited time left. However, when I started this particular piece, I experienced the pure joy of making a work of art. I felt no pressure, and I genuinely followed my intuition. I felt as though my heart had opened up to my world of art, I was free from all pressure, and I truly enjoyed what I was doing.
Figure 4. Miracle Copper, Dye-Oxide Patina

7 x 7 x 3 inches

*Miracle* captures the splashes of water, which reflect God’s miracle in my life. To me, rain symbolizes the love of God. It becomes a miracle when it splashes on me. Not only was the healing of my illness a miracle, but also, I believe, God’s satisfying my daily needs through His grace is a miracle in my life.

The small metal patterns in this work were formed on different sizes of round stakes. I filed the edge of each piece to show the color of metal and thus emphasize the outline of the patterns, as I tried to present the edges of splashes. In each splash, three pieces of copper are riveted together in order to keep their height. The multicolor aspect of this work was inspired by what I feel is the ability of the colors of our universe to reflect themselves in such a small scale of work.
Figure 5. *Wave in Life*  Copper, Dye-Oxide Patina

15 x 30 x 6 inches

In this composition, the symbolic meaning of the water depicted is the difficulties and challenges I face in my life. Even though it is hard to stand firm in difficult circumstances, doing so helps me to form my personality and makes me stronger. Looking back on my past difficult moments, the obstacles I faced were never as big as they seemed to be while I was facing them.

I cut out each piece of patterned copper to represent one segment of water. Then I carefully hammered the both side of copper in different directions on a round stake. To create this wave texture, I used the same hammering technique as I had in *Born Again* (see Figure 2). I used a dark purple color to represent times of darkness in life.
Beginning at the right side of *Walk on the Water*, the rushing water becomes progressively more soft and gentle as one’s gaze moves towards the left side. The story of Peter, who asked Jesus for the ability to walk on the stormy sea (Matthew 14:28), inspired me to create this work. The rushing water represents challenges that discourage me. However, trusting God makes it possible for me to overcome these circumstances.

The aluminum strips were great pieces to work with in order to make this large-scale work. I learned the movement of metal through this work process. I hammered from the backs of the metal strips to increase their height and volume, and then hammered from the front of each strip in order to create the ripple effect. I hammered one strip at a time to create this big picture.
Figure 7. *Unknown Beauty*  Aluminum, Dye-Oxide Patina

20 x 24 x 4 inches

In *Unknown Beauty*, the springs of water swirl out from inside the work. The well of the spring never stops bringing up water. This piece represents the endless love and support from God in my life. The aluminum piece was made into a half-sphere form by spinning it on the spinning lathe. I formed it gradually from the center to create a flowing image of water. The blue wave elements surround the main aluminum piece to bring attention to it and to help the viewer visualize the moment of flowing water.
For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

Psalm 139:13

Be the Life is a cerimonial piece to remind me of the preciousness of life and the purpose of my life in faith. When I look back on my life, I see how God has been guiding me, providing for me, and blessing me abundantly. There was no way I could repay Him, because everything is gift of God. Above all, the most precious gift is Jesus Christ, who saved my life from death and gave me eternal life. When I began to
believe that this is true, I decided that I wanted to live according to God’s plan, which He had already planned even before I was born.

Inspired by Psalm 139:13, the dark purple half-sphere form represents the mother’s womb and the element that sits inside of it represents the image of the human belly button. The base represents the umbilical cord and connects all three parts in a trophy form. The dark purple color and ripples on the half-sphere surface visualize the sack of water in a mother’s womb, which we do not see through our own eyes because it is located inside of the body. The human belly button shape’s color matches the color of the base form.

After attending a workshop with the metal sculptor Betty Helen Longhi at RIT, I was able to use the metal-forming methods she taught us to explore the anticlastic and synclastic raising technique to achieve the powerful forms of the umbilical cord. It was the first time I experienced using Nu-gold, which brought amazing results, both to study and to achieve this fluent form.
Conclusion

Through this period of study, I learned how to express my ideas and emotions through making art. This valuable lesson is very important to me since I was once totally unable to freely express my feelings and ideas. In the process, the love of God softened my heart to accept myself, and relieved me from all the tension I had been holding.

In his spring 2012 graduation ceremony address at Biola University in Southern California, the well-known artist Mako Fujimura told how incoming high school students each year at Beacon High School, a charter school in New York City, are asked, “What do you want to make today?” Fujimura is a believer just like me, and I felt so blessed to have heard his speech. I also ask myself, “What is next? What do I want to make for the future?” These questions help me to think of new directions for my future.

My vision is glorifying God with my talent and sharing my work with others. My passion for making art reflects my love of God and my desire to share stories in faith with my fellow human beings. I hope that my love of God will flow through my work and that people will have the chance to hear the gospel of Jesus and God’s love for us.
Endnotes

1 All Biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV), originally published in the 1970s and revised in 2011.
4 Ibid.
7 Yamamoto, Big Pumpkin (1985), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, photo by Yoshiko Yamamoto, in Quiet Ripples.
8 Yamamoto, Garden Tray (1972), in Quiet Ripples.
10 Makoto Fujimura, commencement address at Biola University, May 26, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euBe4PxKz_M