IN BETWEEN

Master of Fine Art Thesis

By

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Ceramics at SUNY New Paltz

May 2017
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Introduction

The subjects of my research are longing and memory expressed through Korean roof tile structures. As an artist, I realize that while my subject is illuminated in the present, I must be open to creative inspiration and the spark of ingenuity wherever it is found. Sometimes, this means deviating from well-laid plans in order to articulate unique relationships and to express human connections that might otherwise be unseen. When I began my thesis, I had first thought my direction would be to examine spatial links across distance, using diaspora and hybridity as my anchors. However, by being reflective about the work I wanted to produce and what held deep personal value for me, I realized that it was not spatial connection but rather temporal connection in which I was most interested. I wanted to understand how I brought the past into the present through the affective desire to connect to a distant past. Insofar as longing is at the center of my work, it will necessarily change as I age and mature and as my life experiences change. I will long for different times and for different purposes. It is possible that my concept will change as sideward directions lead to new and productive directions. What separates the artist is that she is moved by her creativity, a spark of enlightenment. I must remain humble to my purpose to find and articulate creative inspiration through art. One way in which I can do this is by looking for the loose connections to my current work and being open to exploring them even at the expense of time and others’ expectations.
Artist Statement

My work reconstructs my childhood memories of longing to value moments of the past. I investigate the intersection of my heritage, yearnings, and life in the present. I build clay sculptural forms, using Korean methods of tiled roof construction. Making each piece by hand, I preserve the individuality of each tile. The long process enables me to be self-reflexive, to collect memories, and translate nostalgia into an object. Each roof tile represents a fragment of longing and various memories are materialized in different forms and structures created with a variety of techniques, processes, and materials. Though the act of remembering is intentional, the unique construction of my memories is beyond my control. Similarly, I intentionally create an object while allowing the process of firing in the kiln to create new idiosyncratic work. Recreating objects, patterns, and designs with roof tiles conveys my personal connection to a spatially and temporally different self.

Longing (Seed), 17”x 15”x 11”, 2016
Through experimentation, I explore relationships between the traditional meaning of tiles, my personal history, and remembering. I am interested in Korean traditional crafts and folk crafts with my inspiration coming from every day, practical roof tiles. As Yanagi Soetsu shows in his book, *The Unknown Craftsmen*, nameless and unknown craftsmen created beauty in everyday practical objects. He researched folk art in Korea throughout his life and established the folk art movement, named *Mingei*, which means “art of the people.” Similarly, I investigate ways to create beauty from functional objects in daily life for my work. To research historical varieties of roof tiles, I study books, image materials, and research ancient times to modern history at the Central Institute of Cultural Heritage in Korea and other museums. Early roof tiles built on public buildings like palaces and temples, around 700 A.D. in the early Shilla Dynasty, were limited to advanced techniques and architectural function, but they later became popular and were adapted as a general roof style. This style of roof tile came to represent the building’s dignity and symbolic meaning. However, its style and design were changed by later kingdoms and religions, and it became increasingly common in public. As a result, its functionality was emphasized, and its symbolism was degraded. Roof tiles produced during the Koryo Dynasty used Celadon glazes with some limited use remaining into the Joseon Dynasty period. However, these examples do not exist in practical application in the present day – they are only preserved
in museums. In examining this gap between the historic and contemporary in Korean roof tiles, I find it similar to my memories. Ancestors gave a variety of meanings to each tile piece, and I want to trace their creativity, ingenuity, and craftsmanship in my own work. Thus, I ask the following question: How do I convey personal meanings of roof tiles in a different place and in the contemporary time?

I decided to establish in my studio practice a methodology similar to traditional roof tile construction. I build sculptures with tiny roof tiles, adapting historical roles and meanings. I work with long, repetitive processes, moving to a positive future and a working state like Yanagi Soetsu describes. He said, “If you can void your mind of all like the Zen state (“no mind”) – may seem to represent a negative attitude but from it springs the true ability to contact things directly and positively.”¹ Long, repetitive processes enable me to commune with myself in a meditative state. To establish an interaction between memory, my working process, and roof tiles, I created small architectural sculptures. This is similar to the way Susan Stewart talks about scale in her book On Longing. I worked to achieve a shift in meaning through the miniature, slowing down time when asked to consider the tiny elements of tile within the works.

The main function of memory is preserving order and the position of acquainted persons and places.² David Hume defines the idea of memory as an impression that reappears in the mind after an absence. The reappearance of the past speaks to my feeling, particularly my situation in this country as a Korean in the United States, and I intentionally or naturally attempt to harness this in my work. The human memory system selectively stores a fraction of our experiences.³ As a result, our memory is mixed with chronology. Paul Gilroy asserts memory does not mean.

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¹ Yanagi Soetsu, “The unknown Craftsman”
² David Hume” From a treatise of human nature”, p81
³ Alan J. Parkin, “Memory”, p69
reaching back to some unchanging core, but it is subject to continual modifying and reprocessing in the present (Gilroy, 2000:28). Memory functions differently from an exact history⁴. It is not always precise; it depends on how we feel about the contents of the memories. I want my work to act as a useful and valuable remembrance. Like Abby Smith Rumsey says “Memory is not about the past. It is about the future.” She said accumulating memories of our past enables us to produce visions of the future⁵. Similarly, I want to reshape my recollection and bring my visions of the future to my work.

**Artists review**

Using different patterns and designs in building sculptural forms using Korean traditional methods of tiled roof construction, I have been inspired by Hyung Joon Han and Gun Bok Lee. They are master artisans in Korean roof tile and roof construction. Master Hyung Joon Han always builds tiles by using traditional methods, even though there are more efficient methods of making tiles. From collecting clay at local sites to building tens of thousands of tiles by hand, he follows his teacher and ancestor’s lessons and his accumulated experience. He thinks traditional methods of making are the only way to make beautiful special roof colors, which change with lapses in time and weather. As time goes by, roof tiles are discolored and damaged, but they maintain their historical beauty and the touch of a master craftsman. It is now rare to see those handmade roof tiles in Korea. Master Han emphasizes that the maker should work through the whole process and creates each piece by inches. The long process of making tiles means each piece has the master’s touch and its own individuality. I look for those special individualities and

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⁴ Jerome Dokic, “Time and Memory”, p214
⁵ Abby Smith Rumsey, “Memory of display”, p12-13
the beauty achieved in the variation. Even though each piece is different, they look almost identical and make perfect harmony with other pieces when they are perceived as a whole, as a completed roof. The specialty of colors and styles is significantly different from mechanically made tiles from factories.

The master Gun Bok Lee constructs roofs with more than ten thousand tiles. It looks easy and simple to arrange and build, but he has to calculate angles and shapes. He maintains the traditional construction method because he values the craftsmanship and the process. Such roof tiles keep their shape and protect buildings for more than a millennium. The way the tiles are connected and formed as a roof is similar to the arrangement of our memories and histories. Every day and in every moment, we create and build our memories. Like the roof, each tile of our memory is not visible and remembered, but together they form the architecture of our minds.

Another artist, Do Ho Suh, works with the idea of longing and memories. He built a portable house sculpture from the idea of longing for his original home in his country, creating a fabric home to carry within a suitcase. When you miss something and if you can hold and keep it with you, it gives you comfort. Home means a lot for me because I have crossed an ocean and moved to a different culture, similar to Suh. Tile is a metaphor for my history and protection, just as he said that a house is a metaphor for life. Creating small piece of tiles and constructing sculptures tell stories, and help to interact with each time, place, and memories in my work.
Do Ho Suh, *Home within Home within Home within Home within Home*, 2013

Polyester fabric, metal frame 602.36” x 505.12” x 510.63”

Land with Eastern Tiles, 1988, Seungtaek Lee, Korea

The mystery of the tiled roof has a long history throughout Korea.
Hyung Joon Han, Process of tile making, 2012
Gun Bok Lee, installation Sungnyemun Gate roof, 2013

Sungnyemun Gate roof, 2014
Process images of thesis work
Restoration
Porcelain, glaze, 2017
17” x 17” x 11.5”
Overview of the thesis project

I am using tiny pieces of clay tiles to design sculptural forms. While clay is dried, bisque fired, and glaze fired, it changes its shape, size, and color in every stage. At first, I tried to make different styles of objects with various structures to represent different memories – vague to exact shapes. However, constructing forms from only tiny curved roof tiles resulted in challenges to exact representation and structural stability, highlighting the distance and imprecision inherent in memory. Rather than controlling clay materiality to make various structures, I focus on using the inherent nature of the material to build an object. For example, I assemble each piece to build an object following its own shape and allow for the unpredictable process of firing in the kiln, resulting in distance from the original in new abstract work.

*Untitled I, 2016, 15”x 12”x 6”*
**Gathering**
Porcelain, glaze, 2016
10” x 10” x 2.5”

**From 1975**
Earthenware, porcelain, glaze, 2016
14” x 14” x 3”

**Onggi**
Earthenware, glue, 2016
10” x 10” x 13”
Memory of mother
Porcelain, earthenware, glaze,
2016
18” x 18” x 10”

Untitled IV
Porcelain, earthenware, glaze,
2016
20” x 12” x 4”

Ephemeral
Porcelain, glaze, 2017
14” x 14” x 8.5”
For my thesis exhibition, I created an intimate space for my work titled *Longing (Home)* that used light to illuminate the preciousness and energy of my source memories. In general, the roof tile signifies safety and peacefulness in the way it is used to cover the home. With a large sculpture on a low pedestal, viewers are able to look into its structure and design. Most other work was placed on three feet high pedestals separate from the Longing (Home) to allow viewers to explore various structures and stories easily. Each piece containing hundreds of individual elements, demonstrates value, individuality, and preciousness through the time and labor invested in its creation. The structure and composition of objects represented how my stories are created by different hand building processes. My thesis exhibition was displayed by contrast, juxtaposition, the passage of time, and lights.
Conclusion

This research is not only about personal exploration but to raise the consciousness of others regarding their memories. Building with two different colored, interlocking tiles refers to two different cultures and times interacting together in me. It also means connecting to people around me and their different memories. The roof tile is a metaphor in my work to symbolize longing memories. It also encourages historical reflection through the use of historical craftsmanship. I created portable-sized sculptures to remember nostalgic objects, places, and stories in order to keep and store with me. As a body of work, irregular and abstract sculptures guide the viewer to recollect and reflect on their memories or their imagination. As Rumsey says “Memory records the world as so. Imagination transposes it into the key of as if, transforming experience into speculation.” Each viewer’s memory plays a main role. Eric R. Kandel describes that meaning of work as dependent on how viewers interpret and what kinds of memory they have because it is critical to the viewer’s perceptions and emotions. My work is not just records of memory but recreates new stories and enables links to viewers and me. In the show, I found that many viewers engaged my work and understood as I desired, even though they read the work differently as my thesis. Collecting and recreating recollections of multiple places, times, and people suggest to me a lot of possibilities to commune with me and viewers. New memories are being created at this moment, and the journey of tracking memory is just started.

6 Eric R. Kandel, The Age of Insight
Longing( Home), MFA Thesis Show, 2017
Bibliography


IN BETWEEN

Eunyoung (Elly) Oh

Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition
May 12th - May 16th, 2017
11am - 5pm

Opening Reception
Friday, May 12th, 2017
5pm - 7pm

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
SUNY New Paltz
North Gallery
1 Hawk Drive
New Paltz, NY 12561

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