Duality of a Cage

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Duality of a Cage

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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My former professor Seol Kim said, “If you achieve success, you should show appreciation to those who supported you along the way.” I feel like I am the luckiest person in world because of all the lovely people that have helped me along my journey.

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I send my heart to everyone who helped me during the last two years at Virginia Commonwealth University. I am grateful for the experience.

Lastly, I dedicate the successes I made during my graduate school years to my soul mate JK Han.
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My thesis is about the dualistic connotation of the cage. The original intention of a cage is to create a boundary to enclose a target. However, a cage has a positive intent for protection. With this idea, I created kinetic sculpture and installation pieces referencing cages. While I understand the negative association of cages, I made them seductive through the careful consideration of lightness, fragility, and sheen. I have been exploring forms and material qualities to express the contradictory connotation of cages. Most of my work is made of wire because I have a great interest in the delicate nature of wirework. I use silver as my primary material for its impression of duality. Silver is desirable with its economic worth, but also it attracts our senses with its ability to be shiny and reflective. Conversely it could be manipulated to have a cold distant industrial look. In the end I wanted my audience to have unsettling desires.
Part I

Introduction

When I arrived in America for graduate school, I faced huge cultural differences between this new land and my own Korean culture. For instance, I was surprised to learn that many university students here worked their way through school in order to support their own education. In Korea, parents support their children’s education and life until the time they are married. Further, children in Korea take care of their parents during their old age whereas in the United States this is not necessarily the case. My new life in America gave me distance from my own culture and allowed me to see more clearly the demands and expectations set upon me as a Korean woman. I began to think about personal burdens I had carried with me throughout my life. I have had to be a perfect daughter for my parents, especially for my mother. Given that my parents are divorced, if I were to veer from a straight and narrow path of high grades, good career, and good marriage, my mother’s reputation would be ruined. People would say she was to blame and deserved her circumstances.

Throughout my life these social judgments functioned as the basis for my decision making. I always felt they restrained me from pursuing my own path. Even worse, I had to hide my negative emotions like frustration, obsession and greed from everyone around me. If I exposed my dark side, people could revile my mother, because my mother’s generation believes that raising and educating children is the only duty a mother has. I pretended to be always happy,
bright and positive because my role was to be a perfect daughter. As a result, whenever I tried to
counsel my negative emotions, these feeling only got stronger.

For my Candidacy show, I made 5 jewelry pieces whose form was inspired by cages,
based on the idea that negative emotions are the traps I find myself in. Since cages are the most
common symbols for confinement and constraint, I used cages and other abstracted wire forms
reminiscent of cages as a metaphor for my negative emotions These initial 5 works utilized the
properties of my material, silver, to convey the dualities of lightness and weight. Through
material qualities and form I wanted to convey the idea of contradictory emotions. While I
understood the negative connotations of cages, I made them seductive by carefully considering
lightness, delicacy, and sheen.

fig.1 - Feel Comfortable, 2009
fig. 2 - Your Place, 2009
fig. 3 – 5W1H, 2009

fig. 4 – Desire, 2009

fig. 5 – Forever and Ever, 2009
After my candidacy show, my focus shifted. My new interest became the dualistic connotation of the cage. The original intention of a cage is to create a boundary to enclose a target. Even though cages are the most popular symbol for boundary, limitation and isolation the most curious aspect of cages is the action of enclosing with a positive intent and for protection. For instance, an elementary school in a city has a fence, in other words a cage – like a boundary, allowing children to play safely inside of it. An incubator is protection for immature infant, but it isolates a baby from its mother. A shark cage is definitely protection for a diver, but the diver is limited to the inside of the cage. Even people utilize cages to protect their property. All of these examples are essentially cages but their use is not intended for a negative purpose.
For my thesis exhibition, I created kinetic sculpture and installation pieces referencing cages, varying from quintessential to abstract forms, exploring their formal and material qualities. Most of my work is made of wire. I have a great interest in wire work, because it is more delicate, fragile, difficult and challenging. Through this wire work, I try to recreate the tension and stress I have been going through in order to stay on the right track. In most time, I use silver wire or thread, but sometimes it is glass string or steel wire. To me, the impression of silver has duality. Silver is inherently desirable through its economic worth but also because of its ability to be shiny and reflective, it also warms to our touch. Conversely it could be manipulated to have a cold distant industrial look. In the end I wanted my audience to have unsettling desires.
Part II

Work

Family

One night, I was working in my studio when my father called me to see how I was doing. He said he was thinking about me and said that he really missed me. I was surprised, because it was the first time I had heard him say anything like that. I could sense he had aged from his powerless, shriveled voice. It made me so sad. Not too long ago he was strong, stubborn and obstinate. He was like a huge wall, which I could lean on when I needed it. He asked me when I was coming back to Korea.

I couldn’t answer.

Whenever I talk with my mother on the phone, she cries because she misses me so much. She worries about me because I work late at night. She always worries about what would happen if I got sick or in an accident. Even though I tell her everything is fine, she still worries because she loves me.

I have various roles as a daughter, sister and wife. In other words, I have various social obligations. To me, these psychological web of bonds are a type of cage. I couldn’t be farther from my family than I am now. I know they want me to come back and one day I will. I know I am kind of stuck inside of a cage called family.
Is this cage a bad thing? I know my family loves me. I know that they, especially my parents, would give their life for mine. They support and protect me all the time, and would be right next to me whenever I needed them. I am not a nomadic person because I have a family. I don’t have to feel lonely because they love me and I still feel connected to them. That is my inspiration for the piece, *Family*.

My impression from my individual family members has greatly affected my design decisions. The thickness of the wire and size of cage are changed depending on my impression of that family member. For instance, at the center of the work, there are six silver cages, each representing a different family member. My father’s character is a gruff and blustery, but inside he is so soft and fragile. My mother looks pretty and delicate person. However, she is brave and strong. I made a cage to represent my father relatively small and delicate comparing with a cage for my mother, larger and steady. A cage representing my husband, JK, is the biggest one among these six cages, because he is the one who has the greatest impact on me. My sister’s cage and mine are connecting mother’s and father’s because they are divorced but related through us. In between my cage and JK’s cage, there is a tiny but thick wire cage. That is my dog, Bell.

I made sphere shaped cages for this wall installation piece. I thought family relationships are similar to a thread skein. Like a tangled skein, family members are entangled with biologically and emotionally. That why I made it actually connected.

Around my Family, there are bunch of spheres made of patinated copper wire. These represent family of family and their family. Like our society consist of families, spheres of my work form fragile but widespread gathering on a wall.
fig. 10 – Family, 2010

fig. 11 – Family(detail), 2010


The Space between People

I have a friend. She is very nice and usually a positive person. Sometimes she can be fickle. When that happens, she becomes very anxious, edgy, uptight and even fearful. Being around her makes me nervous too. When she is moody, she is literally emanating her bad mood to others around her and makes them step back. Depending on the duration of this mood, she temporarily isolates herself from others. She makes her own cage and walks inside of it.

I have another friend. She is a hard worker and usually she finishes her work late at night. She always worries about her safety because she takes a metro to go home late at night. So she pretends she is a violent person so that people don’t want to come closer. She is making her own cage to protect herself.

Both of them do not need words to express their bad mood or violent thoughts. Like an aura, this negative energy can be emitted from within and manifest in their facial expressions, voices or gestures. This radiating negative energy can build up as a physical personal space, or distance, between people that pushes them away from each other. This is my inspiration for the piece *The Space between People.*

*The Space between People* is a sculptural body ornament that consists of steel wires that flow from a human shaped form. In this piece, I incorporate kinetic movement and sculptural ornaments. Tiny little cages made of silver dangle on the tips of steel wire and bounce with the tension of wire. It appears as if the cages are emanating from the body. These cages represent the negative emotional energy from individuals.
I stuck the wires into a human shaped form so that it looks like it is emanating from the body. The various lengths represent the different levels of power and strength carried by each negative thought. Also, I made cages with 32 gauge silver wire so that from a distance they are almost invisible. Negative energy isn’t visible but it is felt when someone is close enough to perceive it.

fig. 12 – The Space between people (detail), 2010
fig. 13 – The Space between people, 2010
My husband has a brother with cerebral palsy. He can’t speak, eat, stand up alone, or even go to the bathroom by himself. His mother always does her best to take care of him. In other words, my husband has had to do everything independently since his childhood. Even worse, his mother expects my husband to do everything twice better than his peers to do his brother’s portion also. However, there is nothing enough for her. This burden becomes his cage. He always feels burden unconsciously, and desire to be free from his cage. However, I believe his cage can be the motivation for him so that he can try again to escape from it. He might never try to fly away from his cage if he has no cage.

My husband has a favorite movie Porco Rorso. It is about a pig that once used to be a man who was a pilot and drove a red airplane. In the movie, there is a scene where Porco flies with his darling, the red airplane, above clouds. My husband says he can feel freedom whenever he watches this scene. I think he is imagining himself in Porco’s place. That is my inspiration for the work “Over the Rainbow”.

“Over the rainbow” is a kinetic work. A tiny airplane is flying above silver clouds to the tune of a music box, but it is inside of a cage. The tiny red airplane represents my husband. The cage enclosing the airplane symbolizes his burden and situation. Like him, the airplane tries to go somewhere, but it is not really going anywhere.

The tune of a music box, Over the Rainbow is my consolation for him, because whenever I listen to the song I feel hope. I wanted to give him hope so that he never gives up. Also, I made the space between bars of the cage big enough for airplane to escape from it, so that the airplane
can actually fly away when it realizes where it is. The flying movement signifies my husband trials, which never end. In other words, the cage forces him to keep flying. If there was no cage he could land his plane and might never try to fly again.

fig. 14 – Over the Rainbow (detail), 2009
fig. 15 – Over the Rainbow, 2009
Nabi

When I was a little girl, I used to go catch butterflies during the summer. Whenever I caught one, I would place it into a plastic bug cage, and carefully put the cage on the top of my desk. I gave it wild flowers, water and honey to try and recreate its natural environment. Watching them flutter was evocative enough to fascinate me with its beauty. The line of the butterfly body and its wings were so delicate and sensitive. I would be captivated its flight for long periods of time. In my mind, I thought I was saving the butterfly’s life. I firmly believed I was protecting it from outside dangers such as bad weather and predators.

However, they always died after a few days, and I would bury it in the backyard. When I grew up I forgot about the cage until one day I found it in my desk drawer. Then I remembered all of the butterflies I captured and what happened to them. I didn’t understand at that time why they always died. I was confused and frustrated, because in my mind the butterfly was safer in the cage than outside. I didn’t realize at that time, for the butterfly, the cage was a prison threatening its life.

This childhood experience is the inspiration for my second kinetic work titled “Nabi”--the Korean word for butterfly. I made a cage with glass bars, and put a dead butterfly inside. I installed a simple kinetic mechanism under the butterfly wings to make it flutter. I chose to make the cage with glass instead of plastic because it more closely represented the way I remember seeing the cage as a child. The glass bars produce a more transparent effect, as if there wasn’t a cage at all.
The mechanical device was installed inside of the drawer that I am using as a shelf. Also, I mounted the drawer on the wall a little bit higher than a usual desk height to match the perspective of a child, and the naive belief that its placement would keep my precious safe.

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Abandoned baby headline sparks row, Webpage, 2010,

Grey Reef Sharks, Webpage, 2010,
Vita

Education

2010  **M.F.A** in Department of Craft and Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University – Emphasis on Jewelry and Metalworking, Richmond, VA, USA

2007  **M.F.A** in Arts & Crafts at the Sookmyung Women’s University - Emphasis on Lacquer Crafts, Korea

2000  **B.F.A** in Arts & Crafts at the Sookmyung Women’s University, Korea

Exhibition

2010  **Duality of a Cage** – Anderson Gallery, Richmond VA, USA

                *No Boundary*  - SNAG (Society of Northern American Goldsmith) Students Exhibition, Houston, TX, USA

2009  **River Views Juried Art Show** – River View Art Space, Lynchburg, VA, USA

                *Option 2009 Biennial*  – WPA (Washington Project of Art) art show, Conner Contemporary Art , Washington DC, USA

                *Stuff*  - Sub Octo Gallery, Philadelphia, PA, USA

                *Kinsey Institute’s 2009 Juried Art Show*  - The SoFA Gallery, Bloomington, IN, USA

                *C word*  - Metro Gallery, Richmond, VA, USA
American Craft Council Art Show - Baltimore Convention Center, Baltimore, MD, USA

2008  Leap - FAB gallery at VCU, Richmond, VA, USA

2007  Tales from the Woods: The First Solo Exhibition - Gallery La Mer, Seoul, Korea

The Road to Peace: The International Exchange Exhibition - Hague City Hall, Hague, Netherlands

The 9th Invited Exhibition of Korean Competent Artists - Danwon Gallery, Ansan, Korea

2004  Cultural Products - Gemma Hall / Seoul, Korea

2000  The 3rd Sookmyung Lacquer Association Annual Show - Tongin Gallery / Seoul, Korea

1999  The 3rd Sookmyung Lacquer Association Annual Show - Tongin Gallery / Seoul, Korea

Awards

2007  The 24th Korea New Art Festival Competition - Special Selected

The 43rd Korean Industrial Artists’ Association Competition - Selected

New Artist of La Mer – Chosen by La Mer Gallery

2006  The 5th Korea Ottchil Competition - Special Selected

The 3rd Cheongju Crafts & Cultural Goods Competition - Selected

The 42nd Korean Industrial Artists’ Association Competition - Selected

2000  The 36th Korean Industrial Artists’ Association Competition - Selected

The 19th Public Service Advertising Competition – Selected
**SCHOLARSHIP**

2010  **Minority Scholarship** from Haystack Mountain School of Craft - for attending the session 2, led by Prof. Arthur Ganson

2009  **Graduate student Teaching Assistance ship** from Virginia Commonwealth University - for Beginning Jewelry class of Prof. Susie Ganch

**PUBLICATION**


- Review for the show *OPTION 09’*, weekend section, page21, USA


**The Falls Church News Press** - 30 September 2009

- Review for the show *OPTION 09’*


2007  **The Dong-A Daily** - January 27, 2007

- Review for the first solo show *Tales from the Woods*, culture section, Korea

**CRART vol.57** - January 2007

- Preview for the first solo show *Tales from the Woods*, monthly craft magazine, page39, Korea
Teaching and working experience

2009  **Teaching Assistance** for Prof. Susie Ganch at Craft and Material Study Department of Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA - Specified in Metal and Jewelry

**Designing a Humanoid Robot CHARLI** for Robotics and Mechanisms Laboratory at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg VA, USA - Designed covers of CHARLI

2008  ROBOTIS Co. Ltd, Seoul, Korea

- **Designing covers for a Robot BIOLOID**
- **Designing toy robot product line OLLO**

2000 – 07 **Running Private Art Institute** – Teacher as well as the chief of the art institute, Seoul, Korea

Selected collection

2007  2 pieces of lacquer works in TongYeong Ottcil Gallery - TongYeong, Korea


Qualification

2005  Certificate of Art Therapist for Children – From Korean Art Therapy Association