

STRENGTH IN FRAGILITY

by

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ABSTRACT

Ceramic vessels often have humanlike aspects to them. People are drawn to these anthropomorphic qualities because they live in a human body. Clay contains both a strength and a fragility that correlates to the physical and psychological experiences people have as human beings. Physically, bodies came from the earth/clay, and if thoughts and emotions emerged out of matter, the clay form and the human form share both origin and experience. Psychologically, people redefine what is considered failure, and turn a perceived broken experience into a great gift. My ceramic work is mostly made out of paper clay that appears to be fragile, but is very resilient. The idea of success and failure as a visual art is explored in this paper. Collapses, warpages, accidents, and fusions that occur in the kiln are rearranged and reevaluated by the artist to challenge the audience's preconceived notion of beauty and success. These expected and unexpected changes in the process of making directly reflect what we face in life that is full of surprises. Accepting "what is" in life and the outcome in the kiln helps me to be present and develop skills to see things from various angles and find beauty in it.

CHAPTER ONE

BEYOND TRADITIONAL VESSEL

Traditional vessels tend to have a rim with an opening so that there is a clear boundary of the inside and the outside. Human bodies can be perceived in a similar sense as our ancestors have portrayed vessels that reference contour lines of human bodies as shown below on the left. I saw the rim as a liminal place where I could explore and investigate. *Realm* is a vessel that shows a non-traditional rim that is thick, ambiguous, and intriguing. The beginning and end of the rim was created to be intentionally unclear. This was my attempt to connect or blur two seemingly different sides, inner world (spirit) and outer world (physical body), through a vessel.



Image 1, Lee Kang Hyo, *Boon Chung Hangari*, 2014, woonjung gallery



Image 2, Myung Ahn, *Clay Speaks*, 2021

As much as I admire the beauty and craft of traditional vessels from many different regions, they mostly look too refined, strong and perfect. Traditional ceramics in general have a strong root in functionality that heavily concerns the users. For me, it was challenging to express complex, multidimensional, and fragile aspects of humans with traditional pottery. It has been difficult to break free from the mindset of a potter since it has been my foundation as a ceramicist. Warren Mackenzie, an American potter, spent three years as an apprentice to the renowned British potter, Bernard Leach. Mackenzie said, “Having made Bernard Leach (or standard ware) pots for two years, we were indoctrinated with the sense of form that Leach used. It took five or six years after we had returned to the United States before most of that sense of form no longer pervaded my own work.” I never served as an apprentice, but throwing pots for my first two years at a community college under a teacher who mostly made pots indoctrinated my mindset as ceramics equals pottery.

Toward the end of my second year in graduate school, I stumbled upon a making method a Korean ceramist, Shin Kwon, used that helped me to shift gears in the studio. Kwon used elongated light bulbs in between slabs to create sculptural vessels. I thought this was a brilliant method of creating negative space in sculptures. Kwon’s work is refined, controlled, and a lot of his work still has reference to a vessel. I chose to use a combination of different materials such as pvc pipes, ready-made molds, and firewood that is sitting outside the studio. This approach to the process of making felt like representing my casual and spontaneous personality. The work, *Muh-jeh*, contains multiple layers of slabs, which create volume and negative space. Rather than being a merely singular object, multiple pathways within the sculpture allow viewers to question the boundaries of the piece. Where does the piece start and end? When I used to meditate on a beach in Northern California I experienced this ambiguous boundary between myself and the ocean. The sand on my skin appeared

to be a part of me, and my skin felt illusive and translucent. A part of the piece also has a remnant of tear and collapse that occurred in the kiln, yet it is actually pretty strong despite its fragile appearance. *Muh-jeh* seems to reflect both the strength and fragility we all possess as humans.



Image 3, Shin Kwon, *Nest*, 2011,
Victoria Albert Museum



Image 4, Myung Ahn, *Muh-jeh*, 2022

The color tones in my work are partially influenced by the ocean stemming from a unique experience I had while working as a seaweed collector at the start of Covid during the summer of 2020. We would get into the ocean at 5am when the tide was low to collect edible seaweed for a few hours until the tide started to come in again. It was three months of physically challenging work, but also rewarding as I closely witnessed the colors of seaweeds, rocks, and creatures.

Muh-jeh has received various responses from viewers. A lot of folks with ceramic backgrounds felt a degree of anxiety, especially whenever it was being transported, for potential

damage to the piece, while others felt it had a strong physical presence. There seems to be depth, ambiguity, and visual interest that provokes curiosity from the audience. How can you make a piece of work that makes the audience stop and spend more than a few seconds with it? A professor from my undergraduate program often asked us this question, which I think is a valid question. The purpose of creating art for me is not to promote more visual stimulation for the audience for the sake of attention, but most people will move on if the work lacks a visual interest. As artists in academia, we are constantly challenged with this question: am I making artworks purely for myself or for the audience? We are told not to care if the work interests the audience because once we start caring we are subtly ashamed by the “real” artists and educators. Why can’t it be both? We are constantly pressured to choose one side when the world is not merely black and white.

My work investigates paradoxes. It can be seen as both a vessel and a non-vessel or somewhere in between. It looks light but heavy. It looks heavy but light. It looks strong, but fragile and vice versa. At the end of 2021, this paradox in human experience hit me hard. I heard the news of my dear friend passing away due to a car accident. Richard was an unbelievably strong mid-aged man and a father. It was very difficult to process his sudden death. His death reminded me that it could happen to me any time as well. On top of all this, I caught Covid. For about an hour or so, it felt as if a heavy rock was sitting on top of my chest; I couldn’t breathe well, and I seriously feared for my death. I always thought I would be relatively calm when facing death since I am a spiritual person who used to meditate. But no, I was weak, terrified, and fragile. It was a complete defeat to the Covid both mentally and physically at that moment. It took me about ten months to partially recover from covid. I always felt fatigue after a couple hours of studio time. After two years since the

sickness I am much better, but my body is never the same anymore. I am currently experiencing my body's resilience and weakness at the same time.

CHAPTER TWO

FIBERS IN CLAY BODY

Making large pots and sculptures requires a lot of physical effort, including allowing enough time for them to dry, and carefully transporting them. During the first semester of my second year I made several large vessels, and I was ultimately left with exhaustion and frustration. Oftentimes, I had to wait until someone else was available to help me lift a section of pots or to transport pots to the undergraduate studio where bigger kilns could accommodate the scale of the pieces. In order to make a larger scale vessel, a thicker wall is required, which adds more weight. During the firing, the sculpture has to endure extra weight stress as it shrinks. I lost half of my large vessels due to the cracks that occurred either during the transportation or the firings.

Toward the end of my second year, I began to use paper clay in order to overcome these issues and lessen the strain on the piece and my physical body. Paper clay is simply a clay body composed of slurry clay combined with fibers. I have been using toilet paper for its convenience and accurate ratio of how much fiber is added to the clay body, although there are other fiber options. Danielle O'Malley shared her experience with paper clay in the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts journal.

“Its versatility allows me to patch cracks that may occur during the drying or firing process. Its durability makes it easier for me to load fragile greenware into kilns, I have fewer cracking issues, and it reduces the weight of my fired piece... Paper clay offers a plethora of working opportunities when it comes to building at any of clay's stages (leather hard, bone dry, fired). The fiber helps to join the clay together resulting in very strong excellent compression... The sky's the limit with this material.”¹

¹ Danielle O'Malley, NCECA Journal, 2022 (Volume 42), 84.

Paper clay doesn't have to follow the traditional rules of regular clay as O'Malley describes, which coincides with my desire to break free from the traditional values of pottery. It allowed me to blast a fan when the clay is still wet to speed up the drying process since it can take the uneven drying stress unlike a regular clay body that requires a slow & careful drying process. I could easily fix accidental breakages in sculptures with some paper clay slip.

The image below is a paper clay sculpture that is bone dry. Although the sculpture looks delicate and fragile, the clay body helps to hold everything together. It is strong enough to withstand the shock of transportation and can be lifted with relative ease. A sense of lightness and strength at the bone dry state provides me a sense of comfort and trust. A normal clay body would have been prone to breakage due to its delicate design and extra weight. The graph shows the resiliency of dry paper clay over regular clay, which snaps apart upon an impact.



Image 5, Myung Ahn, paper clay drying

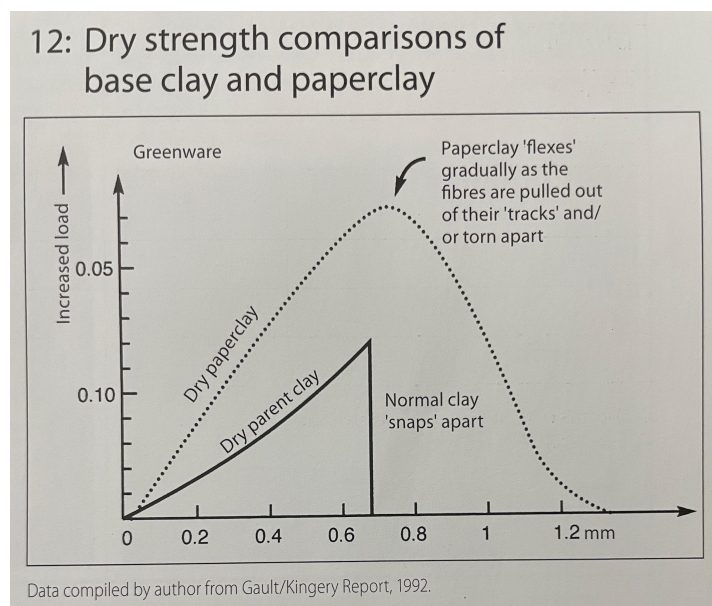


Image 6, Rosette Gault, Paperclay (art and practice), 2013

I ventured onto other ways of using fiber outside the clay body such as dipping fibers in a clay slip. Among them, the cardboard box has been one of my favorites, although I had some casualties in the firing process. At first, I was devastated since I invested so much time constructing this sculpture with certain expectations. The casualty reminded me of what my second year of the MFA program felt like, which was full of uncertainties. My gut feeling guided me to save the main part of the piece, and the broken shards as well, since paper clay is capable of gluing these shards back together in various states of ceramic process. Brad Evan Taylor, a ceramicist describes failure as:

“...a part of discovering that invisible boundary that’s your particular limit to push material around and to deal with it conceptually and physically. And that invisible boundary is something that you have to bump into and that you have to exceed to be able to discover its location, and when you discover its location you have the possibility or the potential to rethink what’s happening or adjust your strategy the next time around to be able to take that boundary and to be able to move it.”²



Image 7, Myung Ahn, Kiln Casualty, 2022

² Brad Evan Taylor, accessed July 14, 2022, <http://bradevantaylor.com/about>.

An accident sometimes opens up new and unexpected possibilities. A curveball that life throws at me to test my anxiety and habitual reactions may be a gift to grow as a resilient artist. I have to admit that I felt like quitting altogether after a few recent ceramic casualties. I am somewhat proud of myself for continuing to move forward and firing until the end, while constantly dealing with anxiety and panic attacks at night. After all, it is an opportunity to stop, breathe, accept what is, and then respond to see what is happening. A so-called happy accident is only possible when the artist spends time in the studio consistently and with discipline. As I have gotten the opportunity to work intensely in the studio toward the end of my time here, I am starting to understand the idea of developing concepts through the process of making work. I started attaching those broken parts to other sculptures that had been bisque fired. A few days later, I found myself adding those broken bisque fired parts into the paper clay slip. The paper clay, combined with the broken shards, allowed decorations and surface qualities I have never made before. What could have been considered as failures destined to the dumpster have now been given a second chance, and were elevated as a part of a ceramic artwork. This experience resonated with me deeply as I have been given a second chance in this program. It is an empowering experience that I get to choose what is valuable in the process of making art. Repurposing these broken pieces allows new art and value to be created.



Image 8, Myung Ahn, *Destroyed City*, 2022



Image 9, Myung Ahn, *Discovered*, 2022

There are a few downsides to paper clay. It is hard to throw on the wheel if there is too much fiber in the clay body, and it can develop an unpleasant odor over time as the added organic matter decays. The worst part is the bisque firing process because it produces smoke as the fibers burn roughly between 400 °F to 900 °F in electric kilns. I fire paper clay at night in the graduate studio when no one is around and open both of the main doors for air circulation. I recently started using the Blaauw kiln at the undergraduate studio, which is partially outside and decreases the amount of smoke that escapes, to make everyone's life easier. It also shrinks more than regular clay when fired, and maintaining physical structure in high temperature firing can be challenging as seen below.



Image 10, Myung Ahn, unexpected twist in the kiln, 2023

CHAPTER THREE

REDEFINING FAILURE

Brad Evan Taylor, mentioned above, is known for monumental scale porcelain sculptures. He fires his sculptures for an extremely long time due to the sizes and thicknesses. On his large sculptures he explains,



Image 11, Brad Evan Taylor, Rift II, Porcelain, 2015, Yingge Museum

“Pyroplastic Deformation Series is about metamorphosis. The porcelain body is formulated to encourage movement. Movement through time and temperature is carefully configured through calculated, observational, and adaptive firing schedules. Internal stress and release allows gravity to begin its work. This transformation of material is what I am interested in. Deformation of the Mass is achieved through time and temperature; the Movement / Transformation, determines the point at which the long climb and soak are

ended. Ceramic matter is frozen into a new State, defined through Time, Temperature, Chemistry, and Gravity.”³

The sculpture has a presence due to its size and anthropomorphic appearance. When you stand next to it, it can appear as a human-like figure due to its size. Taylor is interested in a controlled transformation through time, atmosphere, gravity and observation. It requires a lot of patience, tests, and resources. Metamorphosis through stress and deformation reminds us how artists grow and gain wisdom through challenges and accidents. I am also interested in his scale and surface qualities produced by a porcelain clay body without any glaze. The work is a combination of several separately fired pieces put together as one installation.

Transcended, pictured below, is my attempt to go large in scale as a potential centerpiece for my thesis show. It is significantly lighter than Taylor’s work, but still heavy enough to require two people to transport. I am currently working on using porcelain without applying glaze to accommodate accidental breakage after the firing. You wouldn’t be able to tell if a part of the piece broke off in this case.

³ Brad Evan Taylor, accessed July 14, 2022, <http://bradevantaylor.com/portfolio/rift-ii>.



Image 12, Myung Ahn, *Transcended*, 2022

Ryan LaBar is another artist that shares a similar concept visually and philosophically with both myself and Brad Evan Taylor. Many of his works contain geometric parts that are carefully stacked and weaved into one another when loading the kiln. During the firing, different parts move or collapse in what he describes as a “cascading failure”, as the clay structure and glaze melt together due to high temperature to transform it into a whole new art. He beautifully describes a correlation between his studio practice and life in an interview:

“But the one point that I can’t have control over is when I close that door of the kiln. Light the fire and let it heat up and let it all come together. So, life is like that. There is only so much we can control as individual packets and individual parts of our life. But how it glues together, how it all comes together is left up to chance in a little bit, but that’s the metaphor of the work. I control things. I like to control the materials the way I communicate with, but then I want to be able to let go and let it unfold. Art work to me is a dialogue of material in that you are working on an idea as you are working with material. You know it’s different. So the artwork speaks for itself. That’s it. That’s right there is a metaphor for life. So the beauty is that it just depends on how you look at it.”⁴



Image 13, Ryan LaBar, *Only Disconnect (1)*, 2009

I resonate with his letting go of the controlled mindset in the firings and life, but I am also interested in the initial controlled aspect of his preparation. It is apparent that he spent plenty of time and energy to make those attractive parts. A lot of the parts were thrown on the wheel and then carved, decorated precisely, bisque fired, and then selectively glazed beforehand. I am interested in incorporating these controlled parts that are made along with the broken shards. Unlike Taylor, he

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQOSq8sPAkA>.

knows a specific temperature at which he likes to fire that is suitable for the clay body, so the results come out much quicker, which seems a more suitable approach for my current studio practice.

Below is one of my pieces made during the summer of 2022. I was aware of the potential movement or collapse prior to the firing, since the vertical center structure is constructed with many thin layers of clay and dipped cardboard; I just didn't expect them to move that much. Due to a partial collapse it created some diagonal lines, new spaces, energy, and ultimately emotions. I never intended to make a face, but a face emerged nonetheless. The face seems to reflect me: wounded, yet standing strong. The depth of color and surface quality also reflect our complex human nature.



Image 14, Myung Ahn, *Reverence*, 2022

CHAPTER FOUR

SELF-CARE

To a ceramicist, transformation is a perfect word to describe what happens to a clay body during a high firing process. A clay body typically contains silica, alumina, and alkali metal flux.⁵ These clay minerals partially melt in high temperature to transform into a vitrified mullite that is water tight. One can see ceramics as a chemistry since each clay body responds differently in the kiln, depending on their mineral compositions. Alchemy is another word to describe the glaze chemistry in ceramics that can result in an infinite number of surface qualities. While taking Matt Kat's glaze chemistry class, I have experimented with hundreds of glaze tests, so that I have multiple options to choose from for my sculptures.

I am also drawn to the idea of transformation because I perhaps need it in my life as an artist. It is not only about attempting to make stunning work, but also about transforming my perception about myself and the world around me. I have been struggling with the self-image of this character Myung due to my childhood trauma. For the most part of my childhood, both my parents were not around me when I needed them the most. I felt deep down that I wasn't loved, which directly affected my self-worth and confidence. Standing up for myself has been difficult and self doubt has been affecting me while I am in this MFA program. I do surprise myself sometimes when a decent work comes out of the kiln, and I feel as if I am a better artist. Yet, I don't want my work to define my self-worth because that may not be a true transformation. A real transformation is realizing that I am already enough regardless of what I do as an artist. That is the paradox of being a flawed human. No individual is absolutely perfect at this moment of now. Ultimately, I think I

⁵ Matt Katz (M.F.A. from the University of Colorado-Boulder) in class discussion, 2022.

should let go of wanting to transform myself into this perfect being. My aim is to embrace my current self that is strong and fragile at the same time.



Image 15, Myung Ahn, *Upside Down*, 2022

I chose to visit Korea recently because my father was ill. I had mixed feelings when I saw his deteriorating body. He reminded me of my grandmother who worked very hard for her entire life. She didn't know how to accept and respect herself, thus abusing her body to make a living with

minimal self care. My father's wrinkly veiny hands looked just like his mother's hands. I thought I forgave him and my stepmother years ago, when I understood that they did what they had to do at the time. There was a little compassion toward him, but at the same time I was also afraid that my fate may not be so different from him after all. How can I break free from this cycle that lacks self-respect and heal myself?

I believe self-love is possible when one knows about the “self”. I started meditating about a decade ago because I was curious about myself. After years of meditation practice, I still can't figure out who I am. When I took a 10 day silence Vipassana meditation course several years ago, S.N. Goenka taught us to be aware of the sensations within our body. The sensations that are constantly changing within the body are a direct and real experience anyone can practice as ‘a watcher’. Body is something I have, and it allows me to have this miraculous experience as a human. We are not sure where the mind comes from, yet it seems to be there for us to use as a tool. It can feel like owning a wild Siberian Husky that is barely under control sometimes, but it is possible to train your husky and just watch it run around with a smile on your face. I am not necessarily denying this identity, Myung, which is a small portion of who I am. It is impossible to describe one's core identity with words, similar to when an artist tries to title a complex work of art in one word. I am simply trying to connect with my deeper self, the core self by asking questions, so that hopefully I can translate my complex, multidimensional, and ever-changing self in the process of making.

While visiting Korea, I had the privilege of meeting an onggi master, Lee Kang-hyo. He was one of my heroes in the ceramics world, and I had been wanting to meet him for a long time. We had a long conversation about various topics including life, death, meditation, choices we make as an artist, etc. Lee especially shared his thoughts on choices we make and how there are no right or

wrong choices. He said, “One has to make a decision quickly and own the responsibility.”⁶ When I asked him about the idea of physical self-care as an artist, he encouraged me not to think about it too much and go all-in for the next ten years, if I choose to live as a professional artist. I think he was trying to say that being a professional artist means doing the work even if I am not feeling to do so on a particular day. He emphasized the importance of basic skills and stamina developed in the earlier stage of an artist’s career, so that it is easier to self-care later on when the body ages. Finding a fine line between using my body to the point of exhaustion and actual abuse in the studio, seems to be the key at this point in my life.

⁶ Lee, Kang-hyo, Lee’s studio in Choong-book, South Korea, November 30, 2022.

CONCLUSION

There seems to be no clear boundaries between success and failure in my ceramic practice as I am constantly in the flux of shifting my perceptions on the results out of the kiln. Although I am pursuing this Master's Degree, I don't feel comfortable being associated with the word 'master' at all. I truly believe I am just starting to discover a tip of an iceberg with potentiality. Being able to simply look and notice what is happening, as Josh DeWeese said, and asking questions are more important than having an answer to whether work is a success or a failure. Having said that, it is ok to admit a clear failure or casualty that ceramists deal with all the time and simply move on forward as long as we learn from the mistake.

Strength in fragility doesn't necessarily promote the fragile aspect in human beings. Fragility is more associated with a concept of impermanence and change, which are fundamental aspects of our existence. It is precious and magical because it is temporary. A flower is beautiful and adored for its delicate and short lived existence.

There is a value in making something only humans are capable of creating. Each sculpture, depending on its size, composition, thickness, arrangement, and the glazes, will come out differently from each firing and each studio session unlike a machine made work. Mistakes and unintended consequences during the process of making and movements or cracks that occur under extreme temperature are becoming more exciting experiences for me. Also reevaluating what is beautiful at a given time are intrinsic values humans possess. I am going to keep making visually interesting work that hints at some of the aspects of who we might be.

Stephen De Staebler said, "I think everyone feels inadequacies, incompleteness; and of course the worst of society is trying to pretend you do not have these limitations, violating possibly

irreparably, your own uniqueness, which is largely a factor of incompleteness.”⁷ Perhaps this is why human beings are here: to experience and completely own our unique flaws as fully as possible.

⁷ Burgard, Timothy et al. *Matter and Spirit: Stephen Destaeble*. (California: University of California Press, 2012).

ARTIST STATEMENT

My recent work explores the liminal space of strength and fragility, success and failure, life and death in human experience. Each of these concepts exists on opposite ends of their respective spectrums, but are nevertheless intimately connected. And indeed, they depend on each other.

In my studio practice, I incorporate various fibers and wood planks as structural assists in my claybody and construction processes. The fibers offer flexibility and the wood allows me to incorporate negative space into otherwise solid structures. Through experimental firings, the pieces sometimes collapse and shatter which provides me an opportunity to rearrange the work or repurpose the broken parts to give them new life. I embrace accidents and unexpected outcomes as they allow me to explore my own understanding of success and failure. This approach helps me stay curious and trains me to become a more resilient artist.

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APPENDIX



Image 16, Exhibition documentation 1



Image 17, Exhibition documentation 2



Image 18, Exhibition documentation 3



Image 19, Exhibition documentation 4



Image 20, Wall piece 1



Image 21, Wall pieces 2,3,&4



Image 22, Exhibition documentation 5



Image 23, Heart Vessel



Image 24, Heart Vessel (detail)