A SPLENDID SURPRISE.

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On January 4th 2006, When I was about to get on the air plan to go to the United State of America, I told myself “From now on, I will write a whole new chapter in my life and this will be something that I never expected before.” I was so excited that I could not hide a huge smile on my face to my sad faced parents. With two giant travel bags which were bigger than my lower body, my trip started to the whole other side of the earth.

In the culture that I grew up in there are very traditional and strict rules for women than the Western culture doesn’t have. People say it is changing in this modern era as women’s rights get better. However, many times, I questioned what it meant to be a woman artist in South Korea. When I was in college, ‘man’ colleagues got more attention from the teachers because of their future concerns about a man who will have to take care of his family. Even in elementary school when teachers check our attendance, they called all the boys name first and then girls. My first name is commonly used for boys. One time, I had a classmate who was a boy and had the same name as me. Teachers put the alphabet letters A and B after our names, so people would not get confused. I was called by Kyungmin Park “B”. Second day of school, I went up to the teacher and asked her to change our alphabet order, so I will be Kyungmin Park “A” instead of “B”. She shook her head and nothing happened. I don’t see myself a feminist. However, I just want to talk about these silence hints that I had to feel as a girl in my culture. These feelings may have an effect on my art works later which is why I only use female figures to tell my stories.

First destination, New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University: I transferred to New York State College of Ceramic at Alfred University from Seoul National University of Technology. Coming to Alfred changed everything. It exposed me to the new Art world experience that has affected me in ways I couldn’t have foreseen. Suddenly my approach to art seemed stagnant and unsophisticated and it took me a while to figure out what I needed to
change in order to develop as an artist. I had to look back to what I had learned from my past experiences and to reformulate my definition of art. Before I arrived in America, my definition of an artist was someone who has a good technique and great skills, because to me those two things are fundamental to making a great work. However, during the two and a half years I studied at Alfred, I noticed there was a differentiation between craftsmanship and art. Craft is skilled work, and skill is a tool for the artist to make artwork, so craft and art aren’t the same. According to the philosopher Immanuel Kant, “Works of art is intrinsically final, they appeal purely at the level of the imagination and aren’t good for any practical utility, except ...the cultivation of the human spirit.” When I tried to re-establish my own art theory, I questioned myself about what is the essence of art, to reach a level of purity. Soon, my work started to develop a figurative language. As time progressed I became more interested in creating figures of children and thus grew closer to an answer. Only a child’s untamed imagination could have the ability to create a new and exciting world out of a single object. The combination of an innocent point of view, a vivid imagination, and overflowing curiosity make for a very special environment exclusive to children and their playmates. I started seeking a sort of regression to a childlike state of mind so that I could create in a place beyond boundaries. Children perceive things that you don’t see it in the grownup world.

I started making sculptures that featured stacked pottery and incorporating the human form. Part of my work features pottery, which is a common part of life and one of the oldest implements of mankind. To me, the dishes and bowls represent something to be filled, something to build upon, and a need to rise above others. They represent the possibilities, which spring from my ability to build upon my own reality and myself. In addition to functional ware, my sculptures incorporate the human form. The face of an Asian girl reflects my youth while the
towering pots suggest my untamed imagination. Some dishes fit perfectly in each other, but others don’t. Clearly, the child in the piece is immobile and fragile. From a child’s perspective, little attention is paid to such imperfections. From an adult perspective, there is usually a clear attempt to make it seem as though nothing could possibly be wrong.

MY WORK AT ALFRED:

Alfred University was a tremendous place for the study ceramics. All the enthusiastic faculty members and great facilities helped me to understand better about the basic knowledge of ceramic arts. Education in Korea centers almost exclusively on duplicating and repeating the work. The professor focuses craftsmanship skilled art. In that environment, it can be very threatening for most students to make the leap to making personal, creative choices. Classes at Alfred were different. I was encouraged to stretch beyond the expected result, and push harder
than what was required at the beginning, in order to reach a new level of creativity and to take chances.

While at Alfred, I mostly hand built my sculptures. In two and the half years at Alfred, not only did I learn a lot about art, but also learned a lot about myself. There were no parents to offer guidance or to help me to take care of my personal problems. As time went by, I learned being an adult means you will have lots of secrets from other people. I have to endure the problems and learn from my mistakes. But, from those mistakes I grew stronger and more confident.

After I graduated from Alfred University in May 2008, I worked as a studio assistant with Cristina Cordova in Penland, North Carolina. Cristina taught me many things about working as a figurative artist. Not only had she been teaching me new techniques for handling materials, but she has also exposed me the business side of art—defining the relationship between artist, museum and client, which is beyond what I learned from school. This experience working in a professional environment sparked a desire to study ceramics at a higher level.

I thought a graduate school environment would help me to not only explore and develop my own art philosophy, but also provide me with the business acumen to work as a successful professional artist. Having worked with a professional artist in her studio has given me a unique perspective of both experiences to draw upon and incorporate into my work. It also provided me with a new perspective of what information I still needed to know in order to create my own studio and work professionally.

I was assured that there is no better place than graduate school for me to share my experiences and to explore my curiosities. Moreover, being in an academic environment can give me more chances to interact with new ideas, and to aim my energy towards the artistic community. In 2009, I decide to study at the Lamar Dodd School of Art program at the
University of Georgia as a M.F.A student. Ted Saupe and Sunkoo Yuh advised me. Being in the UGA program for 3 years helped my work to continuously grow both technically and conceptually.

The first year, I started making figures that incorporated pottery forms. I challenged myself to make life sized figures. I mostly used stoneware and white, gold and red colors for my limited color pallet. I wanted to focus most of my time on realistic figures. Working with Cristina Cordova helped me to open up my eyes to think about the movement of the human body, and how body languages can drive huge meanings in figurative sculptures. For the surface treatment, I tried to explore lots of different materials besides clay and glazes such as concrete, metal and found objects.

The second year of the school, I tried to explore different execution practices. At this time,
I was fascinated by Renaissance paintings. Renaissance artists addressed the beauty and majesty of the human body. All those elegant gestures of the figures were powerful enough to show the beauty of human body itself. Instead of using a few limited neutral colors: White, gold and some red on my figures, I decided to use many bright colors that I noticed in the Renaissance paintings. Using pre-made under glazes helped me to have lots of color choices. Looking at the paintings also guided me to concentrate on small details and decorative elements that made my work have more playful character. Most of time, I made small scale works, so I could experiment with different techniques more quickly.

Art works mirrored artists’ thought. It can contain broad meaning like social issues or world problems. It also can be the artists’ own personal life story. Sometimes, I do talk about social issues, but most of my stories come from my mundane life. All of my figures are female or gender neuter. I am a woman artist who spent most of her life in a country where couldn’t speak up or express my feelings through my art.

When I show my work to people, I would rather hear from the viewer what they feel and see from my works instead of me sharing my stories verbally. They reinterpret my work in their own personal stories. Sometimes it gives me more interesting ideas than my original idea was. From these ideas, I decided make 5 works for my thesis show, which can divided into two groups.

The first group is smaller in scale than the other group. They are more decorative and thus more playful and colorful.

The first piece is ‘Teasing,’ which is decorated with lots of bright colors and a facial expression which hopefully intimidates the viewer. Her bright red tongue sticks out and she is pulling down her eye lid. She has a pink ball on her nose which makes her look like a silly clown. Clowns are one of the intriguing subjects that I often use in my work. The clown’s face is
covered with exaggerated shapes and their costumes are covered with lots of vivid colors. Clowns have multiple characters too. It is hard to determine their emotions because they have a happy face with a big smiley mouth or sometimes a sad face with tear drops. Clowns are the comic performers, but it also often refers to scary, tragic characters to children. I wanted ‘Teasing’ to have these clown’s two-facedness. The viewers are expecting to see happy girly figure, but when you look beneath the “surface”, you will see more than just happiness.

The second work is titled “Ladybirdbugladies.” Porcelain is a tricky clay body to use. It is easy to get cracks during the drying. However, a fired white porcelain body has its own certain beauty. For pursuing the cleanness in my ceramics, there is no better clay body than porcelain. Non glazed porcelain can also show a lot more details of faces and hands expression. “Ladybirdbugladies” is about Introspection: Human’s conscious thought and feeling. People regularly struggle with internal conflict when deciding whether to behave responsibly or indulge in impulsivity. Each girl presents this internal conflict. The girl on the left is pointing at the right one who is screaming. One says no to the other one, but the girl doesn’t want to listen to what the other says. I added a decorative element, a ladybug on the right girl’s arm where the left girl pointing. This little element can grab viewer attention easily so viewers can simply think this work is about the girl scared of a ladybug. There is no right answer about how people read my works, but I was surprised at how much a small element in a work can change the whole theme or meaning.

The third work is called “Manitou.” The culture that I grew up in believed that everything has its own sprit. Through ‘Manitou’ I want to talk about our own positive sprits. The tired looking boy is glancing at his bright blue colored soul, who looks happier than himself.

“Teasing”, “Ladybirdbugladies”, and “Manitou” each has a bubbly form as bases. Instead
of making full figures, I wanted to make a cartoon dialogue like balloons. In a cartoon, speech balloons convey subjective thought and help the readers to understand the whole story. In my works, bubbly forms not only work as the foundation for the figures, but also gives more spaces for the viewer to incorporate their own thought into my stories. I added many bright color dots and painted cloud like shapes on the bubbles to create 2-dementional sceneries. You also often find birds on my work. Birds are decorated with black under glaze and carved for details. Simply shaped birds have no such facial expressions contrary to the figures.

The Second group consists of “Hostile” and “Taken.” Both works have an almost life sized young female figure. Figures have the same patterns on their surface. I tried to show more exaggerated and energetic body movements in these pieces. Compared to the first group, these works interact more with the negative spaces in the gallery. To make “Hostile” seem more realistic, I looked up some cartoon hero’s movements. Cartoon characters are depicted with dynamic and exaggerated movements that I want to show in my figures. I got the idea from cat woman for the “Hostile” piece. The figure of “Hostile” looks like she will jump off from the
green rugged cliff at any second and attack something that is in front of her. Her wide open mouth is screaming, and her frowned face scares the viewer. Her wind-blown ponytail also gives more dramatic feelings to the work. This piece suggests a threatening experience or one of survival.

"Taken" is my second figure in the same group. She is a wall piece with three different sizes of red bubbles surrounding her. I depict an angry looking girl who is crawling up the wall and looking back over her shoulder. I was inspired by Spiderman’s pose. If you look closely at "Taken"’s face, her glazed eyes look like she is threatened by something else and her slightly parted lips with buckteeth increases her grotesqueness. Instead of glazing, I chose the Milk-Paints to paint both "Hostile" and "Taken." Milk painted matt surfaces absorbs light and shows more depth. I used off-White color to paint the whole figure and painted camouflage like patterns with pink. The color pink has a peaceful and non threatening feeling. But, pink color is also a combination of white and red which contains aggressiveness of red and pureness of white. I want to use these two totally opposite meanings in the color pink. From the distance, the works seems to be at the happy wonderland but, when the viewers look closely at the figures they will find the violent and scary looking faces. This unexpected realization can leave a strong impression in our minds.

I am pursuing this unexpected happiness in my works. When I got on a plane bound for New York, I did not know what would happen in my future. But, I can say that was the best decision I have made in my life and there is no regret. My past 6 years has been an everyday adventure and I am not sure what will happen in the future. However, If I believe in myself and truly enjoy what I am doing and devote myself to making better art, I will “Figure it out” in my life as an artist one day. Three years of experiences at UGA (which is almost half of my 6years of
journey) taught me to be a better artist and a better person. My thesis work reflects the experiences/stories that I experienced here. I am thrilled by the power and potential of ceramics as a material as well as using the figure as a sculptural language. As I continue to develop my knowledge and pursuit of my artistic goal, I will find new ways to share my unexpected happiness with other people through my art.
Teasing, 2011, Porcelain and glaze, 12”x12”x22”
Manitou, 2012, Porcelain, glaze, epoxy, and metal, 11"x10"x36"
Ladybirdbugladies, 2012, Porcelain and glaze, 20”x19”23”
Hostile, 2011, Stoneware, milk-paint, epoxy, and glaze. 16"x24"x41" (only Figure)
Taken, 2012, Stoneware, milk-paint, epoxy, and glaze, 29"x52"x9" (Only Figure)