

***Fracture and Fermentation: A Journey in Clay – Two Paths, Two
Identities, One Individual***

by

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Abstract

My Master of Fine Art research explores the fracturing and fermentation that occurs when two cultural identities first collide, then begin to merge, one traditionally steeped in collective thinking and community – Korea, and the other with a focus on the individual and autonomy – Canada. I was trained as an artist in South Korea and learned from masters who had decades of experience in the field of traditional ceramics. Until I moved to Canada, my work focused on Korean traditional ceramics and its history. However, my desire to be recognized as an *individual artist* instead of another anonymous traditional ceramic artist has grown tremendously since I restarted my journey as a ceramic artist here in Canada. After practicing in the ceramics field in North America for two years, I am starting to understand what the differences are between Korea, where I received my initial education, and Canada, my adopted culture. The struggles I have experienced as an artist from outside of this new culture made me think about myself as an individual. I am now starting to discover my own unique voice in my work with clay.

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Introduction

If we do not honor our past, we lose our future. If we destroy our roots, we cannot grow (Seelye and Wasilewski 19).

Early 2000, South Korea

I received my Bachelor of Fine Art degree from Dankook University in South Korea. The school is the premier educational institution for people who wish to study Korean traditional ceramics. My professor, Jong Hoon Park¹, taught the wheel-throwing courses while I was attending and his love for traditional tea ware was infectious. Unlike North American students, who start their learning by making cylinders, we had to throw hundreds of traditional bowls when we were first learning. Korean bowls, called *Sabal* in Korean, hold depth and colour in their shape and have natural throwing marks left by the potters. Professor Park would throw a bowl in a few seconds. He did not care if the bowl was warped or damaged while taking it off the hump of clay. His favourite line was, “Uh? You don't like it? It's ok. You can do it again.”

One day, he chose my wheel and the clay I had prepared for the class for a demonstration, but I felt I had to stop him because of the clay's condition. It was so short² that it kept breaking apart. I informed him that I needed to re-wedge the clay because it was not throwable in its current state. He stated, “Artists don't blame the materials. We make it work,” and he started to throw. Again, in only a few seconds, he had made a bowl, but this time with a rougher surface because of the clay I had inadequately prepared. And it looked even better than I could have imagined. I could perceive both the natural shape and the raw clay body itself.

¹ Jong Hoon Park: Professor Emeritus at Dankook University, director of Korean Tea Bowl Association and director of Kang-jin Ceramic Association.

² Clay with insufficient plasticity—tends to fragment during forming. Source: Ceramic Art Daily Glossary <http://ceramicartsdaily.org/glossary/page/9/>

That was sixteen years ago. I still remember that moment vividly. I believe that was the moment when I first fell in love with Korean traditional ceramics.

During my studies, I learned how to measure the amount of clay with my hands by grabbing it and feeling its tactility. As a result of that experience, I never measure the weight of clay to repetitively make bowls of a similar size. We did not even have a scale in the throwing room in my university nor a wedging table. It was a big surprise for me to watch people use a wedging table or a scale in order to repetitively make pots of a similar shape or size. At Dankook University we learned to work more intuitively.

If I turn to those things that display real beauty, my meaning may become clear. A characteristic Korean bowl made in Yi dynasty or a Chinese tea-caddy of the Sung dynasty can be described as neither perfect or imperfect. ... Their slight irregularities came by chance and not by any deliberation. Skipping of glaze or other imperfection was quite fortuitous. If one visits a Korean country pottery, the mystery attached to the beauty of imperfection in the pots is solved; the whole process of throwing, turning, glazing, and firing partakes of this easy-going naturalness, rough perhaps, but beautiful and imperfect. The making of those pots is very free – but not consciously free- and full to the brim with natural good taste (Yanagi 122).

The Present, Canada

I was asked to talk about my work when I started to study ceramics in Canada, to explain the concepts behind my work. I did not understand why I needed to talk about it. I searched, studied, and asked around – why are people asking those questions, why does this matter, and what does this mean? Why do people require an explanation of my work when the objects are sitting right there in front of them?

When I was studying ceramics in Korea, I did not have to explain any concepts or try to put meaning into my work because the works spoke for themselves. For example, when I made

an Onggi³ jar in class, I did not have to explain what it was, what techniques I used, and why I made it. It was simply an Onggi jar – everyone in the room knew its history, what it was and what it was used for. Why would they ask me ‘why’ I made it? It was a visual object that required no explanation because there was a shared understanding of the work and a collective knowledge of its story.

I am passionate about preserving traditions in ceramics– both techniques and process. Using traditional techniques and patterns on my pieces acts like a thread that connects me to the past, hundreds of years ago. As a ceramic artist, I would like to hold onto that string to not lose that connection. How can I be an artist who still appreciates traditions and applies the old techniques, but creates work that has meaning beyond preserving tradition? I have been searching for the answer to this question in my current studies.

An interview⁴ with Kang-hyo Lee, one of the traditional Korean potters, demonstrates the dilemma I feel. He fits into two categories as a potter who appreciates the traditions and uses those techniques, but has his own strong and distinct voice in his work. His insight into this argument is very interesting.

Interviewer: There is conflict between contemporary (modern) artists and traditional artists in the fine art field. Where do you think you belong? Are you a contemporary (modern) artist or traditional artist?

Lee: It doesn't matter to me. I used to think I am not a traditional artist but I do not think that way anymore. My work is based on the tradition. As time goes, people's needs change so we cannot just hold on to traditions. I believe this applies to all other fields. The true tradition is, I think, making something that is needed in this period of time with traditional techniques and materials. If I am called a ‘traditional artist’, that means people acknowledge my skills. If I am put in the ‘contemporary art’ category, that means people recognize/appreciate my sense and style of work. So I am good to be in either side.

³ Large-scale earthenware fermenting jars made using traditional hand-built processes – coiling and paddling. – what is the source for this definition?

⁴ Interviewed in Korean language.

<http://mnbmagazine.join.com/magazine/Narticle.asp?magazine=204&articleId=WTkDI8PX1F7EVE>

Date accessed: Jan 10, 2016

Having a person that I truly respect and admire say that it does not matter how I am defined or classified gives me permission to be who I am. I may have been stuck with the term ‘*tradition*’ so much that I could not let go of it because the word ‘*tradition*’ automatically pressures me to carry the responsibilities of being a Korean ceramic artist.

Between Restriction and Freedom

I am learning to be truly myself.

Educated Koreans with cross-cultural experience are well aware that their group-based morality often conflicts with the interests, intentions, and actions of Westerners. Many are under constant pressure to give up their traditional way of thinking and doing things and adopt the Western way (De Mente 77).

During the first year of my Master of Fine Art degree in Canada, I intensively researched Korean traditions and studied Korean ceramic history at length. The more I learned, the more responsibility I felt I had to carry on my shoulders. At the beginning of my experience as a ceramic artist in Canada, I was still thinking about Korean ceramics and its hidden beauty that is not as well-known as Chinese or Japanese ceramics. When people would talk about the Japanese tea bowl, I was always tempted to share the stories – about how Japanese people found the Korean bowl, *Sabal*, so beautiful that they started to use the bowls for their own tea ceremony. I felt responsible to educate people about Korean ceramics and that it is not all about Chinese and Japanese wares.

Koreans traditionally had a strong sense of their national identity. But according to research conducted by the Korean Institute for Policy Studies, they lacked a sense of *juche* (juu-che), or “self-reliance,” because they were conditioned by Confucianism to suppress their own personal identity and self-esteem in favor of the family and the group (De Mente 165).

2015 Summer, Korea

When I returned to Korea in the summer of 2015 for research and training, I reflected a great deal on the cultural differences between Canada and Korea. I was better able to see why I had been struggling with feeling responsible for preserving traditions of Korean ceramics. The biggest difference for me, and the one I am struggling with the most, is clearly explained in the journal, “A Cultural Task Analysis of Implicit Independence: Comparing North America, Western Europe, and East Asia.” It describes the difference as follows:

It has been proposed that Western cultural contexts emphasize a view of the self as independent, defined primarily by its internal attributes such as preferences, desires, and traits... In contrast, in Eastern civilizations, a contrast in view of the self as interdependent, interpersonally connected, and socially embedded has been elaborated (Kitayama et al. 237).

Basically, the difference between North American and Korean approaches to creative work is the difference between ‘*I*’ and ‘*We*’.

I visited my former professors and had some conversations with them during my 2015 visit to Korea. All of our conversation focused on how *we* as a culture lost *our* traditional ceramics to Japan and how *we* need to try to get those skills back. Again, history returns to play a large role.

...there is more to the coherence of Korean society and the national character of Koreans than what normally results from these shared influences. One additional element was the emotional and intellectual homogenization of Koreans to the point that ⁵*chung* (chuung), or “group consciousness,” virtually replaced individual awareness (De Mente, 76).

Professor Jong-hoon Park stated, “Don’t be sad that people do not recognize Korean ceramics. If *we* continue to do this, *we* will be able to establish *our* own voice again. But remember, it won’t happen anytime soon. It is not going to happen in my generation. It might not

⁵ Chung is also the Korean word for “loyalty.”

happen in your generation. But don't be discouraged. Even if it takes three generations, *we* have to pass this onto *our* next generation.” Park only used the Korean words for ‘my’ and ‘your’ when he spoke about generations, which cannot be described as ‘our’ in Korean due to the age difference.

Koreans often say “we” when a Westerner would say “I,” and until recent times it was common for a Korean man to say “our wife” when referring to his wife. The connotation of this usage was that men did not view themselves as separate from their families; that their wives not exclusively theirs but belonged to the family (De Mente 168).

2015 Summer, Canada

After two semesters of research and study into Korean traditions, I was ready to present my thesis proposal as well as excited to face the second year of my graduate studies. I presented my thesis proposal. This was the response I heard from my MFA committee members:

“What about your work?”

I would say that this was a moment of awakening, what I would consider the most crucial moment since I started creating ceramics in Canada.

What about my work? I had been talking about Korea’s history and what I would like to make, but I hadn’t mentioned *why* I wanted to make those pieces. Until that moment, I had not even given a single thought towards the “*why*.” The only reason I had was ‘because I am Korean’.

All of my experiences – including studying at Dankook University where they focus on preserving Korean traditional ceramics, and then working for a ceramic company that believes maintaining tradition is essential for the nation’s identity, have formed the way I think as a

ceramic artist. Now, here in Canada, I am being asked to talk about *my*-self and *my* work.

Suddenly, I feel free and the pressure I have been carrying on my shoulders is gone. The hierarchy I had to think about constantly can now be abandoned.



I see Korean society as a pot thrown off the hump. The “oneness” is important. Pots are made from one big piece of clay. Individuals are created from one large community. I see North American society as tiles. From a distance, you can see the patterns, drawing, or colors and you read the tiles as one work. But when you get closer, you can see the individual units and these individual tiles collectively create the pattern, the community.

Grace Han, *Path*, 2016, porcelain, size varies

In the piece titled *Path*, I wanted to create the oneness or community using individual objects that from a distance coalesce and are observed as one large piece. The hexagon nut-shape is repeated and forms an overall, vivid pattern. However, once the viewer gets closer, it is revealed that the thousands of nuts are unique and each one has its own individuality. Some have indentations and some are taller than others because the moulds I made are different in height. Some are squeezed because I took them out of the mould too soon. Even the colours – yellows and greens – are not the same because I added varying amounts of stain each time I made the coloured slip. Some shrunk more than others because they were fired at a higher temperature. Every single nut motif is handmade and different from the other. But they are harmonized with

others as in a community. I see both Korea – Oneness, *Our*, and North America- Individualism, *My* – in this work. There is a desire to make each one unique, but have them meld into a community, a harmonious and unified pattern. “Their lives were programmed to conform to a very precise and strictly enforced vertical system based on gender, social class, age, order of birth, education, and occupation” (De Mente 67).

To me, Korean people seem to be speaking at least two to three different languages (possibly even more). When I talk with older people, I have to speak *jon-dae-mal*, or ‘honorific language’. However, it is not as simple as it sounds. It is not just adding ‘please’ or changing modal verbs from ‘can’ to ‘could’. The vocabulary itself needs to be considered and propositions have to be chosen carefully. Last but not least, how the sentences end is also crucial. I had not found using the proper vocabulary and switching how I talk depending on who I was communicating with difficult until I moved to Canada. However, when I visit Korea now, I find it exhausting to find the right expressions to use for each person. There are so many rules and customs I need to think about with each encounter. My role as an individual constantly changes with other individuals, as does their role with me.

...Korea(n) society requires that every individual know his or her place on the hierarchical social ladder and strictly adhere to it. Another key factor in Korean society is that no matter how high one might be on the social totem pole, proper etiquette requires that they maintain a humble attitude and allow others to elevate them to their proper position – by the use of honorific language, by directing them to the seat appropriate for their status, and so on (De Mente 150).

Now, although I try to be free from group-conscious-thought and try to break the hierarchy that is so deeply rooted, I cannot easily escape from it even though I try.



Grace Han, *Gate*, 2016, Soda fired stoneware, 213 x 55 x 55 cm

Grace Han, *Gate*, 2016, Soda fired stoneware, 235 x 55 x 55 cm

This work demonstrates Korea's vertical system. The main concept behind these stacked jars is that of breaking hierarchies. These jars can be stacked in any order. They are interchangeable. The smallest jar can be the very bottom piece and hold all of the others' weight. The biggest jar does not speak for this series. Regardless of size, shape, weight or surface, every jar can be treated equally and every jar can do its job in any order or placement. In the first set, the diameters of the tops and bottoms of the jars vary in size and don't fit each other, whereas I tried to measure the tops and bottoms of the second set of jars so that the transition from one to another could be smooth. I made these two sets this way purposely: the first one shows my desire to break the hierarchical system and "our" culture. I wanted to emphasize the individuality of each jar. It does not matter whether the jars are stacked perfectly in size. They do their job without 'looking good'. The second set represents my desire to be harmonized into a new culture with a smooth transition.

After the 2015 trip to Korea, I noticed another type of self-confusion and chaos began to emerge – I thought I was Korean, but now I do not feel I belong there anymore. However, I am not Canadian yet and possibly never will be. I am trying to be a ceramic artist here in Canada, but I appreciate the techniques and skills I gained in Korea and those are deeply rooted in my work. This is who I am. I do not need to be looking for a group of people I can join. Maybe there

isn't any I fit into, at least here in Winnipeg, Canada. This means I can be totally free because there are no set rules or customs.



Instead of applying inlay or carving in a traditional manner, which is supposed to be done in a highly controlled and meticulous way on the surface of the pot, the slip was applied 'freely'. I did not know where and how the slip would land.

White slip splashed on dark clay body,
in studio at University of Manitoba, 2015



Now that I am away from my country of origin, I can be free from all of the obligations and responsibilities I had to carry. Instead of throwing pots with the meticulous care that I had been taught, I threw pots and squeezed them or dropped them. I poured slip on top of the mural that held some of the traditional pots in place. I carefully carved traditional patterns onto a teapot and then splashed slip on top of it, covering that intricate pattern and almost completely obstructing it from view. There is little evidence that a beautifully carved-pattern existed there. I see this as a defiant form of expression – I allowed myself to be free from tradition.

Grace Han, *Mural: Scholar's Dignity*, 2015,
164 x 108 x 9 cm

Between Two Languages: Korean and English

Two languages, Two personalities?

...the most important skill for entering deeply into another culture is fluency in the appropriate language(s)... Fluency in a common language provides a potential means to a shared identity (Seelye and Wasilewski 47-48).

When speaking Korean, I am more assertive and direct. When speaking English, I am quieter and try not to draw people's attention. For the most part, I am a quiet person in Canada.

Do bilinguals have two personalities? This intriguing issue is controversial in the fields of personality and social psychology, since research testing language effects on personality has been scarce and equivocal. On one hand, personality has long been conceptualized as stable over time and consistent across situations (e.g., Byrne & Kelly, 1981; Pervin, 1980). From this perspective, language is not a contextual factor that could shift a bilingual's personality, but merely a tool that permits the expression of underlying traits. On the other hand, studies on cultural priming have documented language effects on values, self-concept, relationality, and cognition (Oyserman & Lee, 2008), but only a few published studies directly address the issue of whether bilinguals exhibit cross-language differences in personality (Chen1 and Bond 1514).



Stacked Jars and Path

While the large jars show one side of myself – bold, rough, tough, dark, and huge – the floor pieces show the other side of me – soft, smooth, elegant, bright, and tiny.

I used to basically say yes to everything and to everyone in English. When someone asked me a question, I would immediately end the conversation with saying “yes”. If I wanted to say “no” or “but...”, then I had to “work” to come up with some sentences to explain why. Hence, I became a “yes-man.”

Kierkegaard described several levels of despair:

...Real desperation arises, he suggested, with growing self-awareness, and the deeper levels of despair stem from an acute consciousness of the self, coupled with a profound dislike of it. When something goes wrong, such as failing an exam to qualify as a doctor, a person may seem to be despairing over something that has been lost. But on closer inspection, according to Kierkegaard, it becomes obvious that the man is not really despairing of the thing (failing an exam) but of himself. The self that failed to achieve a goal has become intolerable. The man wanted to become a different self (a doctor), but he is now stuck with a failed self and in despair (Collin 27).

After some time, I realized that it is not just about making language mistakes. I was associating those mistakes with my sense of ‘self’. ‘I’ failed to communicate. ‘I’ failed to confront. It was not the situation but ‘me’.

The despair and fear grew inside me so much so that I started to avoid situations that required me to speak. One of the ways I found easy was saying “yes” or nodding. Once I did either of those, I did not even need to try to talk or explain because I had already agreed with the person. The conversation could end without any expansion. No talk, no expression, and hence (as a result) no conflict – which made me feel even smaller. I then started to feel that I was losing my true self. “Was I always this quiet?”

When I visited Korea a few times, my friends mentioned that I was speaking really fast (in Korean) interchanging with some English vocabulary here and there and using my body a lot. Then I saw myself moving my hands a lot when I was explaining something, as if I was using some sort of sign language.

Not only did moving to another country and speaking a second language change my way of expressing myself in English, but it also shook-up how I spoke in my first/home language. I started speaking more softly and more gently in Korean. My family also noticed that I was speaking differently and that I had become quieter. I also had to pause sometimes to find the right word in my first language. When we disagreed, I softly tried to communicate with them instead of arguing. And the biggest change is that I have become passive in both Korean and English – a “yes-man” in both languages.

I strongly feel that speaking two languages can change a person’s character. At the beginning, I felt I was split – one version of Grace Han here in Canada and the other version of her miles away in Korea. Five years later, my two selves seem to have begun to blend into each other. My installation called *Path* represents the gradual merging of two paths, two identities.



Grace Han, *Gate*, 2016, porcelain,
740 (length of installation) x 350 (width of installation) x 1 (height of individual nut) cm

Two distinct paths begin to move closer together.

Process and Resilience

I keep going forward.

All of these struggles – trying to learn how to express myself as a traditionally trained ceramic artist, trying to allow myself to be free as a person who came from a country where the hierarchy is strictly set, knowing my place and where I fit in each group, and experiencing language barriers that block me from expressing things in the right way – take up space within myself. These things need to get out periodically so that I am not trapped or stuck with all the questions in my mind. (*How* can I be myself? *Where* is my true self? *How* do I express this emotion?) These questions keep coming back, so I find that I need to make some room for them. Otherwise, the inside space will be packed tight and might eventually explode. How do I make this room? Enter *process*.

What I have noticed recently is that I *stress out my body to release stress from my body*. When I work on large-scale pieces, they require a great deal of physical exertion that sometimes makes breathing difficult (I believe that this is why I use an Onggi wheel that has no electric power, but spins with only human power and involvement). During the process of working, I sometimes experience frustration with the gravity that I continually have to fight against and I tend to capture that emotion in the work. I sometimes feel discouraged that I am not able to verbally articulate what I am doing. Then I start wedging a bag of clay – which is about 10 kg – and try to throw a large piece from that clay. Again, it is difficult to breathe. All of these processes and activities release negative feelings from deep inside myself and help create room and space again for me to breathe and take air in. I cannot capture this emotion and hold onto it because it is invisible – an untouchable sentiment that cannot be described by language, but that is exhumed by effort. However, when the work is fired, there is a language between the work and myself which I am able to understand, and which I have captured and frozen permanently. Artist

Alexandra Engelfriet⁶ supports my idea: “This rich physical and spiritual experience with raw matter I now bring to the medium of ceramics. Through the process of firing, my work has become lasting. The mouldable hardens into stone in which the act, movement, remains visible.”

Once the pieces are fired, I can remember this emotional moment by looking at the pot. All is recorded within that piece. It is like watching myself growing as an artist and as a human being. When I look at the work, I am not looking at the piece itself but me - myself wedging clay on the floor or throwing a big lump of clay. I can remember the emotion I was feeling at that moment. I might not be able to remember why exactly I was suffering or what I was struggling with, but I can vividly recall reaching the physical limits - having a hard time breathing, completely drained physically, body sitting on the floor with messy hair stuck to my face with sweat, or holding my breath as I make a tall cylinder straight-up, or paddling a large jar and making the noise of slapping for hours. All of these experiences give me permission to keep going.

“Why am I here? How did I end up being here making these? What am I doing this for? Is this the right thing for me to do? Just do it. Make yourself tired so that you don't think about it too much. Make yourself tired so that the fear can leave you alone.”

These physical activities – where I usually push myself to the limit – certainly make me feel fresh once they are finished. It is like my aching body is telling me that I did something difficult but worthwhile.

⁶ Alexandra Engelfriet: Alexandra Engelfriet was born in the Netherlands in 1959 and has received her training at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. She takes a special place in the ceramic field, as she has also been involved in fashion design, sculpture and land-art. It is only in recent years that she has become an artist working with clay, with a strong fascination and reference to nature. (<http://www.pulsceramics.com/exhibitions/alexandra-engelfriet-2007/>) Her work is enormously involved with her body movement.



Grace Han throwing a large pot, in studio at University of Manitoba, 2016

When I make large-sized pots, it requires a tremendous amount of physical exertion, especially from someone small like myself. In order to work on such a large scale, I have to force myself to use all of my strength. I need my hands to throw large pots but one elbow needs to rest on my knees to give me more leverage and more strength. My knees must rest on stable furniture to allow me to support my arms without slipping. My stomach also supports the other elbow and one leg has to be on the floor for stability. My eyes, of course, need to be looking at the pot to examine what I am doing. I often hold my breath to keep the pot centered. I can sometimes see my arms stumbling, but I must reach from the bottom to top. I must not stop. My entire body – arms, hands, legs, eyes, brain etc- need to focus on what they are doing in order to make this gigantic pot. It is physically and mentally exhausting, but this process somehow creates room or space inside of me.

I watched the video that shows Alexandra Engelfriet's work and process very clearly (Alexandra Engelfriet, *Tranchée*, oeuvre en cours de réalisation, VdF 2013 © Estelle Chrétien).

In this video, Engelfriet digs deep into the ground creating a path. Then she brings brick-shaped clay and throws it into the two walls of the dugout site. Then she kneads the clay with her hand, knees, and feet. She basically uses her whole body. She even climbs on the clay wall and kicks the wall at random points. She sprinkles water once in a while and then goes back to the

kneading process. Her body is a whole mass with the wet clay and she appears to become part of the work itself. I cannot even guess at how much clay was used for this project, how much time she had to spend on the site, and how much of this severe physical involvement she endured. Then finally, she built the kiln around the work she created and fired for a week. I was extremely fascinated watching this immense project. In her blog, *Synkroniciti*, Katherine McDaniel describes Engelfriet as follows:

Alexandra Engelfriet is a sculptor and performance artist who works with earth and water, kneading and shaping mud, clay, sand, even snow, with her body. Her works include large-scale environmental projects as well as smaller ceramic works. The flows, ripples, and shapes she creates are spontaneous interactions between herself and the material being manipulated. Her focus is on the process, and whatever remains after the process serves as a remembrance and a celebration rather than a product.

Sometimes I fail. Large pots crack. Pieces do not come out of the kiln the way I expected. Before, I used to be very upset whenever I ‘failed’. Everything I made was so precious. These days I take everything that does not turn out well as a ‘happy accident.’ First of all, I learn a great deal from those mistakes. When everything turns out well, it means I did not try something new or that I was staying in my comfort zone. But more important than learning from mistakes is that I see failure as ‘*freedom*’. I am allowed to fail. I should feel free to make it again. I have the freedom to explore - what can I make this into? Maybe I could make something totally new.

As the physical involvement in the creation of a large work is important in creating space within my mind and allowing me to breathe, making small units also plays an important role in my process. I make large pots to release negative energy and I want to fill the space with thoughts occurring at that moment.



All of my negative emotions at that moment come out. I applied this slip when I was very upset. The slip application was completely spontaneous and not planned, but the frustration had been building up for a long time and I finally let go of it by performing this destructive activity.

Grace Han splashing white slip on a large pot,
in studio at University of Manitoba, 2015



Sometimes I encounter a barrier that comes from a new work or project. When that happens, I sit at the work table in my studio and take several moulds of the nut unit and I start producing them over and over again. I can make hundreds in one sitting without leaving the stool. I put myself in a place where I can totally focus on myself and my work. My hands are busy with making these units, but that is only what my hands are doing. There is a huge mess somewhere in me and by doing this activity, I can clean that mess up and arrange things into place.

Grace Han, *Path*, 2016, porcelain, size varies

Once I feel recharged, I find a bag of clay and start wedging it. Then I return to the large-scale work. Maintaining this balance between the two extreme scales of work and finding the right time to work on each is crucial. Periods of having negative emotions, the timing to get it out, digesting calmly, and recharging myself all happens in this process of creation. And by creating and making in this way, I can step forward and become ready for new projects.

Conclusion

Five years ago, everything was new to me in Canada. I was not aware that living in a new society was about more than just switching from one language to another, but the way of thinking and behaving should change too.

Two years ago, when I started the MFA program at the University of Manitoba, everything was overwhelming and I had to change the way I was thinking about creating art and viewing art. As a ceramic artist traditionally trained in Korea, although I had the skills and techniques, I felt like I had to restart all over again because I needed to focus on myself as an individual.

Through this experience, while adapting to a new culture, language, and atmosphere, I started communicating with myself through my work with clay. Depending on my emotional mood or struggles, I work on a large scale to take the negative energy out or I make very small units repeatedly as a healing and calming process. From all the years of working with clay in Canada, I realized that the process is very important for me – it forces me to keep moving forward because all the steps I take in order to complete a project, create room for me to take on the next and to delve further into asserting my individuality.

Thesis Exhibition:
Two Paths, Two Identities, One Individual







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