Sculpture: 
Exploration with Islamic Calligraphy

A Thesis

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by

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To my wife, son, daughter and both my parents.
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Introduction

Several years ago when I finished my studies in ceramics at the Mara Institute of Technology, Malaysia (MIT), I had an opportunity to evaluate myself as an artist in terms of the way I make art. My conclusion at that time was very disappointing. I could not find personal identity in my work because I was trying to produce art dictated by the instructors. Without exploring the possibilities of medium and technique, I tried to produce works that were technically proficient and that were made in such a manner that I could escape from criticisms of the instructors. I realized that I missed all of the excitement that could be experienced through experimentation. In order to improve my art work, I decided to be a bit more ambitious and to seek a way to establish my own identity. With this motivation and objective in mind I decided to develop my understanding and knowledge about art through study abroad. Fortunately, I received a scholarship to pursue my studies.

In 1985, I attended the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston (MCA). Students from all over the world gathered together
to experience the arts. As students, we learned to appreciate the arts as an important part of our lives. The MCA instructors were practicing artists who shared with us their own philosophies and individual ways of working. That early exposure to the working artist taught me to think independently. Creativity was always stressed over traditional technique. Students were encouraged to explore any media or technique which suited their needs, in hopes of establishing a personal identity. Critiques became a routine format for students to get feedback from both students and instructors. At MCA, I learned to believe in my ideas and intuitions and to carry them out spontaneously. In 1988, I brought these beliefs to the Ohio State University, where I pursued graduate studies.

At OSU my work has gone through major changes, not only in terms of ideas but also in process and materials. I began exploring a wide variety of forms using mixed media and various forming techniques while seeking a tactile medium which I could use to express my ideas. Gradually, my ceramics and mixed media works developed into my current use of paper pulp on wire mesh and welded steel armatures. My large scale organic, architectonic sculptures are inspired by nature; either through direct observations and/or viewing books and magazines. Recently, I
have been exploring the gesture of the Islamic calligraphic mark. I am impressed by the writing and decorative elements found within Islamic architecture and manuscript, and decided to integrate some of those characters into my sculptures. This series of work became an important part of the search for a personal identity.

This thesis is an explanation of my work: my philosophy as an artist and the process of discovering new form in my sculpture. Another element critical to my art is the calligraphic quality of Islamic language and its integration into my work. I hope this writing about my creative process will provide me, as well as the viewer, with a better understanding of my work.
Philosophy as an artist

My ideas and philosophies stem from my background at MIT and MCA. I am not a precise planner, but rather I trust my sense of design, texture and color when beginning a piece. I work from a vague idea inspired from previous pieces and by looking at things around me; nature and/or man made objects. I have a general idea of the piece in my mind, or on paper which I allow to change and be recreated as I work.

Experimentation with media and technique are creative processes to develop ideas. Some media and technique are new to me. Series of tests are conducted to invent a new body of work. This process is challenging in that it requires discipline and patience. But are most enjoyable when the test results surprise me. They offer a wide variety of interesting, and often unexpected results. This flexible procedure became part of my creative process to discover my own images, and my way of making them.
Discovering new forms

My sculptures evolved around the technique and the process of creating. Exploring technical possibilities allowed me to research my own way of working and therefore discover personal images. The following paragraphs are an explanation of creative processes involved in the creation of my sculptures.

Intuitively, I realized that wire mesh would be an important medium for me to investigate and which would assist me to invent new forms. I begin making a basic shape by folding the wire mesh. Once I am satisfied with the general shape, I cut and twist the shape before it is firmly tied together. Formally, I often prefer shapes that have small bases and wide, open tops. I use half inch wire mesh to form the shape because the material is flexible, yet sturdy. It moves easily and is able to serve as an underlying structure. The wire mesh form is then suspended or seated for completion the process.
In my early sculptures, I used a mixture of thick clay slip and other materials to cover the shape. Clay slip was thoroughly mixed with some portion of sand, vermiculite, fiber and paper pulp to offer a wide variety of surfaces, often rough and rock-like. At the same time these additions reduced the shrinkage rate of the clay slip. Using my hands, the clay mixture was pushed and patted over the wire shape, layer by layer to attain certain coverage to the form. To enhance the formal quality of the sculpture, additional shapes were added to the existing form. I continued working on the texture by painting glazes and/or oxide stains, as well as sandblasting to get a unified and rugged surface.

I enjoy working with clay on wire mesh because it is a challenge for me to work with materials of distinct qualities. Technically, clay and steel often do not compromise because of their natural qualities. However, through the ability to control their properties, I managed to make them technically work together and have succeeded in taking advantage of the result. Unfortunately, working with clay restricts me to a certain scale. I decided to push my creative process by making larger pieces and by working with a material which offered immediate results. Fortunately, I discovered that paper mache or pulp suited these qualities and
most importantly has a similar surface texture to clay.

Recently, I learned to weld steel. This technique allowed me to make larger pieces while altering my process. I began my work by bending and welding steel rod to create a general shape and to provide structure to my sculpture. Sheets of wire mesh were tied to the steel armature to give more detail to the form. Colored paper pulp was placed over the armature as a 'skin'. As in the clay sculpture, more detail was applied through additional textures and colors, to enhance particular feelings in the sculpture.

Working with a variety of media and processes has enabled me to come up with different feelings or moods in the sculptures. Clay and paper pulp have similar textural qualities, yet the toughness and strength of the clay creates a feeling of perpetuity and stability. Using paper pulp allows me to work on large scale, unlike clay, while offering a monumental, mythical quality.
Sculpture of Calligraphic Element

Study of Islamic calligraphy has influenced my inner consciousness and is manifested in my sculpture. It has resulted in a stronger understanding of form, configurations, arrangements and structure. The natural flow of movement is as important an element in the Islamic calligraphic character as it is in the making of my art work.

Formally, Islamic calligraphy presents a rhythmic flow of curvilinear line and shape which requires a concern for stroke order. Another aspect is the balance of composition; the characters need to be visually balanced to create a harmonious composition. There is also a great consideration of the positive and negative space in the composition.

Many of my sculptures, if not all, integrate these qualities. Rather intensively, I try to extend the possibility of the surface, in conjunction with form. Experimentation with color and applied
texture continue to enhance the relationship between form and surface. I have selected visually organic textures whose essence is found in nature.

The arrangement of the sculpture is actively explored by positioning a series of separate forms to find more articulate, off balance, and dynamic, spacial compositions.

Culturally, unlike Islamic calligraphy often is of phrases taken from the Koran (holy book of Islam). My work has no literal meaning nor is it taken from any religious book.

In my sculpture I try to deal with confrontive scale to create monumental sensations in the viewer. In some pieces there is also a defiance of weight in the suspension of a sculpture. The question arises as to how one perceives space and the interrelationship of the piece to the floor, wall and ceiling. Unconsciously, all of these feelings and thoughts have become important to my sculpture.
Conclusion

Exploring various materials has provided me with a broader technical knowledge, increased my sensitivity to the characteristics of the materials, and help me adapt to unfamiliar materials and processes. As a result I feel I have increased my aesthetic sensitivity, extended my self-awareness, and have continued growing.

I also learned that exploration and experimentation can be a major source of ideas and inspiration. This concept can be evolved by “fooling around.” I find experimenting with ideas, techniques, and media is one of the most amazing and productive aspects of the creative process.

Islamic calligraphic characters have offered me a wide vocabulary of imagery in my work which is important in discovering my personal development. My studies have given me substantial amounts of aesthetic information for the continuation of work upon returning to my country. There the environment is
full of these elements that have inspired me and which will be further explored. I want to share the experience and knowledge gained here with my professional colleagues and students when I return to Malaysia.