THE WHEEL OF REBIRTH

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree Master of Fine Arts in the

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By

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"The Wheel of Rebirth" is something that gives me an opportunity to take pictures with a reasonable approach that deals with religion and philosophy. As a photographer and human being I intend to explore this concept. It mostly originates from religions, which are based on different ethnic groups and various interpretations. However, I would like to communicate my own interpretation of this cycle through photographic imaging.
TO MY FAMILY
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I deeply appreciate the members of my committee: Tony Mendoza, Arline Nelson, and Mary Jo Bole for their support and insights.
VITA

July 16, 1968.......................................................... Born - Dae-Gu, KOREA


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field:  Art

    Studies in Photography
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Plates</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Photography</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Material Processes</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Karma</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reincarnation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Transmigration</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. FISH 1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. FISH 2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. FISH 3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. MASK 1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. MASK 2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. MASK 3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. SCULL 1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. SCULL 2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The Wheel of Rebirth is a term, which describes the Buddhist beliefs of Karma, Reincarnation, and Transmigration. I explored this concept, using photographic images, in my MFA thesis photography show.

This thesis consists of five sections: Photography, Material Processes, Karma, Reincarnation, and Transmigration. The first and second sections contain my personal perception of photographic reproduction and the material processes used to create the final pieces. The following sections contain the primary concepts of "the Wheel of Rebirth" and each of them is composed of two parts: interpretation and methods. Each part explains how I visualized these subjects with photography and contains a description of these complex terms: Karma, Reincarnation, and Transmigration.
1. PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography is the way for me to communicate ideas and concepts through a visual and physical medium. I am attracted to its mechanical methods; how it is less time consuming to finish a work as compared to other art forms such as painting and sculpture. Finally, recent digital technology has made photography simpler to process and manipulate images.

To create photographic images I need to follow precise technical procedures such as: correct exposure, developing time, temperature, and printing time. Pre-visualization before clicking a shutter is quite an exciting moment, especially in black and white photography, my primary medium. It is necessary to pre-visualize with black and white the tonalities of the objects that will be on the final photographic print. Before clicking the shutter, I am color-blind. I can only see gray scale. In the darkroom, I love to view images which ambiguously emerge off the paper. Getting the instant results satisfies my impatience.

Some art mediums, such as painting, make it possible to create art pieces solely with the artist's imagination. On the other hand, photography requires actual objects to record onto film. The process of taking the pictures makes time and space stop. In other words, transferring a specific moment in three dimensions from the real world into a two-dimensional piece of paper is not merely a document but also a special moment.

I frequently ask these questions to myself; what do I think of photography and
what do I want from the images that I make? This cannot be easily answered. I think I attempt to discover my identity in this world through the procedure of photographing objects.
2. MATERIAL PROCESSES

The photographic procedures are the following: finding images that I want to capture, choosing appropriate angles, and finally printing out the images on papers or fabrics. In the past, I printed images on fiber-base photographic papers or resin-coated papers. For this project, however, I felt a need to get rid of the reflection from the surface of the paper. Instantly I noticed more depth in the images. My choice for using fabric is the works had these reasons: little reflectivity, stretchable, and variable sizing. I believe that traditional photographic papers are too restrictive in their limitations when it comes size, flexibility and reflection as compared to fabrics.

Another reason to use fabric was to hang the pieces and I followed two styles for the final presentation. The first was tiling, a computer method for subdividing an image into many parts and the second was a traditional Chinese style hanger. In the case of the tiling style, the advantage was no size limitation. The images to be processed can be subdivided infinitely into smaller pieces and reassembled like a puzzle to create a larger unified image. The traditional Chinese style hanger utilized two long wooden bars to tighten the image on the fabric as well as to prevent wrinkles in the cloth. Presenting the works in both styles required time, money, and effort; however, I believe it was worth it to display my images elegantly and precisely.

The processing of the images is simple but needs discipline. I scanned all the images that I intended to produce into a computer for retouching and resizing. I printed
out through an ink jet printer using transfer paper instead of regular ink-jet paper. Then I
folded the printed transfer paper onto a fabric piece, and ironed each one onto the fabric.
Depending on types of fabric and temperatures of ironing, the results were varied.
Although the basic idea comes from a T-shirt that has a silk-screened image, I have
obtained better quality than what I had expected with this method.
3. KARMA

If karma is defined as cause and effect, then it is an inherent trait in all humans. My interpretation of cause and effect is retribution or reward for one’s actions. Karma can be described as the collective aura of a person. One can have bad Karma, or good Karma, and it can be seen as the reward or punishment of a prior life or one’s current existence. I believe that a moral person can evaluate what is wrong and what is right which means that humans are capable of gaining the reward or receiving the punishment.

The term karma is used commonly in the mainstream English language. It is not an original English word but a borrowed one. As a Sanskrit term, the meaning of karma is an activity or deed. A universal English dictionary defines karma as the force generated by a person’s actions held, in Hinduism and Buddhism to perpetuate transmigration and in its ethical consequences to determine the nature of that person’s next existence.

Karma and reincarnation are the pillars of Hindu philosophy and belief. The Hindu culture and its belief in reincarnation and the application of karmic law can be traced back thousands of years. The deeper meaning and the many aspects of the term karma will always be a mystery to many of us. However, if we understand the terms of cause and effect, we should logically be able to lead a balanced life. There is no necessity to turn toward the Eastern philosophies for direction and information about karma as the concepts are found in many cultures and religions. You do not need to be a follower of any spee-
ic creed, dogma, or way of life, nor do you need to believe in a supreme being to be able to understand the principles of cause and effect within the Wheel of Rebirth.
METHOD

I created three photographs representing my interpretations of Karma. Each of the photographs has fish within a white plastic container with a palm print of nine underneath. The images appear to show my hands holding the fish in their container.(Plate 1,2,3)

My intention is to portray stagnation - not following a current or stream - not advancing or developing - motionless, timeless. The state of stagnation is a perfect balance. In the photographs of the fish, I attempt to capture a moment of perfect balance. On the surface, it is an image of a dead fish, but the inner and deeper interpretation of these images in my mind represent cause and effect toward Karma.

This is a very personal interpretation because the photographs can hold many connotations. But the photographs themselves follow a simple arrangement, are evocative, and allow viewers to determine different personal interpretations.
4. REINCARNATION

When I see a stranger from far away, I cannot make out his or her specific features. I often have a tendency to guess what his or her face looks like, what their personality is, their physical strength, age, and occupation. It takes just a few seconds to watch and make a quick judgment. What a short period time for investigating human beings! I understand that I can make miscalculations without actual interaction with the people, such as having conversations and sharing information. Of course, I often ask myself why I am doing this and for what reason? Am I scared of the stranger? Do I instinctively protect myself?

Fortunately, taking pictures makes me think about my thoughts, my inspirations, and other subjects that make me think about what it means to be human. I express my personality through photography.

The focus of this project is how I relate with other living things. I intend to mention the term, reincarnation (rebirth) that was presented in the introduction. In fact the definition of reincarnation (rebirth) in a dictionary is the following: "The state of being reincarnated or rebirth in new bodies or forms of life. For example: a rebirth of a soul in a new human body and a fresh embodiment".

9
METHOD

I photographed three "Hahoe" masks (Plate 4, 5, 6) for the different approaches of reincarnation. "The "Hahoe" Mask has been used in the pyolsin dance drama, which is performed as a formal prayer ceremony to bring peace to the village. These masks represent spiritual characteristics from a religious point of view, and also have an artistic aspect as well. They are the oldest masks in Korea and are made with narrow eyes, a raised-up nose and a calm expression in the deeply set eyes. The masks were made to have the expressions of a dancer. The slightly opened eyes and half-open mouth give the face a muscular but harmonized expression. By bowing the heads, the masks take on a sad and pessimistic expression but by raising them, they appear to change into a gay and smiling expression. The viewer sees the expression in response to his own angle of view and inner feelings. The masks can simultaneously show human feelings of joy, anger, love, and pleasure. The chin piece moves independently, causing various changes in expression. It is remarkable that such a fixed objects, such as these can be made to show such a wide range and variety of emotions." (Nara 1997)

My first impression about the masks was humorous and foolish. I hung the three masks on the wall and tried to become familiar with them. The size of the each mask was about three inches tall and two inches wide. I barely saw them from three or four yards back without my glasses. The blurred masks gave me the idea of reincarnation because they looked as if they were changing or reincarnating. I felt the actual moment of their evolution. I also feel that at the time of rebirth we will not know what form will be taken.
I imagined vague and ambiguous objects coming together from unknown places. With this I further imagined the blurred masks reforming themselves at the end of the reincarnation process. The resulting images are different because the masks have various characteristics as humans have various paths.
5. TRANSMIGRATION

Transmigration is a transitional movement as well as the last action of "the Wheel of Rebirth". My interpretation of this concept is the journey from one state of existence to another or the journey from one body or being to another. A common belief in many cultures is that a soul passes from one body to another, be it human, animal, or inanimate.

I believe that there are many examples of transmigration within religions and cultures. For instance, some Indonesian people hold that ancestral souls reside in sacred animals. In Australia, aborigines believe that an infant is a reincarnation of their deceased ancestors and that the soul is continually reborn in preparation for a new incarnation. Similarly, several tribes in the western Amazon avoid eating certain animals such as deer, because they believe ancestral souls have entered the animals' bodies.

Like these examples, the process of transmigration is variable depending on beliefs and ethnicity. Analogically, each new existence comes from previous existences. In other words, souls endlessly circulate in unlimited domains. If the souls are considered as spiritual energies, they can be applied to the principle of the conservation of energy. I imagine all the souls can be mixed together until the time of transmigration. I perceive myself as a coming together of other beings.
METHOD

Transmigration is composed of two photographs in this project. In one, I arranged a skeleton, an avocado, a horn and a piece of wisteria with a black wrinkled background. The wisteria surrounds all of the props except some part of background. The skeleton is biting the avocado with its mouth faced to the horn, which is positioned on the right side of the frame. The skeleton, the avocado, and the horn, each represents human, plant and animal. The wisteria stands for the realm of transmigration.(Plate 7)

Another photograph shows a baby sculpture holding up a skeleton’s head and shoulders minus the arms. A wheel is leaned against this sculpture and a male sculpture is located just behind the wheel. One third of the frame fades out and a semi-transparent image is at the right side. The baby sculpture represents new life and the skeleton speaks for previous lives. The male sculpture is used as an observer in the present tense, maybe myself. This photograph describes the final procedure for rebirth.(Plate 8)
CONCLUSION

I have had many difficulties since I decided to take on this project. "The Wheel of Rebirth", the subject of my thesis project, represent reincarnation, karma, and transmigration. They are difficult concepts to explain verbally and literally regardless of language and cultural background. Personally, it has taken me much time discipline and training to understand the terms.

As I mentioned in the introduction, there are many ways of interpretation and explanations in the concepts of "the Wheel of Rebirth". My Korean background has influenced this project though I tried not to focus on any ethnic groups or religious affiliations.

I believe that "the Wheel of Rebirth" has systematic steps, such as Reincarnation, Karma, and Transmigration. "The Wheel of Rebirth" has neither beginning, nor end, as it is a continuous cycle. I have explored the three concepts of "the Wheel of Rebirth" by focusing on the three "Ishno" masks to deal with Reincarnation, three fish to deal with the term of Karma, and two skeletons to deal with Transmigration. Through these procedures, I have attempted to define and interpret the term "the Wheel of Rebirth."

My interpretations and concepts in the project can be a key for others to explore their own cycle. As for me, I have considered it a significant opportunity to project my identity as well as to inspect my ego by pursuing photography.
PLATE 6

MASK 3 50" x 40"

20
BIBLIOGRAPHY