The Quiet Body

Thesis

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Abstract

“I want to look at how sculpture is physical and how the physical makes psychological impact. Viewers have conscious and unconscious visceral response to objects that they feel in their own bodies and that make psychological meaning” — Rona Pondick

“Feeling is an objective realm, perceivable through the region of the heart. All art embodies feeling, but few authors, critics, or historians know how to speak of it, and fewer realize that feeling can be path of spiritual initiatory practice”

— Robert Sardello, Ph D

I am interested in looking at the subtle and spiritual side of humanity. The body is both external and internal, we experience changes in mind and emotion with our body. The body as a subject can be a form through which we share our emotional experiences and remembrances. I try to capture inner psychological aspects through surreal facial expressions, subtle gestures and placement. The complexity and ambiguity of human feelings that come from the vulnerability and imperfection is a main idea of my work. I always attempt to investigate different narrative aspects of the figure and displays so as not to represent on a singular moment but to make space for a mysterious and changeable reading. Using subtle variations in form, texture and color the physical representation of an emotional state becomes changeable. My work consists of different sizes of figures
and objects that interact with each other, creating connections and relationships, bringing new stories to the space. Complicated emotional interactions occur in human relationship. Nonverbal emotional cues, such as eye contact, facial expression, body posture, and interpersonal distance; these things speak broadly about the tangled thinking and feeling that occurs when we interact with other people. I'm interested in putting these ideas into physical forms by emphasizing them through placement and tactile manipulation.
Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my God who gave me the strength and patience to complete this study, to my beloved family for their love and support.
Vita

2004..................................................Gang-dong High

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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Chapter 1: Body: Physical and Spiritual

The figure is both aesthetic and narrative, signifying the ideal form in art, expressing emotional and theatrical sentiment through the physical expression of the body. Often the figure is used to express cultural, historical and social issues; I am interested in looking at a side of humanity that is subtle and spiritual. Each emotional quality that I want to capture often begins with an internal thought. I create figures that come from the surroundings I find myself in. Sometimes I create images by asking questions of myself as I reflect on past experiences. My feelings are seldom clear and often complicated and I’m interested in capturing these multifaceted and ambiguous moments. My figures are my way of concentrating and compressing my endless questioning of the world and myself. I take photos of people that are important to me and use them as references for my work. Body fragments, gestures, colors, and textures each convey emotions and contain stories in time and space. My work is like poetry and like a poem, my work's meaning is not always clear. Many things may be implied in different ways.

In my work I create ambiguous and subtle emotional cues through small gestures and facial expressions that capture a psychological aspect of our daily encounters. This complexity and ambiguity comes from the vulnerability of the human psyche with all its imperfections. I’m interested in putting these ideas into physical forms by emphasizing them through placement and tactile manipulation. They are a way of wordlessly,
absorbing stories from intricate emotions. I look at the body in a way that is both external and internal. I grew up in a Christian environment where my family encouraged and inspired me to develop my mind and spirit. I realize that most religious practices require internal reexamination. My work explores the difficulty of transcending emotional conflict and connecting to a spiritual existence. Based on this notion, my works fullness shows the separation between external and internal as a psychological experience. Humans feel many different types of desire. We always want to fulfill our physical needs; we want to have delicious food and a better house and clothes. These physical desires are easily recognizable and easy to fulfill. We also have mental, emotional and spiritual needs. These psychological and spiritual desires are more complex and hard to satisfy. The figure, Fullness (see figure 1), shows both types of desires.

Figure 1. Fullness
Chapter 2: Gestures, Facial Expressions and Symbols

This figure is holding out its hands with a thoughtful expression. The subtle holding gesture shows a sort of material desire but it has many different implications. It may imply the desire to have something physically, or it may symbolize actually holding something. On the other hand, hands that hold nothing can also imply loss or absence. Hand gestures take meaning from their visual resemblance to physical actions but the intention may not always be clear. Body gesture, facial expression, and eye contact are silent means of communication. I am looking at the changeability of different forms of nonverbal communication. The ambiguous situation that my figures exist in evokes a wide range of emotions creating opportunity for viewers to interpret and participate in.

The figure *fullness* (see Figure 2) appears to be thinking something deeply or daydreaming, losing its focus. The face is a significant vehicle for expressing emotions and telling stories. Faces add emotional content and contribute sensory details. I notice the subtle changes in facial expressions as they respond to fleeting feelings. This includes the position of eyebrows, eyes, the gaze, shape of mouth, and the angle of the face. I believe the meaning of these movements is stable across cultures, unlike words and gestures. Words can’t express all emotions we have, but we can read a person’s emotion through their facial expressions, especially their eyes. However, like gestures, the faces are not always a clear representation of a single emotion and are thus open to interpretation. They provide a hint to a person’s deep inner self.
Figure 2. *Fullness* detail
Eyes are especially important to the expression of subtle feelings in nonverbal communication. The eyes decide the figure’s perspective within the space where the piece exists. They are essential for bringing a sense of curiosity and instability. My figures are often looking out of the corner of their eyes, creating chances to interact with the space or with other figures in an indirect way.

In the figure *fullness* (see Figure 1), a pair of hollow feet, open on top, rests at the very end of the box, far away from the figure. The idea of absence exists both in the hollowness of the feet and the empty hands held out, both asking to be filled with something. The placement of the upper body and feet brings a sense of distance between physical and psychological need. They are placed in a restricted space that is the top of a long and narrow box that projects from the wall. The feet are located at the end of the box farthest away from the wall suggesting a vulnerable and unstable emotional stage of human existence. I attempt to simplify the complexity of emotions by using symbolic meanings. Showing the inside of a figure as an open vessel shows an inner psychological aspect of human nature. The birthday hat on the figure in *fullness* (see Figure 2) is a symbol of physical needs. On one’s birthday everyone wants to receive gifts from other people. The small birthday hat on an adult figure also evokes memories of childhood indicating no matter how old one grows; there is always the material desire to have something physical to commemorate one’s existence. I see skin as clothing as I simplify the body and develop subtle textures where skin is transformed into clothing. Similar to clothes that wear out as time goes by, humans have a limited life span, and skin, as a part of the physical body is perishable and temporary. This idea continues in a different form.
of manipulation such as paper or cushions. It is another way to present the separation between the physical and the psychological human body. This process of simplifying and amplifying broad meaning allows my work to be both accessible and obscure.

Figure 3. Seek
Chapter 3: Displays

The figure *fullness* (see Figure 1) is situated near the wall on a long box protruding from the wall, which is supported by a pair of connected legs that look like a ladder. My displays often represent existing objects such as ladders, stools, and swings. These objects are altered and transformed into unfamiliar objects as a new setting for the figures. They are painted with limited palette of white and grey that blends in to the color of the wall and the shadow of the work. This minimalized refined environment functions as a theater set, which provides a controlled space contributing to the content. The pieces feel frozen in time and the gain controlled specific environment adds to this reading. My figures and displays have a surrealistic and poetic quality of the sort that happens in a Magritte’s painting. I always attempt to investigate different narrative aspects of the figure and displays so as not to represent on a singular moment but to make space for a more complex and changeable reading. When I read a poem, I like its ambiguity. Sentences are simple but not clear and the logic of a poem often relies on the meaning in between the words, rather than the words themselves. Rene Magritte juxtaposes object and images in an unusual context to question the visible world and the meaning of objects themselves. Unlike other Surrealist artists who use abstract shapes or images, Magritte’s work includes familiar objects placed in a surreal contextual situation. In my work, I take the shape of familiar objects and give them new meaning by rebuilding and displaying them with figures. The figure *seek* (see Figure 4) is placed on an over-extended tall stool.
I combined two normal stools into one, which is inconveniently too tall for humans. However, my diminutive size figure creates an unusual context. The reconstructed stool looks like a bridge or tower through the structural design of the legs. This evokes meaning between the original idea and the rebuilt form. In my piece seek, the stool loses its original function as a chair and creates a space for interaction with the figure. The green apple in Magritte’s painting the Son of Man (see Figure 3) is a familiar object but it is floating and largely obscures the man’s face. This obscure and unfamiliar situation makes viewers think about the interaction between apple and man, questioning the man’s hidden face and perspective rather than meaning of green apple itself. I’m interested in creating a connection and a narrative through placement of pieces like the Magritte’s painting.

Figure 4. The Son of Man, by Rene Magritte
In my work *silent* (see Figure 5), the figure is sitting on a swing and a golden funnel is placed next to the figure. The open cone shape of the funnel symbolizes an idea of sound, which is the subject of this piece. I have used this form because of the funnel’s similarity to an instrument like a trumpet. The funnel both looks like an instrument and is not an instrument; it cannot make sound, only amplify it. The figure is holding its ear in a gesture of listening or maybe blocking sound. The meaning in the piece comes from the placement of the figure and the object, creating an open narrative. The rebuilt swing that is an object represents shifts and changes as physical representation of an emotional state. The figure *silent*, which is suspended from ceiling, also shows interaction between figure and space. It represents a human who tends to be skeptical and doubtful in an isolated and unstable space that is swing. The gesture of blocking out its ears shows the idea of existence of sounds. Even though there is not any sound around figure, we simply understand the figure in this piece appears to be listening to something or communicating with someone. The viewer cannot hear the conversation; we can just see the gestures and responses. The eyes show curiosity and trepidation at the same time. Imagine, if we hear strange sounds of something that is not visible, like a ghost speaks inwardly, you want to know what it is but at the same time you are scared. On the other hand, the figure may not be hearing an actual sound but listening to the unconscious mind. The swing has wedge box shape and narrow top compared to a normal swing. This off-balance display can emphasize this vulnerability and the instability of human emotions.

In the figure *seek* (see Figure 4), the gap between the rungs of the stool gives a context of height. The small figure is looking up and glancing sideways, hugging its own body on
the tall stool. The figure appears to stare into the distance beyond us. All of these physical things, the tall stool, the small figure, the gesture of the body, the gazing off into space, all point to the emotion that I want to evoke, that of internal fear. I am working with two different types of fear, internal and external fear. External fear is caused by an outside source, such as a tornado or a mouse. Internal fear is associated with emotions caused by memories, and projections. In this way the same object can be both an external or internal fear. The outward gazing figure suggests an obscure space, or thought where the fear may come from. The fear is unknown, expansive, and shifting, enabling the viewers to project their own fears into the space.

Figure 5. Silent
I think a lot about the appropriate size for my work. The pieces in my thesis show were all smaller than human scale. The diminutive size of the figures makes the viewer seem dominant, and enhances the empathy we feel towards small things. The piece, *small works* (see Figure 6), which is composed of 13 figures with objects, is arranged on varying levels of boxes on the wall. The boxes have a consistent size and shape but only three of them are open boxes with holes on the side. The top of the boxes provide spaces where small figures can sit, inside the boxes are isolated and private spaces that look like a cross section of a house. Some figures are complete and some are just fragments of a body. Different sizes of figures interact with each other, creating connections and relationships, bringing new stories to the space. In the process of installing my small figures, I was inspired by the painting *Christ Carrying the Cross* (see Figure 7) by Hieronymus Bosch. The painting depicts Jesus carrying the cross surrounded by a
densely packed crowd of people. This flat and compact image of humorous and contorted faces of eighteen figures describes not a single moment of a historical event but eighteen portraits. Even though the size and the color of the face of Jesus don’t distinguish him from other figures, the facial expression and resignation that he shows in this painting contrasts sharply with his tormentors. The figures exist in the same space but are each consumed with their own concerns. I was interested in the way Bosch reduced the figures and compressed the space, making the figures all exist in a narrow plane. Each figure in the piece small work has different characteristics of humanity with their various facial expressions. They are composed of numerous shifting colors and forms evoking a Surrealistic atmosphere. Using subtle variations in form, texture and color the physical representation of an emotional state becomes changeable. I used the boxes to narrow and compress the space of the wall, and arranged the figures and objects in ways that allowed for missed glances and incomplete interactions.

Figure 7. Christ Carrying the Cross by Hieronymus Bosch
Chapter 4: One Body Two Heads: *Before sin* & *Romance*

The figures *Before sin* (see Figure 8) and *Romance* (see Figure 9) have a combined body while most of my other works have one body or fragments. While these two figures each have one body with two heads they represent different ideas; *Before sin* is about individual inner conflicts and *Romance* is about the emotional connection and separation that occurs between people. I was thinking about the complexity of emotional relationships, such as friends, dating, and marriage. This piece has two separate upper bodies but the lower body is joined. They appear to be leaning towards each other and their heads are connected. The connected form itself shows the two figures in an intimate relationship both physically and emotionally. I am questioning what makes an intimate relationship so complex. The gestures and facial expressions display the paradoxical disconnection and discrepancy that can happen in an “intimate relationship”. The figure holds two opposing ideas. The combined body and placement of heads evoke the sense of closeness but the heads are turned away. They do not seem completely aware of each other, showing ignorance and little bit of discomfort in their faces. They communicate with an ambiguous hand gesture that could represent taking or giving. The balloon shape of the larger body has an open pouch that contains the muted blue figure. The figure has wide-open legs with feet that point in different directions. This struggling pose of lower body contrasts with the calmness of the upper body. They are connected and disconnected through form, gesture, and facial expression. These opposing ideas that
exist in one figure imply how complicated an emotional relationship is. Emotions connect people to one another but also cause conflicts between people. Boundaries between partners can become blurry, and it is often unclear where one-person ends and another person begins. I’m interested in looking at this complicated emotional interaction through nonverbal emotional signals or cues, such as eye contact, facial expression, body posture, and interpersonal distance. I think these things speak broadly about our tangled thinking and feeling in a relationship. The connections and disconnections that happen in a relationship because of complex and changeable emotions between two people is the main idea of this work.

Figure 8. *Before sin*

Figure 9. *Romance*
Before sin speaks about another emotional conflict. This conflict is caused by two or more different emotions in a single person. The figure has two faces; one has an anxious and doubting face and the other one has a cunning face with a repulsive smile and contorted mouth. This piece comes from the story of Adam and Eve in which Eve was seduced by a snake and tempted Adam to sin. The figure, composed of two bodies appears to be different characters; Adam and Eve are combined in a way like conjoined twins. The doubting face shows hesitancy and indecision. This figure has a hand with fingers that gently fold towards the chest. This gesture is about questioning what is right and what is wrong also it gives the piece a slightly erotic quality. The other figure that is genderless but reads as male, has a repulsive face puts his arm behind his back. This hidden gesture may show that the figure is hiding something, or carrying out sly trick. The cunning face of this figure shows how we so easily rationalize our faults, desires, and expectations. On the other hand, the figure with the anxious face who is genderless but appears to be female is reflecting a passive and doubtful attitude toward sin. These different emotions and attitudes do not occur in sequence but happen simultaneously.

Various subtle and muted color changes that occur in the figures also lead viewers to read psychological shifts. The major colors are green like the body of a snake, red of anger, white of fear and they naturally blend in to one another. Stories about human fragilities, such as Bible stories, often become inspirations for my work. When I read a story in a book or hear story I often empathize strongly with the characters’ emotions and reflect on my own. These reflections are combined and merged in to my world where I exist with other people and surroundings.
Summation

I worked with disabled children for a long time in Korea. The feelings I shared with them enabled me to develop my work as I built figures that looked like them. The figures represent the complete single moment showing innocent and pureness of the children. I found I was most interested in capturing their emotions. After I moved to the United States, my work became more about myself. I felt like a stranger and even disabled in this new country as I struggled with a second language and cultural differences. Isolation and disconnection to the new community affected my work and materialized as self-awareness and self-reflection. Many barriers and obstacles to new relationships in a non-familiar environment enabled me to ask myself who I was and allowed me to question my existence through these new challenges. I photographed myself at moments when I held multiple emotions. When I thought about my family, the sadness of missing them and the happiness of remembering them occurred at the same time. This combination was reflected in my face, both happy and sad. My face was a little bit contorted between two feelings, with my eyes wet and red nose. The complex state of feelings resulted in physical changes. I attempted to capture the physical manifestation in the fleeting and ambiguous moment. Working alone with clay allowed me to observe my own emotions and thoughts that came to my mind. The slow process of building and refining the clay
figure by hand is a way of recollecting and assembling moments and feelings. These ideas are still the grounding for my present work.

My figures attempt to describe abstract and emotional inner states. Compression of space and the development of a narrative through the placement of figures and objects is an important part of my work. My figures are often contemplative and their thoughts are far away. I record physical reactions to emotions through color and surface changes. A blushed face, a red nose, and cracked surfaces on frowning faces appear and disappear.

My work explores human states that are subtle and multifaceted. I focus on inner psychological aspects of human beings through facial expressions, gestures, staging, and disfigurement. In my work, fragments of the body are often exaggerated and distorted in order to heighten physiological changes associated with internal emotions. Among the body fragments that I use, the face is a significant vehicle for bringing emotional quality to my sculpture. I use subtle color and surface changes through different materials to emphasize the complexity of human feelings. My figures are quiet and the emotional quality speaks through gestural subtlety and doubt. The psychological impact that they emanate is both intimate and powerful.
References


