

A ROOM

a moment of stillness

Graduate Thesis
Master of Fine Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

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I would like to say *Thank you* to all the people who helped me,
especially my fiancée Junichiro Baba who always supports me,
also my Thesis Board Jeff Weiss, Angela Kelly, Allen Vogel,
and my father and mother.

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Introduction

Every visual art work I create is born from my nature and experiences. Without experiences, it cannot become a reality.

NATURE - EXPERIENCE -NATURE - VISUALIZE - FORM

Therefore, the “language” and “words” I will write in this paper are different from what are seen and experienced from my images. They did not come side by side. The “words” came as a result of completing my visual work. These words are an exploration of that achievement. The quotations which are interspersed between my words reflect my thoughts and support my ideas.

The thesis exhibit *A Room* is an achievement of “light” and “space” of my previous work. This exhibition is considered the first of a series I am ambitious to work on.

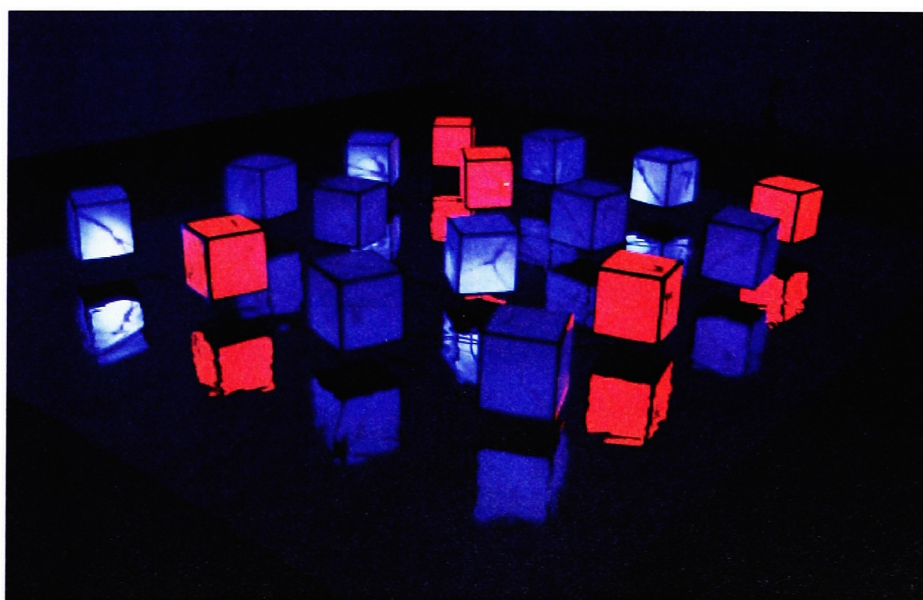
While reviewing my creative art work and doing research in my MFA, my direction has changed. My understanding of beauty used to be controlled by my perception of the male gaze and family discipline. I was an artist who considered myself a feminist. I was both attracted by desire and yet in denial of it. I had a “hard box” trapping desire but protecting me at the same time. I was struggling to be outside of the control of the box.



Untitled (shoes)

However, through expressing myself in visual art, and comparing other feminist artists and myself with their issues and subject matter, I started to criticize the theme itself for being victims. At this Post modern condition, some artists are approaching their visual art work by considering their particular audiences, both politically and socially. However, in my case, I prefer not to choose any particular type of audience.

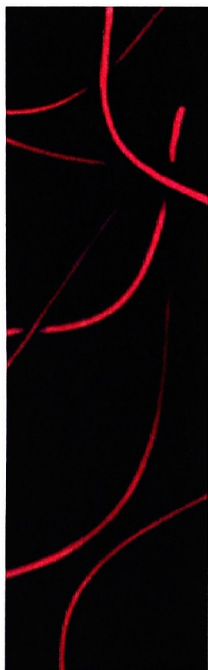
On the other hand, I myself was more attracted to using less conceptualization and creating more perceptual space. Also, the further I am from the country where I grew up, the more I understand how I was influenced and structured by the environment and nature at home. Since I have been paying more attention to sculptural and three dimensional elements, I have found my work becoming more careful and precise in terms of space, material, and the articulation of lighting. Turning to creating three dimensional world was necessary. Besides I want to play with four dimensional world, such as, time, perception, distance and relationship. I have become more interested in creating visual ambiguity than conceptual ambiguity. I am no longer just interested in using the box. Though I still use a precise cubic shape, it implies more a minimal form rather than the metaphor of the box.



Untitled (box)

Although I do not see this as changing my direction, I understand it as continuing my development. Even though I do not state the idea of feminism just like I used to do, I still possess a “femininity” in my work, especially in the colors I use and in the softness of representation.

Here is an artist statement from my last walk through in this MFA program:



Entwine

This work shows my personal experiences, I am reflecting sensibility as female. I, as a woman, am interdependent on something that supports me. I want to concern the balance of relationship in a very delicate way. I want to saturate it with my color.

The form I create shows the balance of relationship, gesture, and movement. I need light to show myself. I choose dark to hide myself. I want them to entwine seductively but not physically touch.

The environment surrounds me has uniformity.

I feel comfortable to being there.

Simplicity is not an end in art... but we arrive at simplicity in spite of ourselves as we approach the true sense of things

- Constantin Brancusi (1)

I have just seen the Jackson Pollock exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Before I saw this show, I thought of Pollock as an artist who has only an abstract style, “dropping and pouring”. However, after seeing his development in each period, I understood he worked in this style for just a few years near the end of his career. Before and after that period, he has a more representative style. I could see this development reaching an extreme here.

As is true with other artists, I would like to approach my true sense of things in my visual work.

Artist Statement

A Room

My interest is in creating a quiet environment to take people to the world of “nothingness” that has meditative and spiritual feeling. *A Room* is not made for the viewer to look at the image but for the viewer to be a participant in the space.

The image is almost the abstract pastel color of a dusk sky. I juxtaposed several images of color to create windows. At the same time, the windows make an invisible wall and a room.

I need meditation and a spiritual environment as a human being. The quality of them comes from my nature. The uniformity I reach at the end comes from how I grew up in my environment. It is like finding a way to have peace in any space. It is a way to make things feel at ease and to create comfort in the midst of chaos.

The more I emphasize spectacular quality, the more my idea cannot be translated to language. It became unavailable for discourse which can be conveyed in a material and space, but cannot be equal to precise word.

- Antony Gormley (2)

This is why I create visual art. If I say my work is about visual illusion, spiritual space and meditation, I want the viewer to be part of it when they come into the space. I am an artist who creates a certain space, and viewers are left to receive the space on their own terms.

A Room / Intervals / Space

In this Thesis project *A Room*, my interest starts from making something called an “interval”. What I mean by interval here, for example; is that

*In this type of music, silent **intervals** between notes are significant.*

*The **punctuation of movement** in dance.*

*He puts some **space** to organize the words in his letter.*

A Room can be understood as *space, time, and intervals*, things that express a spatial void. These intervals exist everywhere in our lives. Sometimes it could be an illusion, the moment you lose yourself. The moment you come to yourself. Right between reality and fantasy. I recollect these moments. These make me create visual ambiguity. In other words, what I am doing in my work is giving a form of *daydream* that every human being may have anytime, anywhere. Certainly, this could be any type of person, not only people who are called artists.

*Art is on the one hand the expression of a personal experience,
on the other of the universally human;
each component complements the other. (3)*

The title of this project *A Room* came to me when I was interested in making this interval. I wanted to use some everyday words which do not have a particular connotation because *A Room* is an experience from everyday life. I hope this word works for people abstractly. The only thing I insist on is that it is human space. Viewers can imagine any room you want.

Because my work is not just objects which exist individually, but objects which create another space entirely, it is very important for the viewer to walk within the space. It is an

invitation for the viewer to sense his / her own body's thoughts in this moment of stillness. There, I am playing with an aesthetic of paucity, in other words, the beauty of extra space. This is not however, an aesthetic reveling in space or promoting the use of space or any such thing -- it focuses, instead, on what is *left out* rather than what is *put in*. Here, there is a rule of "less is more". This rule is related to Buddhism (nothingness and emptiness) which will be discussed in the next section.

*Zen gardens are not created specially to be shown to people,
but viewers nonetheless sense something profoundly moving in them.
The believer discovers in them a world of the Zen spirit. (4)*

Buddhism

Through researching my visual work, I find myself influenced by Buddhist thoughts more than I notice. Not many Japanese people are very religious. However, we all have this influence of Buddhism not as a religion but as a philosophy. It is strongly related to peoples culture, customs, morals, beliefs and values.

Some people experience a mediative and spiritual feeling in my space, just as if he / she is in a church. Though I am not Christian, the specificity of form in the architecture of churches interests me. Also in church, in other words in front of God, I personally think each human being becomes one. All the realistic identification will not make sense in this space.

A Soul is the only thing you can bring to the world after death.

*That is, each human being achieves lots of things,
but you have to leave them when you die. Then, when they ask you,
"Who are you? What did you bring?" you can show them your soul.*

- Hayao Kawai, cc.James Hillman(5)

I always am interested in making images slightly *out of focus* to distinguish details. Something between black and white. Something neutral. It's not just a red, not just a blue. Something intermediate. Something moderate. This process take me to reach the minimum form. In order to give the viewers the same point of reference, not to distinguish between them, the object cannot be distinguished. I want to make something unidentified and ambiguous. This is because I would like to speak to each viewer not as you are belonging to any race or position in society, but in the deep essence as a human being. This is not matter of logic, but it is a way of communication using the senses. I would like my viewers to use not their head, but their stomach. What I mean by stomach here is just like stomach in the American expression :

*She felt butterflies in her **stomach** when she was waiting for him to come.*

Not your brain but your mind. In other words, experiences from my work reflect on the viewer physically. Seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling.

In eastern philosophy, it is a more respectable way of life not to divide one's mind and body. Heart and body, conscious and unconscious, self and others, culture and nature. These are not divided, but understand as one entity.

- Hayao Kawai(6)

It is very interesting to compare the definition of “nothingness” and “emptiness” between America and Japan. In American understanding:

the quality or state of lacking, being devoid of contents, uninhabited, unfrequented, or wanting no human beings, lack of something necessary to spiritual growth or sustenance; void space; vacuity. (7)

It all has a negative definition. On the other hand, in Japanese understanding, it has a positive definition, such as in the Buddhist concept of reaching the highest stage of spiritual realization.

Here is a definition of “nothingness” and “emptiness” which is pronounced “Mu” in Japanese:

The letter “Mu” is a Chinese character (or “Kanji”) for which it is very difficult to find an English equivalent. It has generally been translated in to English as “Nothing” or “Nothingness” , but this is liable to cause misinterpretation. The “Mu” which is used here is not a mere correlative of “Yu”(existence);

it does not mean lack of existence, non-existence or naught; it is quite different from Nihilism.

*“Mu” stands for an inexplicable but essential aspect of the real Self,
which is formless, but one with the conscious self, functioning exquisitely, wonderfully,
and mysteriously through every faculty of the conscious self moment by moment :
a Self which is supporting everything in the universe, and simultaneously
different and separate from ; which is forever unchangeable, immortal, and deathless,
even though conscious selves are always being separated into their elements,
just like the ocean which is constantly the same,
through waves are always rising and going out of sight in it. (8)*

Creating art work for me is similar to a poet writing a poem or a composer creating music; I express myself in my own way. There is no other rule there. It takes me far away from the chaos of everyday life. I could see myself from a distance, being subjective and objective. I find another *self* there. I personally think this creating saves me mentally and physically. This is soothing and easing . It makes one’s life much easy and happier. Every human being has a moment of viewing one’s life through another subconscious self. I assume humans need this. And there, I think I have this “Mu”(nothingness). I could be happy if I can communicate with people through this soothing experience when they come to the space.

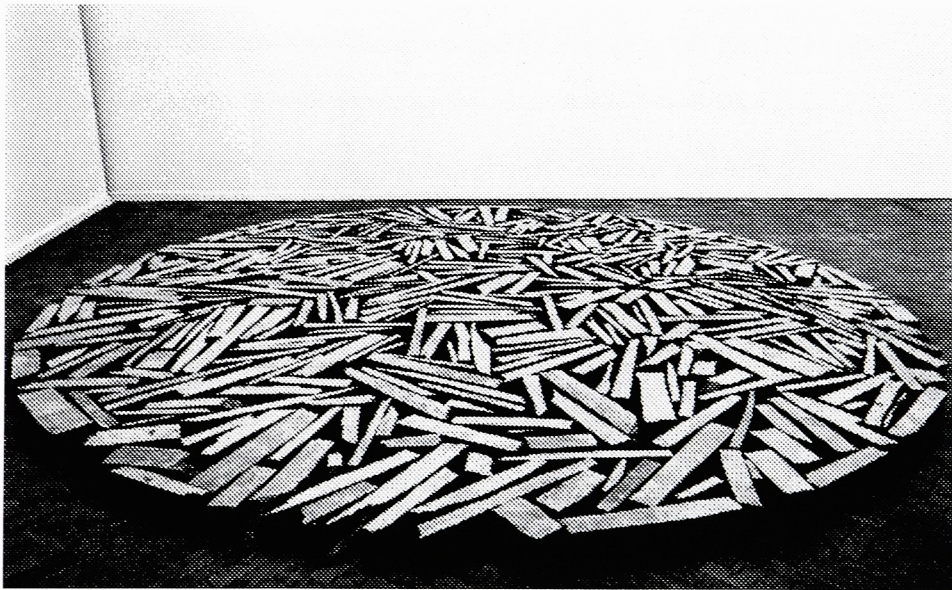
Juvenile Literature is not written for children, but it is written from children’s point of view.

- Hayao Kawai(9)

...they are places where the human heart can contact into direct, pure contact. (10)

Richard Long

Richard Long, a British sculptor, is one artist in whose works I can communicate with in this way of Nothingness (Mu). Richard Long is an artist who takes very long walks in various places of the world and reports the sights along his path. Part of his work is created by several forms, that is, walking with a stated purpose and duration, locating his sculptures in remote places from whatever materials he finds when he gets there. Sometimes he brings natural materials to a more domestic or sheltered environment, such as museums, galleries, houses, hospitals, or gardens.



Whitechapel slate circle
London

One thing I really empathize with is that Long never forces nature in his work. He uses nature “with respect and freedom, making work for the land, not against it”.

*Stones are used when there are stones, branches when there are branches,
brush when there is brush. They are all local produce, nothing is imported.*

His work might keep going or they might become reduced to ashes,

but it does not matter, because he does not intend anyone to see them.

*At the end, we are left with nothing but the knowledge of sights
and forms of photographs and captions describing
two generalized particulars medium and pieces. (11)*

Here, I find a very Japanese sense in his *respect and freedom, not against nature*. In Japan, this “*respect of nature*” also means “*going with the stream*”. It is more respectable to express oneself *with the stream* that one belongs to, than asserting oneself *against the stream*.

Here is an example:

*When western businessmen negotiate with Japanese businessmen,
they have a hard time wondering who really is responsible for the company.*

If you negotiate with someone, he / she says, “I will ask my boss”.

*Then when you negotiate with the boss, he / she answers, “I will discuss this with
my subordinate”. Also, when one western scholar discusses his philosophy with
Japanese scholars, he feels that they are knowledgeable, but they hardly say their opinion.*

*They tend to pay attention to others. However, this Japanese characteristic is
part of the basis of economic growth. In a Japanese company,
the self always works under a reciprocal relation so that business works efficiently. (12)*

Obviously, Japan has a very high population density. If one does not think about others, it could cause fights everytime and everywhere. It is respectable to consider *situations* rather than to think about *individuals*. Also, one Japanese friend who studied Wood craft in the United States told me a story about the difference between Japanese tools and American tools. When one uses an American saw, one *pushes* it to cut wood. On the other hand, with a Japanese saw, one *pulls* the saw when one needs to cut wood.

This is just an example, but I always think that this Japanese ambiguous character influences my nature which is based on my visual work. In my recent works, they are assembled as installation art. I often have a number of similar objects. They do not exist as

individuals but are interdependent on each other. I have a number of objects, but they create a single image. The *juxtaposition* of each object makes harmony.



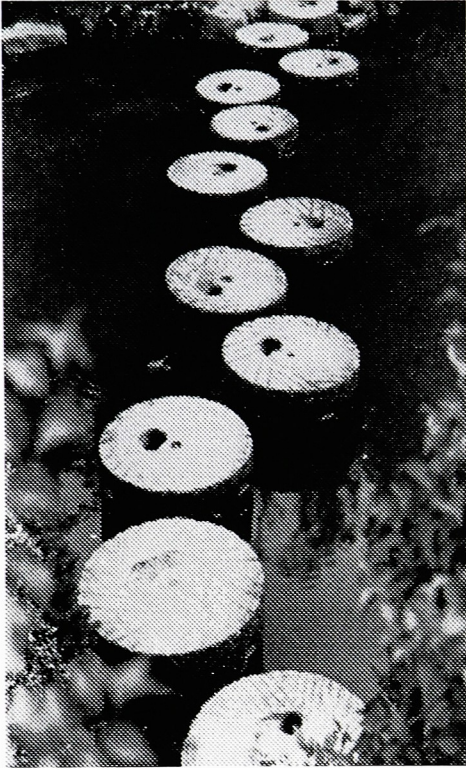
Entwine

The most important aesthetic principle is harmony - harmony of forms, colors, and materials, harmony of expression, harmony of order, harmony of place and time; harmony of heaven, earth, and man; harmony of harmonies. (13)

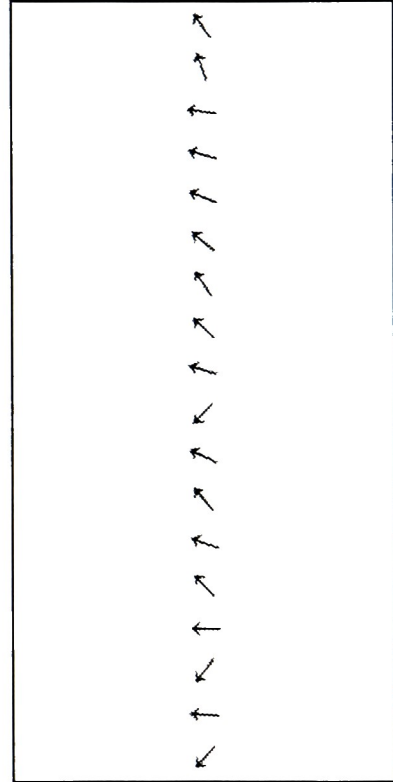
I am interested in *Minimal Art* and feel that this style is similar to my style. However, I think this *Harmony* is what makes my work different from *Minimal Art*. In typical *Minimal Art*, the form is complete un-differentiation, and minimal art-content. Also, I do not feel much movement in *Minimal Art*. To me, there, time is stopped. Or, perhaps it might be a just a moment.

The use of stones and ponds in Japanese gardens is connected to ancient animistic religious practice. It was believed (and still is by many) that certain places in the natural landscape, because of the particular spirit they hold, were likely spots for the gods to inhabit. (14)

In Richard Long's form I found this movement as eternal, circling, and harmonious. Here, I found Richard Long's creative form very similar to Japanese Rock Gardens.



Stone mortars used as steppingstones in pond,
Isui-en Nara

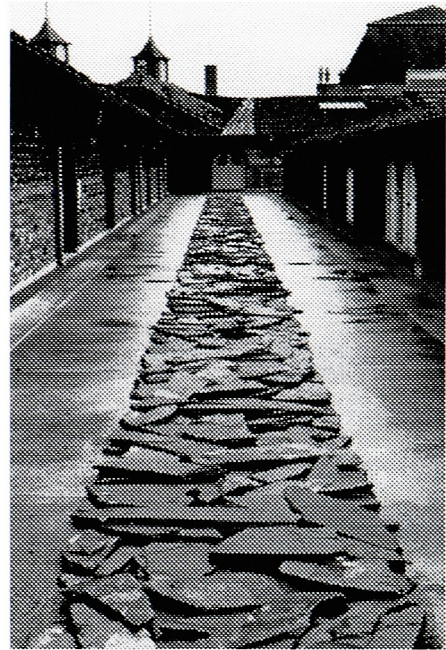


Richard Long, Wind Line
A Straight ten miles northward
walk on Dartmoor

As they are seen, the way they work with their objects, even though the objects are different, they begin with randomness but achieve a balance. Then, it has continuity - a simple line and surface has been created from random objects. (see images above, and first two images in next page)



Stone-paved path in tea garden
Ura Senko, Kyoto



Richard Long, stones in Switzerland

At first glance, the rocks seem to be standing by themselves without any rules or composition; but taken as a whole, they give a sense of harmony. I think both artists let rocks stand by themselves.



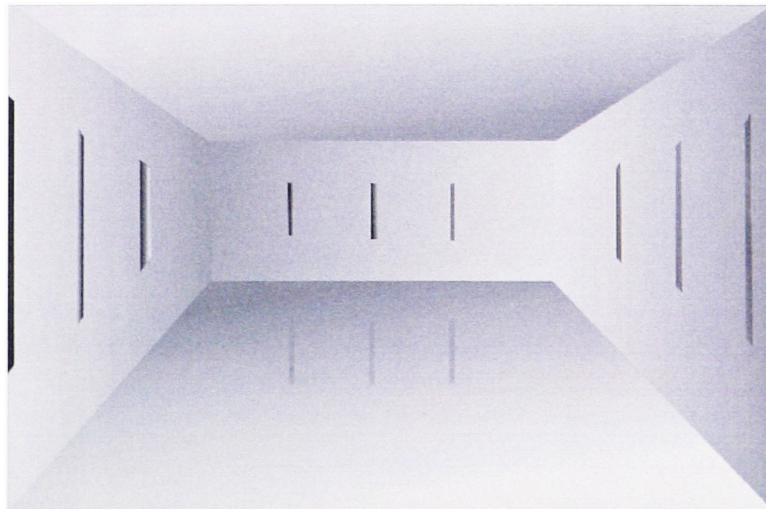
Ama-no-hashidate viewed from the central Islets
Katsura Villa



Richard Long, Bordeaux Slate Line

Description of Art Work

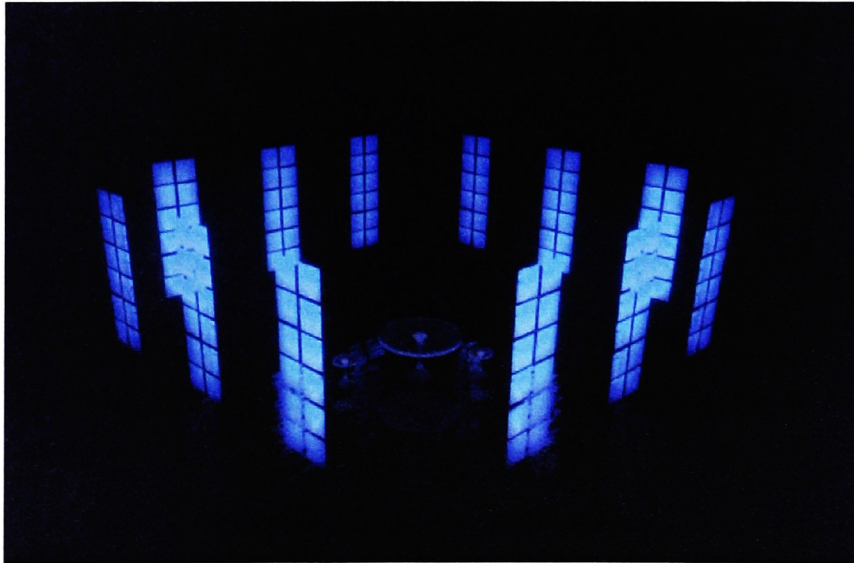
The starting idea of my thesis project was to build a precise rectangular room which has several narrow windows on each wall. Through the windows, we see the image of the sky at dusk which is to be a transparent photographic print (duratrans print) material and lit by fluorescent light. I was planning to make an actual human size room to make people share the “nothingness”. Each of the windows has the same shape and same size. This juxtaposition of windows gives the space continuous development and movement. First, I made the 2 x 2 x 2 (inch) model. I was planning to have the final size about 7 to 10 (foot) tall room that has 3 to 4 windows on each wall. I have photographic transparencies images of pastel colors or out of focus sky images on the windows. The whole room is colored white. In other words it has no color. I chose the texture and color of plaster, since it gives an original and natural color of neutral white rather than white paint. Since this project is not only made for seeing but also to share and feel the sense of “Nothingness”, I assume the sound that the room makes is very important; it has to have a great echo. Also, the floor is full of water. The water is not deep, it could be about five to ten (cm). The reflection in the water adds depth to the room. In the center of the room, I have a white table and two white chairs. They could be miniature in scale. The existing table and chairs create more emptiness and sense of a void.



Sketch for A Room

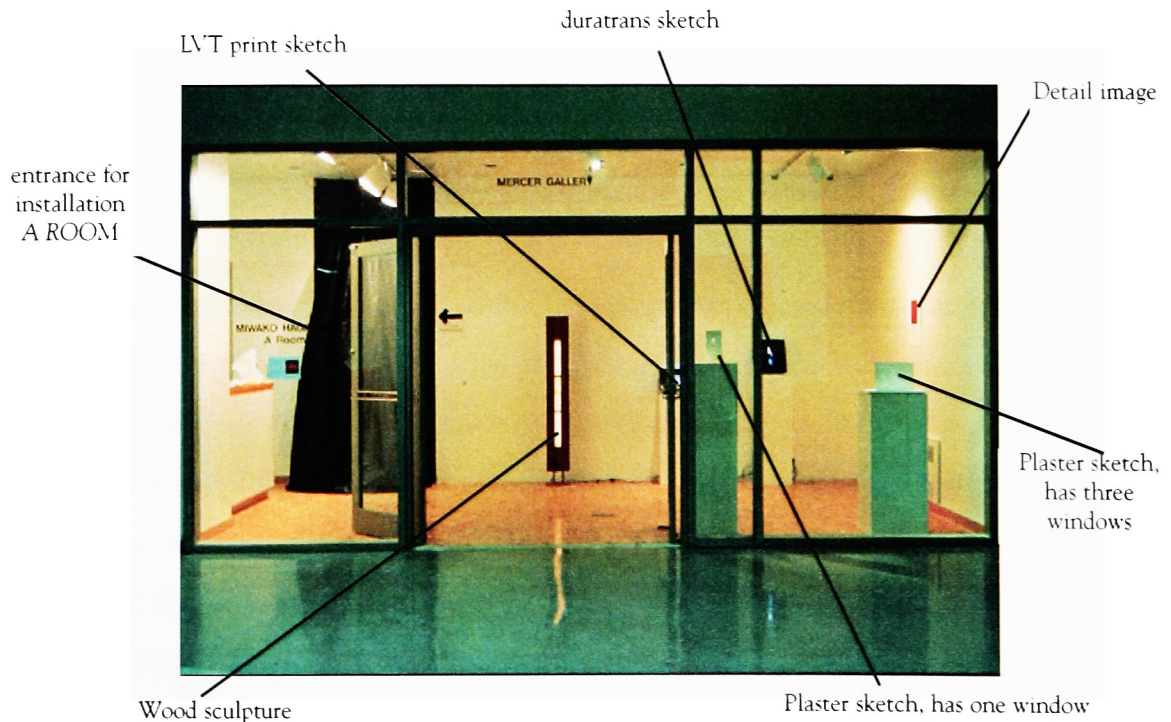
However, I found out this plan was unrealistic to complete physically, technically, and financially. (Of course, it is more an illusion since it is unrealistic to complete). Also, to make this effect successful, I realize that this room really needs larger space and perfect construction.

I started to plan this around the same images in a more simple and minimum way, and this process is strongly related the idea "*less is more*". The second plan I made was a photo installation using nine four-foot long duratrans prints with light boxes floating in a whole environment. This work is the negative image of my first idea. I changed the white wall to a dark space. I used the empty space to make an invisible wall. The light boxes are hung as if they are floating in space. Because my work is creating an environment, it is very important for the viewer to walk around in the space and actually become part of the piece. The juxtaposition of light boxes in parallel creates the illusion of an invisible wall. Therefore nine images make the whole room / space. Here again, I plan to have a table and chair.

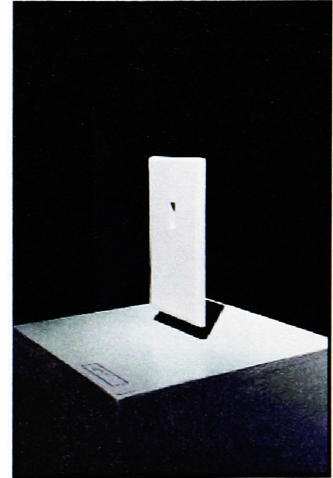
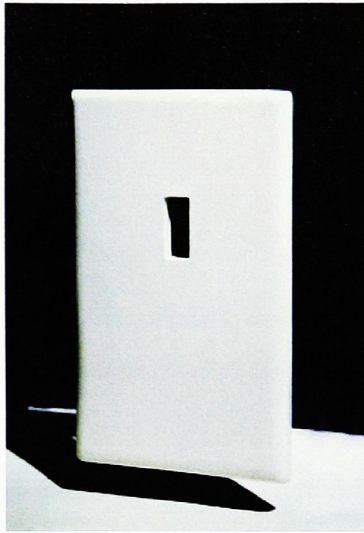


Sketch for A Room

My work was accepted for exhibition at the Mercer Gallery, MCC. The Mercer Gallery has a simple rectangular space. In my work, the space of the gallery decides the number of light boxes I will have, since it needs dimly lit images. In other words, the scale of the gallery space decides how big the work will be. In the Mercer Gallery, the space was divided in two. I had one main installation in the back room and my sketches in the front room.



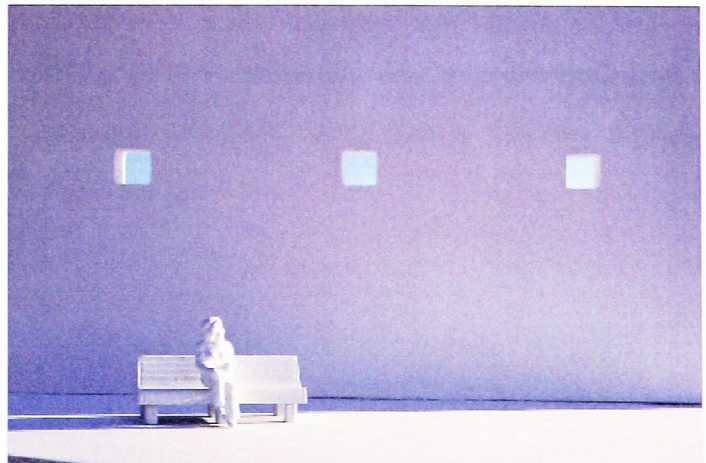
This is an essence of the installation. The image was created on a computer based on my actual photography. In other words, it could be described as computer painting. Here, I have Minimal form. My personal color turns to universal color, infinity, and beginning and ending . It is the transition between becoming dark and before becoming bright. I spent lots of time to create this color. As I said before, this is not a color which identifies something; this is a color of the moment of dim light. I used this image as an invitation card for my exhibition.



sketch for *A Room*, plaster, H7 x W5 x D0.5

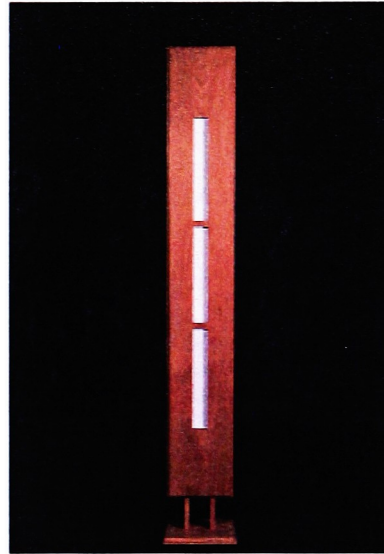
This sketch is made of plaster. It shows my original idea of *A Room*. It is not an actual model of the installation. It is a fragment of the installation but also creates a three dimensional space. This one plain flat sketch inspires the viewer to create his / her own *room* (space). Each viewer has his / her own imagination. I have a small hole in the upper part of the object. From the window, one can see another view which fortunately created a view of the rectangular world of doors and windows of the MCC campus. I hung it from the ceiling. I am always interested in hanging my objects and having a slight space between the floor and the object. I think I like including the sense of gravity in terms of force and space in very delicate way to balance the weight of the object and its ability to float in my piece.

This is another sketch made from plaster. Here, I have three very small square windows. Also, I put a small human figure sitting on a bench and looking into in the distance. The human figure decides the scale of the *room*; also the gaze of the figure gives more distance. Existence (in this case, the human figure) creates more vacant space (beauty of paucity). Here, I have a relationship between distance and space.



sketch for *A Room*, plaster, H5 x W13 x D10

This is a wood sculpture I made in a wood elective class. It has three narrow windows and a small tube light behind the windows. Between the light and windows, there is a sheet of paper that diffuses the light. I wanted to present the sense of light leaking from the narrow space.



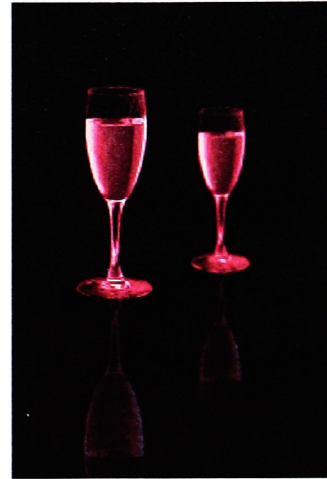
wood, light, paper, H x W x D



sketch for *A Room*,
duratrans print, H10 x W5

This is one sketch from my photographs which shows a sense of space. Even though I took a three dimensional object, here I floated up the two dimensional windows and reflection. The image of the window exists in two dimensions, but the relationship of the window to its reflection brings a perception of three dimensions to this two dimensional image.

During the exhibition, I experimented with having some object on the table. First, I had two wine glasses. The reason why I put wine glasses was I would like to put the idea of relationship in this work. However, the glasses I had were a simple commodity, so it ruined the moment of abstraction.

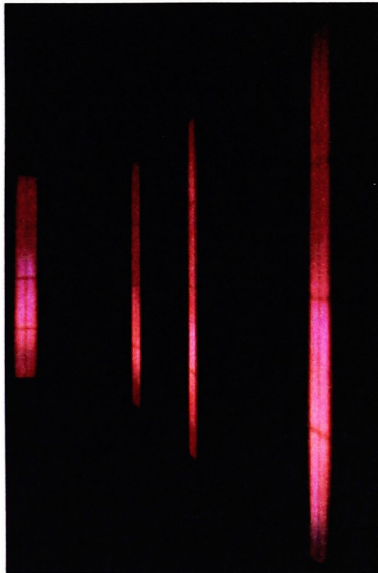


Wine glasses



fish in a bowl

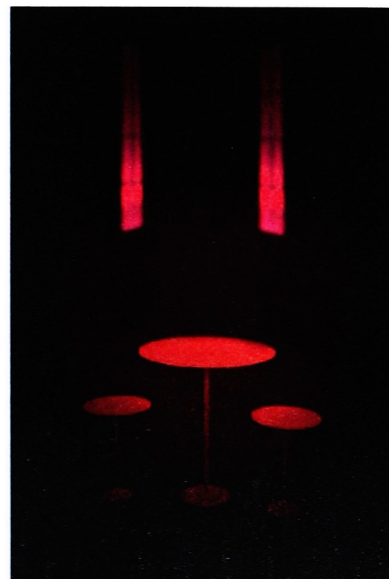
One of my classmates suggested to have some movement in this stillness. I thought it was a great possibility. We talked about having small fish in a fish bowl. I went to a pet store and got the most beautiful pink fish. Their characteristic is that they always need light, and they need someone to take care of their environment (air, changing water, feeding, and plants). Having some slight and quiet movement, especially small fish continuously moving, makes people comfortable. This is very similar to the way in which one feels calm by listening to music rather than being without sound. *Movement creates more stillness.*



Installation windows

In the installation, I had six of the four-foot long light boxes. I reduced the number of boxes from my sketch because nine boxes would make the space too bright and ruin the sense of dimness. I sand blasted the plexiglas windows in order to make everything look blurry. Right behind the plexiglas, I had a lattice to extend back and also to make the light look like it was coming from further away. I did not have much choice in the length of the plexiglas. The fluorescent tube size is standardized. But it is also part of my work, because it functions to adjust the scale. I also had a hard time creating the color I wanted for the real objects. This was difficult since I was using fluorescent light which creates really artificial light. However, I think the artificial light works well for this piece.

In the center of the space, I have a table and chairs which are made of glass. They were sand blasted. They are fragile and unrealistic. Reflections from the light boxes create a pastel pink glow on the table and chair. This also blurs the image of the table and chairs.



Glass made table and chair

Poems

At the end of the paper, I would like to present two beautiful poems that reflect my thoughts on space. Also, I would like to share these with the people who had read my paper.

Thank you very much.

*The perfect way is without difficulty,
save that it avoids picking and choosing.
Only when you stop liking and disliking
Will all be clearly understood.*

*A split hair's difference,
And heaven and earth are set apart.
if you want to get the plain truth,
Be not concerned with right and wrong.
The conflict between right and wrong
Is the sickness of the mind. (15)*

*

*Like the empty sky it has no boundaries,
Yet it is right in this place, ever profound and clear.
When you speak to know it, you cannot see it.
You cannot take hold of it,
But you cannot lose it.
In not being able to get it, you get it.
When you are silent, it speaks;
When you speak, it is silent.
The great gate is wide open to bestow alms,
And no crowd is blocking the way. (16)*

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Quotations

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- (2) Hutchinson, John. *Antony Gormley*. London : Phaidon, 1995. p.12
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Slide List

1. *Untitled (shoes)*, C-41 print, H16" x W20"
2. *Untitled (shoes)*, C-41 print, H8" x W10"
3. *Untitled (shoes)*, C-41 print, H16 "x W20"

4. *Untitled (box)*, light, wood, paper, H10" x W10' x D10'
5. *Untitled (box)*, light, wood, paper, H10" x W10' x D10'
6. *Untitled (box)*, light, wood, paper, H8" x W8" x D8"

7. *Entwine*, digital print, H10" x W2.5"
8. *Entwine*, digital print, H10" x W2.5"
9. *Entwine*, digital print, H10" x W2.5"

10. Sketch for *A Room (white room)*
11. Sketch for *A Room (blue room)*, LVT digital print, H8" x W10"
12. Sketch for *A Room*, wood, paper, light, H57" x W5" x D3"

13. Sketch for *A Room*, plaster, H11" x W17" x 15"
14. Sketch for *A Room*, plaster, H11" x W17" x 15"
15. Sketch for *A Room*, plaster, H11" x W17" x 15"

16. Sketch for *A Room*, plaster, H 8" x W5" x D0.5"
17. Sketch for *A Room*, plaster, H 8" x W5" x D0.5"
18. Sketch for *A Room*, plaster, H 8" x W5" x D0.5"

19 - 30.

A Room

Duratrans pirnt, flourecent light, plexiglas, wood, glass(table / chair)

Each light box is : H48" x W 5" x D 7"

Gallery size is about : W18' x D16' x H14'

