



OAKLAND UNIVERSITY
ART
GALLERY

Jae Won Lee Internal Distance(s)

For Mom, Moo Kyung Park

Jae Won Lee Internal Distance(s)

Mid-Career Restrospective

Oakland University Art Gallery
January 10 – February 22, 2009

Curated by Dick Goody

Internal Distance(s)

There still were many stars to count and a moon quieted my mind down.

– Jae Won Lee, childhood reminiscence

There is something universal in the act of contemplating nature; there is something contextual too. For example, imagine walking down a path and homing in on a particularly attractive leaf; now, pick up the leaf and weigh its beauty. But also consider all the other things that come to mind. The work of Jae Won Lee focuses on the formalistic beauty of nature. All the *other things* that come to mind, which inform her work, she consigns obliquely away to be separately archived.

Using the tropes of beauty and nature, Jae Won Lee, particularly in the private process of manufacturing her work, reflects upon spheres of psychology, gender, alienation and identity. The work is primary, elemental and reductive. Form precedes material. However the psychological forces at work within its making are complex and remain largely undisclosed.

Born in Seoul, South Korea, the artist makes objects whose derivations are embedded in her Korean roots. In parallel, her work exhibits a discrete calibration of process, materials, replication, and repetition; these are the building blocks that comprise her formalistic arrays. Her flat works cartographically record filtered encoded pathological data exquisitely on paper and velum. Conversely, her monolithic installations, which are invariably comprised of multiple objects, resemble scientific equipment to test a particular hypothesis; they are like proofs.

Her work projects an encoded language not unlike a series of repeated highly organized ones and zeroes. Akin to the permanent finality of a lamentation or memorial, the viewer will find it difficult to challenge the authoritative voice inscribed in Jae Won Lee's process. In order to more effectively understand her work we have to see it, so to speak, from afar, from the other side of a frontier, cordoned off, as if being too close all one might see is binary data, too alien for us to comprehend. Nevertheless, we believe it and trust it, conceiving it as being incrementally factual, but its language is immutably foreign like history.



of solitude (detail), paper, needle holes, h. 30" x w. 22", 2006

Working in porcelain or pouncing fine holes through paper, her work is fastidious in its extreme, excessive repetition and multiplicity. It is a record of labor, but its value lies in the complexity of its intricate structural formalism. Since she has tended to choose her forms from a specific range of decorative sources, it might superficially appear that her oeuvre is without reference to her psychological identity. However she is earnest and adamant when she says:

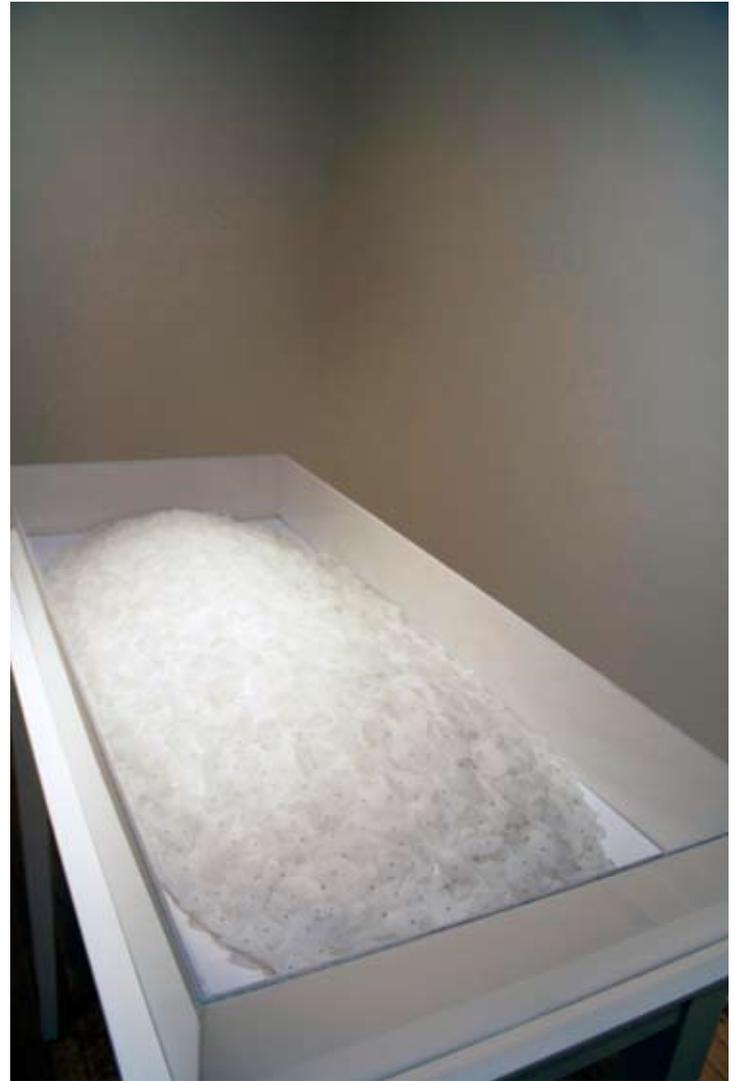
I seek to manifest an inner dialogue about gender and ethnicity that is becoming increasingly central to my evolving from an Asian to Asian American female artist. I am an observer of cross-cultural confrontation.

Jae Won Lee's quest to confront issues of gender and ethnicity is exercised in the privacy of her studio, unseen to our eyes. Its translation into form – into realized works – is cloaked, as if any visible anguish would contradict the formal integrity of her anodyne output. Ruminations on ethnicity, gender and the wrongs of the past are the engines that drive her to work so compulsively.

Another means of understanding her world is to consider the ineffaceable effects of our childhood perceptions. Children are impressionable vessels and as a child she was told the classical Korean story of Nak Hwa Am – Rock of Falling Blossoms, which took place in 58 B.C. The rock is located atop a fortified hill in Puyo, South Korea. At the time, Korea comprised three kingdoms and one of the kingdoms, the Shilla, requested military aid from Chinese Tang Dynasty. To avoid defilement by the invading Chinese troops of the Tang Dynasty, three thousand Paekche court maidens leapt off the rock to their death in the river below committing mass suicide.

This saga is no fable. Consider the fatalist effects of the Brothers Grimm on young minds, yet fiction carries with it the escape clause of (un)suspended disbelief. No such escape mechanism exists in the story of Nak Hwa Am. In hindsight, it could be re-contextualized as Freudian cocktail of repression, anxiety, victim identification and xenophobia.

In response to the tragic events of Nak Hwa Am, Jae Won Lee produced an artwork entitled, *january, snow flower tomb*, 2007.



january, snow flower tomb (detail)



Of a Silent Life from *Immigrant Flowers*, porcelain, c/10 fired, h. 2" x w. 11" x d. 6 1/2", 2005

I, in vain, try to make sense of those anonymous young women who decided to end their blossoming lives. January, snow flower tomb is a response to this event and its specific location, which have had an indelible impact on me since I heard the story as a little girl. Sense of place, both in terms of subject matter and location, is an important part of this work. After I made my first visit to this place in 2006, I chose translucent material and a needle to tear the petal parts and started making paper flowers, which later in their piled form, serve as a commemorative grave, where lost souls gathered together in their mourning white garments.

The reductive formalistic essence of *January, snow flower tomb* is in fact a cultural lamentation in memoriam to a particular story (and culture) and is inextricable from the formation of Jae Won Lee's identity. Her work is a serious microscopic analysis on the lack she feels when she considers her roots. As an American she can no longer fully exist as a Korean – whatever it meant to be Korean has been lost in the assimilation. America can be

oblivious to the difficulties immigrants are presented with upon arrival. Traditionally, it has been an optimistic, liberated landscape full of entitlement and promise; it assumes the transition will be smooth and is impatient when it is not. Even after almost two decades, Jae Won Lee's Korean identity still permeates her work.

Formally, her installations use specific geometric structures: parabolas, grids, clusters of plumb lines, etc; all serve as containment devices for her accrued handmade porcelain fragments which are the numerous building blocks of her work. Often these button-petal-like forms are pierced with a hole so they can be strung with piano wire, as in her work *Between the Petals II*, 2006. This installation brings to mind a piece of agricultural equipment for drying seed. Seeds are fundamental essences and Jae Won Lee is drawn to what she calls "a telescopic examination of individual components..." Where she lives in Michigan, she conceives of seeds lying buried in winter under a blanket of white snow. As a gardener, she plants flowers and collects the seeds in the fall, plants them, and waits for them to reappear in spring. She draws an analogy between seeds becoming potential seedlings and an artist realizing her finished work from its seed stage to fruition.

In an earlier work, *Immigrant Flowers*, 1995–present, she more directly referenced her ancestry. This collection of small hollow ceramic box-forms channels Korean Choson porcelain, which in and of itself is a reflection of earlier 14th century Koryo Dynasty designs of inlaid celadon. Her Korean-ness is integral to her work, but as an artist who studied her craft in the United States, her art is permeated with the West and can be placed in the taxonomy of post-minimalism. Certainly, borrowing Michael Fried's terminology, her installations seem more congruent with absorption than theatricality. Despite the need to view her work in a macro way from a distance – viewing the whole rather than its micro parts – we are ultimately absorbed by our meditation on replication implicit in her process. Because, after all, regardless of our ethnicity, we are global citizens weaned on the milk of mass production, easily entranced by the blur of replication. Inundated with the saturated agglutination of media, with its implied ultra-colorization, hyper-reality and accompanying sound effects, an artist of Jae Won Lee's background would seem utterly entitled to cauterize this flow of information with the panacea of a reductive, monochromatic approach to form and process.



Monsoon from *Immigrant Flowers*, C/10 soda fired, h. 2 1/2" x w. 6 1/2" x d. 8", 2007



a simple path from *Immigrant Flowers*, porcelain, c/10 soda fired, h. 2" x w. 20" x d. 5", 2003



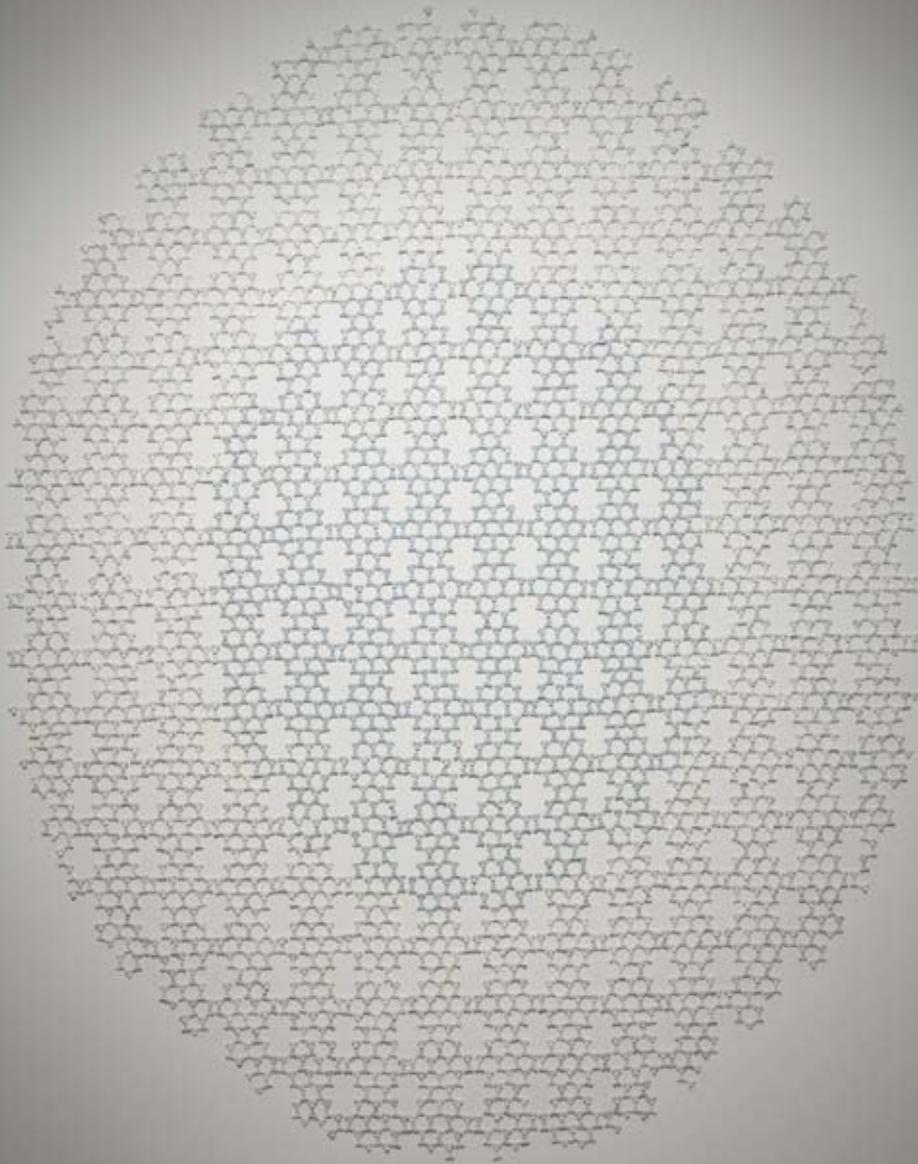
Between the Petals II, porcelain, piano tuning block, wire and pins,
h. 40" x w. 192" x d. 60," 2006

Seeing her work in the context of mass-production is helpful. Immanuel Kant would have perhaps argued that the difference between a square from a roll of kitchen paper towel, with its embossed floral decoration, and a work made by an artist using a needle to repeatedly penetrate paper to form a design, is that the former is functional and the latter purposeless and, therefore, of a higher order because we achieve a disinterested pleasure in our contemplation of it. There are many instances of mass produced, quasi-botanical designs – paper doilies, for example. These round, holed and embossed discs can possess startling intricacy, but they are ephemeral, common, functional and disposable. Repetition and symmetry are fundamental design elements. The commercial industrial complex assimilates all that is good in art and design, from Rococo to Art Nouveau to Mondrian and then to Warhol himself who assimilated commercial art and turned appropriation into a reflexive Möbius Loop. Any use of symmetry and floral repetition pastiches earlier incarnations, but Jae Won Lee is not so interested in pastiche. Contextually her oeuvre operates in parallel with mechanical reproduction. Walter Benjamin argued that mechanical reproduction emancipates art from its bourgeois provenance(s) and dependence on ritual. Jae Won Lee's artist's statement articulates that her work is a crucible for her "inner dialogue about gender and ethnicity." These political issues are condensed and translated into formal structures through her "repetitive acts of obsessive labor." Her designed structures are the means with which she communicates the psychological forces and contradictions extant as part of her inner dialogue. When her work is exhibited the dialogue becomes public communication, but the language is encoded. Her ruminations are not private, but they are veiled. What we see is the apparatus – the reproducing mechanism that masks the internalized themes of ideology, gender and displacement.

As a young girl I liked being in my mother's flower garden. She was away most of the time for her teaching job and her involvement with social organizations. I think her absence led me to spending my time in her garden, reading novels, pressing flowers in books, while longing for her return home to notice me.



Accrescere, porcelain, wood platform, h. 5" x w. 205" x d. 43"; 2004



Wallpetal, porcelain, foam tape,
h. 90" x w. 64" x d. 1/8" 2006

Such introverted childhood pursuits and thoughts prepared the artist for the sort of concentrated solitary focus required to make work which revolves around repetition and symmetry. The image of her as a child pressing flowers between sheets of paper is both touching and explanatory. The revelation of seeing the symmetrical desiccated flowers months after their entombment transcends time and resonates in her work.

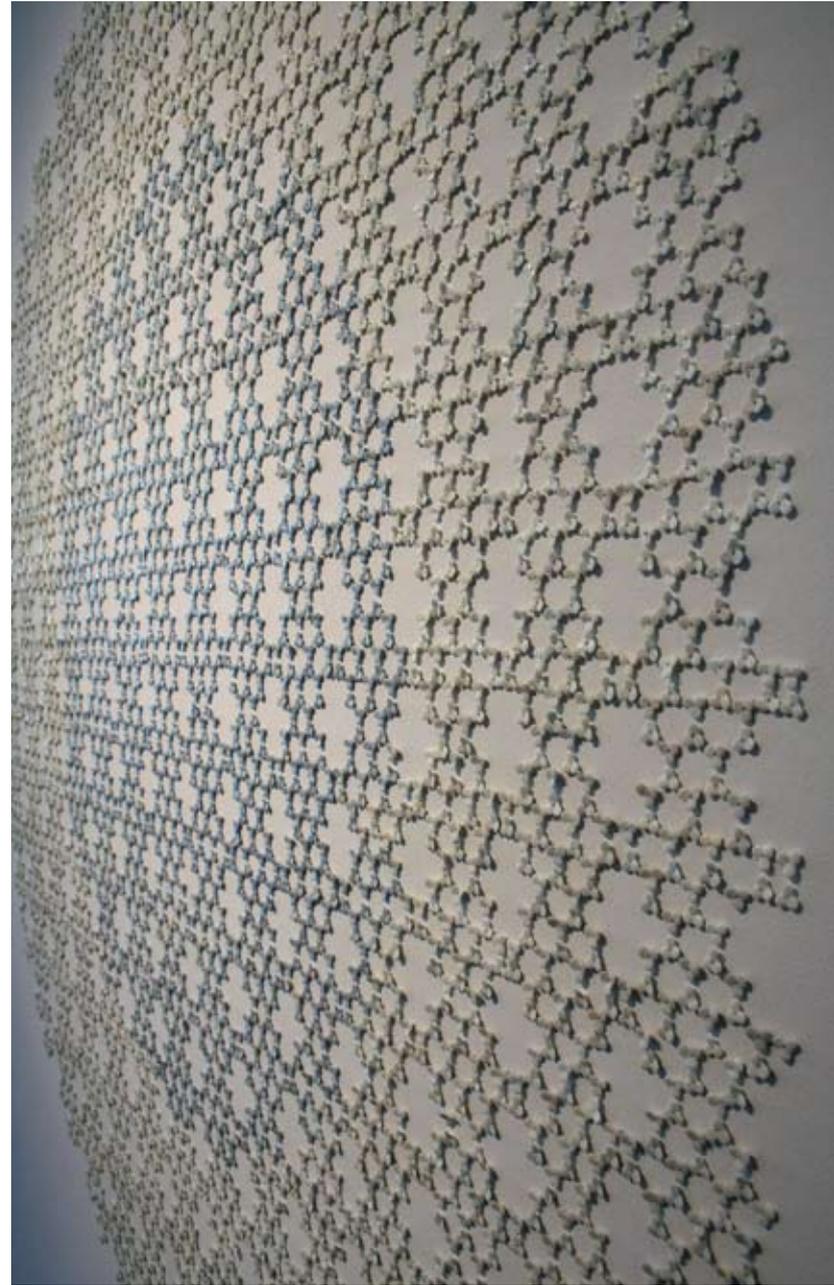
Employing biomorphic forms, which find their source in the balanced proportions of botany, Jae Won Lee reconfigures the natural forms of nature in her work. This reenactment of natural history fulfills a need to make work that is contemplative, but more deeply than that it is the consolation of labor and its implied repetitive processes in which the artist immerses herself.

Navigating the mirror images of nature like a mapmaker allows the artist to conceive flat works which act as the foundation for her larger three-dimensional installations. The strict formalism of her output, with its startling economic simplicity, masks the literary background of her formative years, which led her initially not to choose an artistic path.

I was introduced to Korean literature early on as a young child. The family study housed fiction and poetry from all over the world, in Korean translation. Both my parents taught literature in their early careers. My mother wrote sijo, Korean traditional poems, similar to Japanese haikus and my father translated American, English short stories into Korean. I was fascinated by foreign names, stories, cultures, and countries from readings.

A particularly harsh right-wing regime instigated in the eighties convinced her parents to send her to the relative sanctuary of America to attend university. Duly she enrolled at California State studying psychology. The austere minimalism of her art is in stark contrast to her literary background. It is as if it became necessary for her to banish all personal and linguistic references from her work in order to achieve its non-muddled purity.

Seeking solace in formalism, repetition and media is not a cover-up, rather it is a separation because all extraneous data is siphoned off to be archived in her journals and notebooks, which explains its expulsion from her art.



Wallpetal, (detail)



the ebbing day, paper, hair, h. 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x w. 16" (framed), 2008

I write a journal as an act of faith in recording the attentions of the moment. When the language I use is exclusively visual, my journal becomes a sequence of small ceramic containers.

The objects she makes are the metaphorical reductive crucibles of her inner literary world. Thrust into the heart of American culture after the relative insulation of her secluded family life, Jae Won Lee's immersion was an acute life change, so alarming that the term "homesickness" only begins to describe the cultural alienation she experienced upon her arrival. Her reaction, her contemplative stoic introspection, would ultimately become her focus, sanctuary and default position.

It was, of course, a devastating experience for me to leave reluctantly my own country behind for an unknown world. Losing familiarity and getting acquainted with a new country was an everyday challenge, and is still difficult. Among all the challenges, losing a mother tongue was the most difficult task.

In losing her voice, in turning inward, Jae Won Lee eventually developed a new voice. Part of this voice is a reductive vocabulary and intrinsic to the vocabulary is the use of the ellipse, which finds its origin in the waning and waxing of the moon. The moon is another signifier that has accompanied her since childhood, hence the childhood reminiscence at the beginning of this essay: "There still were many stars to count and a moon quieted my mind down."

I want my message in its empathy, simplicity and sensitivity to evoke a sense of isolation.

Jae Won Lee reflects and laments, but she also looks to the future when she says that she is, "evolving from an Asian to Asian American female artist. A new body of work incrementally reflects this transition. Gathering her shed hair, she ties single filaments in knots and then, like the child pressing flowers, archives them behind glass. This is material pathological evidence of her American existence. Each knot is another action, another thought, another shift away from what was to what will be – the here and now of American literalism - Korean hair grown in the USA – and it is as close to conceptual art as her work has ever moved.

— Dick Goody, December 2008



Toil when memory fails., paper, hair, adhesive, h. 15" x w. 12" (framed), 2008



Toil when memory fails. (detail)





frail hope, internal distance: object VII,
porcelain, beads, mono filament,
h. 72" x w. 8" x 8," 2008



of silence I (diptych detail), plexiglas, aluminum pin, h. 16" x w. 23" x. d 1/8", 2007



january, snow flower tomb,
paper, sewing pin,
h. 41" x w. 38 1/2" x d. 18 1/2"
(w/ table, acrylic box), 2007

right page:
january, snow flower tomb, (detail)





of a moon garden
whitely, moon a

whitest of whites

and without a

trace

The floating

LINEAR

gather into a narrative.

by begin to

we to be non-specific.

they is a synthesis of

minimal verticality and

originality.

U.F.O.

background and a solitary calmness sets in

cast off individual things

invalery

an invisible veil
dew, words in air

and there were only

without a trace



Book III, paper, wood, plexiglas,
h. 2" x w. 9" x d. 8," 2008



Book II, paper, hair, wood, plexiglas,
h. 2" x w. 9" x d. 8," 2008

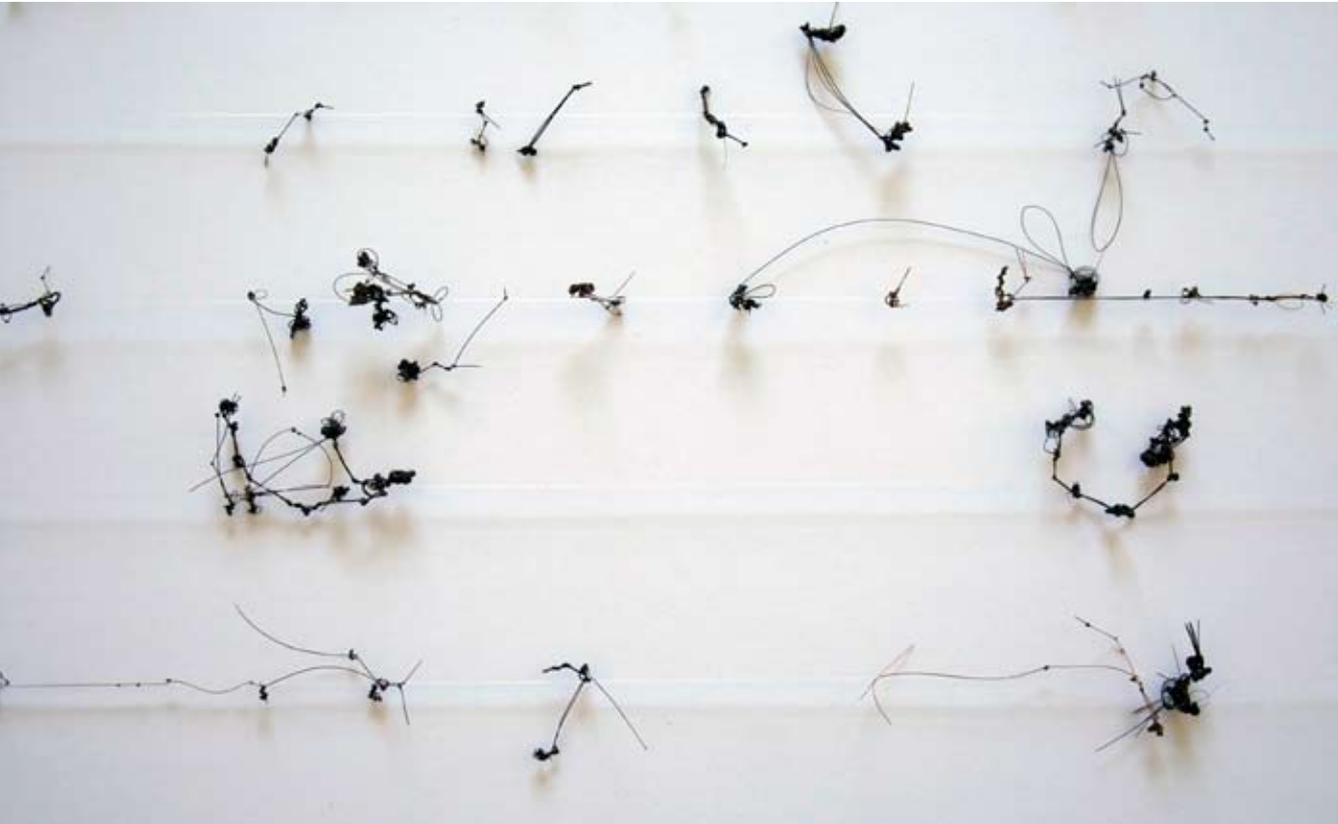
left page:
Book II (detail) *Book I* (detail)
Book III (detail) *Book IV* (detail)



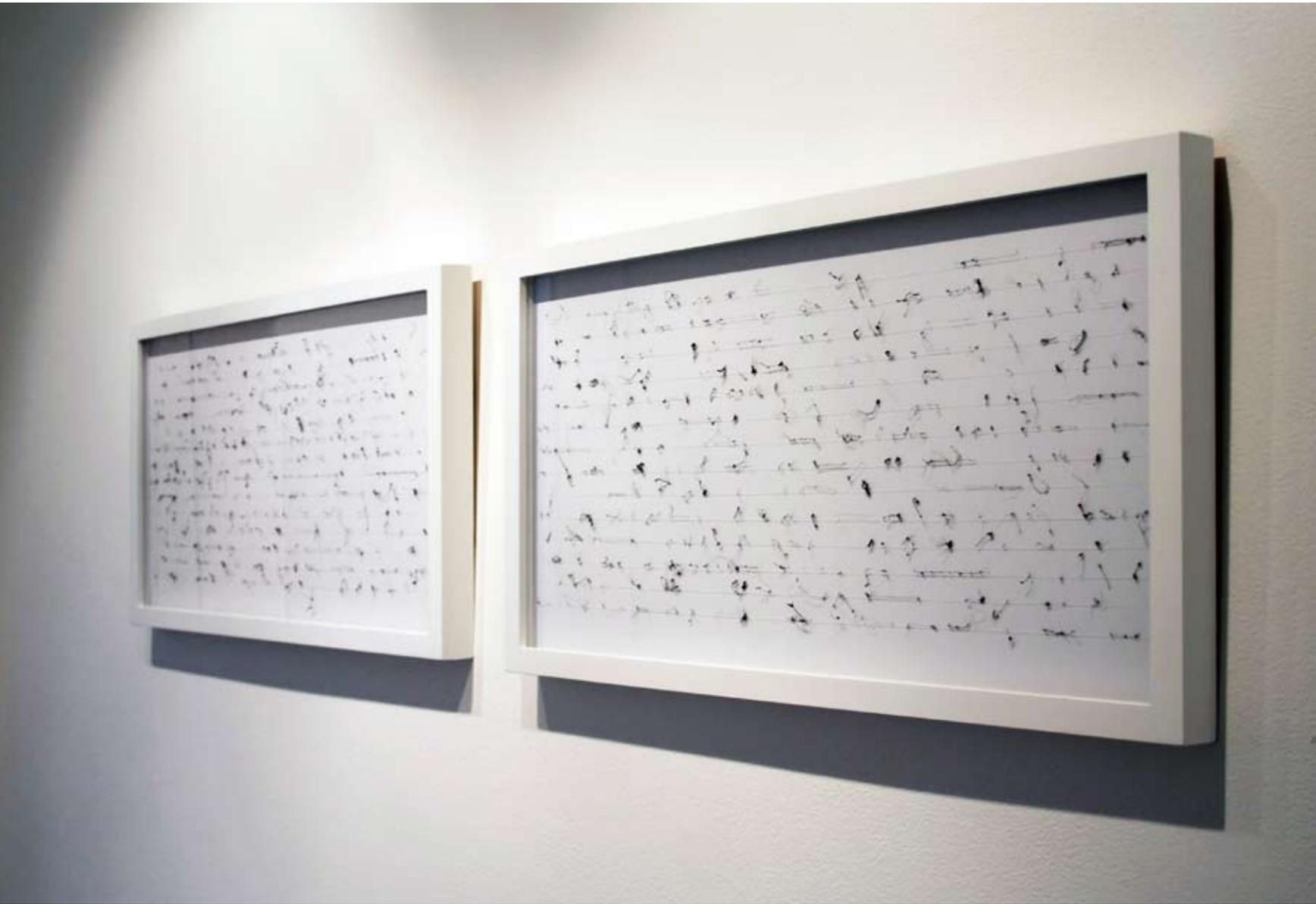
Surface of Years, fabric, threads, hair, h. 24" x w. 72" d. 2," 2004



Surface of Years (detail)

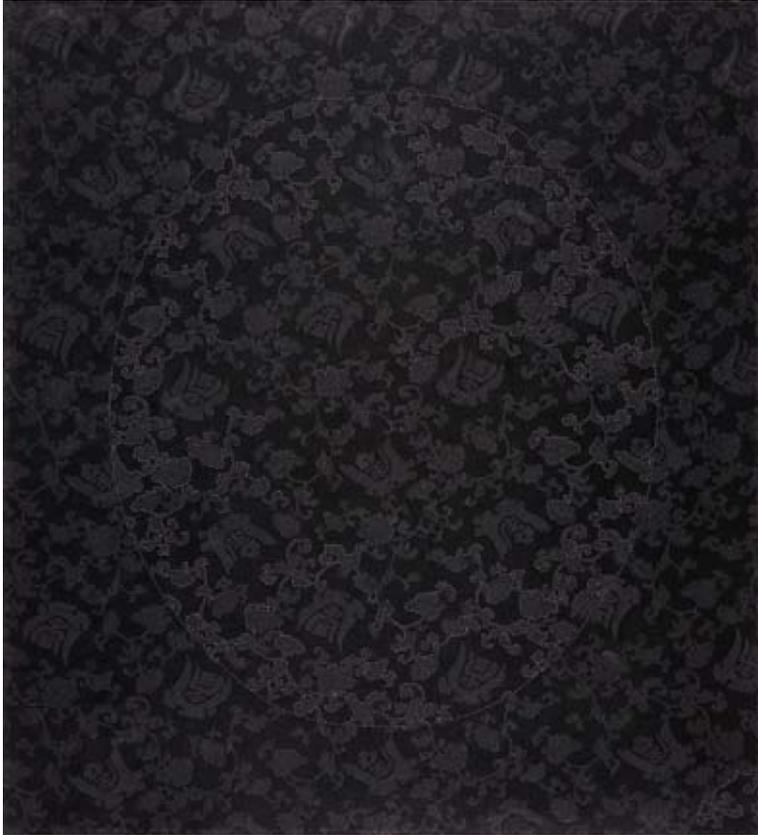


of syllables (detail)

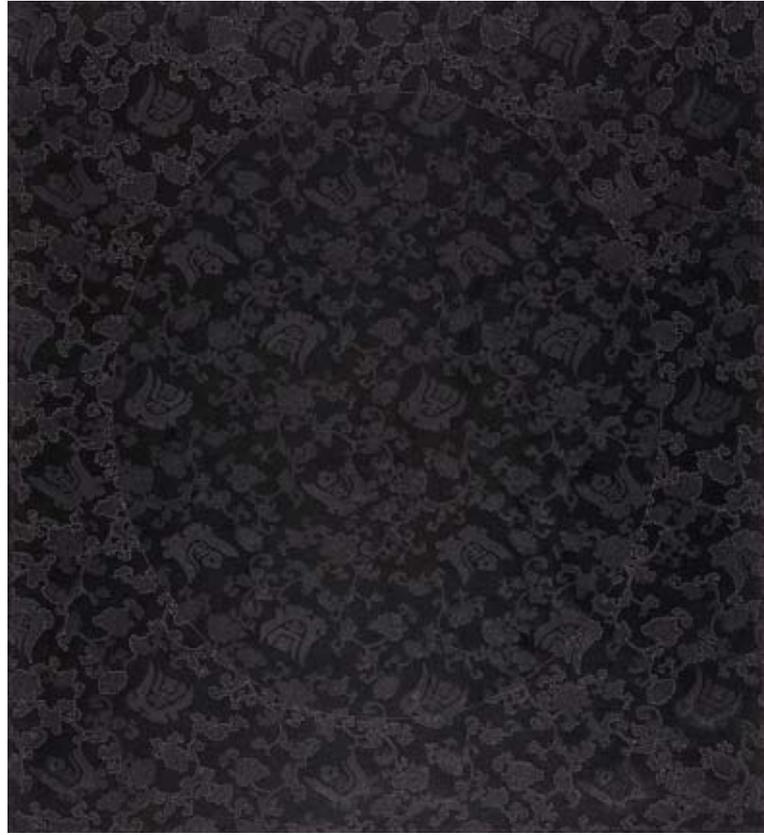


of syllables, hair, foam core board, mono filament, h. 12 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x w. 47" (framed)





sotto voce, fabric, threads, h. 24" x w. 42," 2007 (left panel)



sotto voce, fabric, threads, h. 24" x w. 42," 2007 (right panel)

몽유도원도

Mongyudowondo (Sleepwalking around a Peach Garden)

recycled paper, thread, size variable, 2008

Mongyudowondo (1447) is a title of a famous landscape of Utopia of Asia, painted by Angyeon in the Choson Dynasty, Korea. *Mongyudowondo* is considered to be the greatest masterpiece of dream scenery, arranging the real world on the left and the world of paradise on the right. The painting is composed of a number of independent scenes, but still gives the viewer the feeling of floating between reality and fantasy at first glance.



Jae Won Lee Internal Distance(s)

Solo Exhibitions

- 2009 *Internal Distance(s)* Oakland University Art Gallery, Rochester, MI
- 2008 *In the Shadow of the Moon* Paul Kotula Projects, Detroit, MI
- 2007 *Of a Moon Garden* Korean Craft Promotion foundation, Seoul, South Korea
- 2006 *Of a Moon Garden* Harrison Gallery, The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, PA
Of a Moon Garden Chung Nam National University Museum, Daejeon, South Korea
- 2005 *A Homing Instinct* Tomado Gallery, Seoul, South Korea
- 2004 *Accrescere* Revolution Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 2002 *Jae Won Lee* Gallery Materia, Scottsdale, AZ
- 2001 *Immigrant Flowers* Embassy of the United States in Germany, Berlin
- 2000 *Between the Petals* Revolution Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1999 *Jae Won Lee: Selected Work 1996-99* Tho Art Space Gallery, Seoul, Korea
Europees Keramisch Werkcentrum 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands
- 1998 *Absent One* Revolution Gallery, Detroit, MI
Still Gallery II, Irvine Fine Arts Center, Irvine, CA
- 1996 *Jae Won Lee* Jane Hartsook Gallery, New York, NY
On Longing University of Montana, Missoula
Ceramic Sculpture: Jae Won Lee University of Washington, Seattle
- 1995 *Jae Won Lee: Recent Work* Revolution: A Gallery Project, Detroit, MI

Artist in Residence

- 2007 Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts, Newcastle, ME
Pottery Workshop, Shanghai, China
- 2006 The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, PA
Chung Nam National University, Daejeon, South Korea
- 2004 Ceramic Center Guldagergaard, Museum of International Ceramic Art-Denmark, Skaelskor, Denmark
- 2001 Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, CO
Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI
WOCEK, World Ceramics Exposition Korea, Yeoo, South Korea
- 2000 New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, Alfred, NY
Chitrani Ketan Artist Residency, Kovalam, Kerala, India
Camberwell College of Arts, The London Institute, London, The UK
- 1999 Europees Keramisch Werkcentrum, 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands
- 1997 The 7th Jinro International Ceramic Art Workshop, Kyung Nam University, Masan, South Korea
- 1996 Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, CO
- 1995 Archie Bray Foundation for Ceramic Arts, Helena, MT

Education

- 1995 New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, MFA in Ceramics
- 1991 California State University, Long Beach, CA, BFA in Sculpture

Honors and Awards

- 2007 Fellowship, Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts, Newcastle, ME
- 2007 College Fund for International Travel, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI
- 2006 Fellowship, Guest-Artist-in-Residence, The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, PA
- 2005 Intramural Research Grant, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI
International Research Travel Grant, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI
- 2001 Fellowship, WOCEK (World Ceramics Exposition Korea), Yeoo, South Korea
Fellowship, Visiting Artist, Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, CO
Fellowship, Artist-in-residence, European Ceramics work Center, the Netherlands
- 1996 Anderson Ranch Arts Center Artist-in-Residence Award, Snowmass Village, CO
Judge's Commendation Award, Fletcher Challenge Ceramic Award, Auckland, New Zealand

Academic Positions

- 2005- Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, Associate Professor
- 1998-05 Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, Assistant Professor
- 2006 Chung Nam National University, Daejeon, South Korea, Visiting Professor
- 2003-04 Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ, Assistant Professor
- 2000 Camberwell College of Arts, The London Institute, London, The UK, Visiting Lecturer
- 1997-98 California State University, Long Beach, CA, Lecturer
- 1996 University of Washington, Seattle, WA, Visiting Lecturer

Public Collections

Racine Art Museum, Racine, WI
Arrow International, Reading, PA
Arthur Williams Collection, New York, NY
Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, CA
American Museum of Ceramic Art, Pomona, CA
Jinro Cultural Foundation, Seoul, South Korea
Robert Pfannebecker Collection, Lancaster, PA
Archie Bray Foundation of Ceramic Art, Helena, MT
Danmarks Keramikmuseum, Museum of International Ceramics Art-Denmark
Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI
Hong Ik University, Ceramic Research Center, Seoul, South Korea
Kresge Art Museum, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI
Doo Shik Lee, Dean's Office, Hong Ik University, Seoul, South Korea
The Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art, Alfred, NY
State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, Honolulu, HI

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Jae Won Lee Internal Distance(s)

Mid-Career Restrospective

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Designed by Debra Lashbrook

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