

The Voided

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THE IDEA OF ENCAPSULATING MEMORY AND EXPERIENCE is an ongoing theme in the work of Minnesota artist Eun-Kyung Suh. Born and raised in South Korea, Suh finds inspiration in various culturally specific container-like objects, such as Korean funereal headwear and traditional Korean wrapping cloths called bojagi. Suh creates stylized, three-dimensional versions of these objects as storage vessels, visual metaphors implying the way most people store the memories of their life experiences.

Memory is frequently nonlinear, fragmented, and missing pieces, yet peppered with random but surprising moments of clarity. Personal, familial, and societal relationships and events—friendships, the deaths of loved ones, the births of the next generations, the places in which one has lived, and the social and political events that have had an impact on one's life—all have their places in the chain of sometimes tenuous memory fragments that trigger emotional responses and serve to contextualize one's sense of self. This idea is beautifully illustrated in Suh's work *Red—緯*, where the inclusion of photographs inside the diaphanous red fabric vessels can be seen to represent various events in a life—with the occasional photo-less vessel representing memories that have been lost.

Bojagi hold a special place in Korean culture and are used to protect, store, and carry possessions—everything from precious ritual objects to everyday clothes and mundane household belongings. While the first recorded mention of bojagi appeared in the Three Kingdoms of Korea Period (57 B.C. through A.D. 668), these cloths evolved and flourished during the Chosun Dynasty (1392–1910). Early bojagi were used for religious purposes, as altar cloths and coverings for sutras (Buddhist scriptures). Later, the women of a household made bojagi out of leftover scraps of fabric, which they carefully and artistically pieced together. These women, living in isolation in a Confucian society, developed aesthetically beautiful bojagi, using techniques such as embroidery, painting, dyeing, gold leaf, and quilting.

Suh turns this tradition-steeped craft into a multilayered metaphor by transforming the object-wrapper form into a three-dimensional vessel holding only a void. She explains: "This body of work involves a series of sculptural vessels as a metaphor for human emotion, memory, and experience. These sculptural vessels are created out of diaphanous textiles using a design originally inspired by bojagi, the traditional Korean wrapping cloth. However, my interest in bojagi does not lie on how to re-create traditional bojagi, but on how to extend the basic patchwork structures into my sculptural vessel forms because I am fascinated not with bojagi's overall design but with the process of making it, one patch after another."

Suh is also concerned with the idea of distilling human existence into its essential elements: memory, experience, life, and death. This concept is beautifully underscored in her work by her use of primary, or elemental, colors: blue, red, yellow, white, and black. These colors correspond symbolically to the five foundation elements in Asian culture: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Suh thus invites her audience to empty the mind of all that is not elemental and experience the idea of memory as the core of one's essence. The artist herself practices the emptying of the mind as she spends long periods of time at the sewing machine piecing together small rectangles of fabric in a form of creative meditation.

Suh's craftsmanship is exquisite. While she employs a tight Asian aesthetic and visual symbolism rooted in Korean culture, she has managed to say something universal about the place of memory and experience in the emotional and spiritual lives of all human beings. In "The Voided," she has produced an installation work that balances traditional craft with contemporary art making. This balance is what makes her work both thought-provoking and satisfying.

The most powerful and intriguing component in "The Voided" is what is missing inside each of the beautifully designed, perfectly crafted vessels. There is a quiet yet powerful energy in these empty spaces. Close inspection allows the visitor not only to experience the artist's essence in the form of photographic images or other ephemera, but also to be coaxed to contemplate his or her own memories, experiences, and unique essence.

When one looks in and sees nothing but empty space, one actually finds all that is needed.

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