

# The Self Reconfigured

Soe Yu Nwe





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A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics in the Department of Ceramics of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

by

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# Abstract

In my work, I explore different ways of narrating my experience of alienation, confusion, pain, and psychological confinement as a cultural outsider. I seek to create narrative spaces that explore the spatial relationships between the fragmented and dislocated self with the surrounding environment along with a yearning for connection. I convey these experiences through the use of symbols (house, shrine, vessel, and snake) as metaphors for the self. As a third generation Chinese immigrant in Myanmar, I look back to Buddhist and Animistic practices in my native country, in addition to Chinese cultural practices, for inspiration in my work. The concept of “Spirit Houses,” in particular, influences my work. Spirit Houses are animistic shrines that people in Southeast Asia build to placate the spirits disrupted by the human habitat by offering them shelter, food, and entertainment. Building upon the imagery of these ruined sacred spaces, I instill my metaphorical sculptural self with a sense of organicity and intricacy by gesturing the body, the viscera, the skeletal, and the botanical to express the vitality, the delicacy, and the injury of the spirit inhibiting and animating the forms.



“Spirit House.” Digital Image. Null Stream. December 20, 2004. Accessed May 13, 2015. <http://www.nullstream.com/archives/thaiUnluckySpiritHouse.jpg>.

# Narratives

## Name Story, an Origin of the “Spirit”

I started exploring the narrative of my identity in the summer of 2011 when I received a summer grant at Albion College for a ceramic project I proposed. For inspiration to create work, I began thinking about my identity as a third culture kid: someone who moves in between different cultures, whose personal and cultural identity was disrupted prior to the full development. I was born in Lashio, a rural town in northern Shan State Myanmar, but lived five to six years in the border area of Thailand. When I was seven, we moved to Yangon, the then-capital of Myanmar. In addition to Myanmar and English that was taught in Myanmar high school, I grew up learning Chinese, because of my Chinese heritage, and Thai because the nature of my family's business involves import and export trade with Thailand. During these formative years, I felt estranged from my surrounding society. At one point, in reflecting upon my identity, I realized the multiple names that I had acquired, all in different languages.

In Myanmar people are generally superstitious. Our country remained closed and highly privatized for almost thirty years because of military rule and to avoid global criticism. As a consequence, Myanmar is influenced less by globalization and Americanization. Folk beliefs and practices that revolve around supernatural forces still flourish. My father is a superstitious man. When I was born, he consulted an astrologer about my destiny and was advised to find me three “god mothers.” He decided that one of them would be a tree from his mother's house, another one a well in her yard, and the third my mother's friend. A few years ago, when I was pondering upon my name, I recalled this anecdote. I found this animistic and maternal association with the natural world both perplexing and fascinating.



Ancestors' shrine at home in Yangon, Myanmar. Photo courtesy of Kyi Zar Thein.

When I was born, my mother nicknamed me Xiao Xian (小嫻). To this day, the aunts that took care of my siblings and myself when we were little still call me Xiao Xian. When I was eight, my family went up to Lashio, where my father was originally from, to visit our paternal relatives. I had always been a very shy and timid child. The trip was not only exhausting but also overwhelming since it involved meeting a lot of blood-related strangers. Lack of electricity was a common problem in Myanmar and Lashio, despite being the largest town in Shan State, only received electricity about a few hours a month. People go to bed very early and it was pitch black at night. I cannot remember precisely what I felt but I do recall feeling very strange, out of place and frightened. So, during one of the nights, I had to urge to sing in bed while everyone was asleep to alleviate the inner tension. It was a Thai song I used to know with a sad comforting tune. My relatives overheard my humming, and the next day they asked me if I remembered singing at night. Because of my innate timidity and painful shyness, I had always had the impulse to retreat from any kind of outside attention, so I shook my head as I did not understand their question and remained elusive to further questioning. The relatives thought that I might have been possessed by a ghost and advised my mother to change my name to help ward out possible negative forces and to renew my luck.



“Spirit Houses of Myanmar.” Digital Image. April 2, 2013. Accessed May 13, 2015. [http://nepaldog.typepad.com/danger\\_dog\\_blog/2013/04/spirit-houses-of-yangon.html](http://nepaldog.typepad.com/danger_dog_blog/2013/04/spirit-houses-of-yangon.html).



“Burmese Nat House.” Digital Image. Burmese Art. Accessed May 13, 2015. <http://www.burmese-art.com/burmese-nats-spirits>.



“Spirit Tree.” Digital Image. Thailand Stories from Herman Studio. April 22, 2007. Accessed May 13, 2015. <http://www.hermanstudios.com/blog.html>

In Chinese and Burmese folk culture, when one faces a conundrum, it is a common practice to consult a supernatural medium meaning, asking an oracle. Learning from my mother that two of my godmothers were the well and the tree in my grandmother's house, my aunt consulted an oracle near the well to rename me for the change of luck. After trial and error, the oracle agreed to the name Long Hua (龍花) meaning "dragon flower." The conceived name was considered too masculine for a girl so they tried another name on the oracle. From that day on, my family called me Shu Hua (樹花) meaning "Tree Flower", named after my god mother, the tree living in my grandmother's yard.

Along the lines of pondering my identity and recalling the fragmented anecdotes told to me at various times and places, I conjured a conglomeration of images about my name, from memory and research to express myself and my quest to understand my origin and identity. I looked into Animism and came across outdoor animistic shrines attached to trees that are considered sacred. Sometimes they are erected within one's property. At times they attached to a Bodhi tree, the tree under which Buddha gained enlightenment. These shrines are loosely and collectively known as "spirit houses."

I have numerous pictures of spirit houses in my studio that support my exploration of a house to shelter my spirit. These houses are animistic shrines that the Burmese have created to placate preexisting spirits whose land they are building homes upon. I began to realize these miniature “foreign” ghost houses are “outsider” shrines. The first spirit house that I made for myself was in the summer after my sophomore year at Albion College. I find this notion of providing shelter and offerings to appease pre-existing ghosts intriguing. The animistic idea of a spirit dwelling in a land, a tree or a mountain is especially fascinating for it reaffirms the power of my own name: “Tree Flower (樹花).” Therefore I sculpted a ceramic shrine-like container as an appeasement for my own spirit. The sculpture is also based on the Chinese word, 囚. Pictorially, 口 recalls a box or enclosure and ideographically, 人 means human or a person. Therefore, the resulting meaning of the Chinese character is an enclosed or confined person—a prisoner.

I now see these houses as a private protest of my surrounding, a shell to retreat and seclude myself within when I am distressed from my environment. Being a foreign student in the United States, in addition to homesickness, there are a lot of cultural and linguistic difficulties with which I am faced. Prior to coming to the United States, in Myanmar, I suffered emotional difficulties living with my mother. Home was not a safe haven but rather a disquieting space permeated with unsolved domestic conflicts and unhealed wounds. The impulse to create a spirit house for myself could be due to my wishful escapist thoughts to detach my soul in order to be protected and housed in an ambiguous shrine while my body is trapped in the inescapable physical realm. Other pictures on the wall of my studio are images and illustrations of body and anatomy. They serve to inspire thinking related to my identity as a woman and as someone who mines the fertility of the previous and current inner life, and materialize them for self-disclosure.



House, for My Spirit  
Glazed stoneware, oxides, cone 10  
8 in x 8 in x 13 in  
2011



Ceramic artifacts printed from my palm resting on my object hand (left) and my subject hand (right).

# Language

## Reflexivity, a Deconstruction

Reflexivity creates a curious distance. It is different from reflection, a mirror effect of the self where the perceived image is deeply connected to one's identity because of "total external symmetry." In reflection, the division between the external image and self is seamlessly fused and therefore the replicated image passively follows the self. A reflexive process is instead an inherent "radical asymmetry"<sup>1</sup> that divides the outside image as an "other"; as long as their distance is maintained, the respective images can converse and inform one another<sup>2</sup>. For example, in the case of replicating an image of my hand by pressing clay into a mold made from it, the duplicated hand becomes an object that my subject—hand—manipulates to create a self-dialog. The resemblance creates allusion to the source image and also draws attention to the process of its reconstruction. The nested self-imagery within a single plane of vision invokes the uncanniness of the *Mise-en-Abyme*, an effect in which an image is recursive within itself<sup>3</sup>.

I observed the same linguistic pattern in my visual vocabulary. The image of a hand served as a symbol of the act of making, and the successive hands made were to be perceived in conjunction with the previous hands like reflexive pronouns. Therefore, the reflexive hands systematically draw attention to their own status as a communicative artifact. Such visual patterning, utilizing the reflexivity within the cognitive and linguistic, creates the association of meanings for me to express my subjectivity with a full sense of self-awareness. The materiality of clay and my own hands with flesh and bones create a radical separation that informs each other throughout the process of making via the intimacy of touch, one of "the most emotional and human sense"<sup>4</sup>.

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1 Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, Vol. 1. (Spring, 1976), pp. 50-64.

2 Rosalind Krauss, pp 56.

3 McHale, Brian. "En Abyme: Internal Model and Cognitive Mapping." In *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge*, edited by John Gibson, 189. New York: Routledge, 2012.

4 Dent, P. (2014). *The neglected power of touch: What the cognitive neurosciences can tell us about the importance of touch in artistic communication*. In *Sculpture and touch* (p. 108). Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.

Mold-making process creates an “iterability” of the hand image, allowing the hand to be repeated in a new narrative and grafted into new context<sup>5</sup>. The associative “play” between the image of my hand in contrast with my own also creates instability in the meaning during the state of making, rendering the narrative irrational and placeless. This creative process thus gives rise to a psychological state that attributes to the deconstruction and reconstruction of the image of my hand, and in extension my self-image. Clay also plays the role to recollect the tactile aspect of my making. I find the agency of the clay object functioning and responding intimately as collaborative image creator inspiring and unique in my ceramic making process.

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5 Balkin, Jack M. Deconstruction. 1995. Accessed May 13, 2015. <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/jbalkin/articles/deconessay.pdf>.





Ram-press mold-making with Lawrence Bush.



Ram-press mold-making with Lawrence Bush.

## Symbols

Another example of how language and reflexivity operate in my work is when I use other symbols to locate and express my identity. When I dissociate myself from my body or self-image I view the body as a conduit. Hence, externally, I compare myself to a house, a shrine or a snake as an “it”; internally I see my insides as organic botanical mass. In combination of the two, I create spirit houses, a shelter for my soul, and give the ghost offerings as appeasement. I have come to think that my work is deeply rooted in my alienation from not only the foreign culture and language but also from the self.

Growing up in a multicultural background and living in different foreign places has created in me a sense of innate alienation and painful division between myself and the surrounding cultural environment. Despite learning and knowing four different languages, in the midst of globalism and circumstantial up-rooting, my own inherited languages, cultural customs and traditions and those of the countries of residence become a source of confusion and the barrier between myself and others. The cultural alienation causes me to rationalize my identity into the form of other, non-human imagery becoming human or other symbols becoming humanized, morphing into and out of my hand.

My work is an attempt to recognize and reconcile such distance. My smaller sculptures become shelters and containers where I encode and store inward self-referential thoughts and abstracted narratives. I am interested in addressing and exploring the idea of distance as a device for closer understanding. Being multi-lingual permits me to look at different languages from a distance, and ponder how certain words in different languages hold significance or are visualized in my brain. Puns generated from utterance of words, literal translation of my name in different languages, self-invented metaphors, etc. are components that are synthesized into my work as poetic imagery.

## Shelter

The notion of shelter persists in my the work for both its positive meaning and the negative. Does it serve to provide safety or to obstruct growth? Is it a refuge or a prison? Is my urge to retreat a defensive mechanism? If yes, then what am I defending myself against?

In thinking about these questions, I explore making objects suggestive of containers to house my spiritual or metaphorical self and to explore what I surround myself with in moments of reclusion. Shelter allows me to face what's haunting me and within the enclosure, I understand what needs to be done in order to release them.

I explore the expression of confinement versus shelter, intimacy versus distance to express the emotional growth resulting from such exploration and discovery. Before becoming aware of the potential of glass as a material, I was creating forms around the idea of closure as a protective mechanism, and disclosure as a source of revelation within the form. These forms were made into an organic mass that vaguely resonated the idea and gesture of a house as shelter and also as prison.

Growing up in a household where my mother was the sole economic provider and ridden with anxiety and anger, the mother figure came to represent a pillar of the house that felt oppressive, cold, agitated and domineering. In contrast, the maternal figure also symbolizes the protection and sustenance. I respond to these experiences in my work by creating organic forms that allude to fettered growth with a rich kinetic energy flowing through and around them. The forms narrate my emotional struggle living with my mother. Glass, due to its trans-

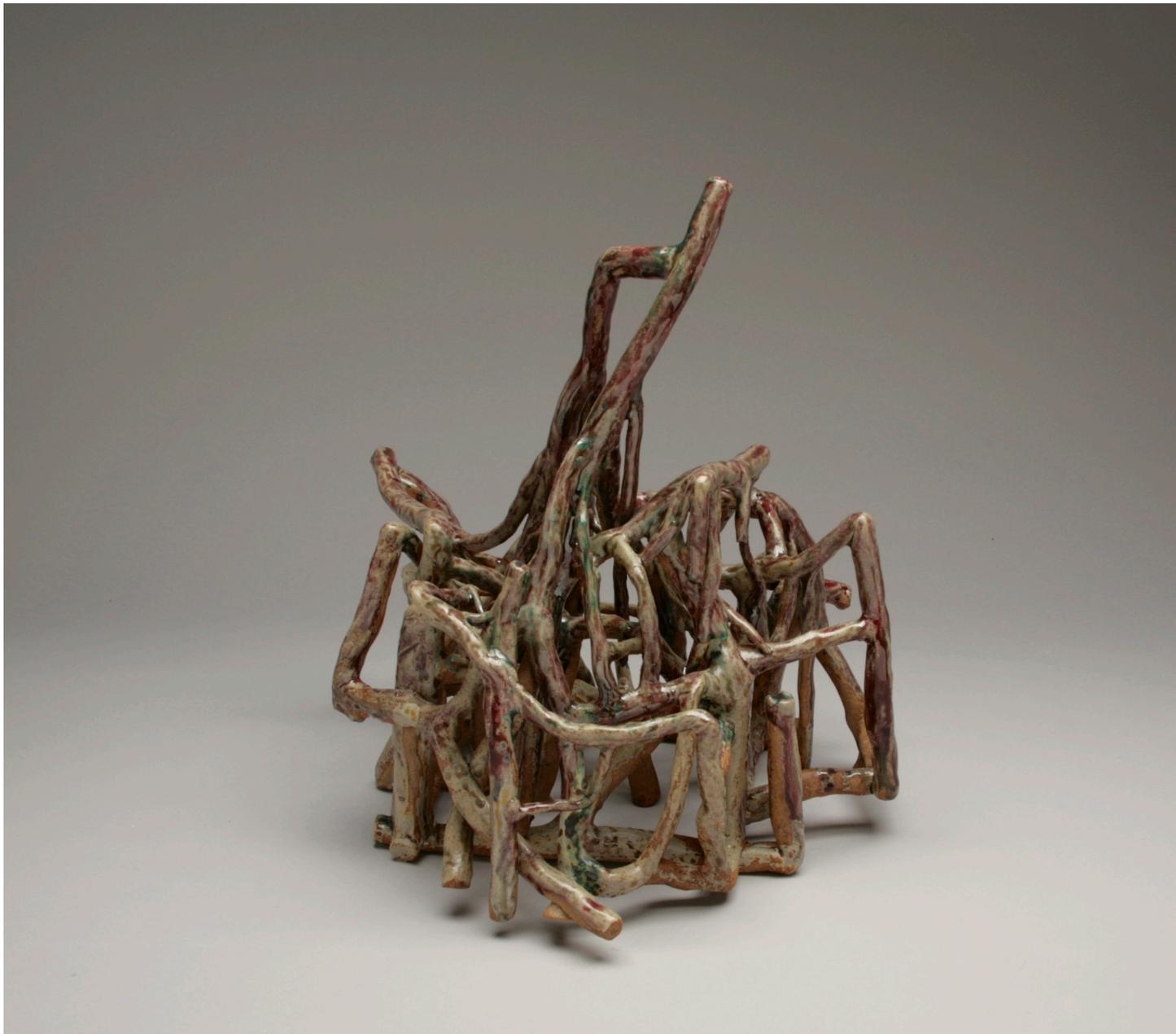
parency, has the potential to both allow light and protect and entrap the content within. In a way, it has the potential to offer a close and intimate view of the object while at the same time creating a physical distance between the viewer and the object being viewed. I began to realize my interest of this material in my experimentation later on as an attempt to distance myself from the distress of facing my mother while still agonizing, scrutinizing and ruminating the origin of this anxiety and dread.

## On House

The Prophet, a book written by the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran, is one of the most inspiring books on human condition I have read. One of the lines from the chapter, On Houses, Gibran wrote, “ ... children of space, you restless in rest, you shall not be trapped nor tamed. Your house shall be not an anchor but a mast.” The idea of a house being both a haven and an obstruction of growth resonates deeply with me. Inspired by those lines, I created Line House to explore making an abstract drawing out of clay by using lines as compositional devices. The gestures of the lines are inspired by the genius of botanical and physiological growth patterns. The lines in “Line House” echo the rhizomatic growth pattern, tracing its rhythmic chaos. By mirroring how a plant knowingly and forcefully roots itself downward to facilitate its upward shoots for photosynthesis, I hope to draw an analogy to a human’s instinctive need for a sheltering ground in erratically toiling for spiritual illumination.



Line House  
35" x 25" x 20"  
Ceramic  
Cone 10 reduction, reclaimed stoneware clay, handbuilt  
2013



Lone Root (visceral view)  
15" x 12" x 17"  
Ceramics  
Handbuilt and glazed reclaimed stoneware  
2013



Lovers  
8" x 9" x 17"  
Ceramic  
Cone 10 Reduction, reclaimed stoneware clay, handbuilt  
2013

## Feminine Wound, a Landscape of Reconfiguration

In these specimen pieces, I adopted my Chinese zodiac animal, the earth snake, as a self-image to explore and express notions of myself as a woman. Through the depiction of a wounded and dissected body of a snake, I clinically disclose my inner conflicts and psychological wounds.

The imagery of a snake is a symbol for both masculinity and femininity since it can be read as both the phallic symbol and the feminine archetype for the healing, the mysterious, seductive and destructive power of women<sup>1</sup>. Therefore the segmentation of the snake body also alludes to castration anxiety. To inscribe myself into the imagery of the snake, I sculpted my hands and botanical parts, morphing in and out of the snake body, a gesture that literalizes my name and my physical identity as the maker into the piece.

The piece can thus be read as my self, symbolically castrated and thus reveals my rational or irrational fear of feeling powerless. It can also be read as an identity unstable during transition, a person becoming the snake, the plant, and vice versa; the civilized, the animalistic and the immobile descending into dissolution. This is an exploration of feelings of insignificance and alienation resulting from my identity as a woman and a foreigner.

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<sup>1</sup> Stutesman, Drake. Snake. London: Reaktion, 2005.



Specimen#1  
Porcelain, Cone 10, Glaze and Luster.  
24 in x 40 in x 5 in  
2015





Specimen #5  
6 ft x 8 in x 5.5 ft  
Porcelain, glaze and oxides, luster, cone 10  
2015







Specimen# 3  
Porcelain, glaze and oxides, cone 10  
32" x 6" x 38"  
2015



Specimen# 3, detail view.



Feminine Wound, a Landscape of Reconfiguration #2

Glazed porcelain, cone 10

18" x 18" x 17"

2015



Feminine Wound, a Landscape of Reconfiguration #2  
Glazed porcelain, cone 10  
18" x 18" x 17"  
2015



Feminine Wound, a Landscape of Reconfiguration #3  
Glazed Porcelain  
14" x 13" x 12"  
2015



Feminine Wound, a Landscape of Reconfiguration #3  
Glazed Porcelain  
14" x 13" x 12"  
2015



Feminine Wound, a Landscape of Reconfiguration #1  
Glazed Porcelain  
18" x 9" x 27"  
2015





Lacerated Shrines (Love after Love)  
Glazed Porcelain  
36" x 40" x 5 ft  
2015



# Experiments

My creative process becomes experiments for me to amalgamate and reconfigure pre-existing language into a constantly evolving imaginative language that precedes verbalization. The process of making is also a process of narrating my confusion and fascination towards the psychological experience of being unable to verbalize thoughts in communicating. By using the language of the process as part of the vocabulary of the work, I engage myself with the activity fully and intuitively, enriching the meaning of the work and adding a visceral dimension to the message of the work.

## Experimentation with Glass

If you were to look at yourself, after dissecting, cleaning and deciphering the complicated parts that make yourself you, what would you see? If you can pick one thing from your body to represent yourself, which part would that be and why? How would you represent it? These are the things that I constantly ask myself when I create a piece. My work is a quest to understand what makes me the person I am today and what differentiates me from others. My work strives to materialize the impulses that arise from self-reflection alongside confusions that accompany daily life. In this series of experiments, I seek to encapsulate my experience in the form of specimens.

## Material Studies Specimens: Assorted Materials

Inclusion is defined as the state of being included. It can also refer to the foreign solid body enclosed within a mass.

My interest in the word “inclusion” inspired me to create poetic containers for my emotional or spiritual self. In “House of Inclusion”, I set out to experiment with a pun on the social meaning of the word, “inclusion” and its material meaning. I conducted a material experiment by firing foreign materials such as ceramics, metals, plaster, etc. inside glass to observe which materials are receptive to being included without cracking the glass. The experiment was a poetic attempt to narrate the alienation I feel.

After the experiment, I created a container, a nest-like or cage-like environment, using wire netting materials that are associated with caging enclosure, such as chicken wire and hardware cloth, to confine all the inclusion specimens. I enshrined the piece on a tree, like one would encounter an outdoor animistic shrine in Asia. Due to the cultural association of the netting material used, the resulting wire container recalls in the mind an ambiguous trap. The perpetuity of the encapsulation of foreign bodies inside glass also creates within the psyche an unsettling atmosphere of eternal captivity.

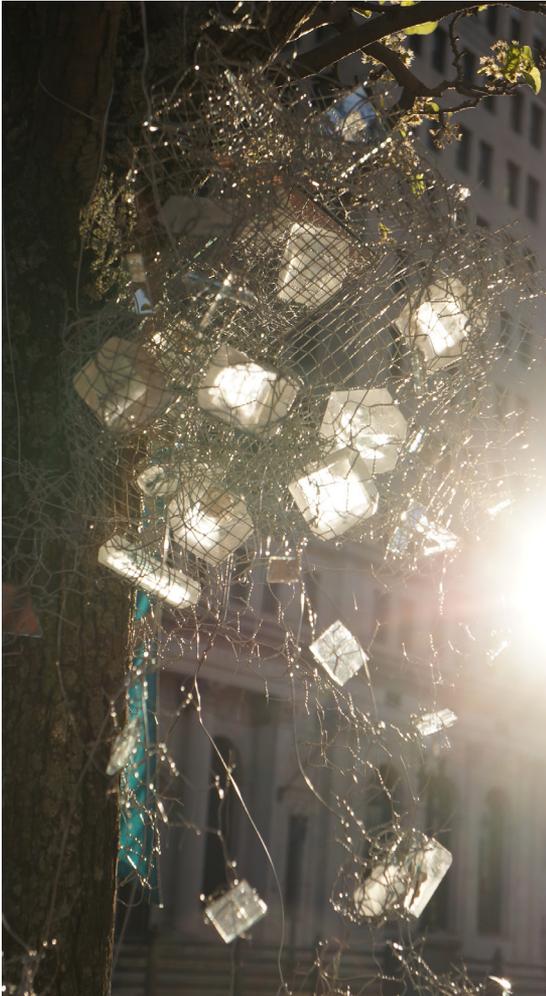
After the installation, I casted a video I made as an expression of desire and discord to create an emotional projection onto the nest-like or trap-like form in attempt to convey my metaphorical spirit within that house. Through this material exploration and digital expression, I hope to narrate and question my sense of alienation as a result of the self-imposed separateness, unsuccessful cultural assimilation or defensive impulse to repress my physical and instinctual expression.



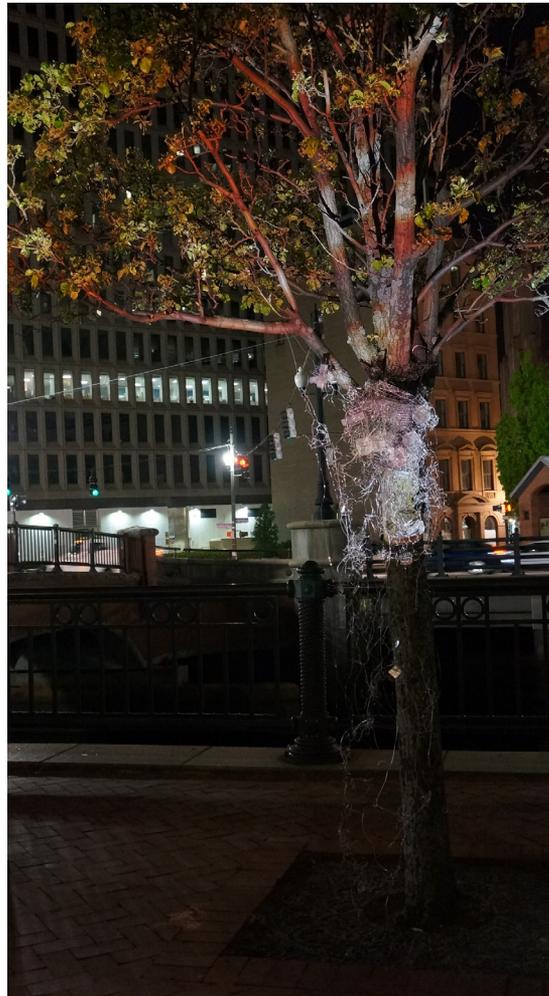
Assorted inclusion specimens: wire, clay, plaster, plaster + silica, fibre glass tape, etc.



Assorted inclusion specimens: various metal oxides.



House of Inclusion, day view.



House of Inclusion, night view with video projection.

# Material Studies Specimens: Femininity

## Nayoung's Hands

My interest in reflexivity prompted me to experiment in creating a collaborative self-portrait, a depiction of self through others. In “Material Studies Specimen: Femininity (Nayoung’s Hands)”, I collected remnant porcelain pieces from Nayoung Jeong’s Thesis Installation and created specimen studies by inserting them into hot glass as its inclusion bodies. The porcelain chips were casted from nipples of mothers and mothers-to-be to symbolize maternity, nurturance and perhaps the cusp of entering womanhood or motherhood. Because of the difference in coefficient of expansion, the ceramic breaks the glass during the annealing process. I repaired and polished the broken pieces into material study specimens to collaboratively explore the idea of feminine spaces and notions of displacement in conversation with Nayoung’s work. The fragmentation in glass caused by the ceramics also expressed the idea of internal violence between the glassy space and the encapsulated ceramic nipple. The material violence in this experiment alludes to the psychological violence within one’s repressive urge.



Nayoung's Shelter: Hands  
(Collaborative work with Nayoung Jeong)  
Porcelain nipple as inclusion in glass  
2.25" x 2.25" x 0.8"  
2014

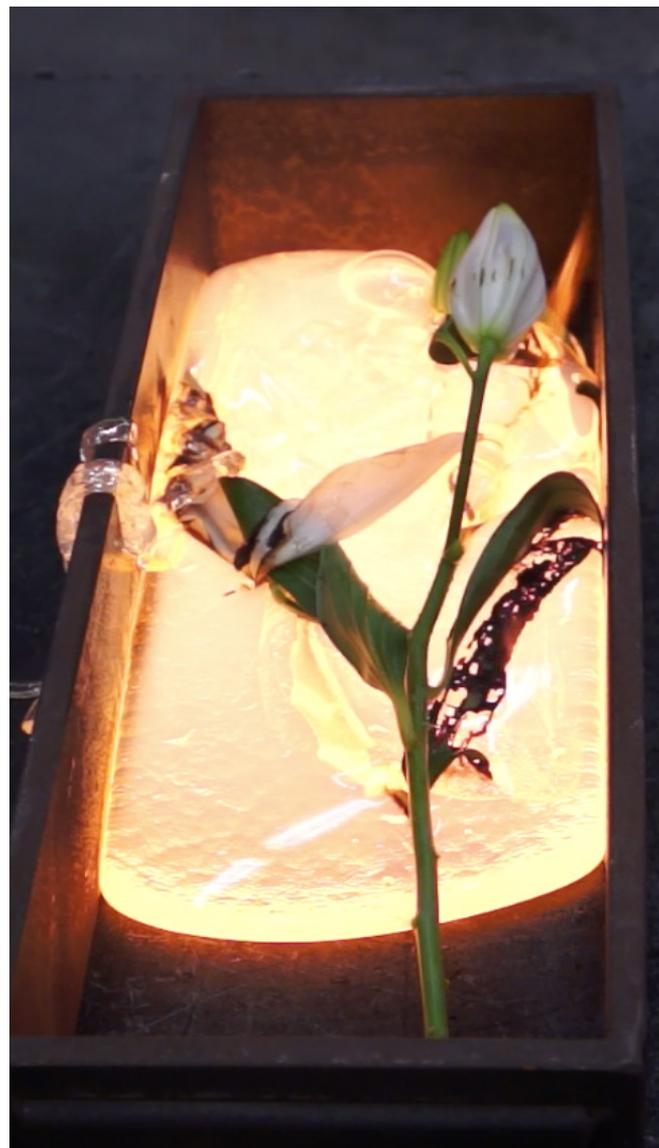
## My Braid

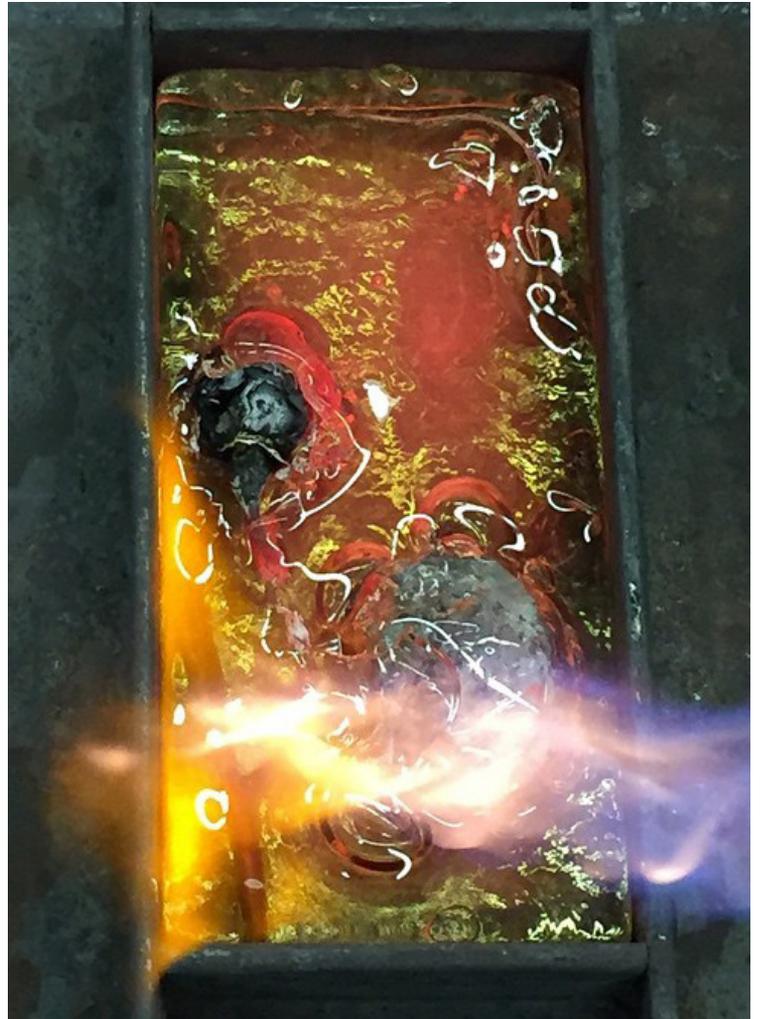
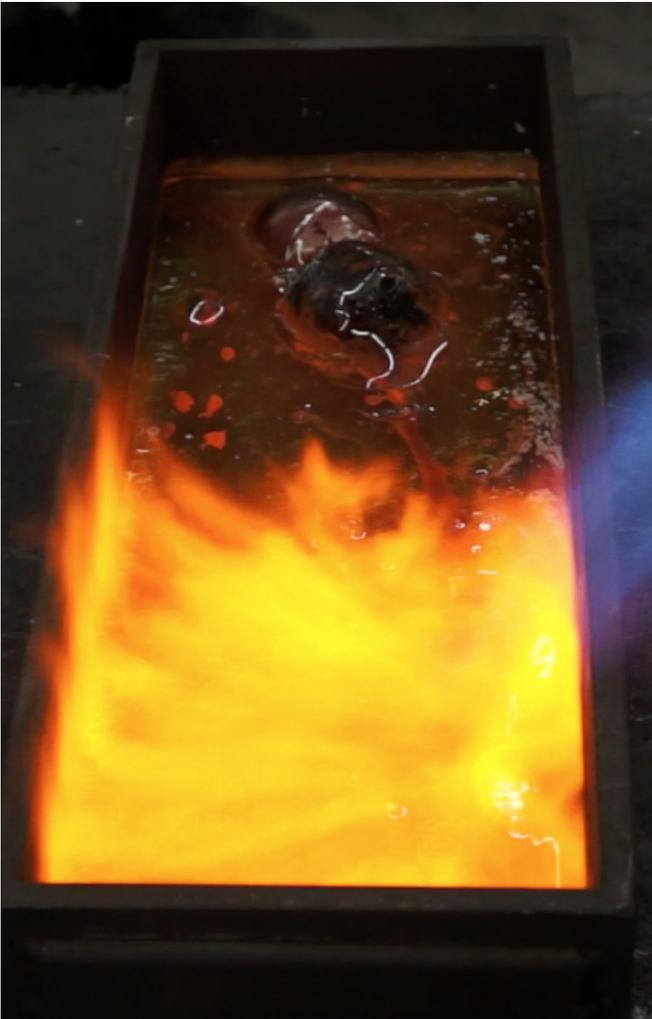
In “Material Studies Specimen: Femininity (My Braid)”, I materialize and literalize the expressive impulse by using myself, symbolized by my hair, as material to be fired as inclusion in hot glass. The gesture is an oxymoron, the statement contradictory, the un-belonging, letting go or destroying parts of myself concluded as the preservation of its remains. The resulted specimen is a reflection on the sentimentality, the act of romanticizing a void that loss can create.



My Braid  
Human hair as inclusion in glass  
3.5" x 7.24" x 0.75"  
2014

Various material tested as inclusion in glass including flowers, the artist's hair, ceramics, plaster, oxides, metal wire, etc.





## Sagger Firing

Sagger is a protective box made to enclose ceramic ware while being fired. In sagger firing, combustible materials are placed inside and around the sagger along with the ceramic ware before being loaded in the kiln. To continue to explore the themes of narratives within enclosure and protection, I started experimenting with sagger firing. The sagger boxes act as protection for heat shock but also as a secluded environment in which the atmosphere is more heavily reduced. The reduced atmosphere causes the ceramic ware inside to be hungry for oxygen and therefore to readily bond with the carbon from the burning of combustible material placed inside the sagger. This causes the ceramic ware to absorb the carbon on its surface and receive a variation of black to grey sheen. I experimented sagger firing with sawdust, ceramic oxides, rice, salt and sugar to understand the aesthetics of the result in order to use the combustible materials symbolically after the experimentations. This way I can incorporate firing as a rite of offering and reference to my use of ceramic making as a process of transformation.





Sagger-fired writings:

## Snake Parts Reconfigured: Fictional Characters

Despite being born of Chinese heritage, learning Chinese language has always been very challenging to me. The characters elude me. No matter how many times I practice writing, I could not seem to grasp the specificity of the words to remember them. In this series of ephemeral installation, I reconfigure the ceramic sagger fired parts by intuitively arranging the features and gestures of the ceramic lines in order to create fictional characters that are reminiscent of the pre-existing Chinese characters. My ephemeral characters are pictorial and not verbal. Every time I write a picture, I reuse the ceramic parts, each time creating a new word and forgetting the previous. Through this action, I hope to narrate the longing for my root and the failed attempts at connecting with it.





# Conclusion

The process of making in clay is cathartic and transformative. Communicating through the use of symbols creates a safe distance for me to express. The tactile experience in the ceramic making process serves to reconcile the distance that I create through the use of symbols, production techniques such as mold-making, and detaching material such as glass. The intuitive act of creating reflexive images for the purpose of communicating sentiments such as loss, anxiety, pain, etc. creates a self-dialog that builds self-knowledge. Through symbolic narration I hope to address and heal psychological wounds caused by alienation from culture and society, family and self.













Page 60-61:

Emotional Waters  
Drawing  
30 x 22 ¼ inches  
2014

Page 62-63:

Spirit House under-drawing  
Drawing  
30 x 22 ¼ inches  
2014

Page 64-65:

Cages  
Drawing  
30 x 22 ¼ inches  
2014

Page 66-67

Interior of a Serpent (detail)  
30 x 22 ¼ inches  
2014







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