

**Esther Jihye Cho, Heather Kohlmeier, Veronica Pham**

*Masters of Fine Arts thesis exhibition at The Center for Design and Material Culture at the University of Wisconsin's School of Human Ecology*

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Essay

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Artists Esther Jihye Cho, Heather Kohlmeier and Veronica Pham reflect on the body, secrecy, memory, and migration in artwork created for their Masters of Fine Arts thesis exhibition at The Center for Design and Material Culture at the University of Wisconsin's School of Human Ecology.

Esther Jihye Cho utilizes *jiseung*, a method of weaving paper into sculptural form. It is a traditional Korean practice developed 500 years ago. With it, Cho laboriously constructs whimsically abstracted objects that describe confidences that are deep, dark, and at times hysterical. Her exhibition is aptly titled "Tangible Secrets."

"A man slept in my bed." "I am addicted to weed and I don't know how to stop." "I just bled through my pants."

Using urgent messages scrawled on the walls of bathrooms, bars and restaurants, Cho uncovers what we wish to reveal and at the same time keep hidden. The artist then draws expressionist vessels that evoke these secrets. From the drawings, Cho weaves *hanji*, Korean mulberry paper, that has been twisted into cords to construct objects that take on the characteristics of the secrets she has collected.

The sculptures are reminiscent of viscera, or perhaps strange and rare animals. "Drunk," is a vertical construction that flares up off its pedestal, darkly dyed fabric fading to a lighter sage green as it rises. The top loses its upward motion, flaccidly listing to the side. Two red protuberances offer lewd invitations.

The largest construction of the nine artworks in this exhibition is a cumulative piece including the artist and her studio mates. "Secrets from Room 2103" rises up like a hydra, a large abdominal shape topped with flailing tentacles or hair spilling from the top. It feels like shouting.

Cho elegantly mounts her sculptures on airy wooden pedestals with light features that she has also constructed. Together, these works emerge as inventive reflections on our paradoxical need to expose personal truths while simultaneously remaining anonymous.

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“Inside Out,” is a meditation on the body and how we perceive and experience it. Artist Heather Kohlmeier navigates interpretations of the body’s interior, the body clothed, and the body as it exists in the physical world.

Our insides are an abstraction to us. Even with the use of medical imaging, we *feel* our interiority more than we ever see it. Kohlmeier has assembled layered and stained paper within back-lit frames. They resemble microscope specimen slides or CT scan imagery. As the stacking of paper compounds, they become more opaque. Natural dyes saturate the paper in various hues of flesh. The lighting reveals darker aberrations, meant to elicit the feeling of irregular, perhaps diseased formations.

Across from these works, Kohlmeier has constructed minutely realized clothing at macro scale. Pants, shirt and a dress, all made in translucent white paper, hang from a clothesline. “In Over My Head” describes the body’s ritualistic task of covering and uncovering. The clothes feel perfectly authentic in construction, but the proportions stretch to touch the ground, and continue to extend onto the floor. The experience reminds us of the weight and labor we take on and remove throughout the entirety of our lives.

From interior to exterior, Kohlmeier then asks the viewer to imagine the body in places it might inhabit. “*My Little Corner*” reflects the spaces we curate for comfort and respite, where our bodies feel most at home.” Furniture, tchotchkes, and photos are compiled in a domestic assemblage, augmented with additional bolts of handmade paper festooned in and around this setting. The installation feels both domestic and formal, an archetype of place and experience. Kohlmeier describes the intimacy of our interior selves, our physical acts, and the spaces we navigate throughout our lived experience.

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Veronica Y Pham interrogates the complexities and decisions of the immigrant experience in her exhibition “The Line along the Knot.” What must be left behind? What is vital enough to carry along, as heavy and burdensome as it may be? The artist has created a body of work that in itself is a journey across the ocean, a tangle of knotted possessions and emotions, and a coming together of thought and experience through material and memory.

Sheets of handmade paper are hung seamlessly together to create a current of dusty blue lining two walls of the gallery. It is a description of the ocean’s expanse, undulating forms echoing Pham’s family’s journey from China and Vietnam to the United States. The blue paper surrounds a woven fishing net that Pham constructed from mulberry paper. Within the net’s knotted pattern, the artist has festooned small objects, coins and beads, from a distant past. In the center of the netted enclosure, a table displays a film of Pham’s hands weaving the net

itself, creating her own connective tissue. During the exhibition's opening, the artist's mother performed an improvisational composition on a *guzheng*, a traditional Chinese zither. The performance occurred in and amongst the weave of fishing nets and knots, the hands of the musician echoing the hands of the artist in making.

The far wall is strewn with dried mulberry bark, installed to look like flotsam on the wind, another allusion to movement, migration and to ephemerality. It was a haunting experience. I felt the wind blow this resilient plant through the air, from east to west, across time.