

COCOON

A vulnerable package
in transition
to
a new
existence

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Introduction

Why this subject?

Boxes and closed forms have always played an important role in my ceramic design. Even when making vases I would finish them by placing a lid on the opening. Boxes have something intriguing, something fascinating, something mysterious. What can you hide in a box? A box can also be used as a protection for a precious object or to wrap a valuable present.

Recently I have developed closed forms. I wanted to produce very thin, fragile forms in paper porcelain which express vulnerability. Several people mentioned to me that they look very much like cocoons or mummies. I didn't have these terms in mind when I started making them. Probably again, very unconsciously, I started making a wrapped form which is like a "box" in transition to a new creation.

In this essay I want to research the meaning of cocoons and mummies in different fields and how they have inspired myself and other artists. My main overarching research question is: **"To what extent can ceramic cocoons communicate vulnerability and transformation?"**

Once I decided what kind of work I was going to create, which materials I was going to use and the ideas I wanted to express, I formulated a title which includes three terms which are important to me and which are the focus of my research:

- * "vulnerability"
- * "transition"
- * "new existence"

The title includes evident questions:

- * Are porcelain cocoons expressing "vulnerability"?
- * Are porcelain cocoons a symbolic metaphor to express "transition"? "transformation"? "metamorphosis"?
- * Do porcelain cocoons suggest the emergence of a "new existence"?

Research questions:

- What is the meaning of a cocoon?
- What is the meaning of a mummy?
- What are the differences? Similarities?
- In which ways do cocoons perform in nature?
- In which ways and cultures do mummies perform throughout history and throughout different cultures?
- What is the social-cultural, philosophical and metaphysical meaning of cocoons/mummies?
- Has the cocoon/mummy been an inspiration for artists?
- Which contemporary artists have been inspired by the cocoon/mummy? (some case studies)
- How are contemporary artists materializing the cocoon/mummy in their artwork?

My own practice:

- Why did I start making this kind of forms which look like cocoons/mummies?
- What is the meaning of a cocoon/mummy to me?
- What do I want to emphasize? The cocoon? The mummy? The metamorphosis?
- What do I want to express with these forms? Symbolic meanings?
- How do I materialize these cocoons? Methodology?
- Where and how do I want to present this work? Why?
- Which image/message do I want to give to the audience?
- Which comparisons are there between my idea of a cocoon and the idea of other contemporary artists?

Part 1

Context

What is a “Cocoon”?

A cocoon is a protective covering of silk, spun around the pupa of a caterpillar. It is one stage out of the different life stages of an insect going from “embryo” into “larva”, “pupa” and “imago” (moth or butterfly). Only a certain kind of insects (holometabolous insects) undergo such a complete metamorphosis. **(1)**

Etymological origin of cocoon

The word “cocoon” originates from the Middle French “coucon” (16th C) and from the Old French “coque”, which means “shell”. The modern French word “cocon” means “clam shell, egg shell, nut shell”. In Latin the word “coccum” means “berry” or “fruit”. In Greek the word “kokkos” means “berry, seed” **(2)**



What is a “Mummy”?

In school we were taught about the mummies of the Pharaohs in ancient Egypt. They were intentionally preserved through embalming and kept in their graves and Pyramids. We were seldom taught that in many other cultures the deceased were embalmed and mummified. The Egyptians even mummified their cats and other animals.

Etymological origin of mummy

The word mummy comes from the Latin “*mumia*” and the Arabic “*mumiyah*”, which means “embalmed body”.

In the English language “mum” is often used as a pet word for mother. “Mummy” is a childish alteration of mammy or mumsy.

It is quite remarkable that the word “mummy” in the English language is referring to mother, a person who takes care of children, offers them protection. In the French, German or Dutch language there isn’t such a reference.

What are the differences and similarities between cocoons and mummies?

A cocoon is a protective envelope which is created by a caterpillar in order to reproduce an adult insect. The cocoon is spun by a thin, fragile silk wire produced by the silk worm. After the cocoon is finished it is strong to offer enough protection to the pupa in its temporary stage. A cocoon is the intermediate stage of a creature which is slowly developing into another life. Therefore the cocoon can be seen as an archetypal image that symbolizes a metamorphosis.

It is remarkable that the etymological explanation of the word "cocoon" refers to words like berry, seed, shell, egg or nut shell. A seed or a nut can also grow into a new plant or tree, a new existence. An egg will also evolve into a new being. A shell offers protection. Not only through etymological elucidation there are links between a cocoon and eggs or shells but mainly in symbolical clarifications and image-wise a lot of similarities can be discovered.

A mummy is an embalmed body, cleaned, packed and buried in anticipation of reincarnation. The dead body is wrapped in thin, mostly linen bandages. Although the deceased doesn't really grow into a new life here on earth, the mummification was executed by the family of the dead, believing there would be another life after death.

Both, cocoon and mummy, are casings, they are carrying vulnerable forms and provide protection during a transitional phase. Both are referring to a metamorphosis, to a change, a rebirth and therefore both have a very strong symbolic meaning. A symbolic similarity between the embalmed mummy and the etymological meaning of the word "mother" can be seen, as both are protecting vulnerable beings.

In which ways do cocoons perform in nature?



Physicists and scientists have done a lot of interesting research on cocoons and how they perform in nature. The silk cocoon has been used to study Arthropod biology.

For this essay the scientific research and analyses are not really relevant. As an artist I am much more interested in the images and forms in which cocoons occur in nature and how they materialize.

Therefore I would prefer to focus more on the similarities between the images of cocoons and mummies and most of all the metaphysical and philosophical comparisons.

Historical and cultural performances of Mummies



Although mummification is known for thousands of years, the first scientific and historical studies only started in the beginning of the 20th century. The first World Congress on mummies was held in 1992 in Tenerife, where hundreds of scientists shared their research.

There are two categories of mummies:

1. **Anthropogenic** mummies were deliberately created by their family mostly for religious reasons
2. **Spontaneous** mummies, were created mostly unintentionally due to weather conditions (extremely dry heat or cold), or the bodies were found in bogs. Leading archaeologists believe that these bog bodies were murdered people who were deposited in the bogs as a part of a cultural tradition of human sacrifice or execution of criminals.

The ancient Egyptian mummies are best known in the world. Deliberate mummification became a common ritual in Ancient Egypt at +/- 3500 BCE. The preservation of the deceased was seen as an important step to the after-life. Burial practices became a status symbol for the wealthy and the methods of embalming became more sophisticated.

But apart from the Egyptian culture, embalming and mummification were performed in many other ancient societies like Aztec culture. The oldest mummies in the world, both deliberate and accidental, were found in South-America. From the Inca-period several naturally-preserved, unintentional “ice-mummies” were found in the colder regions of Argentina, Chile, and Peru.

The mummies of Asia are usually considered to be accidental, while many mummies found in Europe were often Bog Bodies, found in acid swamps. Some mummified bodies were found in Christian crypts in Hungary, Czech Republic and Italy.

In all other parts of the world - North America as well as several African countries – mummies were found.

In more recent times Jeremy Bentham (1748 -1832) was the first man who expressed the wish to be mummified after his death. His mummified body is still on display at the University of London.

There are many more interesting things to explore about mummies: the different ways of embalming in different cultures and the background of all these mummified people throughout the millennia. But this leads me too far from the intended focus: the reason why deceased were embalmed and the philosophical, symbolic, metaphysical and socio-cultural meaning.

Part 2

Cocoon

Mummy

in

Contemporary context

Social-cultural meaning of cocoons

Although “cocoon” was originally only referring to a casing of insects, this term obtained a new meaning in the 1980s. “Cocooning” even became a verb and a term for social behavior. In the eighties a new trend occurred: people seemed to choose more for the security and safety of a trusted environment and quiet, cozy entertainment at home, just on their own, as a couple or with a few friends. The word cocoon got a new meaning: a cozy nest for people where one could withdraw from the hectic world and find rest and protection. **(4)**

This social change had its influence on the cultural environment and behavior resulting in commerciality. Home cinema systems became a new trend. Online shopping, internet gaming, reading the newspaper and e-books have made sure that you can stay up-to-date without leaving your seat. Chatting and virtual contacting sites were developed so that social contact could happen from home.

Faith Popcorn-Plotkin is an author, trend forecaster and marketing consultant. In the 1990s she explained her vision about “Cocooning”, known as the “Popcorn Report”. She predicted that cocooning would become an increasingly attractive option and could have a significant commercial influence on home entertainment, “work-at-home” options, electronic shopping, ...

*“If a reasonable amount of progress has been made when one is cocooning, one may expect the subject to have a breakthrough and emerge like a butterfly to enjoy life.” **(5)***

The vision of Faith Popcorn has been skeptically viewed by other authors. One of them is Chuck Palahniuk who describes in his novel “Haunted” the behaviour of one of his characters, Lady Baglady, who is staying at home, hanging around, cocooning, as “slumming”, an illness of modern society.

The design world developed interiors and furniture that would meet the expectations of the cocooning crowd. Saunas and hot tubs are installed in private homes. Some of the contemporary furniture is explicitly designed as a virtual embrace and protection.



Social-cultural meaning of mummies/mummification

Nowadays a general trend of mummification as it existed in ancient Egypt no longer applies. Although there are some exceptions.

In 1924 Vladimir Lenin's body was embalmed and is still on display in the Lenin mausoleum in Moscow.



Plastination

In the 1970s Gunther von Hagens invented a new way of mummification called "plastination". Although this sort of mummification was in the first place developed for medical and scientific reasons, there was a social-cultural resonance. For educational reasons, Gunther Van Hagen organized exhibitions of plastinated bodies, "Körperwelten" (Body Worlds) which travelled around the world. In the beginning when "Körperwelte" was exhibited there were a lot of ethical and controversial discussions. Dr. von Hagens understood that a taboo would be broken by using donated bodies for public educational exhibitions. The Institute of Plastination was accused of disturbing the peace of the dead and violating the German burial laws. They never lost a case.

The first exhibition of "Körperwelten" in Belgium caused a lot of commotion. Some people found it shocking, creepy, irresponsible, aggravating, provoking, scandalous, offensive and horrible. But the exhibition also attracted thousands of visitors.

In November 2009 the Ethics Advisory Committee of California ScienCenter was commissioned to study the ethical responsibility and controversial questions like:

- * Is this exhibition treating human remains respectfully?
 - * Does the scientific educational value outweigh community and cultural sensitivities.
- And many more issues were questioned but in the end this Ethic Advisory Committee gave a positive recommendation for "Körperwelte" to be exhibited in the State of California. **(6)**

At this moment there are worldwide 9 exhibitions going on about "Körperwelte" – "Body Worlds": Amsterdam, Berlin, Dublin, Mexico, Texas, New York, Austria, Rome and in the Plastinarium in Guben, Germany.

In recent press releases quotes can be read referring to: fusing science and culture, the artistic miracle of the human body which shows vulnerability and resilience.

In this option similarities can be seen between the ancient mummification and the contemporary plastination. The religious meaning was probably crucial in ancient times but it was also an expression of the general socio-cultural rituals. Respect for the deceased was very significant. This same respect for the dead is also an important moral and socio-cultural issue in the plastination exhibitions.



Dr. von Hagens says about the recent exhibitions:

*"This exhibition is all about the **cycle of life**, from the spark of conception, to the development of a mature body, and it goes through to elderly people. It shows the whole spectrum of life. It shows how we develop and how we age. ... People will learn about the importance of their bodies. They will learn how fragile and how strengthful the body is."*

From the Independent, October 28th, 2008. (7)

By exhibiting the plastinated specimens to the general public, Dr. von Hagens caused quite a worldwide stir. In the time of Vesalius (16th century) anyone interested could attend the surgery of human bodies because it was a public affair. No serious ethical, social or cultural issues were raised. In the 20th century the presentation of the dissection of a human body raises all kinds of questions:

- Is it offensive?
- Is it medically, ethically, educationally and socio-culturally appropriate?

Consciously Dr. Von Hagens meticulously chooses themes for his exhibitions with which he indicates that he wants to show more than naked, dissected, analyzed human bodies and especially humans in a socio-cultural context. Man as an artistic creation of nature (God?). The human being in his nakedness: "vulnerable yet also resilient."

Philosophical, Psychological and Metaphysical meaning

Cocoons and mummies are both connected with the symbolic idea of metamorphosis. Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), the founder of analytic psychology and also an important philosopher, did a lot of research on the meanings of symbols in mythological stories and religious images and rituals. He discovered that there are a lot of similarities in the meaning of symbols and rituals in different cultures all over the world. In his assertion Jung states that the unconscious is divided over 2 layers: the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious, which contains a collective memory of experiences. This collective memory creates archetypes or fundamental, symbolic images, which are universal and occur in all cultures throughout history. Archetypes have a symbolic meaning and refer to hidden spiritual knowledge.

Human beings have the tendency to give a symbolic meaning to objects and images in their surroundings, especially when the images seem mysterious or transcendental. A lot of symbols refer to hidden spiritual knowledge. The cocoon and the mummy are both archetypes with a very strong symbolic meaning.

Edward F. Edinger, a leading Jungian analyst writes:

*"A mummification indicates symbolically a preparation for a mental rebirth. The old ego is mortified, soulless and motionless. A subtle mental process begins, a fusion of old and new, visible and invisible, light and dark, conscious and unconscious. The **Mumia** of the alchemists refers to the **Anthropos**, the original human being. This is a fantasy of perfectness which suggests the possibility of a new, unspoiled and incorruptible personality. (Edinger, 162-163). It is a state of deep introversion which takes place after a consistent reminder of things which are inspired by unconscious energies and eventually compose a new connection to life." (8)*

Throughout human history the process of dissolution and coagulation, of disintegration, regression and individualization has been expressed in archetypal imagination. In ancient Egypt, during Classical and the Celtic period as well as during the Renaissance metamorphosis has the meaning of a magical transformation. The ancient Greek mythology and the Hindu religion is full of stories about gods turning into other creatures. In the New Testament the transformation of Jesus into the Lamb, into Christ, the Son of God is a very emphatically metamorphosis.

Part 3

Cocoon

Mummy

In

ART

PERFORMANCES OF COCOONS AND MUMMIES IN CONTEMPORARY ARTS

Ovidius describes the story of a metamorphosis in "Pygmalion and Galatea", where a sculpture becomes a real personality through love and art. This story has inspired many visual artists throughout the centuries. In "Die Verwandlung", Franz Kafka tells the story of Gregor Samsa who wakes up to find himself transformed into a giant insect.

In the novels of Harry Potter a lot of transformations and metamorphosis's happen all the time.

It would be very interesting to start studying how cocoons and mummies, and the underlying idea of metamorphosis have inspired artist (painters, sculptors, writers, musicians, ...) throughout the centuries. A systematic research of such a study would require a lot of time. Regarding the subject of this assignment I find it much more interesting to focus on contemporary artists whose work is inspiring me and also encourages me to reflect upon my own work. Therefore I decided to analyze the work of some contemporary artists.

A lot of contemporary artists are using images which refer somehow to a cocoon or a mummy. It can be image-wise or conceptual, it can be because they are using similar materials or for some other reasons.

BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE

The art works of Berlinde De Bruyckere force you to think about their expression, their meaning.

During the 2013 Biennial of Venice, De Bruyckere presented a huge sculpture named: "Cripplewood". She made a wax copy of a tree which had been laying in a river near her house in France. The tree had fallen over during a storm and was left for years, hanging half way in the river. During the years objects floating in the river got caught in the branches. The tree had been collecting rubbish, useless things, thrown away.

Not only the image of the sculpture is impressive, but also the metaphor.

The title "Cripple-wood" has a double meaning. Is it referring to a crippled person, a crippled society? It certainly refers to something broken, fallen over, torn, tormented, hurt, handicapped. What does the artist want to express? Does she want to refer to how society neglects people who have "fallen over", who had accidents, who are handicapped, who are growing older and getting more and more helpless.

This sculpture is made in wax, colored in grayish-pink. Therefore it looks very much like human skin. That's why this sculpture looks like a dead, human body. Some parts are wrapped, like a mummy. Most parts are bare, looking like a bleeding tree, a bleeding body.



"Cripplewood" shows the remains of a majestic elm. Struck down, bruised and hurt he lies on the floor of the museum. Branches are bandaged. Wood skinned into colored wax. A delicate and damaged creature nevertheless remains impressive.

Cripplewood summarizes perfectly all the themes, motifs and inspirations of De Bruyckere: metamorphosis, duality, body, skin lesions, brittleness that is both strength, weathering, melancholy ... But De Bruyckere never lapses into pessimism or fatalism; her work witnesses a sublime, tranquil beauty. (9)

Dorothee Cappelle - Mirjam Devriendt
From "Ons Erfdeel" www.onserfdeel.be



In January 2015 I had the opportunity to go to a solo-exhibition of Berlinde De Bruyckere in the S.M.A.K.-Museum (museum for Contemporary Art) in Gent, Belgium.

<http://www.smak.be/tentoonstelling.php?la=nl&y=&tid=&t=&id=582>

Some of her sculptures left me affected, touched and softened, others I found disgusting, too harsh, too crude, too brutal. But most of all I was struck and speechless. Only after reading the catalogue and looking at the pictures again and again, I could start formulating, with hesitation, what her art work evokes in me, in which way it touches me.

Philippe Van Cauteren writes in the introduction of the catalogue:

"Each physical encounter with her work makes me speechless, words and sentences fall into meaningless sounds compared to the loaded imagery. Mysterious existences that force us to stand still and leave us behind uncomfortable."

...

"Each sculpture is an injured body that emerges deterioration and damage and invites viewers to lose themselves in it. Berlinde De Bruyckere moves in a spectrum of beauty and horror, intimacy and hardness ..." (10)

De Bruyckere works with wax, wood, animal skin, metal, fabric, paint, pencil, paper, recycled materials, ... Some of the sculptural works of De Bruyckere are somehow affiliated with my own work, not so much concerning the image but much more concept wise.



"Glassdome with Cripplewood" 2014, Wax, wood, glass, cloth, epoxy, iron.
Exhibited at Hauser & Wirth's London, December 2014



Title: "Lingam"
Size: 240 x 122 x 62 cm

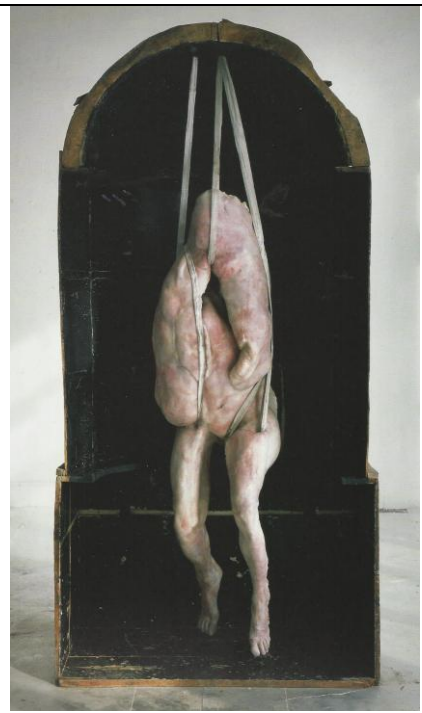
Looking at this sculpture from one side, it seemed to have some resemblance to a cocoon. It looks like a wooden box, which could be seen as a case to protect something.

The title suggests something erotic, sensual, powerful.

A Lingam is a column-like form, which is representing the creative power of the Hindu god Shiva. It is the symbol of a phallus. In Hindu culture a Lingam is often presented together with the Yoni, a symbol of Shakti, which stands for the divine feminine creative power. The union of lingam and yoni represents the eternal process of creation and regeneration, the indivisible *two-in-oneness of male and female*. **(11)**



A Lingam in Hindu Culture



Inside the "Lingam" of B. De Bruyckere

When the spectator walks around the "Lingam" of Berlinde De Bruycker, one discovers a very creepy, scary image of figures hanging in a dark shell-looking cave. Is this an image of two bodies entangled and hung on the ceiling of the Lingam? Is this representing *the union of "indivisible two-in-oneness of male and female", the passive space and active time from which all life originates"* (12) ?

This image is questioning the meaning of love, the meaning of intercourse,. Does love tie two people together and enclose them in a cave which looks like a prison? Is love between two people really resulting in creative power or is it rather destructive?

KOREAN MOON JARS

Korean Moon Jars have something mysterious and intriguing. They are very simple sphere-like shapes, thrown on the potter's wheel. The minimalistic round shape and the white glaze radiate innocence, pureness. To me these Moon Jars also refer to egg forms and therefore also to the idea of a form in transition to a new existence.

Two Korean artists showed their "Moon Jars" during the 18th Biennale of Sydney in 2012 (see below).



"Translated Vases" YeeSookYung



"Moon Jars" - Park, Young-Sook

PARK, Young-Sook (°1947): *"While producing countless moon jars, I see them explode and break apart, and eventually think of them as resemblances of our lives because they each become a single whole when their generous acceptances and concessions in harsh conditions are realized – and this is similar to humankind meeting, understanding and embracing each other. In this exhibition, there are twelve moon jars positioned in a circle, surrounding YeeSookYung's works. Twelve different moon jars symbolize the twelve months of the year. In eastern view, the elapse of time is interpreted as endless circulations and repeating of nature."*

YeeSookYung (°1963): *"Translated Vases is a series of works that is reconstructed and rebuilt. Ceramic masters traditionally destroy the vases that are deemed to be under-qualified according to their own standards. I create 'Translated Vases', piecing together the shattered vases that are rendered trash, as if I'm putting together a jigsaw puzzle, then I cover the seams with 24 karat gold. Originally, the ceramic masters were trying to make a perfect work of art. But what I'm trying to do is literally 'translate' the work by collecting the pieces of broken vases and mending their 'wounds'. A broken ceramic piece finds another piece they rely on each other. The crack, which symbolizes the wound, is emphasized with the gold. This work is a metaphor of a struggle for life that makes people become more mature and beautiful as they overcome suffering."* (13)

Although the work of these two Korean artists is both inspired on the traditional theme of "Moon Jars" the design is quite different. But it is remarkable that both artists use similar vocabulary: breakage, broken, destruction, wounds, harsh conditions, suffering, ... They both refer to meeting, understanding, embracing, relying on each other. So actually the Moon Jars are also expressing fragility, communication and collaboration. The way the Moon Jars of both artists were presented in relationship and interaction to each other emphasizes this idea.

The moon is also associated with emotions, with the unconscious. The moon is considered as Yin, female, receptive. **(14)**

Another Korean artist, Ik-Yoong Kang, created 1392 Moon Jars which were installed at the Guggenheim in New York city. He titled this installation: "Wind".

The Moon Jars are made from two semi-spheres, thrown on the pottery wheel, later on assembled into one spherical form. Each jar is different and shows slight irregularities and is deliberately imperfect. Each vessel is an individual piece with its own character. Being placed together in a large circle, the jars become a component of a larger universe.

Ik-Yoon Kang writes about this installation: *"It becomes one body and it starts breathing air into the sky. The Moon Jar exemplifies oneness from this connection. Indeed, although the jars are empty, the title "wind," suggests that viewers should think of them as holding immaterial and elusive concepts, such as time, memory, dreams, and hope,* **(15)**

"I believe the Moon Jar contains unlimited potential for connection to the outside world through the spirit of sharing and openness." **(16)**



Part 4

My own practice

Because of many reasons I have been working mainly with porcelain for a number of years. The tactile and sensual qualities of this material have always been very appealing to me. The possibility of making delicate forms with smooth surfaces, often burnished, was one of the reasons for me to continue working with this unruly material. Being able to handle and control porcelain on the wheel has been quite a technical challenge as well.

The whiteness and translucent qualities of porcelain are other reasons why this material is very attractive to me. It radiates pureness, innocence, fragility and yet also something strong.

For many years most of my ceramic work was made on the pottery wheel. Since 1996 I started working with paper-clay and paper-porcelain. I did a lot of research by practice because in those days it was hard to find articles about paper clay or other ceramic artists using paper clay. Gradually I integrated paper-porcelain and paper-clay into my ceramic work, especially into my ceramic wall pieces.

Recently I wanted to continue using paper-porcelain purely, because of its whiteness, its translucency and the fact that it is possible to make very thin forms which are relatively strong after high firing. I am fascinated by the properties and the technical possibilities of paper-porcelain, which are very different from regular porcelain.

My first focus was making forms which express vulnerability. I was looking for a support for the layers of paper-porcelain. Quite coincidentally I developed shapes which other people seemed to recognize as cocoons, or mummies. Gradually I accepted the idea of the forms I developed to be seen as cocoons or mummies. After research about the symbolic and metaphysical ideas connected to the cocoon, I realized that this "cocoon-shape" which was formed through my hands is expressing quite obviously what I had unconsciously in my mind: a form which expresses fragility and vulnerability, a form which is in transition to a new form, an archetypal form which symbolizes a metamorphoses.

Cocoon or mummy?

Meaning for me?

Both a cocoon and a mummy are forms in transition. A cocoon is a process in nature where a caterpillar is weaving a protection around itself in order to be able to start a transformation and grow into a butterfly or a moth. Was the idea of mummifying a dead body inspired on the transformation of a cocoon into a butterfly? The concept of embalming a dead body is certainly based upon the idea of a person in transition to the next life, the idea of reincarnation.

As an agnostic, I am not sure whether or not to believe in reincarnation. The idea of paying respect to the deceased by mummifying his/her body is certainly admirable and to be appreciated. It is a result of paying respect to the deceased and a cultural witness of how the deceased were treated in ancient societies.

The most well-known mummies are the ones in ancient Egypt. As Egypt burial practices became a status symbol, wealthy people were able to pay for the more expensive and more sophisticated methods of embalming and had more elaborated tombs built. The mummies and tombs of the Pharaohs are the most exquisite proves of this burial culture. The pyramids are gigantic architectural constructions, built by many slaves. With this idea in mind, I tend to dislike the idea of mummification as a status symbol for wealthy families.

In nature every caterpillar can turn itself in a cocoon. There is no hierarchy. The caterpillar has to do the work by itself, there are no slaves in charge. 😊 Most cocoons will develop into a butterfly or moth, if no natural enemies or disasters occur. The idea of the rather creepy caterpillar turning into an ugly cocoon and then transforming into a beautiful butterfly is a wonderful natural process. It is a beautiful metamorphosis created by nature.

In the silk industry the material of the cocoons is used to produce silk threads. The cocoon doesn't become a moth but in the end it contributes to the creation of the beautiful, soft and precious silk fabric. Silk, which will be used to make saris, dresses, suits, precious clothes which can be seen as "wrappings" for people.

In this perspective, I would like to see my porcelain forms rather as cocoons, a natural process in transition towards a new life.

The cocoon as an archetypal symbol is a very strong image which – again unconsciously – fits into the stage of my life at this moment.

Being confronted with a lot of changes in my life (loss of partner, starting a new job, grown up children, moving my home and my studio) certainly had its effect on my artistic work. My previous ceramic work was in a certain way matured and needed revitalization. Some years of contemplation and less productivity (cocooning) made me realize I needed new nurturing, new developments.

I realize now that making cocoons is a very strong symbolic process for me. The meditative, tactile and sensual production process offers me the time to think about my own future in different fields: personally, professionally but also in which way I want to evolve with my ceramic art. The cocoon is not only a form or an image, it is also a metaphor for my personal process, which seems to be in transition to a new stage.

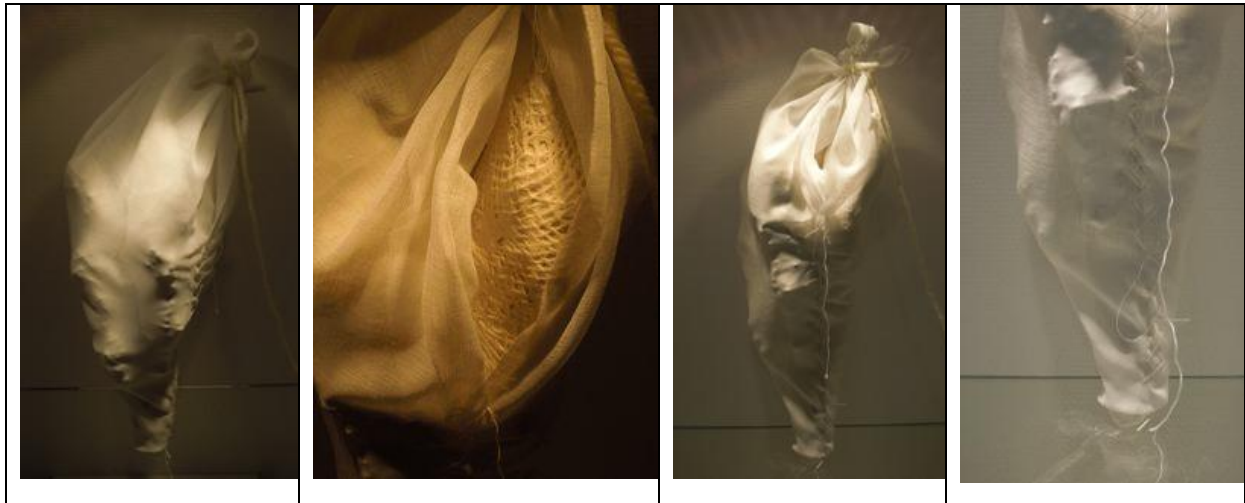
How do I materialize these cocoons? *Why is my practice research?*

Clay and porcelain are definitely the perfect medium for me to work with. I love the tactility and sensuality of feeling and touching clay, manipulating the clay into a new form by squeezing, scraping, caressing, smoothening, I am fascinated by the process of working with clay: earth, mud, which is a product of millions of years of rock erosion. I feel very fortunate to have had the chance to develop ceramic techniques and knowledge, to be able to manipulate the clay into new forms and after the drying process turn these forms back into rock hard objects in collaboration with fire. It is almost a magic process! This is also a metamorphosis, giving a new life to seemingly dead material (clay) found in nature. Therefore my art work will probably always be including (some parts of) clay and ceramics.

But is my main purpose still making pure ceramic objects?

I think the concept of my creations is becoming more considerable. I want to express ideas, give a certain meaning to my creations and not only make esthetic objects or utilitarian ceramics. The total image is more important than the individual object. Therefore where and how it is presented becomes more weighty. I am looking for new ways to present the cocoons so that they are more significative. Scale is a notable element in presenting art work. As the size of ceramic work is in general rather small, ceramic objects are often placed in a group, as a formation in order to gain importance.

Presenting one small porcelain cocoon can attract the attention of the audience because of its fragility, tactility, texture, whiteness. Presenting a large quantity of cocoons together will create a stronger, more impressive image. I came to the idea of placing many cocoons together in a large bag made out of thin white fabric.



Why?

Bringing cocoons together is a symbolic metaphor which expresses the idea of social and common changes within people. Every one of us experiences different stages throughout our lives. As a person, we grow, we evolve, we make decisions which determine another stage in life.

Placing a group of cocoons in a thin, white fabric bag, emphasizes the idea of all of us going through metamorphoses at certain stages in our lives. Although this is an individual process, we are not alone. As humans we have the capability to share this with others, to give each other support. Placing the cocoons in a translucent bag, hanging from the ceiling underlines the concept of fragility and vulnerability.

When I was doing my first art degree as a youngster, I was very much irritated by the selfishness and self-centered attitude of my fellow students. The statement: "Art is the most ultimate expression of the most individual emotion" was a very common philosophy among artists, which justified their narcissism.

My attitude was quite the opposite. I was convinced that an artist needed to be concerned and engaged to pay a contribution to society in order to improve social and cultural situations. For this reason I chose to be engaged in art education and work together with other people throughout my career.

In the 21st century I notice a different attitude among artists. Many of them are no longer working on their own on their individual projects. Some of them even deliberately choose to work as a group or together with less fortunate groups like the unemployed, the poor, immigrants, aboriginals, orphans, ...

The following artists have developed such collaborative art projects: Ai Wei-Wei, El Anatsui, Arin Rungjang, Monika Grzymala, ...

Catherine de Zegher, art historian and artistic director of the 18th biennale of Sydney wrote in the catalogue:

"Seeking conjunctive energies, this collaboration has taken place on many different levels: in co-existence, conversation and juxtaposition but also in purposeful connectivity. Within this framework of mutuality, recognition and thoughtfulness, disparate ideas – some distantly and some closely related – are brought together in an exhibition process of composition; much akin to the process of thought itself. Artists, who can often feel isolated in their practice, come together with neighboring artists. ...

The interconnection and interdependency occurs in the knowledge that audiences will take elements from the exhibition and connect them with their own experiences.

...

Through this process, a collective composition or a new "Gesamtkunstwerk" is accomplished in the active generation of meanings realized by all those who take part, each taking their stories home and beyond ..." (17)

Is ceramics an ideal material with which to express emerging vulnerability?

For me clay and porcelain are important because of the tactile and sensual qualities. Working with my hands as tools in direct contact with my medium (clay and porcelain) is important. A painter uses brushes, paint and canvas but therefore almost never has any direct body contact with the materials he/she is using. Same for a sculptor who is using chisels, drills, grinders and other machines, etc. The materials I am using – porcelain and clay – are fragile and vulnerable and therefore emphasizing the concept. During the making of the cocoons there is a constant physical contact: with my hands I am smoothening the surfaces, caressing and handling them very attentive and careful to prevent breakage. The whiteness of the porcelain underlines pureness, innocence and is therefore also amplifying the concept. After firing porcelain will break when you drop it, another obvious confirmation of the concept.

The cocoon in contemporary artistic context.

"A braided metaphor building on notions of self-similarity is used to capture the dynamic, fluid nature of art practice as research." (18)

Graeme Sullivan, professor of Art Education at Penn State University

Why do I feel connected with the work of other artists? What attracts me? Which similarities do I discover? What are the differences? Why do I dislike some other art work? Every time I visit exhibitions, museums, look at art books, I ask myself these questions. It is very important to me that the very first moment I am confronted with an artistic creation, I feel some kind of emotional confrontation, something that strikes me, intrigues me and invites me to wonder what the artist is trying to express and what we have in common.

The sculptures of Berinde De Bruyckere struck me because most of them are metaphors for wounded beings, showing their scars and vulnerability. Some parts of her wax sculptures are bandaged with torn, worn-out fabric which emphasizes the idea of being hurt, vulnerability. This is where I feel connection with my own work. On the other hand her work is confronting, harsh, sometimes creepy, desperate, hopeless. Here is a noticeable difference with my porcelain cocoons. Although my cocoons show scars, bandages, emerge breakage, they are forms in transition towards a next stage in life, they are offering hope.

The Moon Jars of YeeSookYung, Park Young-Sook and Ik-Joong Kang are also expressing the struggle of life, how vulnerable we are as human beings. But another element is playing an important role: all these Korean artists value communication and interaction. YeeSookYung puzzles trash together of shattered Moon Jars, she gives the broken Moon Jars a new life, she transforms shards into a new, beautiful sphere. By covering the seams with gold she is emphasizing the preciousness of the newly emerged sculptural form, which is the metaphor for a new life. In her statement she confirms that people become more beautiful as they mature after they overcome suffering.

With his 1392 Moon Jars, Ik-Yoon Kang wants to underline and express the spirit of sharing and openness, of dreams and hope.

These hopeful dreams are also included in my porcelain cocoons. The whiteness of the Moon Jars, radiate innocence and spiritual life. Because of this reason I decided not to use any color but just the pure porcelain.

I would prefer to continue discussing the work of more contemporary artists like U-Ram Choe, Andy Goldsworthy, Anish Kapoor, ... because I feel connected with each one of them in slightly different ways. But the number of words allowed for this essay forces me to limit myself.

CONCLUSION

Artists are expressing their ideas via images, sculptural work, two-dimensional paintings, drawings, prints, via installations, performances, via an incredible diverse amount of materials, ... Very often, actually all the time, artists use forms and images which have a symbolic meaning, which are metaphors, archetypes. There seems to be a universal artistic language and yet every piece of art is unlike, radiates a unique spirit which is distinctive from other art work. Finding the right words to express the various differences and similarities is not evident, sometimes they are obvious and extreme, sometimes they are very subtle.

When I started creating some kind of formless porcelain shapes in a rather experimental and random way, I didn't know where these "creatures" would lead me to. Other people started to name them "cocoons" and "mummies". At first I was surprised because I didn't have these terms in mind during my practice.

Researching, reading and studying about cocoons and mummies and their symbolic meaning, convinced me that this image is perfectly expressing what I want to communicate with the audience:

- How vulnerable each of us is
- How we all evolve throughout the different stages of our lives into the next one
- How a group of cocoons can communicate interaction, support and holding on to each other as indispensable values in life.

Julia Kristeva: *"Aesthetic experience engendered in both making and encountering art is a transformative process vital to the renewal of our imaginary capacities"* (17)

NOTES

- (1) Description based on information found on www.wikipedia.com
- (2) www.etymonline.com
- (3) www.etymonline.com
- (4) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cocooning>
- (5) Faith Popcorn, "The Popcorn Report", New York: Doubleday, 1991.
- (6) [www.bodyworlds.com/Downloads/englisch/Exhibition/Original/EthicReport CSC E 190110](http://www.bodyworlds.com/Downloads/englisch/Exhibition/Original/EthicReport_CSC_E_190110).
- (7) The Independent, science page, Friday October 28th, 2008
www.independent.co.uk/news/science/doctor-defends-body-worlds-exhibition-972496.html
- (8) Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, "The book of Symbols", Taschen, Köln, 2011
- (9) Dorothee Cappelle en Mirjam De Vriendt, "Ons Erfdeel", p.
- (10) Philippe Van Cauteren (curator of the S.M.A.K-Museum in Gent, Belgium)
Monograph: "Berlinde De Bruyckere" p. 11 Published Mercatorfonds 2014
- (11) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lingam>
- (12) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lingam>
- (13) Catherine de Zegher, "All our relations", catalogue of the 18th Biennale of Sydney 2012, p. 289, published by National library of Australia.
- (14) Claire Barliant about the work of Ik-Joong Kang,
<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/26824>
- (15) Ik-Joong Kang,
["Artist's note for the 32 Moon Jar Installation for the Korean Mission to the United Nations, NY,"](#)
accessed November 1, 2010.
- (16) M. Gauding, "De Tekens- en Symbolengids" (The Signs and Symbols Bible),
Veltman Uitgevers, Den Haag, 2010, p. 209
- (17) Catherine de Zegher, "All our relations", catalogue of the 18th Biennale of Sydney 2012, p. 49, published by National library of Australia, 2012
- (18) Graeme Sullivan, "Art Practice as Research, Inquiry in the Visual Arts", SAGE Publications,
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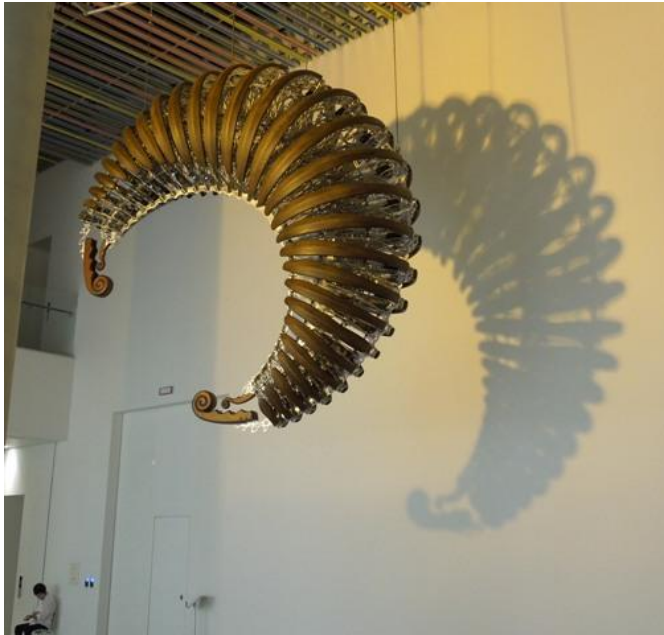
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ATTACHMENTS / APPENDIX : Other interesting and inspirational artists

U-RAM CHOE (South Korea)



"Opertus Lunula Umbra" by **U-Ram Choe** (South Korea)

http://www.uranet.net/eng_new/intro_en.html

I saw this monumental moving sculpture hanging on the ceiling of the museum of Modern and Contemporary Art when I stayed in Seoul, the summer of 2014. To me this looked like a gigantic breathing cocoon. Very impressive!



Viennese/Croatian design collective **Numen/For Use**



Taizo Kuroda (Japan)

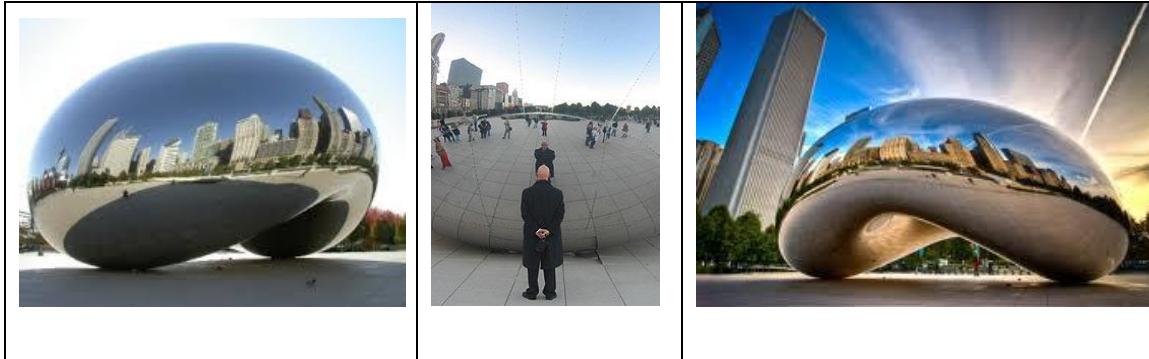


"A person who is not talented tends to make objects with a simple shape and a simple color. I feel that this is a kind of shortcut toward the light, toward my destination. I don't think I can reach this goal during my lifetime. In this lifetime, I have to go as much to my goal as I can, that is my destiny. "

Taizo Kuroda

<http://www.taizo-kuroda.com>

ANISH KAPOOR – “The bean” – Chicago



ANDY GOLDSWORTHY



Chapter 6. Artist as Theorist –Greame Sullivan

This chapter argues that artists' studios, be they atelier spaces, classrooms, the streets, housed in suitcases, or found on-line, are sites where the creation and critique of new knowledge takes place. These are places of theoretically powerful and methodologically robust sites of inquiry. In drawing together the arguments about ways of theorizing visual arts practice, I make a case for practitioner research where the artist-theorist can be seen as both the researcher and the researched. This chapter also focuses on the ever-expanding practices used by artists to advance our understanding of who we are, what we do, and what we know. Settings such as those opened up by digital environments, cultural collaborations and community spaces are creating new places for creative and critical inquiry that offer opportunities for different forms of research and imaginative practice. I argue that artists explore these places in ways that disrupt assumed boundaries. The chapter also looks at how practice and theory merge as critical, curatorial, and cultural perspectives that are considered within the context of visual arts research practice.

Part III. Visual Arts Research Practices

The purpose of the final part of the book is twofold. First, visual arts research is characterized as inquiry that embraces cultural contexts, institutional settings, the digital environment, information arts, **indigenous** perspectives, and other realms that open up new avenues for study. As such, visual arts research practices are presented as creative and critical investigations from which many other areas of inquiry can be pursued. Another aim is to consider the many conceptual issues involved in visualizing and planning visual arts research projects. My challenge is to be able to provide useful suggestions yet resist the tendency to prescribe methods. For the artist-theorist, however, working within constraints, be they technical means, design briefs, or problematic positions, is a long accepted practice in the creative construction of new knowledge.