

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: John Pai
- Interviewer: Leyla Vural
- Summer 2021 / John Pai's home (Fairfield, Connecticut)
- Recorded and transcribed by Leyla Vural
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Leyla Vural(LV): You came to Brooklyn in 1958, after receiving a four year scholarship to Pratt Institute. Can you tell me what it was like to come to Brooklyn, what you found at that time, and what Pratt was like?

John Pai(JP): We were told that Pratt was a converted shoe factory, and there were classrooms where you could actually see that, that might have been the case. My first visit to Pratt was as a high school student.

LV: This was when you were in high school in Highland Park?

JP: Yes. Basically, I fell in love with New York. And Pratt kind of reminded me of how a boxing gym is, it's just a sweaty, kind of noisy place, because you hear all the rat-a-tat-tat of punching bags and skipping rope. I always liked the picture of doing things, learning things, so I wasn't looking for a beautiful campus, but a place where there was a lot of hard work and people who were dedicated to what they were doing. At the time, they kept emphasizing how important it was to have someone critique your work, that you should be grateful for critiques whether you agreed or not. You could feel the intensity of people who were pursuing something, trying to learn something. Having New York as the larger school in itself was really exciting-and you just felt that everything was possible.

When I came to Pratt there was an emphasis on the concept of Abstraction, emphasizing a reductive process. I liked the idea of reducing down to the bare minimum and then building back up. It was a lot like the Big Bang theory; starting with the smallest unit. Even the idea of collision, even a random collision of things, creating some new combination, that was really parallel to the idea of abstract expressionism. At the time this was a very important concept. Abstraction was a view into the New world. How you analyze, how you see things. A lot of things seemed to make sense and I liked the challenge of working in a three dimensional space. It was very different from working on a flat surface.

LV: What were those first years at Pratt like for you?

JP: It was the greatest thing to be a student in New York. Part of our assignments were classes held in the museum. We would go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and draw from the art we were surrounded by. We went to the Museum of Natural History and did nature studies. I had never seen museums like this before. There was so much to learn and look at. I went to shows and concerts in NYC and I saw ballet for the first time choreographed by George Balanchine, modern dance with Martha Graham. I think it was one of the happiest periods in my life, because I was challenged in so many ways and there were so many new things that

were stimulating me.
It was like finding the promised land.

LV: What happened in your later years at Pratt?

Pai: In my foundation and sophomore year I was doing sculpture, exploring form and structure and three-dimensional composition. I had a wonderful teacher Rowena Kostellow in my second year. But in my junior year, it was more product oriented, really getting into industrial design. All my time was devoted to product design. I wasn't drawing, painting or sculpting. Even though I had a full scholarship, I was seriously thinking about leaving the department. A couple of the faculty asked what I wanted to do and while there was no major or program in fine art, I wanted to focus on painting, sculpture and drawing. My teachers suggested I finish my junior and senior years in one year and receive a degree in industrial design. After which, they would give me a fellowship to major in Sculpture after graduation (You were only able to major in graduate studies at Pratt Institute) But somewhere along the line, before my junior year was over. Gerry Gulotta, a professor, who would later become a dear friend, was taking a leave of absence and he asked if I would teach his course. I was a senior and hadn't graduated yet but I said yes. I taught for one semester. My sculpture teacher Calvin Albert was the head of the graduate department and had no interest in running the undergraduate program. He recommended me for the position and in the fall semester, they asked me to take over the undergraduate program. It was a highly unusual situation.

LV: That's incredible. I was hoping we could talk about your art and some of the work we are surrounded by. When you made the piece, what you were thinking, what it said to you when you made it and what it says when you look at it now. Anything and everything you want to share.

JP: How many days do we have?

LV: We have lots of time.

JP: I thought we would start here, because at least within this room, that's the earliest piece that I did, and It was done in 1963. (*Untitled, 1963*)

LV: Can you describe the piece?

JP: Well, it's a combination of what I had been learning up to that point and especially in

foundation and first year industrial design, where we were basically doing constructivist-type of exercises. And for the first time, I learned to weld. At the time I was working for Theodore Roszak, whose work I had seen in a show at MoMA, “New Images of Man”. I think my early work resembles Roszak’s work. Because of my interest in music, this process of working with line, plane, texture, mass, it all fit. During that period I was practicing what I was learning, using elements like movement, gesture, almost classical concerns about formal relationships. At the time there were a lot of people who liked to work with heavy geometric pieces of metal. They wanted steel to look like steel. I was beginning to see the other side of steel, which with a welding torch, you’re taking something very strong and solid and you’re melting it until it’s liquid. So that’s the side that fascinated me, because it seemed to offer an incredible range of flexibility. From there, I began to experiment with what the torch can do.

LV: When you went to work for Roszak, were you already interested in working in metal yourself?

JP: I liked the fact that it wasn’t a precious material, that it was strong, but malleable. By chance, when I lived in West Virginia, I lived across the river from a huge steel mill, Wheeling steel. I don’t know if there was any relationship, but there was always a subconscious connection to steel as a material.

LV: Do you remember what kind of reception you got for this first piece?

Pai: In design, I received plenty of criticism. But in art they were always encouraging. It was an interesting balance between what was happening with the formal side, through the three dimensional design or form and space exercises I got in design, and I think the critical part of it helped me. It expanded my formal language and I understood how to analyze. Later on, I realized that sculpture is more than form, more than composition. It was a good prelude. Like in music, doing all the exercises helps you to understand the larger picture.

JP: At this point, you didn’t identify yourself as a sculptor yet. Is that right?

Pai: No, because the attraction to industrial design and Bauhaus was like envisioning a different world, or a different self. It was at a time when everyone thought he or she had to specialize, and your identity was tied to being a specialist in something. Whereas in terms of what the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College were trying to do, to open up the person to full potential, you could do architecture and you could do sculpture. It opened

the doors to so many things. At the time, as a student, it was a revelation seeing the collaboration between Martha Graham's work and Noguchi's set designs. My work began in three-dimensional design class in my foundation year at Pratt Institute and would lead me to a point where I had more freedom to think and experiment. I began to search for things that went beyond design and composition.

LV: When did you begin to think of yourself as a sculptor:

JP: After I received my first commission for an outdoor piece "*Passage, 1977.*" At the time, Kingsborough Community College was being built and had to devote 1% of their budget to an outdoor installation. In that one commission, I made almost a year's salary as a teacher. I realized that I would be able to devote my life to being a sculptor.

LV: Let's talk about this piece "*Untitled 1970/Entitled 2021.*"

JP: You'll notice it's done with the thinnest steel rod that I could get, which is 1/16th of an inch. I like the idea of drawing, being able to sculpt the way I could draw. When the line is reduced to that scale, it's not really that different from pen and ink drawing, where the line can join other lines to create a plane. I recognized that there is a certain logic that you become very conscious of, for instance, how does it stand? You're always dealing with an orientation to gravity and I thought, what if you didn't? What if you didn't have to worry about structure all the time? So I created a frame so I could start anywhere inside that space.

LV: I think it's beautiful. There is a frame and a fine curved piece suspended in the air with rods.

JP: So, there are several things happening. One, is that I've reduced the line to a dot. And that gave me a certain kind of freedom. It took time. It pushes you into a form of transparency, because you can have layers. If you have them in several layers, you can see each layer through the other layer. So the process, I didn't know where it would take me. In this piece, I was able to look at it and realized there was a completeness. So I began working on "*Untitled, 1971.*" In this piece there are two things at play. One was the whole idea of abstraction, of breaking things down to the smallest unit and then building from there. In the process, you don't know where it's going, but each form is kind of a reaction to ones next to it. My process of working changed quite a bit. Like the very early work has a sense of direction and some degree of planning. In this case there was the possibility of accidents and a stream of consciousness.

LV: Do you remember where this piece started?

JP: Somewhere inside. Somewhere in the center. It began as a dot in space.

LV: "*Persistence of Forgotten Things, 1977*", can you tell me about this piece?

Pai: Even this piece was a continuum between this and the form studies I used to do. I began to ask myself, what if I tried to do something without thinking about the surface? I began to do pieces like this one. Working with cubes. Things happen, because each one is distorted in some way. And because they're all connected, whatever distortion there is in one affects all the rest. How would you describe it in words?

JP: The idea of silence or nothingness. Can you have silence and nothingness with somethingness? The cube, in its original state, I think has a certain equilibrium that is equal to silence. As soon as you change the angle even on one corner, you're creating tension. So it's introducing a sound that changes silence. But they are mutually dependent. Each distortion is in relation to what changes, or differences it makes to the original state. By having multiple layers of distortion in the cubes, it creates a certain kind of momentum—movement. It was maybe closer to some aspects of music, when you have a cluster of sounds that will either create a level of harmony or dissonance, a rhythm or pattern. I worked this way for quite some time.

LV: So you often talk about music, the way that making your pieces is similar to the making of music. I've read that you listen to music, specifically Bach, when you are sculpting. Can you tell me about listening to music while you sculpt?

JP: My whole family was oriented to music. My mother made me start the piano at an early age, because my sister was a musical prodigy. She played all the classics: Chopin, Beethoven, Mozart and Bach. Music in my family was like eating and sleeping. The thing about Bach is if you take it unit by unit, note by note, phrase by phrase, it seems like he took simple elements, but he created magic with their relationships. Listening to his music, you learn about structure, you learn about drama.

LV: When you are sculpting and listening to music, does it inspire you? What happens?

JP: It's complicated, because you get a certain kind of energy from certain kinds of music. Sometimes it's supportive, sometimes complementary and sometimes the opposite of what you are doing. But that's the contrast you need. It can take a long time for things to happen in sculpture. It may take hours to make a small change. But in music, it's happening in time, and sometimes it can just take you around the corner. I think music helps in so many different ways. When I hear jazz, I wonder, could I have

made that choice? Most likely not. But I think it is tied to culture, and the rhythm from daily life. It's a cultural background to whatever I happen to be doing.

LV: This piece, "The Vigil, 1986", can you tell me the story behind it?

JP: This was inspired by the sidewalk in front of my home and studio in Brooklyn. In those days, they used these enormous slabs of bluestone. But over the years they crack and fracture. Living in that house, I was always conscious of the fact that we didn't really have big trees or even grass. And I noticed one day there were cracks in the bluestone, and blades growing in between. It's like a force of nature that is kind of undeniable. Somehow it has the will to survive, and so I called it "The Vigil." There's something about nature that keeps the vigil of life.

LV: So when you sculpt, do you think about the way the stories you are telling with your art? Do you feel you're having a conversation with yourself about your own story?

JP: I think what drives me is curiosity, a certain sense of wonder about the way life is, the way the universe is. I'm driven by memories and curiosity. I remember somebody saying, when you're dying, you're all alone. And I thought about that and, physically you're alone, but you're carrying all these memories of people and their music, their writing and painting. You owe so much of your life to all the people who have lived before you.

There is something about roots that you either feel or you don't. I thought when I left Korea in 1949 to come to the states that I would never see Korea again. I had no idea where I was going. With time, you begin to realize what it really is. Korea for me is a lifeline back to the beginning of time. It is part of one's body. So there are connections you can't find. A magnet that tells you somehow part of your soul or body deep in the roots. It will always be there. Strong connections, strong memories and its where it all began.