

**Ramen Noodles**

**by**

**Sang-Wook Lee**

**B.F.A. , University of Dong-A, 1993  
M.F.A. , University of Dong-A, 1996**

**A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art  
of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment  
of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**ATHENS, GEORGIA**

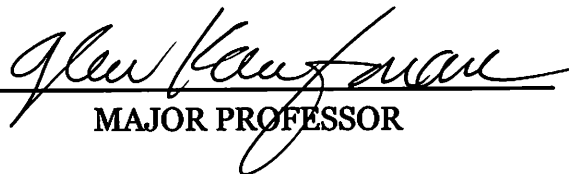
**2003**

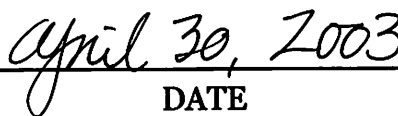
Ramen Noodles

by

Sang-Wook Lee

Approved:

  
MAJOR PROFESSOR

  
DATE

My work has been influenced by the cultures I have existed in. I've spent most of my life in Korea, absorbing the richness of everyday life. My studies in art were concentrated in fiber and I knew I wanted to explore other countries, other cultures and what they had to offer me. By coming to America I faced challenges as an artist being away from home and having to create meaningful work in a very different environment. The UGA Study Abroad Program in Japan encouraged new influences in my work. As I continued to absorb American culture, the "ramen noodles" influence of Korea developed into a body of work and it clearly defines the core of a concept that has motivated me for several years. By traveling from Korea to America and then Japan, I have discovered the root of my reflection of cultures and the importance of my cultural roots.

When I was an undergraduate student in Korea, I participated in an exhibition in 1992 in which my work expressed the power of yarn. In the work, titled "Red Car", a small red car yarn was packed with white yarn that spilled outside on to the floor I had a hard time presenting this work because this kind of installation was not very common in Korea at that time. Many people who saw the exhibition were confused by the work but found it unique and interesting. I was encouraged by these reactions.

When I entered graduate school I spent most of my time weaving tapestry. My textile department in Dong-A University in Pusan was very focused on tapestry weaving. I spent many hours, days and weeks weaving tapestry without entirely understanding why. When I finished the series of five "Snail Tapestries", I realized that I really wanted



Red car 1992  
cotton yarn, kia

to work on something else. After I told my major professor I didn't want to continue tapestry weaving, he said I was crazy. I met Prof. Kaufman when I was a graduate assistant at Dong-A while he was a visiting lecturer in Pusan. After many discussions, he encouraged me to come to America to study at the University of Georgia.



Snail I 1996  
tapestry, wool



Snail II 1996  
tapestry, wool

When I came to UGA, I did not know what I wanted to do. I spent most of my time in the first year doing class projects and learning new techniques. At the end of my first semester I had a great chance to join the Study Abroad Program in Japan and learn much about that culture. We visited famous Japanese fiber artists and some minimal artists. I became really interested in minimal art.

When I came back to America I began to research minimalism and materialism. I made my first major work in the US titled, "Torii", was installed in the Main Gallery in the Visual Arts Building with other fiber graduate students. I was really fascinated by the mystery of Fushimi Inari Shrine, which has a unique tunnel of hundreds of red gates (torii) leading up the mountainside. It takes an overwhelming 1-2 hours to walk through these gates, which influenced me in a most powerful way. I was inspired to think of some way to take advantage of this extraordinary experience. I constructed a work that was made of red rayon and black plastic bags, in which I created a simple arrangement of stepped vertical half-columns that was reflective of tunnel of torii that I experienced in Kyoto.



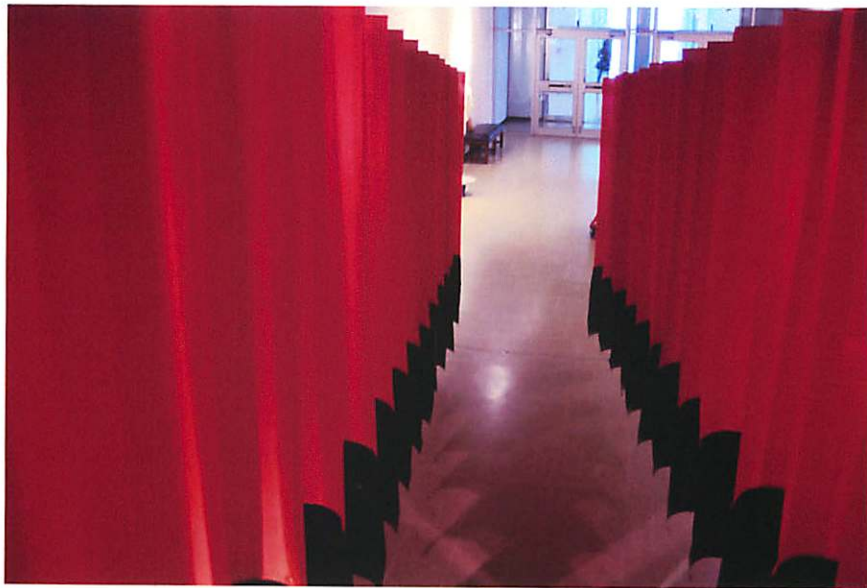
Torii, Fushimi Shrine, Kyoto, Japan



Torii 2000  
nylon, plastic



Torii (detail) 2000  
nylon, plastic



Torii (detail) 2000  
nylon, plastic

The pure sense of cotton fabric was the focus of this work. I chose a circle for the arrangement of my "structures" as a means of surrounding and enclosing space. I feel a close relationship with pre-historic sites like Stonehenge that are in the form of circles. I wanted to create a relationship between the viewer and my circle of fabric forms. I strove for a sense of "mystery of cloth".



Structure 2001  
cotton cloth



Structure (detail) 2001  
cotton cloth



Structure (detail) 2001  
cotton cloth



Structure (detail) 2001  
cotton cloth

When I first came to America, I did not have Korean food for 7 months. I was home sick and I happened to meet a Korean student Kroger's and he gave me a package of instant ramen noodles. I cooked it and I suddenly had tears in my eyes because of the memories I had of ramen from my home in Korea. My early memories go back to when I was a child and cooked and ate ramen with my friends. We would get together and have fun by cooking a huge pot of cheap instant ramen noodles. Also, I knew my



A Package of Instant Ramen Noodles

mother and father had been fighting when my father cooked ramen noodles. By tradition, Korean men are never in the kitchen and do not cook. Ramen is the only food a Korean man can cook, so when my mother refused to cook, my father served himself ramen.



Ramen Noodles 2001  
cotton, glue

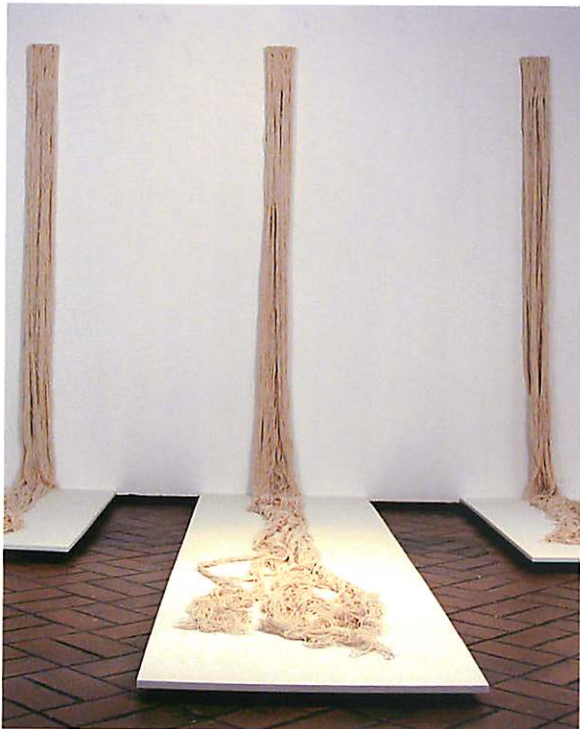
These are memories of good

and bad times with friends and family from back home. American people don't celebrate the importance of noodles like Koreans. For young boys of Korea, eating instant ramen noodles is a big deal for snack food. Noodles of many types, however, are common in most Asian cultures. An important part of Korean culture is the enjoyment of finding a restaurant where they serve good noodles, hot or cold. At Korean weddings, noodles are usually served and it is said if you eat them at that time you will live a long life.

I made a number of works inspired by ramen noodles. One of these symbolized the "long life" you receive upon eating ramen. I made another piece, "Noodle Headstone", that I placed in a local cemetery as a site-specific sculpture. I never knew how much noodles meant to me, until I came to America.



Longlife 2002  
cotton yarn, glue



Longlife (detail) 2002  
cotton yarn, glue



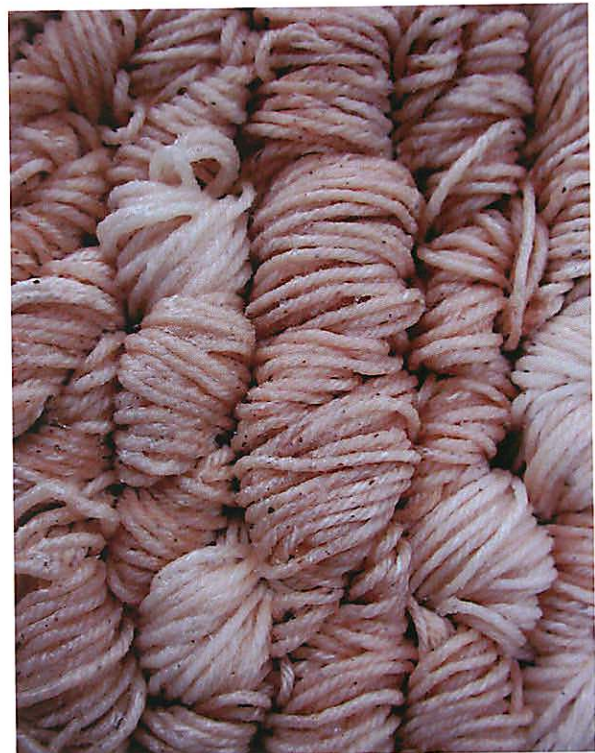
Longlife (detail) 2002  
cotton yarn, glue



Headstone 2002  
cotton yarn, glue, resin



Headstone (detail) 2002  
cotton yarn, glue, resin



Headstone (detail) 2002  
cotton yarn, glue, resin

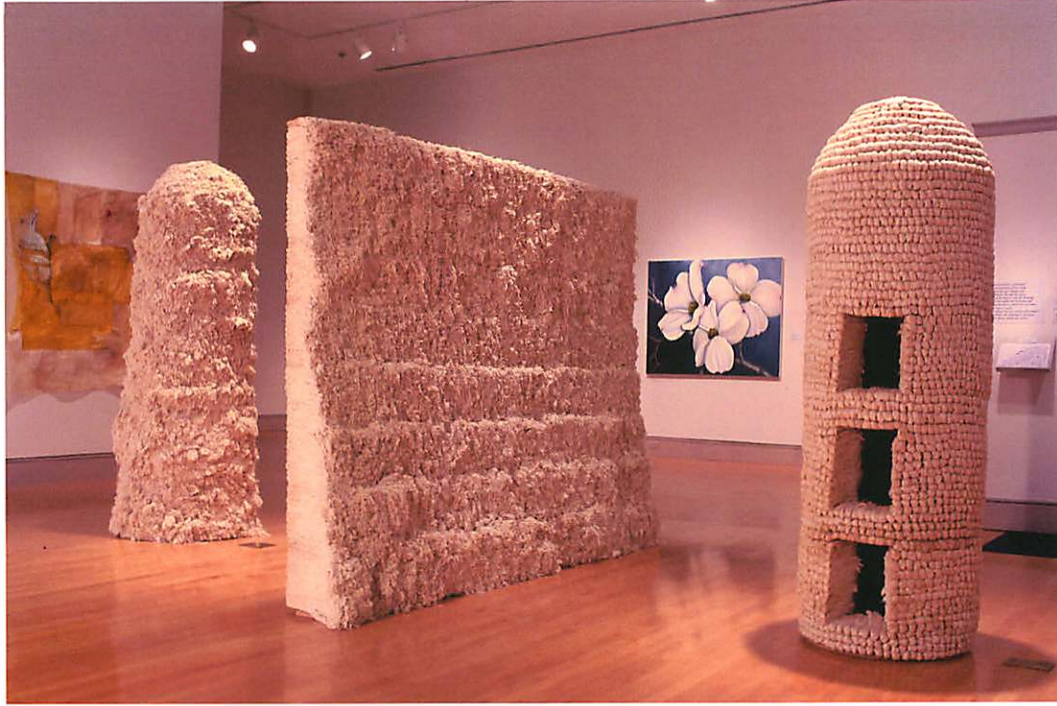
I found many reasons why I am intrigued by ramen noodles, such as taste, memories, and culture. I like instant ramen because of the lines the noodles make and the square shape that they are packaged in. One of the most important aspects of ramen is the line of each noodle in the "pack". The ramen pack consists of very complicated lines made by the hundreds of noodles but is organized by a simple rectangular shape. When I cook ramen, the square shape is softened as the noodles become 'free'. I am interested in the soft lines (edible noodles)



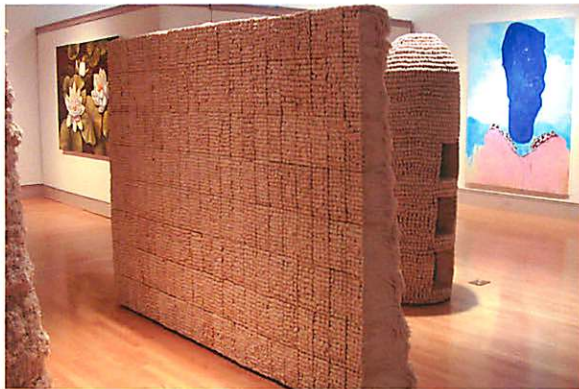
Cooked Ramen Noodles

that are controlled by the rigid square shape (packaged) but transformed by cooking. This transformation of a rigid to soft state is a prime consideration in my work. I have worked with yarns for many years, thus I discovered the visual similarities between yarn and noodles. I started using the cotton yarn as my material for my ramen inspired work and chose to use white glue to harden the yarn, like the hardness of the noodles in a package of instant ramen.

For my MFA exhibition I began constructing ramen-like block of bricks and stacked them in horizontal rows. I felt that scale as very important in the work and I wanted to construct a form that one could not see over. As I built this form from the bottom up, I reduced the size of the blocks so the form had a triangular shape when viewed from the end. Bit by bit the form evolved into a form that people who saw it called 'the wall'. So it became a wall, which is a very simple shape that embodies some sense of mystery.



Ramen Wall and Silos 2003  
cotton yarn, glue



Ramen Wall and Silos 2003  
cotton yarn, glue



Silo (detail) 2003  
cotton yarn, glue

This mystery is due, in part, to the ability of this soft/hard object of impressive size to stand on its own. The use of soft yarn that can be hardened by the glue became a metaphor for the transformation of hard ramen to the soft cooked state. From the start of this building project I decided one side would be hard and formal while the other side would be soft and chaotic. I felt that the wall alone would not be a complete expression.

My earlier works, "Torii" and "Structure" both used a group of shapes to lead the viewer into and around the work. I wanted to create the same feeling with this installation. Separated by the wall are two round cylinder shapes that are inspired by the traditional American farm silo. The function of the silo to store food for cows and the enormous size of the silo standing in the middle of the countryside was a cultural surprise to me. I find the silo uniquely American since we do not have such structures in Korea. I chose this form as an element of cross-cultural experience in my work. I chose to make one of the silos with the hard exterior and one with the soft exterior, echoing the two sides of the wall. I placed these silos so that the surfaces would contrast with the adjacent surface of the wall to emphasize the hard and soft metaphor of the ramen. From various positions one can see one silo and wall or the two silos and the wall and anticipate the surface of the wall not in view at that moment in time.

My travels across Korea, America and Japan have all influenced my path as a fiber artist and helped define the cross-cultural experiences I have had. Ramen is the metaphor used in my most recent body of work. Ramen is an important symbol in Korean culture. I chose to express the connection that I have made about the importance of noodles in memories through out my lifetime. In coming to America I discovered a new importance of ramen noodles in Korea. This is a reflection of who I am.