

# sculpture

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On the cover: Do Ho Suh, *Gross Roots Square*, 2012. View of work installed at Government Building Complex Part 6, KORO, Oslo. Photo: © Do Ho Suh, Courtesy Public Art Norway – KORO.









# Foon Sham

## Crafting Dialogues

BY ANETA GEORGIEVSKA-SHINE

COURTESY PROJECT 4

Above and detail: *Canyon of Salt*, 2012. Hickory and salt, 35 x 88 x 72 in.





One of the hallmarks of Foon Sham’s sculptural language is his ability to cultivate a fine line between the dictates of his materials and methods and the specific context of his work. Another, which has shaped his career both as a practicing artist and as a teacher, is his dual perspective on the importance of history in his work: fully informed by tradition, he is, nonetheless, remarkably unburdened by its ballast. Though this Chinese-born and Washington, DC-based sculptor has always shown great sensitivity to dominant modes of sculpture, he has been consistently able to step aside from the mainstream in order to address his interests in a deeply individual manner, regardless of the currency of the moment.

His favorite medium is humble, yet versatile wood. Throughout his career, he has explored the formal properties of this elemental material in sculptural compositions that invariably highlight the process of their own becoming. The structures that he develops often suggest a search for the geometric underpinnings of nature or for the origins of the human desire to rationalize its morphology. Typically, this

Left: *Curve*, 2010. Cedar, 120 x 48 x 58 in. Above: *The House of Identity*, 2006. Wood, phone books, rice paper, and ink, 7.5 x 7.5 x 11 ft.

inner geometry is brought out through a methodical application of controlled gestures, from cutting and sawing to stacking, laminating, and assembling a myriad of small pieces together into seemingly self-generated forms. His most recognizable works in this manner are the various large- and small-scale “vessels” or “vascular” compositions fashioned either for specific sites or as freestanding indoor or outdoor sculptures.

*Curve* (2010), a 10-foot construction of cedar blocks stacked on top of one another in a disarmingly simple, yet subtly intricate fashion, exemplifies this approach. Like many of Sham’s larger works, *Curve* invites viewers to experience the dynamic relationship between its exterior and interior facets by walking around and into the form itself. This process encourages contemplation of how the manmade and the industrial can approximate the unmediated agency of nature—calling to mind the central idea of Tao about interconnectedness in the phenomenal world. *Curve* took on a particular resonance during its most recent presentation. Prominently placed in front of the entrance to the River Inn Hotel for the Washington, DC, group show “Sculpting Outside the Line” (2012), this fragile, organic structure composed of almost a thousand thin cedar blocks became a potent metaphor for the illusion of permanence associated with the notion of “home” or “shelter.”

The same internal dialogue between an urge to order the irregular and an equally strong desire to follow the “accidental” qualities of nature and its unpredictable energies is just as meaningfully conveyed in smaller works such as *Drift of Life* (2006). Here, what begins as a statement of mastery over nature, expressed through a skillful stacking of curved walnut and mahogany blocks into a tower-like shape, gives way to a counter-claim about the disorderly forces of life. A single, ostensibly “dead” piece of driftwood protrudes, flame-like, from the hollow core of the column, causing it to “split” under the pressure of its surprising vitality.



View of exhibition at Project 4 Art+Space, Washington, DC, 2012.

Though Sham is continually drawn to intersections between the natural and the manmade, a closer look at his recent work reveals several interrelated, yet varied approaches to this theme. In a recent series of cone-like structures that he calls “phone books,” evocative forms are composed by layering of evenly cut pieces of wood in different tones, textures, and sizes, interspersed with sections of phone books whose individual pages have been laminated together to form impermeable blocks. The results of this process fall somewhere between finely crafted intarsia and Dada collage. They seem to grow in complexity as one explores their surfaces and discovers unexpected affinities between the wood-grain patterns and the cross-sections of the phone books, those near-obsolete repositories of personal data, recovered for a different purpose and merged again with their source material.

Another, equally imaginative exploration of the meeting points between the currents of nature and the paths of man has led to a series titled “life-prints,” in which Sham zooms in on the irregular shapes of growth lines present in wood panels (tablets) and uses them as points of departure for pencil drawings that overflow onto a surrounding paper surface. Once again, we see his interest in the wood/paper dialectic and the constant transformation of substances, either through natural processes or willed by artistic gesture. The real growth lines are juxtaposed with those that might have occurred or that were likely present before the felling of the tree. Part archaeological reconstruction and part poetic musing on the cycles of life, these assemblages invoke additional imagery, from microcosmic structures observable only with the aid of magnifying lenses to maps that compress and rationalize expanses whose patterns can only be seen from impossible distances.

Sham’s recent exhibition at Project 4 Art+Space dramatically highlighted all of these concerns. Its focal point was the

*Aim High*, 2012. Plexiglas, sawdust, and hardware, 72 x 48 x 48 in.







Top and detail: *Vessel of Green*, 2012. Pine, aluminum flashing, grass, and soil, 41 x 86 x 84 in.

site-specific installation *Aim High* (2012), a circular mound of graduated disks that seemed to grow ever so gently from the gallery floor as visitors standing on the balcony above tossed handfuls of colored sawdust down over its gently cascading walls. While the gossamer-like layers of sawdust may invoke the traditional Asian use of this material for dry lacquer, the ephemeral quality is even more reminiscent of sand mandalas—those painstakingly crafted forms brought into being only to be destroyed in an affirmation of the passing of all things. The most compelling aspect of this subtly changing piece was its unpredictability—neither the artist, nor the audience knew how the handfuls of sawdust would affect texture and hue. As Sham has observed regarding the work's allegorical content, no matter how high one may aim, there is very little one can control.

The same duality of deliberate gesture and chance governs *Vessel of Green* (2012), which gives a new twist to a signature element in Sham's vocabulary. Here, the characteristic "vessel" of wood

tiles stacked at regular intervals is transformed on the inside by spiraling layers of metal flashing that create an enclosed terrace-garden for grass. While clearly alluding to the labor-intensive practice of rice cultivation on terraced lots carved into mountains, the beauty of this composition lies in that all-important balance between the conceptual and the formal, the idea and the material, the planned and the accidental.

Though Sham's interest in the conjunction of opposites has been present ever since the beginning of his career, its fullest expression to date may be the installation *Sea of Hope* (2003–11), whose origins can be traced to 2002, when his mother died from cancer. It took several months before Sham felt that he could speak of his grief through a work of art, which he made during a residency in Victoria, Australia. The personal memorial that grew from this process took the form of a gracefully curving vessel crafted of small stacked and laminated pine blocks suspended, somewhat improbably, by unobtrusive metal bars. Harking back to one of the most recognizable motifs of his Chinese heritage—the spirit boats for the dead—this vessel was envisioned as an homage that could encapsulate both personal and artistic identity. What Sham did not see as he gave shape to this boat, so similar to many of his earlier works, yet so unlike anything else in terms of its intensely private message, was how this installation would become a locus for the memories and wishes of others, people who would, eventually, become his collaborators.

Even as he was making sketches for the boat's first showing at the Manningham Gallery in Australia, one of his sisters expressed her wish to also honor their mother. Unable to contribute an artwork herself, she made a small, white paper boat reminiscent of the hand-crafted vessels from their childhood and added it to his piece. Through this gesture, she brought to her brother's work an allusion to the small paper boats sent afloat in Chinese funerary rites, each adorned with a votive candle to symbolize the journey of the dead to their final resting spot. Sham's sister then invited other cancer patients and survivors to contribute their own spirit-boats. By the time that *Sea of Hope* left its first exhibition venue in 2003, it had grown into a much more complex installation. Sham's spirit-vessel had become a centerpiece surrounded by more than a hundred paper boats, each one made by a different person and inscribed with an individual message.

In 2006, the installation was shown in Hong Kong. This time, instead of a commercial art gallery, it was displayed at the University of Science and Technology, where it was seen by hundreds of students. In this show, it was complemented by the largest of the "phone book" sculptures, *The House of Identity* (2006). The two objects related to one another in manifold ways: both combined wood and paper, and both were envisioned as habitats. Yet, whereas *Sea of Hope* spoke of ceaseless change, *The House of Identity* gave expression to a desire for permanence, however illusory. Once again, neither the sculptor nor the organizers of the show could anticipate the eagerness with which passersby became participants: within days, there were several hundred more paper boats "floating" around the original. Many carried inscriptions commemorating ancestors, in line with the funerary



*Pages*, 2009. Phone book and pencil on paper, .25 x 16.5 x 23.38 in.

spirit-boats, but many others were annotated with wishes, turning what began as a tribute to the dead into an expression of hope for the living.

This subtle transformation continued in *Sea of Hope*'s subsequent Hong Kong appearances: at the Tsuen Wan Town Hall in the New Territories (August 31–September 14, 2011) and at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital of Kowloon (September 17–October 10, 2011). By this time, the spirit-boat dedicated to Sham's mother had generated more than a thousand little companions. The ethereal mass of white paper boats covered the floor in a gently curving shape that alluded to an imaginary stream of water. In addition to messages written in various languages, each of these tiny vessels carried a small "load" placed by the sculptor—a cone of black tea leaves representing the votive candles of the funerary ghost-boats. The symbolism of these offerings was heightened by their allusion to the tea's healing properties, the hope, as Sham has noted, that its anti-oxidants may bring miraculous healing even from the gravest of diseases. In a more general sense, the "cha" of spirit in these boats calls to mind the goal of the tea ceremony as a ritual—to bring the drinker's body back into balance with nature.

*Sea of Hope* is Sham's most personal sculptural installation. And yet, he has paradoxically opened it to co-creators who range from close relatives to complete strangers, whom he knows only through the messages that they leave in their ghost-vessels. Each of these boats will continue to change the original homage to his mother, inflecting it with a somewhat different meaning. But then, this acceptance of impermanence is inherent in the meaning of the spirit-boat as an object: the funerary paper vessels disappear, either burned by the votive candles they carry or slowly dragged beneath the surface of the water.

In many ways, the dialectic between presence and absence accords *Sea of Hope* authority as an artistic statement about

*Sea of Hope*, 2003–11. Wood, paper, ink, and tea leaves, dimensions variable.



the ruptures and continuities of being. At the same time, this dialectic sheds additional light on Sham's interest in the workings of memory—an idea central to the "phone books" and the "life-prints" with which *Sea of Hope* was shown in Hong Kong in 2011.

Like the seeming paradoxes of Tao or Buddhist thought, this "unfinished" installation provokes feelings whose mutual relationships promote further reflection rather than offer definitive answers. These reflections address such perennial questions as the relationship between artist and audience, individual and collective identities, and the meaning or meanings of a work of art as it travels through different sites (gallery, university, hospital) and geographic locations (Australia, Hong Kong, and ultimately, the United States). As *Sea of Hope* continues to trace Sham's psycho-geography, it also reminds us of the power of the archetypal form at its center: the vessel that can carry a myriad of messages. It is not an accident that the first record of paper-folding craft in the European tradition is a drawing of a small paper boat in a treatise on astronomy (*De sphaera mundi*, 1490). East and West may never have been that far from one another. The messages on the paper fleet around Foon Sham's spirit-boat continue to affirm the shared concerns and hopes of many different individuals, despite the different languages in which they are inscribed.

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