

Oi-ee Moochim

Michael Hong

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2024

Committee:

Whitney Lynn

Victoria Jang

Andy Fallat

Michael Swaine

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Art, Art History and Design

© Copyright 2024

Michael Hong

University of Washington

**Abstract**

Oi-ee Moochim

Michael Hong

Chair of Supervisory Committee:

Whitney Lynn

Art, Art History and Design

손 맛 (son-maat), directly translating to hand-flavor is a Korean phrase that expresses the intimate connection between an individual's tactile sensibilities and the food they prepare. Within the domestic space, this hand-flavor symbolizes the unique taste imparted by love and care, creating flavors that cannot be easily replicated. This essence is often passed down through generations, becoming a cherished cultural inheritance that evolves over time.

Hand flavor is a defining aspect of one's identity and personalized essence. I use the notion of hand-flavor as framework to provide context for my research and studio practice. In doing so, I unfold the complexities of labor that are often associated with the expression of one's hand-flavor. I interweave materials emblematic of a South Korean immigrant household, through which I am able to investigate the intricacies of my relationship from everything between the familiar and my sphere of life in Koreatown, Los Angeles to contextualize my methodologies.

## **Definitions**

Hand-flavor:

1. The sensation one feels from touching something with a hand
2. Sensation

The sensation that an angler feels when a fish takes the bait on his/her fishing rod.

3. The taste from a hand, meaning that the hands used in making food give a special flavor to the food.

*(Source: Naver Korean-English Dictionary)*

I grew up in Koreatown for most of my life. For the first time since moving to Koreatown, I relocated to Seattle in 2022 to pursue my Master of Fine Arts at the University of Washington. Coming from a small, culturally distinct and homogenous bubble, I have found myself questioning the values that have been engrained in my upbringings- which I have been exploring through the material sensibilities of staple items of a Korean immigrant home.

Richard Shusterman, in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, articulates the problems with the approach to defining art, arguing that it “is a complex of interconnected activities which require learned skills and knowledge, and which aim at achieving certain goods internal to the practice.”<sup>1</sup> Shusterman proposes a “body-centered discipline as a framework to examine the relationship between the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aisthesis) and creative self-fashioning.”<sup>2</sup> The notion of hand-flavor resonates with Shusterman’s disciplinary proposal of somaesthetics, and the importance of habit, or discipline as a guiding force. Through this framework, he critiques traditional aesthetics for its tendency to deprioritize active engagement. Hand flavor, at its core posits the embodied nature of experience, which involves not just passive observation but also active participation through sensory engagement.

## **Koreatown, Los Angeles**

One day in 2004 my parents told us that we were taking a family trip to Lotte World, the Korean equivalent of Disneyland. Instead, we were on a plane on the way to Los Angeles to my aunt’s house in Northridge, where we stayed for the first couple months until my parents got things settled. While we lived with our cousins, my brothers and I got our English names with no rhyme or reason, out of a conversation that sparked in the backseat of a car on the way back from

Galleria, a big chain Korean grocery store. Min Jae became Jason, Min Seok became Michael, and Min Chul became Austin.

We lived in Hawaii Gardens for a year after leaving my aunt's house until we made the move to Koreatown in Los Angeles. There were many nights of arguments between my parents because my dad would struggle to find anything beyond an entry-level job. My mom would always refer to my dad as someone with a strong personality and couldn't ever work under someone. He ended up leaving to go back to Korea while the remaining four of us made a house a home in K-town.

Koreatown was great for us because it provided a space of familiarity in an unfamiliar place. Food was the primary source of communication, one that transcended language and cultural barriers. The access to 7 Korean grocery stores in a 3 sq. mile allowed many Korean mothers to make sense of the world around them through ingredients they associated with home. My mother always found it important that we ate at least one full meal at home- rice, soup and side dishes made by her for us. There was always too much food. My mom was 큰 손, or big-hand, which refers to someone who, in the name of love, prepares and shares an overabundance of food.

Church was the gathering place of all 큰 손. The church was a fascinating place where a complex network of trading happened. Families would take turns preparing food for lunch after service, purposefully making extra for people to take home. After lunch, there were two teams of people- one to help clean, and one to help pack leftovers sandwiched between Styrofoam plates and meticulously wrapped in foil.



큰 손, (*Big-Hand*)  
stoneware, aluminum silver leaf,  
rice bags

There were families who opted out of these potluck style lunches, and instead showed their appreciation through other tokens, most notably crocheted scouring pads called 수세미 (soosemi). As a 5<sup>th</sup> grader having just learned about the 3 R's- reduce, reuse, recycle, I was baffled by absurdity in the pile of Styrofoam plates that went into the trash can every week with the exchange of a tool meant to encourage the reuse and reducing of disposable tableware. It was always a flower or fruit created using bright, fluorescent yarn, covered in a fuzzy and sensorially pleasing scratchiness that captivates anyone who comes across it. Most 수세미 are made using special textured yarn imported from Korea, which until the popularization of Amazon, could only be found at local craft stores. Despite the availability and accessibility of these readymade any Korean grocery store, there was conscientious effort in searching for the material and

spending time to crochet each bit by hand.



*Sunday Christian*  
stoneware, epoxy resin, scrubby  
yarn, styrofoam plates

### **Recipes Gone Wrong**

During the pandemic, my mom would pack side dishes from her house in K-town and deliver them to my place near USC, where I was attending at the time. In aged tupperwares that were older than my brothers and I, she would pack a variety of side dishes and soup that would last us until her next delivery. Her Oi-ee Moochim, a dish consisting of cucumbers marinated in pepper base, was always the first one to be emptied which ultimately prompted my countless failed attempts to recreate it.

Oi-ee Moochim is a Korean dish made using a Korean household staple marinade consisting of pepper flakes, vinegar, sugar, sesame oil, and hand-flavor. Cucumbers were always on sale at any Korean grocery store, so it wasn't uncommon to find this dish on a daily basis.

This is my mother's recipe for Oi-ee Moochim:

일단 오이를 얇게 썰고, 소금을 뿌려주고 15분 동안 물기를 빼줘

(First, you want to cut the cucumbers thin, sprinkle salt and let it sit for 15 minutes while you drain the water)

그리고 고추가루, 식초, 설탕 넣고- 맵고 시고 달면 팽이야. 난 설탕 대신 매실 액을 써  
(Then, you put pepper flakes, vinegar, sugar- it just needs to be spicy, sour, and sweet. I use plum extract, not sugar)

그담에 다진 마늘 쫌 넣고

(Put some minced garlic)

참기름 한 바퀴

(One round of sesame oil)

마무리는 깨

(End it off with sesame seeds)

몰라, 그냥 너 맛 있는대로 해

(I don't know, just do whatever tastes good to you)

All of my mother's recipes would look like the one above, descriptions of the amounts of ingredients rather than clear amounts. Most, if not all Korean mothers I know do not own measuring devices at home. Crafting each dish is something she no longer must think about but can just *do*. Out of this intuitive act arises a flavor, a signature, a marker of the maker that is developed from practice over the course of many years.

My mother's intuitive cooking method is a methodology I have been heavily influenced by when working through materials. Like her recipes, my working process is devoid of any precise measurements, but rather relies heavily on my senses. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment provides a theoretical framework for exploring the concept of hand-flavor. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty positions the relationship between tactile sensibilities and personal identity, and the interconnectedness of these elements through cultural practices such as cooking. Merleau-Ponty implies that the embodied actions, and the perceptions in direct response to these actions are habitual, of which "new clusters of meanings is formed; our former movements are integrated into a fresh motor entity, the first visual data into a fresh sensory entity, our natural powers suddenly come together in a richer meaning."<sup>2</sup> Following this logic, perception is not a purely mental activity detached from our physical bodies, but positions the body as a primary way of engaging with and experiencing the world. He

emphasizes that the body should be understood as a subject, something that is not merely possessed or used, but integral to our self-awareness. Tactile knowledge is not easily translatable into words or measurements, but rather learned embodied practice through habit that is passed down through generations.



*뭘 했다고 쉬어? (What Did you Do to Deserve Rest?)*

stoneware, epoxy resin,  
cucumbers, table, vinyl,  
cardboard

### **Practice/Ritual/Sacrifice**

*Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta*

There were a few nights in the summer when I could hear my mom in the kitchen slicing cucumbers in preparation for a cucumber face mask.

*Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta*

The slices had to be thin. Too thick would make them too rigid to sit on your face. Each time, I would suggest she use the mandolin knife, to which she insisted on cutting by hand. Our rectangular, plastic, off-white colored mandolin cutter sat peacefully under the sink, collecting dust.

I often think about the way the cucumbers were cut so thin that the inner part became translucent enough for light to pass through. My mother had a very particular way of doing things, often unnecessarily time-consuming or tedious. In this case, the meticulous, laborious ritual of hand-cutting cucumbers was a way for her to justify the reward of sitting down and enjoying television. The meticulousness of her expression of love and affection came at the cost of her isolation- unable to ask for help she often stood alone in the kitchen, overloading herself with sensory stimulations, most notably a Korean drama on the TV.

This is a list of the shows I have watched from 2022-2024 in the studio:

*Weak Hero Class 1*

*Alchemy of Souls*

*Reply 1988*

*Under the Queens Umbrella*

*Dr. Romantic 3*

*Twenty-Five Twenty-One*

*Extraordinary Attorney Woo*

*My Liberation Notes*

*Reborn Rich*

*Crash Course in Romance*

*Pachinko*

*The Uncanny Counter (Season 2)*

*Divorce Attorney Shin*

*Narco-Saints*

*Doctor Cha*

*Captivating the King*

*Lies Hidden in My Garden*

*Moving*

*Alchemy of Souls (Season 2: Light and Shadow)*

*My Mister*

*The Glory (Part 1 & 2)*

*Queen of Tears*

*Dear My Friends*

*D.P (Season 2)*

*Juvenile Justice*

*Little Women*

*Parasyte: The Grey*

*A Time Called You*

*King the Land*

*Thirty-Nine*

*The Law Cafe*

*Sweet Home (Season 2)*

*The Killing Vote*

*The 8 Show*

*Green Mother's Club*  
*Love Is Blind: (Season 3-6)*  
*Big Mouth (Season 1 & 2)*  
*Peaky Blinders (Season 1-3)*  
*Hyena*  
*The Ultimatum: Queer Love*  
*Mo*  
*Too Hot to Handle (Season 4-5)*  
*Bling Empire (Season 1-3)*  
*The Light in Your Eyes*  
*Money Heist: Korea- Joint Economic Area*  
*My Name is Mo'Nique*  
*Kill Boksoon*  
*Bloodhounds*  
*The Lincoln Lawyer (Season 2)*  
*DEPP V HEARD*  
*The Devil Judge*  
*Lupin: Part 3*  
*Love After Divorce (Season 4)*  
*The Crown (Season 6)*  
*Comedy Royale*  
*The Brother's Sun*  
*Griselda*  
*Love Island (Season 11)*

*Our Blues*  
*Barbarians*  
*Misty*  
*Prison Playbook*  
*The Ultimatum: Marry or Move On (Season 1-2)*  
*The Crowned Clown*  
*Change Days (Season 2)*  
*Single's Inferno (Season 2-3)*  
*Physical 100 (Season 1- 2)*  
*Perfect Match (Season 1)*  
*Ms. Pat: Y'all Wanna Hear Something Crazy?*  
*Queenmaker*  
*BEEF*  
*The Witcher (Season 3)*  
*Zombiverse*  
*Mask Girl*  
*Destined With You*  
*The Fall of the House of Usher*  
*Surviving Paradise*  
*Squid Game: The Challenge*  
*World War II: From the Frontlines*  
*Love on the Spectrum (Season 2)*  
*Killing Eve (Season 1-3)*



*Playing/Working  
stoneware, pepper flakes (import of  
Korea), rubber tub*

In her self-defined particular parameters, my mother's love and affection were shown through a ritual of sacrifice for the happiness of her children. There's a romanticization of time spent and the pride in the amount of labor for the sake of others, but also the expectation for one to acknowledge and appreciate these elements. This was felt and understood during the many days I would assist my mom in cooking large batches of food. Most notably, the act of making kimchi required lots of preparation and meticulous use of touch to create the perfect balance of spicy, salty, savory, sweet, and sour. Rather than simply asking for help, work and play were conflated. "Pretend this is a game," my mother would say. Only, after this game, your legs cramp up and your hands are stained red from peppers after sitting on the floor massaging napa cabbages for hours straight.

In my practice, I cope through clay, a medium that readily responds to the tactile feedback from its maker. Its plasticity creates a constant site of negotiation between the maker's

sensibilities and its environment. In the accumulation of this process, I find comfort- it has become a ritual defined by discipline and habit, like the way my mother would perform the absurd ritual of cutting thin cucumbers by hand-subjecting myself to a pattern of monotony. In striving to reach his self-imposed goal, the clay often collapses, unable to resist the weight of my continuous, additive process. There is a constant struggle, the negotiation between how much the clay withstand and how far I can push myself to reach my desired goal despite its absurdity? Is there value in art that is a by-product of coping? My mother too, must've been filled with uncertainties navigating through an unfamiliar place with three sons to care for, I think about the isolation and loneliness one feels in a relentless pursuit for an intangible purpose. Perhaps that is why despite a more efficient method, she had to follow through the ritual of hand cutting cucumbers. It is important to note that each material comes from a very personal narrative and history as its foundation- it is what I know but do not fully understand.

Hand-flavor is not only a framework for an appreciation and respect for this labor, but a way for me to understand the values of discipline and habit that have been ingrained into me from my childhood experiences, a coping mechanism that I too employ as I navigate through the uncertainties of being an artist.



*At What Cost/만세 (Hooray)*

*stoneware, working gloves, cotton gloves, artificial grass, repurposed fabric*

**Endnotes:**

1. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 261.
2. Ibid, 261.
3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 177.