

Galleries

Jae Ko, on a Roll

The Young Sculptor Adds to Her Reputation

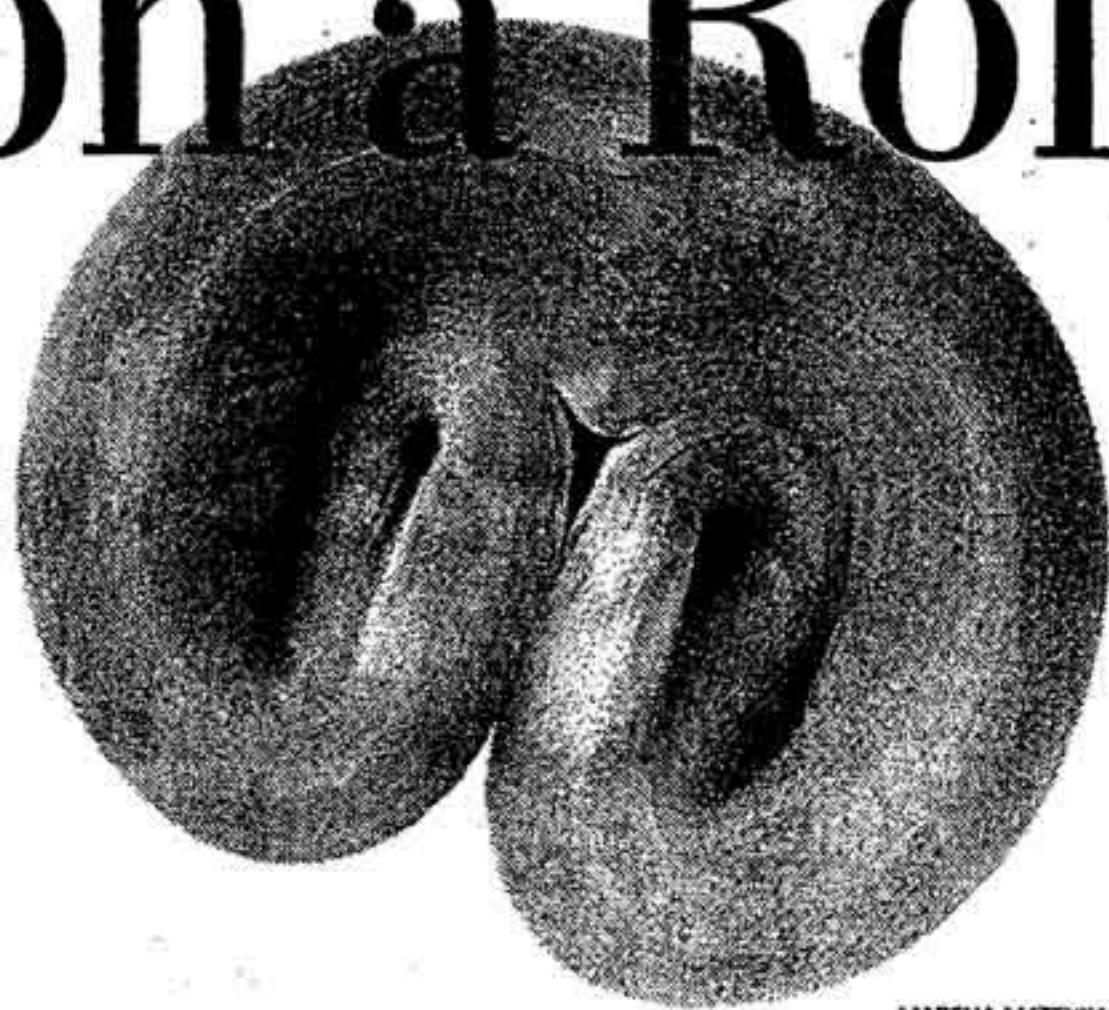
By FERDINAND PROTZMAN
Special to *The Washington Post*

When Jae Ko's strange, austere sculptures made from rolled paper and black ink appeared in "Artsites '98," the sprawling group show by Washington area artists, they were an immediate hit. But that sudden success by a relatively unknown young artist also raised questions about whether she was a flash in the pan.

The answer, a resounding no, can be seen in Ko's extraordinarily evocative exhibition of new works at Marsha Mateyka Gallery. The show reinforces Ko's reputation as one of Washington's most interesting young artists. It also highlights one of the most exciting developments on the local art scene over the past few years: the emergence of a group of talented young female sculptors, including Yuriko Yamaguchi and Tara Donovan, who work primarily with simple materials or found objects. Ko's work is clearly part of that conceptual trend.

The 11 wall-hung sculptures in the show were all produced with the process that first earned Ko kudos. She takes rolls of paper—usually adding machine paper rolls with varying degrees of tightness—submerges them in a tub, then adds Sumi ink, which is made from ash. The paper absorbs the water/ink mixture and swells into a much larger shape. Ko eventually removes the paper, applies glue to stabilize it while drying and finally adds a wooden backing.

The finished works, all untitled, are somber, sober, severe and beautiful. At first glance, they resemble giant black fungi that have mysteriously sprouted from the wall. But as you look at them, these simple shapes made from simple



MARSHA MATEYKA GALLERY

Jae Ko's abstract sculptures are made of rolled paper soaked in a tub of water and black Sumi ink.

materials become increasingly complex and intriguing. The sculptures seem to mutate with every shift in the fall of light or the viewing angle, as if they possessed a closed-loop, kinetic energy, like a Mobius strip made from a single, three-dimensional brush stroke.

There's lots of gesture and emotion. And the color, form and texture offer a wealth of allusions.

The shadows, created by the rolled paper sinking into itself, are so deep and black they seem to absorb light, like some black hole. The layers of paper call to mind the growth rings of a tree or the pages of a book. From different angles, the blackness can either shine like silk or fade into dusty gray. The forms, which Ko apparently can control more than she could those in her earlier works, are equally varied. Some are simple circles, like a tire or a doughnut. Others are more complex shapes that look vaguely like a water lily or a baboon's face.

For me, the ever-shifting blackness and sharp tonal contrasts in Ko's sculptures evoked images of Mathew Brady photographs and memories of the shiny, black horsehair sofa in my grandmother's living room. Only a very talented artist can get that kind of evocative punch from an adding machine roll soaked in inky water.