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Paper Work

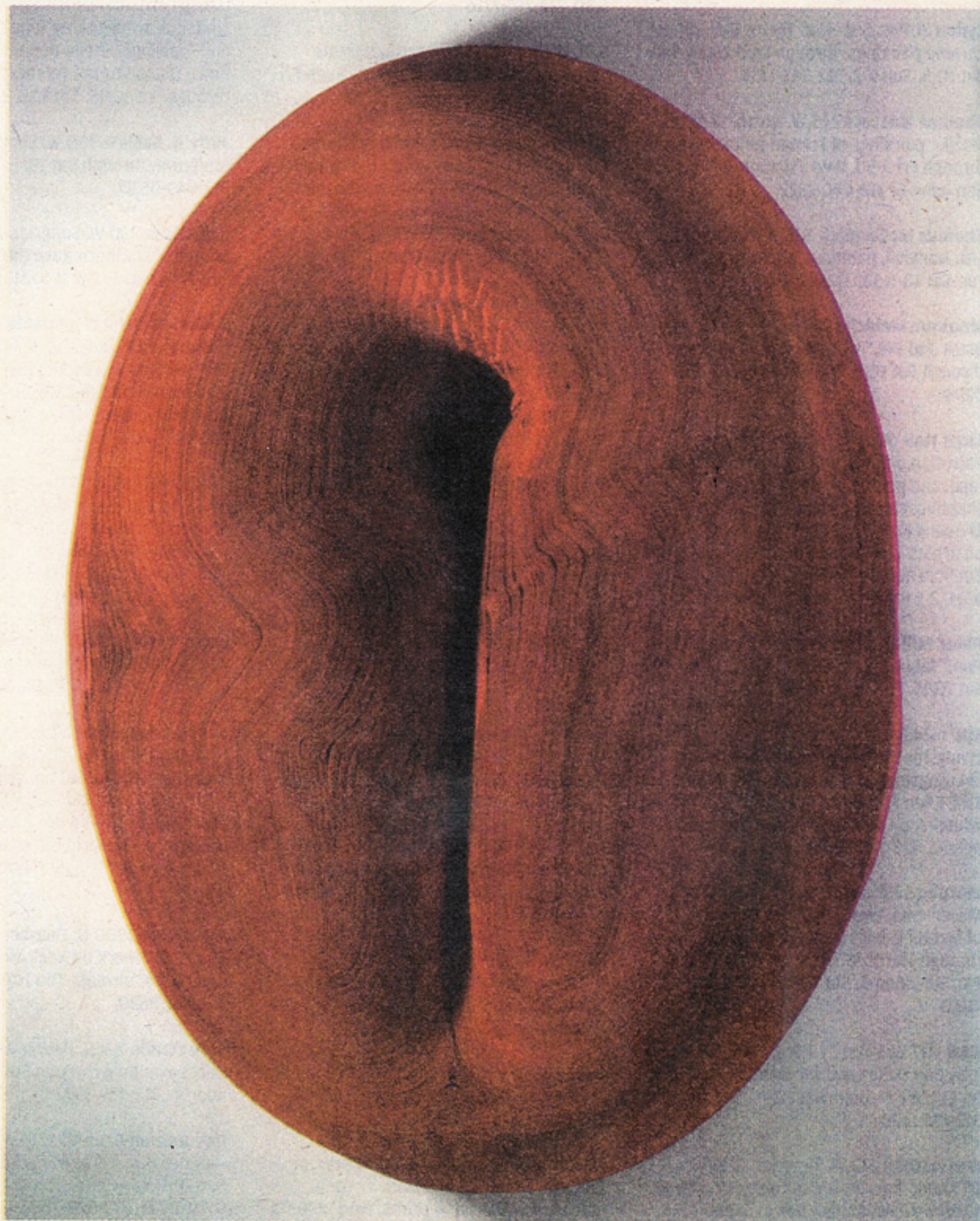
Jae Ko's 22 bold abstract sculptures at Andrew Bae, made of long rolls of adding-machine tape soaked in water and ink, have their origins in a seven-year depression. After getting art degrees in Korea and Japan, Ko moved to Washington, D.C., in 1988; she married a Korean-American in 1990. She'd been raised in an unusual Korean family: her father designed their homes and encouraged her to learn carpentry. But her husband's more traditional family, she says, was living in the style of Korea in the 60s. "And when I married him, I married his whole family." They wanted her and her husband to work the night shift at their grocery store. "All I can really do is make art. They said, 'Artists don't make any money.' My husband didn't say anything." She left him in 1993, but it was two more years before the divorce was final. Meanwhile she had no money or job and stayed with a sister living nearby. Ko thought that going to grad school would help her return to making art, but for the first month at the Maryland Institute College of Art she sat in her studio, unable to work. Finally she began slopping paint on some plywood panels she'd asked a friend to make, adding plastic junk. "I hated it," she says, and when her fellow students called it "interesting," she knew they didn't like it either. But her depression lifted. "I was happy as soon as I was making art, even terrible art."

Ko thought back to the earliest pieces she'd made on her own. For the first, she pressed glass she'd smashed with a hammer into rice paper, creating jagged relief effects. Later she impressed Plexiglas she'd bent with heat on rice paper, creating curves, and once she made an installation of several thousand sheets of altered paper stacked to the ceiling. Not wanting to return to rice paper, she began experimenting with other kinds of paper in grad school. First she bolted together blank sketchbooks and soaked them in water mixed with ink

in a plastic swimming pool, then separated the pages. "Each paper had a different emotion, almost like a different human face," she says. Later Ko cut rolls of brown wrapping paper in half all the way to the core, and after discovering they didn't absorb water very well, buried one on a beach at low tide. When the tide receded again, the paper had separated into elaborate curved patterns at the cut, she says, "like a flower blooming." She buried another, uncut roll underground. Even after a month it wasn't much altered. But after three months, "bugs had started to eat the paper, making amazing lines all over it, like a drawing. I thought, 'Oh my goodness, this is so beautiful,' and brought it back to my studio. Everyone else said, 'This is so stinky.'" When Ko's father had died, around the time her marriage was ending, she'd had a difficult time with his interment. "People started to put my father's body, this thing I love, in this big hole in the ground. I thought, 'You can't put my father in there—it's too dark, he can't breathe.' He was still alive in my mind. One of the reasons I buried things later is that everything goes back to earth."

Ko discovered adding-machine tape in 1996 while looking for paper that absorbed water well. By wind-

ing many rolls together—first by hand and later on a pottery wheel—she made single rolls as large as six feet in diameter. She found that the paper changed shape when wet depending on how tightly it was wound, and that she could control a work's contours that way. She places the rolls in a mix of ink and water or mixes traditional Asian colors and water to get blazing reds and yellows. She also sometimes folds the rolls into different shapes before soaking, resulting in some forms that are almost square, and



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often combines up to four rolls in a single piece. Mysteriously abstract, her work suggests calligraphy, natural shapes, buildings. Ko says that each piece has multiple sources in her observations, some from the car trips she takes with her boyfriend, artist Jim Sanborn. "I'm trying to see all I can of nature, architecture, human shapes. I look at my toes as I move my body. I see the way people's clothing changes when they move. I love the shapes of small dunes and the textures of wet soils." —Fred Camper