

5-1-2015

# Progress Through Process

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**Rochester Institute of Technology**

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School for American Crafts

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts, Glass

*Progress Through Process*

Richard Clayton Hufford

May 1, 2015

**Thesis Committee**

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## **Proposal and Abstract**

Aristotle once said “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” (Bynum) My thesis takes a note from Aristotle: it is an on-going investigation into how common objects may be altered in order to renew the viewer’s perception of them. Such alteration occurs when one encounters a handmade work in progress – particularly a project not yet finished. In particular, my thesis work examines the period of transformation when an object’s boundaries, which define the interior or exterior of a space or object, are not yet fully defined and questions how function and value are related in such objects.

Consider that, when building a house, after the walls are set, brick mortared, and paint applied, all visible remnants of the process disappear. The effort it took a craftsman to build the structure becomes hidden and, in a sense, forgotten. The value of the object is based on its ability to complete the intended task. In the case of a house, such a value might be to offer shelter.

In contrast to the values inherent in the typical building progression, my thesis’ finished pieces conclude prior to this final concealment or enclosure. It is my belief that before a structure is finished, it reveals itself more deeply to a viewer. My work is based on this idea of a structure being “revealed” and in essence I deconstruct a structure prior to its finish. The end result is a shift in values, and the emphasis of my work is not on function (or “use”) but on how objects are viewed or appreciated when more information is presented about how they are used structurally. As such, my work is relational forming a connection between myself and an audience by exploring how I believe value may be

assigned to objects and concepts. I believe an audience is more likely to perceive something as possessing value when they have more information about how or why something works, seeing literally what is the relevance for why an object may exist.

Toward this end, I am curious about objects from both early twenty-first century American culture and from decades past, so-called common objects of the late twentieth-century industrial culture, such as pallets or roofing tiles, that are simply so common as to be rendered invisible. This line of inquiry places me within a broader context of artists who are exploring similar questions: Sol Lewitt, Richard Serra and Fred Sandback, to name a few.

Glass is unique in its ability to balance fragility, strength, transparency, opacity. In different stages, it is both brittle and flexible. My thesis applies fabrication techniques intended for wood and metal to the medium of glass, and, in doing so, questions how material shifts affect a given object's perception and functionality. Further, by decoupling appearance and purpose, I ask the artist and the viewer to reconsider how thought and perception may influence an object to gain strength or become weak when a material shift has been applied.

## **Discussion of Sources and Research**

David Pye, the accomplished wood-turner and carver, who also worked on the theory of design and handcraft, said "First of all, the things we inherit from the past remind us that the men who made them were like us and give us a tangible link with them" (Pye). I resonate strongly with Pye's words. Much of what I create is built from an essential form that I inherited from the past. For example, when I began working with

glass, I found most of my inspiration in kitchen cupboards, home furnishing magazines, and design publications. I made functional objects such as tumblers, bowls, and plates. Functional work was an obvious first choice because I followed a well-known process. I made something: a cup, a bowl, a vase. Upon review, I realized that is how the craft movement functions on a broad scale: Artists who have access to materials make functional objects that enhance or somehow improve daily life.

I learned my craft primarily through apprenticeship. As such, I inherited much of my schema through the natural process of creation, trial and error. The word **schema** (plural *schemata* or *schemas*) describes a pattern of thought or behavior that organizes categories of information and the relationships among them (Cherry). It can also be described as a mental structure of preconceived ideas, a framework representing some aspect of the world, or a system of organizing and perceiving new information. Schemata influence attention and the absorption of new knowledge: people are more likely to notice things that fit into their schema, while re-interpreting contradictions to the schema as exceptions or distorting them to fit. Initially, glassblowing represented an activity or “sport” in which I wanted to strive for perfection, learning to make objects requiring a high level of skill. As I began working on my exhibition “Progress through Process,” I realized it was not the perfection of skill I was truly seeking, it was the act of glassblowing itself which I needed to consider more fully. In order to become a skillful glassblower, one must be able to anticipate many steps needed to execute specific shapes and quickly improvise when a plan may need adjustments. By learning how to mentally organize the glassblowing process, I felt empowered in how that discipline helped me

better organize my thoughts as they pertained to everything, from cooking to writing a thesis.

Educational theories of apprenticeship often involve the combination of formal and informal training for the development of [schema](#), (mental structures that represent individual understanding of experiences that frame a person's conceptualization of reality.) Essentially, all my experiences up to this point are informed from my past jobs as an apprentice. I have chosen architecture and architectural elements to portray my ideas in this thesis exhibition because, for me, architecture represents a constant debate, in form, about whether structure is functional, art, practical or decorative.

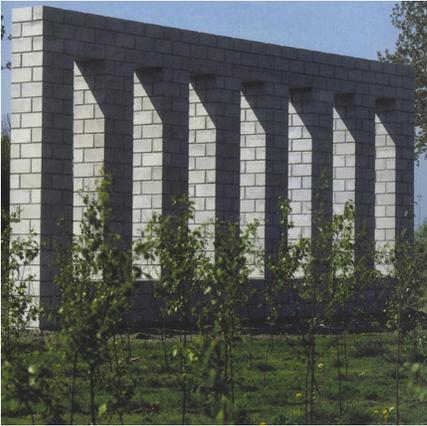
There is a lineage of artists from whom I draw inspiration: Sol Lewitt, with his versatility of drawings, models, his artistic simplicity and Richard Serra, with his masterful handling of mass, space, and volume. Fred Sandback and Bruce Nauman, specifically the way they expand sculpture and concept beyond the physical representation of a piece. Vito Acconci, who envisions architecture not just as structure but also as arteries (causeways) for human movement, and finally, Scott Burton and how he explores material and its relationship to permanence. As I explore my own process and existential considerations, I draw inspiration from the work of these artists and share similar threads in my own work.

In an interview Sol Lewitt said,

I think that time is ripe for another kind of revolutionary thinking but something more simple than what's happening now because now it's all to do with expansion and multiplication. It needs to be cut down into subtraction and division instead of multiplication; it needs some clarification it needs some purity it needs some simplicity. I don't think we have that right now; I think that what

probably, what people will probably cry out for is a renewal of simplicity (Ostrow).

Lewitt's revolutionary and somewhat puritanical aesthetic inspires me. His use of typically un-interesting architectural elements such as cinder blocks to create something interesting is thought provoking. For me, Sol Lewitt's work in this case is profound because he maintains a level of permanence by using concrete as a material for the sculpture, "Eight Columns in a Row," but removes the element of function for the architecturally inspired work.



Sol Lewitt, Eight Columns in a Row 1995 (Lewitt)

In this way, he is able to tightly straddle the line between art and architecture and has a keen sensibility to elevate simple building materials to a status of high regard and renewed spirit. I believe that as humans we can too easily associate thought provoking objects as only temporary and functional structures as permanent. My thesis is essentially a study to determine how objects are perceived when they are created in a different, unconventional material, and often, when the object itself is pared away from its final function. It is "divided" away from that final use into something different. I use the word "study" primarily because I have never made these objects before, so the outcome is very much unknown, even though these structures theoretically have the potential to exist as functional objects.

In Richard Serra's work, he explores the essential nature of materials. In his piece "To Lift," for example, he picked up a ½ inch thick piece of industrial rubber and the material held its shape, appearing like a cape. In so lifting, Serra allows the material to naturally respond, revealing how the rubber material is true to its nature. The idea of a material's uncontrolled response contains an inherent unforeseeable, creative, experience.



Richard Serra, To Lift. 1967 (Douglass)

It took me some time to break out of my schema regarding the functional necessity of objects. I did not know it then, but I was seeking this same impulsivity or creative quality in my own work.

I wanted to expose more creativity and impulsivity in my work, to bring in not just the act of creating, but even the space around it. As Vito Acconci talks about when discussing his work, "the wall and floor are surfaces, but they are also spaces to be inside of; they are supports, but also container." (Acconci) There are spaces under the floor, between stories, inside the walls, between rooms. I wanted to open these spaces in my own work. I found I enjoyed exploring those spaces that are not designed or intended to be participated in, but that hold the form/soul/guts/framework/bloodflow of a structure. As my work progressed, I was excited to reveal the bones or structure of buildings or the idea of buildings and have a reverence for how the constructed object came to be.

This was the ethos of my apprenticeship, i.e. the inherent value on structure and function, seeking to be more consciously recognized. The more I began to encounter those values, the more I wanted to challenge the status quo. This is a challenge that in, “The Model and it’s Architecture,” author Patrick Healy references Susanne Langer’s argument that “the “illusion” of architecture is easily missed, because of the importance of its values: shelter, comfort, safekeeping. The discipline of its practical functions leads architecture to be confused about its very status. For some it is chiefly utilitarian, or it is applied art where the ideal that one begins with is inevitably compromised in the reality of making, and some have argued that utility and function are paramount.” Langer notes perspicuously that in architecture the problem of appearance and reality comes to a head as in no other art (Healy). I would argue that this is true in any craft, and it is certainly true in my own experience working with glass. Much of my thesis work strikes at the heart of this paradox of values.

I began to work with this paradox by employing material shifts and the reveal i.e. showing an object in the process of assemblage. Fred Sandback’s work with yarn sculptures is similar. In “Untitled (Blue Wall Piece),” 1968 he challenges the concept of volume by removing any physical material which may create an interior volume. He uses yarn, as a material, which is not load-bearing, instead sketching what is potential, presenting only perimeter.



Fred Sandback, Untitled 1968 (Sandback)



Bruce Nauman, "Space under My Chair," 1965 (Nauman)

Bruce Nauman's, "A Cast of the Space under My Chair," 1965 in contrast, explores space and volume by eliminating the opaque perimeter, and exchanges the air under his chair for concrete. But both artists are working with the same concepts, albeit in very different ways. A major interest for me is in exploring the relationship between volume and value. Some questions are: what materials represent permanence, and do those materials retain that permanence when placed upon transitory objects? An example of this is in Scott Burton's piece, "Rustic Table" and how he has replaced wood timbers used to construct an Adirondack Table with cast bronze "timbers".



Scott Burton, Rustic Table 1977 (Burton)

Material shifts are not uncommon, but represent grand opportunities to exploit a materials strengths and weaknesses. I find this even more challenging with glass as it has the unique ability to be transparent or opaque.

### **Critical Analysis**

My own creative process began with a series of simple steps, i.e. sketching an idea, making models, choosing material, and fabricating the plan. In my initial stages, I chose forms that were commonplace, often from the construction trade, objects that do not tend to inspire immediate thought or appreciation. For example, wood trusses are essential to the internal stability of a building, but they are assembled with jigs and guides and pieced together quickly, stacked, and shipped to the site. When looking at 100 trusses on a house, no one particular truss seems significant, but if I lower one down to investigate its construction and the job it performs, I realize how this object is important to the entire structure. The experience of bringing such objects into the spotlight, in order

to investigate their values, became more important as I developed my final work for this exhibition.

Additionally, I realized my value system is based on my work experience as an apprentice, and many of my past jobs revolved around the necessity to understand materials and techniques to become a competent employee. I believe the most important element to working within an apprenticeship environment is repetition. Repetition was the originating concept in my show, and it is important to explore my relationship to it further for a moment: Repeating the same rhythm many times in a day or an hour help the mind and the body work in unison to form muscle memory—memory that the mind will force the body to remember and identify subconsciously. Such memory is accessed intuitively in order to bring a specific material and technique together later. Through the repetition of glassblowing I have become more skillful at my trade, learning to organize the steps in my mind so my hands perform the necessary movements quickly, eliminating time wasting activity.

Glass was the main physical component of each piece in my final show “Progress through Process.” In this work as a whole, glass also captured the ideological component of my work, often representing that which has become invisible or lost. In every structure, the presence of glass was at or near eye level because I wanted the viewer to experience the glass component primarily and then take note of all other features after.

In each piece, I first decided the variables I would like to control, such as: scale, material placement, presentation, and would then alter specific variables depending on the effect I hoped to achieve. Throughout my entire exhibition, I arranged these variables with different levels of importance, treating each situation differently, but keeping all

variables present within each piece. I found that if I worked with a system of consistent variables in rotation then even when the pieces were different, the work had a visual continuity.

### ***Breaking Through***

In this piece, I began with the radiator form because it represented repetition. A radiator form has one or two dozen replicated fins within the form—and echoed the repetition of my early training in material form. I worked with this form for months, trying to turn it into something interesting. I made fins carved out of foam; I cut shapes out of paper and made a mold so I could cast them in wax. All these attempts were a way to separate shape from material, and to discover what about the shape was interesting in its most minimal form. After making a lot of wax fins and being frustrated with no movement, I hit the wax—and found something interesting.

The movement from the force of the blow created something new; it was the first time I let go of control of my creative process. The motion was totally impulsive. Afterward, I realized that what I ultimately wanted to achieve was to shift the perception of glass as an impersonal material. I wanted to transform the rigid, fragile, cold, sharp qualities into something more social, inviting and warm. I felt that if I could remove some of the material's traditional attributes, perhaps I could impart new attributes.



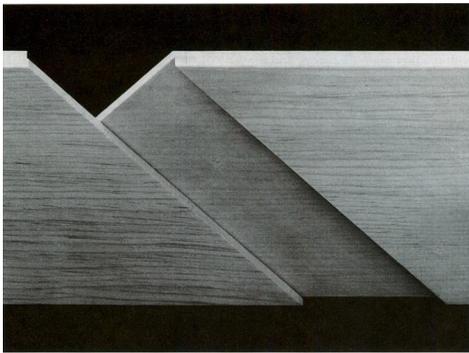
Breaking Through

Showing motion, encased in form, i.e. how glass moves when it's warm, links the experience of the person creating the form and prolongs the momentary movement into the material's cold state.

Simply put, "Breaking Through" was the first time I felt my mind and hands were working in unison, and not simply fighting for attention. The piece, titled appropriately, pushed me as an artist, in that I realized that if I wanted to change the viewer's perception of glass I needed to work with glass in new ways i.e. unsafe, unpredictable. It was a realization that led me toward my next work "Bring It Down," in which I joined my skills with glass to my interests in other materials and their techniques (metal and wood specifically). A larger "material shift" theme emerged in my work. I continued to be interested in how to give glass a new life/existence for me, and most importantly, for my audience.

### ***Bring it Down***

“Bring it Down” was the first time I stopped working with repetition or multiples and focused instead on a single piece, choosing to build a glass truss. The truss was assembled as if it were a wood structure, using mortise and tenon joinery. In this instance, I also felt drawn to the shape of the truss, and I was interested in the combination of simplicity in terms of its functioning and complexity in terms of its structure.



Mitred lapped scarf joint (Graubner)

In woodworking, joinery techniques rely on hiddenness. In tables, chairs, or dressers, the skill of construction is often measured by the degree to which its construction is concealed. In wood, joinery that is revealed represents less skill or craftsmanship. I wanted to challenge that idea. My truss plays with this same concept by using a material shift to create a “see through” approach or a total reveal. It is an outline of what exists, and by sketching the potential of a truss, in glass, I create the inverse effect, revealing the precision, technical awareness, union and skill that trusses use. I hoped that the viewer could consider how it was assembled, and develop an unfamiliar relationship with a familiar, arguably even “unseen” object.



Bring it Down

My intention in this piece was to shift the viewer's relationship with the object toward humor, curiosity, questions regarding practicality and impracticality. Perhaps the glass truss would stir new fascination in the built world and materials. Getting back to the question of value, I wanted the perimeter of the truss to be present so that the object was recognizable, but the most important element of the piece was the glass' transparency i.e. offering the viewer the ability to literally see-through the object to an interior point. The viewer's focus travels deeply inward, to the inner part of the object and to the inner workings and function of the truss, hopefully discovering how it is of value and why.

### ***Line Them Up***

In "Line Them Up," I started to bring a human element back into the piece. I created steel scaffolding to support glass tiles, which mimicked the shape of an actual terra cotta rooftop. The 8' wide by 6' tall scaffolding is topped with a row of double glass tiles and bolted to a wall marked every six inches by a chalk line. Builders use chalk lines

to create a level plane between two separate points. The lines suggest the potential for the piece to keep going, and is a visible marker of the creative process that, upon completion (a roof, for example) becomes unseen. The viewer is not aware of the lines.

I also created a pallet out of terra cotta. The terra cotta pallet displayed stacks of glass tiles, left as if available for further use. The implied relationship to the human builder was a new element in my work.

“Line Them Up” plays with the concept of completion, finding motion in the unfinished implication of the scene. It employs the show’s most fully realized material shift, in that the tiles are glass, not terra cotta. In this case, the material shift directly impacts the viewer’s ability to see the objects. Pallets are so common as to be rendered invisible. Made in terra cotta, they are noticed again. Tiles shield the occupant from the elements. Made from glass, they offer the viewer to see through them. They invite imagination. The viewer might wonder what it would be like to see the rain or snow through the roof of their house. Such imaginary exploration offers the chance to encounter the object’s use and inherent value, allowing it to be “seen” with new eyes.



Line Them Up

## CONCLUSION

I am attracted to all stages of creating something with structural integrity: drawing, material selection, model making, and final assembly. Combining all of these elements together creates an environment where I have an ordered path for my ideas to develop. I believe most people are open to learn about how objects are made when they can see them being made. This education helps one become an active participant in the process of their learning. With my work, I am essentially offering the viewer a self-guided tour through my process of learning. It is a process with many starts and stops and an occasional path diversion. I strive to have this inquisitive energy present in the finished works. I strive, if only for a few minutes, for a viewer to walk away from my work with a new perception of the material being used. Whether it be with serious intent or a nod to the absurd, I would be satisfied that a mind was open long enough to allow my curiosity in to stir their own.

My exhibition, "Progress Through Process," is an investigation into why I have such a deep interest in the way mundane objects are perceived. By calling attention to various mundane objects and attempting to break them free from the mundane thoughts associated, often by deconstructing a structure's elements. I am forced to consider why I think they are in fact mundane. The answer is difficult.

In "The Shape of Time," George Kubler argues that

Human desires in every present instant are torn between the replica and the invention, between the desire to return to the known pattern, and the desire to escape it by a new variation. Generally the wish to repeat the past has prevailed over the impulses to depart from it. No act is ever completely novel, and no act can ever be quite accomplished without variation. In every act, fidelity to the model and departure from it are inextricably mingled, in proportions that ensure

recognizable repetition, together with such minor variations as the moment and the circumstance allow. (Kubler)

When Kubler describes replica and invention, he strikes at the heart of my own interest.

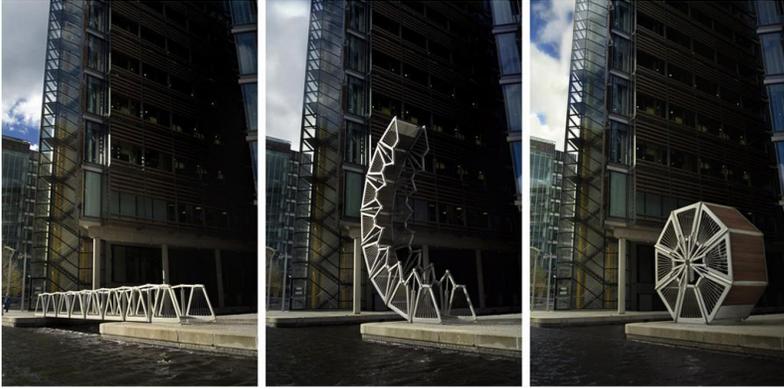
The objects I chose were “replica” objects. I am not inventing any new objects, but I do strive to challenge the idea of function. I believe the functionality of the objects I chose to showcase in my exhibition were effectively challenged. Though the objects I chose to investigate are inextricably linked to their primary function, I use the known function to initiate a new experience and draw a viewer in for a closer look. Once they have been invited in, I create an opportunity to introduce them to a new idea/concept that I have invented. I hope the viewer will be engaged by this tension.

When contemplating the work in this exhibition, half of me is devoted to expressing the concept of function by choosing known functional objects, and half is devoted to the act of function (or sometimes removing its ability to function). The act of deconstructing *concept* and *act* creates the tension that fuels the viewer’s experience. I can only expect a viewer to go so far as I have the ability to lead with my work.

Looking forward, I will explore more invention in my work, creating objects and structures less recognizable in their physical attributes. I will continue to explore how objects are perceived when an implied function is added or removed. I would also like to consider how I may create structures which may cause a viewer to falsely anticipate what they think something is used for – and in this way engage the viewer with a progression of uncertainty.

I would like to call attention to a work by Thomas Heatherwick, a London based artist, designer and architect. “Rolling Bridge” is a pedestrian bridge that when outstretched

allows walkers to cross a small waterway, but when contracted coils into an apparent sculpture.



“Rolling Bridge” Thomas Heatherwick 2005. (Heatherwick Studio)

I am inspired by this work because it questions boundaries which may define function. Is it an access bridge, a kinetic sculpture, or an object that makes one look twice? It has no real beginning or end, and as it unfurls, it could be stopped at any second and still be engaging. When the bridge is retracted, it represents the concept of function potential and as it opens and spans the void it is the act of function. My work in “Progress through Process” does not have the same luxury of movement that this example does, but I feel the essence of what it represents is similar. The piece reminds me that how an object is valued may be random and may evolve every time that object is viewed or used. Most importantly, it makes me want to proceed with purpose and create more objects that provide myself and others with a renewed opportunity to debate purpose and value.