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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

[Title goes here]

By

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November 1994
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About Process

During adolescence, any respite I could find was desperately sought, deeply appreciated, and carefully tended in memory. Occasionally I was allowed to spend seventy-five cents for an hour and a half bus ride, lurching from my home in one of Western Pennsylvania’s cruder, more sprawling and self-confident mill towns, into the relative sophistication of Pittsburgh, and ultimately to my favorite haven, Carnegie Museum. Once safely inside and partly lost in the dark hallways filled with frozen dioramas, my everyday concerns about pimples or socks faded. I felt like a disembodied thought, combing through memories that were always the same — the saber-tooth tigers attacking a wooly mammoth, or a compilation of dusty songbirds, deflated-looking in their airless, beige-walled display case.

One image from the museum haven remains particularly potent — a squat, age-blackened West African fetish, its head and neck adorned with braided grass and elaborate offerings of strung cowrie shells, its chunky wooden body all but completely hidden beneath a bristling hide of nails — hundreds and hundreds of nails it seemed to me. Bent ones and straight, thin and thick, hand wrought or manufactured, each nail representing a grave offense transferred directly, by faith and a hammer, from sinner to fetish.

Some people would label the figure and the activity obsessive; some would dismiss it as crude and unenlightened. For me the unlovely black figure practically vibrated with the power of great conviction, directly expressed, without any attempts at the cosmetic or the tasteful.

Similarly, my creative process divides itself into a series of activities which transform the objects with which I work, and also change me as I create those objects.
I identify things. Many of my glass pieces are individualized with numbers and patterns and fragments of abbreviated words. As I handle the glass, laying down a track of thin masking tape, images and ideas rise to the edges of consciousness. I become aware of the possible uses of a particular vessel. Sometimes I feel as though I’m someone else — a befuddled engineer trying desperately to make something work, without the proper tools or the right components, and all against a pitiless deadline.

I create systems. Some of them are small, and are inserted within the elements of a particular piece. Some are larger, and evidence themselves among several components of a much larger piece. Even though these systems may not be visible to the viewer, for me their existence is important because they mirror the pervasiveness of hidden, often unsuspected attributes in almost every aspect of the world of phenomena, and allude to the cyclical qualities of the natural world, where the seed contains, in an altered form, the adult, which contains the seed, and so on...

I make connections. They are usually unsubtle, unapologetic, and undecorative. I apply glue out in the open, where it can be seen. I clamp and bolt and tack and paste, preferring to keep my methods direct and low-tech whenever possible. For me, perfection implies detachment, leisure, objectivity, luxury, discernment, exclusivity, sophistication and calm. While these attributes may be fine in and of themselves, I am unable to trust them completely. Blame my theatrical experience, or perhaps my having worked as a low-level professional for a large New-York-based international investment bank, but I feel much more at home with obsession, urgency, empathy, poverty, desperation, banality, bad taste, and a certain degree of panic.

I create illusions. For all the frankness of my joining things together, I also alter materials and colors and textures — but for a different reason than
simply disguising them as something else. I believe that, when working on a plane surface, my job is implying plasticity or three-dimensionality as strongly as possible. When working in three dimensions, it is my job to imply the fourth — time. It is important to me that my work be experienced, as it were, in a verb tense other than either the present or the simple past. These works, while undeniably present, like the fetish in the dark museum hallway, maintain a visceral connection with another time and place and condition — looking at my work, I want to be unavoidably reminded of some other time or place, preferably a future that is already worn, pillaged and exhausted.
About Glass

In pushing beyond the familiar uses to which I've seen glass put, in both the craft and fine art senses, I have found a stratum of metaphor, reflecting back and forth between the medium and myself. My reasons for choosing to work with glass are anything but arbitrary, and blur the boundaries between the practical and the psychological.

Transparency gives glass a tremendous psychological richness, and also provides a source of immediate, if unacknowledged, metaphoric parallel to the viewer. The muddled, blurred transparencies of the glass surfaces I create for my work are similar to translucencies of human skin. They force me to consider that, in spite of my insistence in seeing myself as a solid object, much of my identity depends on what shows through from below the surface -- that when I blush, it is my blood that others see. This personal transparency is something with which I'm familiar on a day-to-day basis, but something I can readily ignore. Until the glass reminds me.

Like the human body, glass is also remarkably supple, ductile, and responsive. Bill Gudenrath, during one of my classes with him at the former New York Experimental Glass Workshop, would remark that, whatever we chose to do to it, 'the glass always remembers'.

He meant this as a warning, because one of the conventional goals of glass work is to preserve the untouched, pristine quality of the material by working it as delicately and judiciously as possible. But when I considered this 'remembering' aspect of glass further, I was reminded of the work of forensic anthropologists, who, examining human remains, can trace the course of a disease or deduce a former occupation, solely by the marks left by now-phantom muscles on their aged supporting bones.
So I chose to emphasize, to highlight this 'memory' in the glass, deliberately subjecting the material to far more stress and abuse than is the norm in more decorative applications. The surfaces I've achieved, for example, come from repeatedly dunking the hot glass in water, allowing the surface to crackle, and then reheating to trap air bubbles. When the glass is hot enough, I add a thin coating of powdered glass and repeat the process until the glass seems to have achieved enough 'character'. Basically the classic technique for 'ice glass', it has been pushed far beyond the cosmetic level, to create pocked, crusted forms that disturb me when I look at them.

Even more compelling for me than transparency or 'memory', is the almost clichéd fragileness of glass. What comes to mind at some level when I look at or handle even manufactured glass is a slight anxiety, an awareness of a fate hanging in the balance. The question is 'When will this break?' Not 'will this break', but 'when will this break'? I don't ordinarily feel as cautious about a piece of finely-wrought furniture, or an exquisite necklace, or even a raku pot. The plain fact of the glass, wedded with seemingly unrelated elements, calls up in me a sense of deep identification -- isn't that in fact something like me, lying there on that blistered table, or trapped in that untended box?

It's possible to emphasize these metaphoric elements in even an ordinary commercial glass jar, but for me the evident individuality of each glass shape, while clearly related to its larger group, underscores more strongly the connection with the individual, unique human body, vulnerable and imperfect as it can often be. When my glass pieces work the way I feel they should, they mirror my flawed physicality and my discomfort with being a finite fleshy creation. Screened-in, or bound to the wall, or inescapably entwined with others like it, the glass speaks for me, expressing my anguish and shame at knowing my helplessness and my mortality, and of not being able to do a single thing about it.
600-D
Essences for ‘600-D’ (format: conversation?)

If ‘600-D’ were:

a piece of music, it would be either relentless serial minimalism, or a high-pitched electrical whine, or dull factory noises as heard through thick concrete walls

a place on earth, it would be the border between Iraq and Kuwait, after the Gulf War, or a marshy beach sometime in the next century;

a taste, it would be salt and wood ash;

a smell, it would be a mixture of formaldehyde, smoke, burnt rubber and something electrical burning;

a temperature, it would be 98 F, with 86% humidity;

a tactile sensation, it would be a rough, soft dryness that seems about to give to the touch, like a rotten grapefruit;

an article of clothing, it would be a frayed, discarded grey sweater;

a time of year, it would be relentless August, or a gloomy stretch in November;

an animal, it would be a skunk or weasel or centipede;

a kind of vehicle, it would be a battered brown ’49 pickup truck;

a dwelling place, it would be a dank concrete basement, or a set of cardboard boxes under a major urban bridge;

an occupation, it would be either a mortician’s assistant or an actuary whose employer has just announced layoffs;

a kind of dance, it would be a slow, methodical, linear pavanne, done by exhausted performers trying to ignore predictions of an earthquake...
Lying under the feeble light as though laid out for a late-night autopsy, the '600-D' curls slightly on its rubber-topped cart, already cringing at the touch of clinical probing. The flat serpentine head, laden with a menacing brittle fringe of glass and metal and wire, seems too heavy to be raised by the thin, corrugated, multi-stranded neck that connects it to its pair of bladders lying at the other end of the cart — bladders filled with glistening crystals, stained with unidentifiable liquids and solids, and through which smaller strands of numbered tubing snake their futile way. Encrusting the whole tangled form is a thin coating of salt, suggesting that perhaps this is really some desperate hybrid of machine and blind bottom-dweller, no longer capable of feeding or defending itself, and finally, at the height of a storm, flung far up along a cold littered beach, alone where scavengers prowl.

There is a feeling of exhaustion, of having been used and abused for some foul purpose, then patched together and used some more, then having been discarded either in haste or exasperation. This piece is the antithesis of the way some island dwellers sweep out their homes and place fresh flowers in a beloved vase when a volcanic eruption threatens — here, there is no feel of caring, only of utility having been brashly wrenched from a clumsy assembly of parts not even designed for the uses to which they have been put.

Both glass bulbs are roughly the size of a shorn human head, and both are clogged and clotted inside with chunks of safety glass, dried fluid and strands of hair, through which an irregular length of glass- and plastic tubing twists its way. The bulbs, flattened along one side, are joined together there by a flexible black hose, each end of which fits into a black flange smeared with a
gritty substance that holds firmly to the glass. On the curved surfaces of the bulbs are letters and numbers and other coded information, either etched into the glass or glued on. ‘FD 506 K’; Day Use only’; 2.2.2.2.2.2.2.se are the bits of information imparted on the surface of the bulbs, along with some marks that imply fullness or measuring of some kind. A scrap of black vinyl tape stuck to one of the bulbs gathers salt along its edges.

From each of the bulbs emerges a hose, held in place by a metal belt-clamp and a black rubber sleeve. Although the hose appears to be black at first glance, closer inspection reveals that it is a translucent blue, with yellow, orange and white wires or tubes inside, like veins beneath the cold skin of an exhausted swimmer’s wrist. Each hose runs about six inches to the single end of one of two ‘Y’ joints, which are also held in place with belt clamps and rubber sleeves. From the arms of each of the ‘Y’ clamps issue two more hoses, similarly clamped into place, which lead to two openings in the flattened triangular ‘head’ of the object/creature. These hoses cross-combine as they meet the ‘head’ — rather than both hoses from one bulb running to the top opening in the head while both hoses from the other bulb run to the bottom opening, one hose from each of the two bulbs is wedged into each of the two head openings, leading to an awareness that everything in this object is cross-related and contaminated.

The head itself is a flat triangular prism, roughly the same size as one of the bulbs, but without their graceful, swollen curves. Where the bulbs stand on their sides with their flattened portions facing each other, the ‘head’ lies flat on the supporting surface. Where the bulb-tubes join the head, a set of wires, about as thick as cheap restaurant spaghetti, emerges and curves down to join the long, narrow lip of the head’s far opening. A black tape ‘flag’ waves from one of the wires, while from along the lip protrudes a fringe of nasty-looking, hypodermic-needle-like instruments; some are broken, some intact, with long,
twisting pointy tips — all are made from glass stuffed with twisted bits of wire and metal hooks. This fringe lies hanging over the edge of the four-wheeled cart supporting 600-D.

The cart looks almost too small for its burden. It's industrial grey, spattered and scraped, and is reminiscent of the kind of wheeled table that might be pressed into emergency use in a war-zone operating room. The top is covered with a thin rubber mat encrusted with yellow and black and brown stains, and held in place by greyed tabs of cloth tape. In one corner of the mat, secured with clear tape, is a dirty blank surface which many be paper or cloth, and which implies a message or set of instructions, but which is in fact blank. The handle of the cart, which is on the same plane as the table-like surface, is padded with stained cloth and wrapped in dirty plastic, suggesting the frustrated desperation of someone who no longer wanted to touch the dirty pad but had no time to change it properly.

This piece began in the trash. The plastic 'head' above referred to was the mouthpiece of an industrial carpet cleaner, hastily marked 'Good', and then tossed into a garbage bin when a hi-tech electronics firm went out of business. I misread the 'Good', jotted in cursive script with a red grease pencil, as '600-D'. Even then, it had the look of some concentrated, efficient intent, the way some insects do, and disturbed me.

I tried to make some glass vessels that would mimic the shape and volume of the plastic part, but wanted to work with the glass very freely. Instead of creating an exact mold, I used cinder blocks and the concrete floor of the hot shop to help me gently contain the glass as it was blown. The shapes I got weren't what I thought I wanted, but, in my usual trance-like state of creative dissociation, I simply blundered ahead, trying to make sense of what was hap-
pening around me. My first impulse was to join the mean-looking plastic head and the bladder-like glass shapes to each other quite brutally and economically, without taking into consideration the visual impact of the elements between. But, having found a source of unused hospital ventilator hose, I decided that perhaps there was no need to jam the glass right next to the plastic — that there might be some virtue in allowing a measure of gracefulness and relaxation into the piece.

I also wanted to steep the piece in history, in implied events, in a trail of use and misuse. I covered the surface of the glass with masking tape, and composed sequences of numbers and cryptic warnings, to give each bulb its own character. After having sandblasted this information onto the glass, I poured paint into each bulb and let it dry. Then I added a layer of shellac, and let that dry in turn — but propping the glass in such a way that while the pools of paint were oriented in one way, the congealed blots of shellac lay on another side of the glass interior altogether. I stuffed some human hair inside while the shellac was still wet, and then tried to get some of it back out. I added handfuls of broken safety glass I'd brought with me from my studies at the New York Experimental Glass Workshop.

As the piece was beginning to take on a distinctly medical tone, I constructed two sets of tubing, one for each bulb. Short lengths of neon tubing, etched with letters and numbers, alternated with longer pieces of flexible plastic hose. The joints between the glass and plastic were sealed with electrical tape, and I then poured paint and shellac down through both lengths of tubing, to give the sense of circulation. When the tubes were dry on the inside, I stuffed them into their respective bulbs.

The joinery was also a matter of layering — I stuffed wires and smaller tubes into the blue hospital ventilation tubing, and constructed a twisted, oddly
poetic esophagus that would connect the bulbs to the plastic head. I was intrigued by the translucence of the plastic, as compared with the transparency of the glass.

Even the '600-D' portion, the hard white plastic vacuum cleaner head, had a sort of luminosity to it, but I worked hard to animate its harsh utilitarian surface, and break up its relentlessly purposeful silhouette. By working slowly and carefully, and using my sense of discomfort as a monitor, I came to the conclusion that the end of the 'head', that flat, harsh lip, was too final and mathematical — that I needed something to soften that hard line.

It happened that, months before I began working on '600-D', I'd taken a neon class, and one day decided to experiment with the left-over bits of tubing that were the result of our trying to learn to join or bend the glass properly. I took a length of scrap glass long enough to hold comfortably over the flame, and heated the middle until I could pull the glass apart like candy. The resulting spiky-tipped shapes, like clear frozen flames, intrigued me, but I couldn't think of what to do with them. Never having let the lack of immediate use stop me from squirreling away any amount of detritus, I hoarded these useless bits of neon tubing in my basement, until I realized that they were just what I wanted for completing '600-D'.

I had on hand some electrical hooks of some kind and many scraps of electrical wire that I'd rescued from a dumpster, and from a selection of these I twisted together an uncomfortable-looking arrangement, half electrode and half syringe, that would fit inside one of my neon-tubing scraps. Individually glued in place and secured by electrical tape, and then wedged into the narrow slots along the wide end of the vacuum's mouth, these hybrid creations grouped themselves into a demonic fringe, which functioned just as I had hoped it would — implying injection or suction, while the hose-and-bulb assembly made
reference to some sort of digestive or circulatory function.

When the three sections were assembled, however, there was still too much of a sense of separation among them, so I opted to tone the whole unit with judiciously-applied layers of spray paint and shellac. I darkened the blue plastic tubing just enough to make it seem black to the casual observer, but leaving places where the inner wiring could be plainly seen. The vacuum head, too, already darkened by sand-blasting, was further darkened and spattered. Less paint was applied to the glass bulbs, but I was able to use just enough to reduce the new shininess, and to give a palpable sense of time. As I made the last few adjustments, adding a bit of tape here and twisting an errant piece of wire there, I also made quick marks in various places, then later erased them or scribbled over them — the object being to load the surface with the patina of wear and casual, mindless abuse.
When In Use
Essences: ‘When In Use’  (format: diner menu)

If it were a song, it would be a scratchy juke-box rendition of ‘Stand By Your Man’ that tends to stick halfway through the chorus and repeats itself until you hit the machine.

If it were a smell, it would be of an overfull, wet ash tray.

If it were a taste, it would be of cigarette ashes on your fingers.

If it were a tactile sensation, it would be the flimsy handshake of the strange doctor who’s too busy to discuss your diagnosis.

If it were an article of clothing, it would be a therapeutic canvas supporting corset, slightly damp and with the buckles and straps in a confusing tangle.

If it were a kind of dance, it would be moshing against your better judgement, at a concert for a band you don’t really know very well.

If it were an occupation, it would be an anesthesiologist.

If it were a flower or plant, it would be a pot-bound oleander.

If it were a piece of furniture, it would be the bucket seat from a Toyota, sitting on the side of the road.

If it were an animal, it would be a mongrel that was hit by a car years ago, and can’t walk right.
'When In Use'

At first glance, it looks like a utility box installed with the building. Probably hasn’t been used much. A clumsy, unimportant white alarm of some sort, with what might be two small fire extinguishers inside. A closer look...

The box — about the size of two large Kellogg’s Corn Flakes, back-to-back — is open in front, and the opening is covered with a thin, soiled screen. What looks like a piece of mop string, stiff with dirt, has been tied to the mesh. Suspended from the top of the box behind this unpleasant, insubstantial protection are two lung- or testicle-like, glistening, pock-marked shapes, of roughly the same size as a seven-pound newborn baby. Distinctly unlike any human newborn is the pitted, corroded, scorched skin on both shapes, blistered in places to show a slick, reddened substance underneath. The shape on the right sags closer to the box’s stained floor; the one on the left seems more taut, almost inflated. Is it holding its breath?

Each of these shapes is connected to the box’s dusty roof by a short piece of ribbed black hose. From the outside of the box, the hoses twist upwards for eight inches before bending back to meet two paint-stained metal flanges that have been screwed to the wall. The hose on the right has been patched with black tape, but it’s unclear how permanent the patch will prove to be.

Attached to each unmoving lung-shape is a suction cup; a clear, small cup on the left, a larger, red cup on the right. In addition, the left shape sports a thin, cloth-covered wire probe, held in place by two pieces of stained hypo-allergenic tape. The rounded metal end of the probe nestles into one of the deeper pock-marks on the surface of the left shape.

From the right lung, a slender hose, just twice the thickness of a #2 pencil, arcs down to a glass bulb hanging from the underside of the box. A thickish,
brown-yellow liquid has dripped and spattered the floor of the box, staining the walls as well, where the shapes would touch the sides if for some reason they were to begin respiring.

On the lower left side of the outside of the box, near the back, is a dirty burnt red rectangular plastic light cover, currently unlit. In white letters, arranged vertically, this cover reads ‘IN USE’. On the middle of the outer right side of the box, a printed warning has been taped. Torn, repaired and stained, the warning reads as follows:

```
When In Use

Intervals preset. Do not tamper or adjust. Unit has been inspected and designed to operate only in [correct] mode when in use.

Caution

Operation should be normal. Levels may vary with conditions. If malfunction should occur, see use guide, grid page only. If error repeats, or unit overheats, call

Do Not Tamper or Adjust
```
Origins of ‘When In Use’

This piece crystallized in a flash, as the result of an arbitrary ‘accidental’ juxtaposition of shapes and textures. I had been working to develop a grittier, ‘uglier’ surface for the glass I wanted to include in my thesis work, and it had been further suggested that I allow the glass to take a less controlled shape too. After a particularly productive night of glass-blowing, I was looking for a safe place to put the newest, most unpleasant of my experiments, still warm from the annealer. A plain metal box, scrounged from one dumpster or another, lay amid the clutter on my work space. I placed the new glass pieces inside it, the larger one to the right, until I figured out how they were to be used.

Voilà.

There it was. Lying side-by-side in the banged-up, abandoned, but clinical metal box, the red glass shapes (from which some people had recoiled, thinking because of their color that they were still hot to the touch) assumed a disturbing potential.

Because I found the physical environment of the school so bland and visually sterile, with its featureless cinder block walls and blind metal doors, any degree of detail caught my attention. High up on the wall, for example, at the juncture with the ceiling, flattened metal alarm bells and other devices lurked behind metal screens painted to match the walls. On the ceilings in the hallways, fist-sized plastic objects, slotted and domed and reminiscent of lone insect eggs, emitted a silent red gleam of light at no regular interval. More interesting still, inset low into the walls just above the floor (no doubt at intervals and heights prescribed by the fire code) emergency extinguishers safe in their glass-fronted rectangular niches, dangled like little regularly-inspected idols or talismans. I’d caught myself many times mentally altering those fire
extinguishers into something less benign and passive. And now this battered white box, with its almost identical twin vessels lying in it, seemed to radiate malign potential, inviting me to create a polluted cousin of those nice, pristine wall arrangements installed in their shrines to protect us all from burning.
XXX-XXX-703/Peristalsis
Essences, XXX-XXX-703/Peristalsis: (format: short paragraph)

If it were a plant, it would be something that causes a rash if you touch it, like poison sumac.

If it were a piece of furniture, it would be a narrow metal bedstead with the springs attached, like they use in military barracks.

If it were a dance, it would be more like a drab military review — a march of some sort, done without much energy or determination.

If it were an occupation, it would be a position as lab technician/maintenance person in an underfunded medical research facility.

If it were a kind of car, it would be a jacked-up, stripped-down '57 Chevy that the owner drives to work every day because he can’t afford to race it anymore.

If it were a dwelling place, it would be a vacated subway tunnel in a major urban center.

If it were an animal, it would be a naked mole rat.

If it were an article of clothing, it would be a stained, mildewed fatigue jacket that’s been under the stairs in the basement, near some mothballs.

If it were a tactile sensation, it would be the feel of someone else’s badly blistered skin.

If it were a temperature/time of day, it would be just before dawn during a abnormally hot, humid summer.

If it were a sound, it would be the crackling hum of a bug-zapper.

If it were a smell or taste, it would be the sulfurous flavor of the yolk of an old hard-boiled egg.
XXX-XXX-703/Peristalsis, with Question

Lying low on the floor, sprawling purposefully from one blackened, frizzled socket attached low on a wall, running for at least a dozen feet before ending at a matching dark socket lying flush with the floor, this contraption has the self-absorbed feeling of a sweaty, unkempt janitor called into a fancy dress function to clean up an unfortunate mess. 'Just keep your head down and do what you have to do,' you can almost hear the supervisor say.

Wires tangle and seek connection; the prone procession of ten glass objects, like pared-down heads of 'moderne' mannequins, bear letters and numbers and an array of purposeful-looking attachments on their variously smooth or shiny or pitted surfaces. Clear or red, black or yellow, empty-looking, or bearing something twisted inside, they imply purpose without illuminating it. There is a vague sensation of choking about the whole arrangement, of suddenly swallowing a throat lozenge and having no choice but to feel it work its way slowly downward. There is also the tension of potential or interrupted activity, as though no one would really be surprised to see an arc of electricity flicker inside one of the glass bulbs, and catch a whiff of ozone, before it returns again to its state of dishevelled quiescence.

This piece developed with the discovery of an arrangement of plastic chimney flanges in the plumbing and roofing section of a local hardware chain. These pitiless black orifices, like shaven metal vulvas dilated for birth, disturbed me so much that I bought half a dozen right away. As soon as I got them back to the studio, I played with them all for a while, orienting them in different ways, staring at them inside-out, to see if there might be an even more disturbing way of using them — but then I was satisfied that what I had first seen was the 'best'
way of looking at these things. I hot-glued two of them side-by-side to the studio wall, to watch them, and think about them, and wonder what, if anything, would develop.

It became apparent that the birthing image was going to remain a strong influence on anything that grew from these plastic objects. I considered the unadorned, biological imperative of the birth-to-death cycle; how, expelled from the womb, I am relentlessly drawn toward another dark, unemotional cavity that will embrace me no matter who I am or what I have done. This cheerless contemplation recalled for me the dreary Presbyterian precept of predestination (in which we are assured that the Divinity already knows what we’re going to do, but won’t lift a Finger to help us). Fed with this bleak spiritual sustenance as a child, I was led to think of the piece in its growth as ‘The Calvinist Version’ — only the popularity of the comic strip ‘Calvin and Hobbes’ prompted me to retitle it.

At first, I thought that one of the chimney flanges would be attached to the wall at about 5’ above the floor, with the other flat on the floor, maybe ten feet directly in front of its wall-mounted mate, and the string of glass vessels connecting the two. But the plastic and rubber flanges would obviously buckle under the strain of such an arrangement, so I lowered the wall-mounted unit to about eight inches off the ground, giving the piece a lower, less decorative, more utilitarian profile, like something that isn’t really supposed to be seen, but has been inadvertently exposed to view.

The ten roughly head-sized and -shaped modules which make up the bulk of the piece were blown at about the same time, though not specifically for this piece. I was still experimenting with surfaces, and had in mind at least one construction involving some heavier metal flanges. The idea of pairing the glass modules came as I arranged the piece in one of the fourth-floor studios — I had
carted along ten pieces of glass and the two plastic flanges, and some tubing and hoses, and as I lay things out, I noticed that I had brought along 'sets' of shapes — two black and smooth, two black and pitted, two red, two iridescent and two clear. I didn’t like the way the shapes looked arranged all in the same direction — even though I wanted to talk about a remorseless, relentless ‘squeezing’ of life into death, I preferred more of a ‘figure-8’ look, and thought about pairing the glass vessels as though one of each pair were the inner, and the other the outer ‘face’ of each pair. I mixed the pairs up somewhat, not wanting anything too clean or calculated or consistent. In arranging the order of the vessels along the floor, I wanted to spread out the interest — rather than creating a ‘spotlight’ of color or texture.

In an effort to particularize the glass units, I gave each one a serial number. My intention was to select a nine-digit number for each unit, and feature that number twice on each piece. It was only after I’d sand-blasted the numerals onto the first two units that I noticed I’d given both pieces the same last three numbers — 703. (When I looked at my sketches, I realized that, unthinkingly, I’d repeated this ‘703’ on two of the shapes. Then I looked at sketches for another assemblage that I’d planned, using some of these same glass pieces, also with numbers on them — I sketched in a nine-digit number ending in 703 as well. Hmmm) There was something about this that didn’t bother me, so I adopted the rule of ‘703’, and made all the serial numbers end in 703. I also added striping and lettered or numbered elements to the surface designs — my impulse was to create a military feel, as though the individual identities of these units had been submerged by a larger, cryptic purpose, the true meaning of which is not decipherable to the average observer. I tried to avoid more than the barest minimum of comprehensible language — usually in the form of warnings or instructions — preferring the numbers to serve as identifying markers,
without any emotional attachment that might attend proper names or common English usage. It was important to me that these pieces seem clearly individualized, but in an emotionless way — these glass entities were not to seem at all cared for. They were like clinical specimens, or like recruits. Cannon-fodder.

I wanted to create a third unifying element in the 'Peristalsis' piece, besides the common shape and size of the glass elements, and the surface treatments. I constructed a miniaturized version of the original grouping of ten elements, using discarded TV and radio vacuum tubes (found in a box on South Street in my first Rochester winter), plastic aquarium hosing, hot glue and thin electrical wire. Laid out flat on a table, these TV tube arrangements looked like the skeletal remains of a flat leaf. They were designed to fit into the small opening at the neck of each glass vessel — the largest vacuum tube would just squeeze through, alongside the flexible plastic tubing. Though few viewers will ever notice this detail, it was sufficiently important that I expended considerable time and trouble creating these hidden elements. I also partly filled three of the glass units with crushed glass, which gave me the option of adding color (I kept thinking of 'Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight,' from the lyrics of a Sunday school song) and another element that was connected thematically, if not precisely logically.
A Question

When I think about my work and the ways in which it arises, I come up against a stubborn, unpleasant, 'cause and effect', right-and-wrong, scientific bias. I don't always know on a conscious level how a particular piece is going to evolve. At times, I'm comfortable with this vagueness, and have even had other artists corroborate this state of indecisiveness as essential to their creative process. At times, I'm sorely tempted to devalue my process, simply because it is so distinctly personal, blundering, accidental, anecdotal and owing more to what I think of as inspired coincidence than to rigorous planning. In the case of Peristalsis, for example, some of the glass parts were created months before I saw the chimney flanges that seemed to cause the whole piece to coalesce. When I first laid out the pieces that became 'Peristalsis', I knew that I'd brought too many pieces of glass, that at most I'd use maybe five or seven elements — but arranged in pairs, these ten pieces seemed 'right' — seemed to have established a visual relatedness both between the pairs of elements, and amongst themselves as a larger group.

After I'd decided on the pairings, and the order in which the pairs would relate to the two dark flanges, I continued to haul the piece back and forth from my work space to a fourth-floor drawing studio, so I could see the fifteen-foot expanse of the piece as I constructed the myriad parts that would make it all fit together, functionally and psychologically. It was on one such occasion that I realized I'd created, with the accident of the repeated XXX-XXX-703 number motif, a family of glass objects. At the same time I resonated, rather disturbingly, with the fact that I am the oldest of five siblings all born within seven years of each other. Do we say then that this artwork, which I so laboriously strung together while thinking about predestination, began when I found those two
black plastic shapes in the roofing section? Or when I blew the first of the ten glass vessels used in the piece? Or on the December night in 1952, three weeks before Christmas, when my mother went to a hospital in East St. Louis, Illinois, and gave birth to twins?
‘Untitled’
(Date Last Inspected)
Essences, ‘Untitled’ (Date Last Inspected): (format: scraps of paper on a sidewalk)

If it were a country or place on earth, it would be the abandoned control room of an old nuclear test site.

If it were an animal, it would be part of a dying coral reef.

If it were a dwelling-place, it would be a quickly-built, badly-painted, cinder-block public housing project.

If it were a kind of car, it would be a panel truck with the name of previous owner’s business painted over.

If it were a dance, it would be a slow ladies’ choice at your thirtieth high-school reunion, which is being held in the local volunteer fire hall this year.

If it were an occupation, it would be an air-conditioner repairman who just recently graduated at the bottom of his class in training school.

If it were a kind of food, it would be left-over broth, too salty, with just a few vegetables and pieces of barley at the bottom.
Untitled/Date Last Inspected

My design-maven friend Jamie couldn’t wait to show me the newest of mid-town Manhattan’s recently redecorated hotels, splendid, to his eye, with the latest and sleekest Post-modern decor. He exulted over every detail of the lobby and then decided I had to see what they’d done with the hallways and the doors to the individual rooms. The seventh floor was his favorite. Rather than take the elevator, he suggested we run up the service stairs for a quick peek.

As he opened a well-camouflaged doorway and ushered me in ahead of him, there was an immediate breath of pine disinfectant and cigarettes. The lobby door hissed shut behind us and we were in a totally different world. The cramped, dimly-lit yellow-and-grey hallway was sweaty in the New York summer heat and humidity — these walls probably hadn’t been painted in twenty years. Grey mop strings stuck in the corners of the metal risers, which rang hollowly as we inched our way past a collection of buckets and brooms on one landing, and then past the emergency exits, each lit by one bare blue bulb.

I don’t recall the seventh-floor hallways, or the doors either. I was much more impressed by the jarring contrast between the ‘public’ display space, and the ‘backstage’ grit. Even more, before the lobby door had hissed completely shut behind us, I was marvelling at the sheer impertinent thinness of the illusion — in the case of the lobby door, no thicker than a layer of exquisitely color-coordinated paint.

My urge in creating this piece (since titled ‘Date Last Inspected’) was to pull back the gallery walls and reveal what might be pulsing and humming and whirring behind them. Rather than allowing the gallery to contain the piece, I
wanted to imply that the gallery itself and, by extension, the viewer was in fact contained by something that might not readily explain itself, something that might or might not be operational, something which might be powerful or dangerous, something of faintly familiar utility which might not be in the best of repair, like the following quote from Isaac Asimov:

"...it isn’t maintained properly. I told you about decay."
Seldon frowned. "Surely, people don’t sit around and say, ‘We’re decaying. Let’s let the Expressways fall apart.’"
"No, they don’t. It’s not a purposeful thing. Bad spots are patched, decrepit coaches are refurbished, magnets are replaced. However, it’s done in more slapdash fashion, more carelessly, and at greater intervals. There just aren’t enough credits (dollars) available."

‘Date Last Inspected’ was the first piece that I designed for my thesis exhibition, and was the reason for my choosing to have an off-campus showing. The physical parameters of the Bevier Gallery preclude anything as complicated as sawing a hole in a wall. At the Pyramid Art Center, however, this was not a problem, and in fact the gallery director seemed genuinely enthusiastic about the prospect of hosting such an endeavor.

The piece took a lot of work. I created over seventy hand-blown glass vessels for it — small and large, plain and ribbed, clear and colored. Because I wanted the face of each vessel to be unmarked, I cracked each piece directly off the blow pipe and into the annealer. Each glass piece then had to be sawed into two parts, as I needed a flat surface to attach to the back of each individual ‘meter’.

As for the interiors of the ‘meters’, I had amassed an interesting and varied array of scavenged oddities from my frequent visits to the campus dump-

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sters. I numbered all the meters, then traced the shape of each onto a piece of cardboard, which would serve as the base for the interior arrangement. After having cut out all the cardboard shapes, I assembled a series of purposeful-looking objects which would fit inside the glass ‘meter’ shapes. These were glued into place onto the cardboard, and then the cardboard backing was attached to the glass with more hot glue and a generous winding of electrical tape. I was careful to leave the back of the cardboard bare, as that would in turn be hot-glued to the sheets of homosote board which were the ultimate support for the entire colony of electrical-looking cells.

In some cases I wanted greater visual complexity — I assembled some units that didn’t sit against the back wall, but which were attached to pieces of machined aluminum or steel, and which jutted out from the flat surface to a depth of about a foot. To heighten the sense of utility and purpose, I attached narrow strips of scrap rubber to the homosote, first joining pairs of ‘meters’ together, and then joining groups of ‘meters’ to each other. I also included a series of highly reflective surfaces in safety yellow, and added a single pale blue light bulb in the lower right-hand quadrant of the assembly.

When all the meter units were secured to the backing, and the backing was bolted to a support, I painted the surface of the homosote board, alternately using diluted India ink, shellac that had been thinned with alcohol, and watered-down acrylic paint. I wanted a surface that looked sporadically cared-for, but fundamentally neglected. As the homosote dried between coatings, I attached random single letters and numbers to the painted backing, to further create the sense of cryptic purpose.

The piece was built in a studio downtown, but then had to be taken apart and reassembled in the Pyramid’s gallery space — which reassembly started with sawing a three-foot by five-foot hole through a sheet of dry wall. Once
reassembly was complete, I attached plastic grillwork that ran from the top and sides of the meter wall and joined the back of the dry wall, to create the feeling that these meters were totally boxed in and alienated from the environment which they might well control. I also suspended a painted screen of hardware cloth over the opening, and added some mitered trim, to make the entire piece blend into the gallery environment, as though some backstage equipment had been inadvertently left out where the guests could plainly see it.
Succor
Essences: Succor  (format: delirium/fever dream)

If it were a place on earth, it would be McKeesport, Pa., or some other dead steel mill town.

If it were a taste, it would be powdered milk over burnt oatmeal.

If it were a tactile sensation, it would be pinching hunger.

If it were an animal, it would be an old black sow, well past her prime, nursing her last sickly litter.

If it were a kind of transportation, it would be a ’68 Cadillac that burns oil and has bad shocks.

If it were a dwelling place, it would be an orphanage.

If it were an occupation, it would be an overburdened social worker whose rent has just gone up the same day the department announced budget cuts.

If it were a flower or plant, it would be a tree-of-heaven growing into someone’s septic tank.

If it were a piece of furniture, it would be a weathered bench at a city bus stop.

If it were an article of clothing, it would be a bundle of unmatched socks.
It hangs in the corner, low on the wall, like a drunken mother who has lost her balance and struggles to get her footing before something on the stove boils over. It reaches with its three uneven tentacle-like hoses, seeking balance, perhaps even siphoning something from the walls themselves?

At its core, it is a dark, thin, rectangular grid, encased in a weathered skin that sprouts a taut, self-contained arrangement of tubes resembling the leathery legs of roosting birds. From the grid’s bottom edge, a tumble of hoses and tubes spills out over the floor, each ribbed black length ending in a glass bulb or tuber.

Some of the bulbs look swollen and taut. Some seem deflated; some seem struggling to fill or empty themselves. Two or three show gaping holes torn into their surfaces. A number of them hold something white and granular. Some are obviously empty. All have a forlorn, unattended feeling, like after-thoughts, like gate crashers.

One bulb wears a slick, distorted plastic coat, vaguely reminiscent of the grid’s grey skin. What will it become? Hiding in amid the bulbs are half a dozen thin tendrils, ending in little black nubs. Is there growth here, a future? Or is it all futile? Are these shapes feeding silently and contentedly on their flat black support? Or are they instead providing nourishment for the unpleasant, self-absorbed thing hanging from the wall?

Something frequently happens to me as I begin a piece of three-dimensional work. Without necessarily meaning to do so, I find myself thinking about a particular topic as I work. It’s almost as though the piece itself, even before it is finally assembled, is trying to focus my attention, not only on its own completion, but also on other issues, whether political or social or economic or spiritu-
al. I don’t recall ever having heard any other artist talk about this phenomenon; I only know that for me, this can be true, and of course the prevailing mood of the emerging piece and the thoughts that spring up from that mood will deeply influence the work’s realization.

Like so much of my recent work, ‘Succor’ began with some synchronicity — driving through the University of Rochester campus one day, I saw a car radiator lying in the dirty snow at an intersection. I’m used to seeing mufflers lying by the side of the road, but this was the first time I recalled having seen a disembodied radiator. No car, no sign of an accident, no distressed motorist. Just a radiator.

As usual, I was late, so I merely noted the presence of this oddity, and went my way. I must have passed the radiator at least three more times that week before it became apparent to me that if I didn’t grab it, it would disappear. Feeling a familiar sense of embarrassment, I parked, retrieved the radiator, and threw it into the nest of oddments clustered in the back of my Toyota hatchback.

It stayed there for a few weeks, or it may have been months, passively surfacing, then submerging again, as the clutter level in the back of the car rose and fell. I glanced at the radiator every time I got something else out of the car. I was interested in the pattern of corrosion, in the way the little metal folds had rotted away in some places, but had stayed intact in others. I noticed the green patina that showed up as the radiator dried out.

My original intention for what I called ‘The Radiator Piece’ was something much less dynamic than what ultimately emerged. I thought simply to pile a row of maybe ten of my organic pod-forms on top of the radiator, join those pods all together at one end, and then create some kind of hinge arrangement between these glass bodies and the flat metal radiator. I began blowing forms that I hoped would suit the final piece, but without bothering even to
measure the radiator — I wasn’t even sure on whether the glass pieces would lie parallel to the sides of the radiator, or to the top and bottom.

Finally, I dug the radiator out of the car, dragged it into the building and lay some of my glass forms on top of it, which of course wasn’t what I wanted at all. But even a bad start is better than no start at all, and I began toying with other ways of making the glass pods relate to this flat, wasted piece of trash I’d rescued from the snow.

I was also working on ‘Date Last Inspected’, and as I sawed the glass ‘meters’ in half, I saved the tops, most of which were about the shape of the classic champagne coupe allegedly modelled after Marie Antoinette’s breast. There was something about the flatness of the radiator that concerned me — I felt that if I could create a more interesting or involved topography, the work might begin to develop for me. I also decided that, whatever I did on one side of the radiator’s flat face should be mirrored on the other face, to create a sense of bilateral symmetry.

I rummaged through one of the boxes of ‘meter tops’, as I called them, and selected eight that were roughly the same size and shape. One pair was much larger and seemed to fit at one end of the radiator’s flat plane; there were three other pairs that were approximately equal in size, which I clustered at the other end of the flat surface. I also decided that these ‘breast’ shapes should contain something — that they weren’t simply to act as forms, but as channels, as it were. As I’ve done with other work in my thesis, I opted to use crushed scrap glass and waste frit, which ties in another form of glass. Using silicone, I glued the base of each glass ‘breast’ to the flat side of the radiator, and funneled chunks of broken glass into the breast’s cavity. I plugged the small open ends with some black rubber objects I bought at an outdoor flea market in Pennsylvania — I unfortunately have no idea what they are or what their con-
ventional purpose is, but they were perfect for this. When the arrangement on one side of the radiator was set, I flipped it over and repeated the arrangement on the other side. I also pressed broken glass into the excess silicone that oozed out at the base of the 'breast' shapes, to give a sense of visual and tactile continuity between the glass and the metal framework.

But, as is often the case in my work, what I saw was not what I wanted. Even though I'd gone to all the trouble of matching the shapes and sizes of these ‘breasts’, and had designed an interlinking set of tubing to tie them all together, I felt that there needed to be another visual level — that the breasts needed to be shielded and disguised. With plastic sheeting and an eyelet gun, I constructed a loose garment that encased the arrangement of glass shapes on both sides of the radiator. Then I used my heat gun, causing the plastic to shrink and hug the radiator body more closely. When I was done, the plastic had created a desiccated, weathered skin that gave me just the right feeling of queasiness in my stomach.

For some reason, ideas about wealth and distribution and dependency were spinning through my head as I worked on ‘Succor’. I’m hardly a qualified economist, and I’m not really sure that the quality of my thoughts is really the point — what interests me is the way in which a particular piece, as it begins to emerge from the border between the material world and my unconscious, seems to resonate with certain concerns or themes. ‘Succor’ definitely led me to think about the concentration of wealth, and the pitiful state of neediness, of being dependent on something which may not at all have my best interests even remotely in mind. Having situated those glass-filled breast shapes on both sides of the radiator, I ‘saw’ that these shapes, rather than relating to the growing pile of pod forms that I kept creating in the hot shop, should be linked only with each other. I saw the 'body' of the radiator as some incestuous accretion of
wealth, constantly channeling its output back into itself. And then there would be this horrid string of helpless, greedy ‘things’, hanging off to one side, squealing like undernourished piglets and writhing against each other to get the niggardly portion that might be siphoned away from the sealed-off, self-satisfied, self-referential, self-sufficient central monopoly.

Although it had been my original intention to have the radiator balance on the system of electrical conduit that connected each set of four ‘breasts’, in practice, this wasn’t satisfying. I didn’t want the radiator simply to lie there on the floor, or even sit propped up in a corner — the three openings in the radiator’s ends too eloquently demanded that this heap of appetite in turn attach itself to the room in which it finds itself, literally and figuratively depending on the very environment from which the radiator wants most desperately to isolate itself. This is definitely what makes the piece so strong and strange — its active relationship with the walls and floor — the fact that it straddles a corner, and seems, for all we know, to be climbing, repositioning its tentacles as it makes its hungry way along, dragging its glistening fringe of neediness behind it.
And Then What Happened?

In the year it took to create this body of work, I’ve come to some interesting conclusions. Here, in brief, are six of them:

• Things happen. Also, I needn’t expect myself to know everything all at once. Also, creativity feels different than I thought it would.

As well-planned as my installation ideas might have been at the start, there was always a point where an un-looked-for element or feeling began to intrude. In the best of cases, I have learned to allow these unforeseen twists and turns in my work. They are humbling, and remind me that I function best as a conduit, rather than trying to take pride of place as a primal source.

• People are more likely to identify with my work if I am honest and keep the focus on myself.

Tempting though it is to wax pontifical about how things ought to be, and how society should repent and repair itself, I try to hold my work as close to my own personal issues as possible. If someone sees something recognizable in what I’ve produced, so much the better — if not, there’s at least the chance that the viewer will come away with an appreciation of how life looks from another perspective.

• Art — or the promptings thereto — can be wherever I look.

Rather than drawing my inspiration from the works of other artists, I mostly find the underpinnings of my work in, say, a janitor’s closet on the ground floor of building 7, where an unexplained tubular presence hangs down from the ceiling, wrapped beyond recognition in black electrical tape. Or look-
ing out the back window of a chic apartment in Chicago, at a series of badly-maintained utility poles lean this way and that, bearing Medusa-like nests of wiring which no one in the neighborhood notices, but upon which they all depend.

- Art can also be where I put it, and how I put it there.

In insisting on a direct connection between my glass pieces and the environments in which they are placed, I remain committed to exploring the borderlines between where art usually lives, clean and tidy and safe on a pedestal, and the world I normally inhabit, which is unruly and preposterous when it isn’t downright dangerous. Ideally, I would soon like to mount a show of my work in the appliance section of a major department store.

- Discomfort can be a reliable guide. Good taste is... suspect.

I’ve mostly spent much of my life, creative and otherwise, avoiding the things that I find disturbing, seeking to use my art as a kind of visual and behavioral salve. But we are currently living in a time of upheaval — anyone remember the Soviet Union? — and it doesn’t take the most fertile imagination to wonder if it couldn’t happen here. Even if all I do is read the local paper, I am reminded that there are things going on in the world which exceed my worst suspicions — for example, a recent article from the Associated Press reporting the use of Chinese prisoners as sources of organ transplants — often while the prisoners are still alive.... While I don’t use these uncomfortable issues as direct creative topics, I do find that when my reaction to a choice of materials or shapes or connections is one of discomfort, that choice is invariably the one I need to make.
- There is, after all, a kind of perverse hope.

As I bumble my way along, compulsively ‘adopting’ orphaned vacuum cleaners and space heaters as well as their less recognizable, soiled and fragmented rubber and metal and plastic relations littering the city streets, I begin to recognize that the need I feel, to integrate these odd splinters into something compelling and consistent, is in fact a positive activity. When I pick up a commercially-manufactured metal plumbing flange, slip it into place over the end of a blistered piece of blown glass, and the fit is perfect, I feel a sense of synchronicity that is just short of spiritual. It strikes me as odd — but reassuring — that while my work focuses on darkness and alienation, abandonment and dysfunction, it can still be seen, in the fact of its existence, to display the healing qualities of connection, utility, integration, and above all, an appropriate transformation.
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