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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

CULLET

By

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I, Charles Sorrels, grant permission to the Wallace Memorial Library of RIT to reproduce my thesis in whole or in part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.
This paper discusses a series of five sculptures that are now five and one-half years old. Today these sculptures are scattered and in some cases gone, but the goals and the decisions which shaped their creation in 1986 and 1987 are still fresh in my memory. They were important experiments for me, and I carry them with me today. I would not claim these sculptures defined me as the artist I am now, but they do define me as the artist I was then. And to that extent, my understanding of myself is enriched by this thesis work.

In 1986 and 1987 the message I wanted to send with my work was that the pursuit of a predetermined sculptural look or theme held no interest for me. Since any artist's body of art presumably has planning and message implied, to avoid these inherent qualities was not only my frustration as an artist but the challenge of my thesis project. My work was not only a reaction against the predictability of design, but also against the notion that art is a predetermined statement of an artist's aesthetic position. In some ways this paper is paradoxical, because it requires that I engage in what I tried to avoid four years ago: it requires that I explain the meaning behind my sculptures.

Why the academic discussion of art disturbs me has to do with my nature. It bears looking into because of the connection to the project, but it cannot be defended or assailed against. Whether I am right or wrong to feel alienated by the expectation that an artist explain his work is, as I see it, irrelevant to the argument. I was alienated, and therefore this alienation came through in my art. This seemingly contrary position becomes an interesting academic quagmire: frustrated by the pressure to
make a statement through my work, I decided to make a statement about not making statements and thus discovered the inevitability of statement-making in art.
As is the mind of any artist, mine is one element in the artistic process. I am the impetus. As a sculptor, I have plans, some goals of design, a specific inspiration, and something called a statement. But I believe this statement is most clear if I let the glass dictate the process of creation and thus translate my ideas into "it", rather than translate the glass into my ideas.

The designs and inspirations that led to the series of glass sculpture built in 1986 and 1987 at Rochester Institute of Technology in New York state will be discussed in this paper. There are several areas that require in-depth analysis. There is much to be said about Medieval altar pieces and about the placement in my work of broken glass slugs. There are specific messages I hoped to communicate five years ago with these pieces that should be developed. However, much of what I need to say has to do with my perception of the relationship between design and execution: that is, which of these concepts is predominant and which is subordinate in the artistic process; and why that relationship works for me.

When I first began to work with glass my main concern was mastering it technically. Glass is a difficult medium to work with because when mistakes are made, they often terminate the project or at least some large part of it. Simply, the work is broken. At some point I began to experiment with the shattered pieces and lost control of the technical
objectives. It was this further manipulation of the glass after control had been lost that excited me. I became intensely interested in working this way, just beyond my control. This idea of working unrestrained became the nucleus of my work at R.I.T. and remains a major factor in my work to this day. Glass is the perfect medium for me. It has elements of repetition and looseness. In 1986-87, the more I worked with glass, the more I improved my skill in controlling and improvising that which was out of control. Sometimes I had good results, sometimes I had bad. The more I worked, the more the desire to retain aspects of an uncontrolled technique became important.

Two major influences guided my work on the series of sculptures which I submitted as my thesis project. The first was the personal need to put execution above design in the context of the creative process. The second was an emotional attraction to items of Catholic art from the Middle Ages. In my series, I asserted cullet as a link for these two artistic impulses. Cullet became my personal metaphor for the randomness that comes within the artistic process and which elevates the means above the end in the hierarchies of that artistic process. Cullet, then, was presented in such a manner in my sculptures, as to give it special significance, much like a crucifix was given in Medieval religious art; much like, but not just like.

These three ideas, (1) technique's relationship to design, (2) Medieval Catholic models as inspiration, and (3) cullet are the focal points of this paper.

When the work began the images that came to me were those of revered objects. Specifically my inspiration came from medieval artwork, and particularly important were the Gothic pieces from the late 1100's through the 1300's. Catholic reliquaries were among the main sources for
my imagination, especially the crudely constructed ones made by artists with imperfect techniques and materials. I was also interested in the way medieval altars, tombs, reliquaries, and sculptures seemed to be visually enhanced by the deterioration effected by the passing of the centuries. The randomness of time's flaws was in itself moving. I choose to approximate this effect in my work.

Typically in Medieval art the artist was able to heighten the impact of the crucifix or Madonna, in any particular work, by surrounding it with ornamentation. A cathedral's altar might reach one hundred feet in the air and include hundreds of elements of ornamentation, all to visually support the Christ in the middle. An altar piece might consist of a portrait of Mother and Child surrounded by elaborate gold relief sculptures. In these cases, this central religious symbol takes up only a small percentage of the total work, but it is clearly the dominant element. The elaborate rest of the work celebrates and reverses the much smaller focal point. Something about these medieval pieces reminded me of what I envisioned for my pieces of cullet.

Though the placement and significance of the crucifix is clearly apparent in medieval art, the supporting ornamentation and details are equally impressive. T.R.S. Boase points out that Gothic shrines were carved with a splendid amount of detail. "In the relationship between reliefs, corners and central figures, and supporting caryatids, it is much influenced by the great Italian pulpits." ¹

The point of my analysis of Catholic art was not to define, confine, or shape my series of sculptures. Quite the opposite: I was drawn to the Medieval art works because they were so similar to the images and techniques that already existed as a part of my own aesthetic. I found myself moved by Gothic pieces, and that was the extent to which it was
important. An awareness of Medieval art helped me to articulate my own series of sculptures.

Interestingly enough however, the mind of the medieval artist compares similarly to mine. Anne Fremantle points out that in the Middle Ages "sculpture was employed to lighten the heavy Romanesque effect. Having long lain fallow, the stonecarver's art blossomed with an exuberance that sometimes seemed to cover every surface in sight. No heed was paid to classical proportions, shapes were bent, twisted, stretched, or reduced to fit a specific space." The implication is that the individual artist allowed a sense of improvisation to shape his work with a decreased emphasis on making all the traditional forms appear correct.

Boase points out another interesting similarity of Medieval art work to my own. The mind of Medieval man was drawn to images of decay. "At Tewksbury the tomb of John Wakeman," says Boase, "...shows a mouse, snakes, and snails preying upon the corpse. In France there was the same lingering on decay." It must be stressed that my attraction to the Medieval art served only as an artistic inspiration. The aesthetic beauty of these pieces is intrinsic, as is the art of many different cultures and times. I never allowed myself to be dictated to by the emotions of these centuries-old icons; rather, my involvement with them could only be called a design goal. I was happy when my sculpture somehow reminded me of these Gothic altar pieces. I liked the way the old religious art work looked and that response influenced my work. However my designs were very rough. Sometimes I painted abstracts and sometimes I made small sketches in a notebook. Often my plans and jottings were no more sophisticated than "tall sculpture," "flat sculpture," or "sculpture with wings."
improvisation with the material to take over where preconceived design left off.

This heightened element of improvisation was a major part of my work. Justification for both a disengagement from the design process and a lack of conformity to design is the subject of repeated debate in art. Borec Sipec, a noted contemporary designer, seems to indicate that he believes the artistic process relies on design. "Technical development distracts from spiritual development. Design adapted to technique is spiritually dead. It is not necessary that we adapt our ideas to technique, but rather the other way around." 4 Such discussion of the "spiritual development" as the purpose of the artist seems to me to be both gratuitous and elitist.

Some artists may believe that they paint or sculpt to reach some spiritual fulfillment just as some individuals read the Holy Bible to feel closer to a supernatural experience. The Medieval artists were perhaps getting themselves closer to God through their work, or the point of the work may have been to get the viewer closer. A twelfth century sculptor may or may not have had a rewarding experience. For me, however, these spiritual terms are overblown. Art is what I do because it is interesting. Any connection to metaphysics is superfluous. For Sipec to insist that I, or any artist, must ponder indefinitely on designs for some mysterious "spiritual" reason just does not make sense to me. My own experience is that the artistic process is at its highest point while the art is happening. A reckless willingness to allow my art to move in any direction was a major part of the cullet series.

Most artists are familiar with that moment in the creative experience when an unexpected technique or detail emerges as superior to that which was originally planned. The unexpected may be a color, a texture, or a brush stroke. Many artists think it unwise to resist such serendipitous
discoveries just because they were not planned for. They are aware of a fluidity that is inherent to art. Everything good can not be planned. In the series of glass sculptures I made, I chose to embrace the accidents that occur.

As I have stated, glass is a fragile medium and many mistakes are made. In my experience I have enjoyed a reasonable amount of success, but I have also created a fair amount of sharp, beautifully colored bits of garbage. At some point in my stay at R.I.T., I became interested in the broken pieces of goblets and vases. I was concerned in finding a use for glass gone wrong. These scraps of broken glass led me to the use of cullet as the central element of my work.

Cullet is the shard remains of manufactured and hand-blown glass. It is the waste which is left over when a molded piece of glass is made. A glass factory might make twenty thousand bottles or bowls in a day. If the bowl-makers are skilled, every bowl is essentially the same. However the cullet left from breaking usable glass from its mold is unpredictable. Every piece of cullet has a jagged, irregular edge. Every piece is different. Cullet exists in a shape without design or use. It is left over. It is refuse. With its cracks and broken edges, it is for an industrial glassmaker the only element of chance in a predictable business. As an artist of glass, I chose to make cullet a symbol for the accidental and terminal nature of my medium.

The idea of using cullet came to me in two ways. First, my art had always been hot worked, with very little cold work involved. In 1986, I wanted to expand into other areas. Second, the use of raw chunks of cullet came about from a class assignment. The purpose of the exercise was to rapidly assimilate sculptures with all the emphasis on speed. Craftsmanship did not matter. During one of those rapid sculpture
projects, I found a use for the cullet. The cullet was given a place of prominence within the construct of this class project. Already I found myself thinking of some kind of similarity between my present experiment and the work of Medieval artists. The focal point of their work was however vastly different.

Developing that thought further, I came to appreciate cullet. Cullet was a perfect metaphor for my feelings about my work and aesthetics. It is a direct result of a very controlled process, and at the same time, it is determined by random chance. It seemed only fitting, while searching for my thesis theme, that I make a body of work incorporating cullet.

My first serious piece in this series was a multimedia upgrade of a quick piece I had done as a class project. (Figure 4; Sculpture # 1) It was put together with 2x4's, Pyrex tubing, wire, and cullet. The idea came to me through random association. In my mind was a Spanish alter-piece that I had seen pictured in a book and a Louise Nevelson work. I wanted to capture the feeling evoked by the Catholic religious articles of long ago in my secular piece while using the more modern methods at hand. The centerpiece of the work was to be cullet.

The sculpture was a crude framed piece held together by glue and other materials. It was simply put together. Very little conscious, aesthetic decision making went into the process of construction.

The remake involved much manipulation before the final assembly. The wooden framework was uniformly carved with small notches across its entire surface. I cut slots into the individual pieces of wood to allow the individual slabs of glass to slide into the frame. I used plate glass and cast glass. Cutting the plate glass with a diamond saw, I made large wings for the sculpture. The wings were made from four pieces of plate glass. Two of them were solar gray, two were mirrored peach. The
diamond saw was used not only as a cutting tool, but for a carving tool as well. Such a saw is normally used for making straight cuts; however the heavy, thick blade can also create the carved pattern in the glass when it is moved sideways along the length of the cut. The gnawing of the edges of the plate glass, along with some short cuts directly into the glass, allowed me to create the irregular, battered look I often saw in the art of the middle ages.

The use of the diamond saw as both a cutting devise and a carving tool was a solution to a problem. In my drawings there were two appendages attached to the piece, which I thought would be best built from plate glass using a saw. This procedure worked most satisfactorily.

The next step for this sculpture was sandblasting. Sandblasting both softened the marks left by the saw and eliminated the scratches in the surface. Finally I set the saw depth so that I could make a series of shallow cuts parallel to the side of the wing and across its entire surface.

The cast glass parts were made by sand cast glass cut into simple shapes. The design specified that the pieces be both rough and smooth. The solution to this problem was to create basic shapes in the sand casting box then pushing my finger into the sand after the shape was laid out, thus resulting in an uneven surface texture. Once the castings were complete they were cut with the diamond saw and polished on their cut edges. I now had pieces that were uneven and wavy on one edge and crisp and polished on the other. Both the polished and rough sides fit the metaphor of order from chaos for which I had made my rough plans; likewise, these edges contributed to the look of some primitive and deteriorated artifact which I had intended the sculpture to achieve.

Final assembly began with the wings being attached to the two sides. The dark wings with the parallel cuts overlapped the lighter peach ones.
The cast pieces were placed into their slots, and the wood was assembled. Before assembling the base, I put a piece of the plate glass carved with the parallel lines at the top of the sculpture to help visually balance the large wings. The next step was to mount the cullet. My intention was to put a small piece of cullet in a central location on the sculpture. I concluded that if I placed it on a small pedestal, it would help give it a feeling of importance and visually enhance the piece. I chose to place the cullet on cylindrical slabs of glass left over from a previous project. The pedestal was sandblasted to give it a pattern that would match the other elements of the sculpture. I added another piece of cullet at the bottom of the cylindrical cullet pedestal, putting one at either end of the central focal point of the piece. I felt this would make the the piece more symmetrical, thus suggesting the Medieval Catholic icons to which I had originally been drawn.

The sculpture was complete, yet it seemed too visually balanced. With this in mind, I bored a series of holes in the wood of the upright pieces and inserted into these small glass pegs in a random pattern. This would serve to pull the viewer's eye off center, while the illusion of symmetry would work against this visual tug.

My first piece was now finished. I saw an example of my original idea executed and refined. The goal seemed worthy. Nevertheless, I concluded the wood appeared out of place in the sculpture and I decided to avoid using it in future projects.

The second sculpture I made was constructed completely from cullet and plate glass. (Figure 5; Sculpture #2) Putting small fragments of cullet in the center of the unit, in very prominent places, I believed would increase the importance of the cullet in relation to the other components of the sculpture. The plate glass was laminated into three layers with a
high-powered epoxy. I enjoyed, however, a deliberately sloppy application of the glue because I was primarily interested in building up the layers of glass for carving.

The tools of cold working were used. The diamond saw and the sandblaster were the most important of these tools. With the diamond saw I was able to cut, to carve, and to engrave the prepared sections of glass. I chose to emulate an alter piece from the Middle Ages even more pointedly in this work. Because the saw only cuts straight lines, the curves were made by a series of short slices. After the shape was roughed out, the edges were smoothed by running the outer part of the form against the blade in a smooth sweep. I developed a notching technique by making small angular cuts in order to give the perimeters of these large wings a toothy, rough edge. This, in combination with a carving away of the larger angles, made for a broad curve throughout the wing with a rough edge. The result was perfect for my needs. I achieved not only the shape I wanted, but also the method through which I acquired it followed my aesthetic exactly. The crude technique also helped give the piece the scarred and deteriorated feeling, as if it had suffered ravages of passing centuries, which I admired in medieval religious artwork.

The next step was to set the depth of the blade to a point where it would cut through only the outer layer of glass while leaving the entire, three layered, piece intact. By making these full cuts across the glass in parallel lines, I exposed the dark, inner plate glass pane in a repetitive pattern across the surface of the wing.

The final step before assembly was sandblasting. Sandblasting served not only to frost the glass, but it also was a carving tool, removing material to make a pattern. Additionally, it smoothed the edges still further.
At this point I should explain another aspect of my work, namely the need for ornamentation and the decorative patterns used in my pieces. Ornamentation has always been one of the most important elements in my work because it furthers the imitation of my sculpture pieces to medieval art and artifacts, which have a unique decorative pattern growing out of styles and techniques of another age. Ornamentation is one of the strongest design elements which an artist can use. By his use of ornamentation an artist is capable of creating moods ranging from playful to somber. In the case of the medieval artist, ornamentation created an effect of religious significance: reverence, glory, and adoration.

There comes a point in the decorative process when ornamentation transcends adornment and becomes itself an element to be as carefully considered as the original design. The ornamentation in my work reflects both my tastes and my aesthetics, and as such, goes much further than just enhancing the piece. Even in the areas where I abstain from ornamentation, the absence of it carries power and weight. By scarring the surface of the glass with the saw and sandblaster, I directly applied my aesthetics to the physical presence of the work. This application of my taste adds not only to the visual results, but also to the furthering of my ideas as as artist.

All the patterns were the result of either my wanting to stay loose or of a loose sequence of construction. In the case of this particular piece, the rough patterning covered the rough scratches and edges (one caused by the other) and threw off the symmetry. Both are a reflection of my style and aesthetic.

The pieces of glass were assembled, and the sculpture was finished.

My third piece returned to the idea of using cast components. (Figure 6; Sculpture #3) While working with this piece, I chose not to use plate
glass, but I did further explore the use of hot glass components and introduced metal into the series. My inspiration for this particular sculpture grew from the idea that a column would be an interesting form on which I could place cullet with a resulting powerful effect. My vision of this column was of an aged and time-ravaged artifact, rather than a clean, polished, new one. I wanted to capture the feeling of an old and weathered monument which might have deteriorated through the ages. Ancient ruins, especially, are an example of my vision as they have been of many others, who have constructed elaborate "follies," or ruins in the past. No doubt the reason for building them has always been both intellectual and visual. Although these ruins are not in their stately original condition, the visual appeal for me comes in their aged and worn appearance. The metaphor, if you will, has as much to do with the effects of time as it does with the original form. They have a beauty which is achieved through their very continuance, through their battle with time. This perseverance carries with it all the weight of the passing ages which have contributed the many chips and cracks in the stone. It is as if every flaw that appears on the column is a testament to the passing of time, was earned by the work of years. The column has additional significance when seen this way.

I felt a column was an excellent model for a sculpture since my feelings about columns in many ways mirrored my feelings about cullet. Cast glass was my choice because I felt it would prove exceptional in providing a worn and weathered look. My idea was to start with a central shaft and attach cast slices in a circular fashion to the surface. I also wanted to experiment with the copper etching and electroplating techniques learned in a metals class I was taking at RIT.
After the cast pieces were cut, polished, and attached to the central shaft pieces, I decided the best way to incorporate the copper was to attach strips of it along the edges of the cast glass. I felt this would add visually to the piece as well as give me a new surface to decorate with etched patterns. From past experience, I knew the metal surfaces would work well with the glass. Once the cast pieces were in place, I was unhappy with the backs of the copper plating and the glue seams which were visible through the polished cast glass sections. I acid etched the cast sections, rendering them translucent and thus blocking from view my unattractive oversight. The effect pleased me because it gave my pillar an aged look.

I had originally considered making a sculpture that included two small columns. At this point in the assembly I experimented with joining the two smaller pieces to make one large cylinder. I stacked the sections and was satisfied that the result was more visually exciting than two smaller ones. The base was a solid piece of hot formed glass in the shape of a gnarled half-sphere. It was ground flat on the top and bottom thus making it a suitable platform on which to set the column. Similar bases were made to join the two sections and to cap them. The cap piece of hot formed glass was the base for the cullet which crowned the top of the sculpture.

However the joints, the cast half-spheres, appeared to me to be awkward points of transition, looking more like blobs of glass than anything else. My solution was to electroform these three pieces. I hoped the process would visually ease the flow of the column and tie the different sections together. By laying copper in areas throughout the sculpture, I was able to mimic the different shapes of glass, thus unifying the whole. When the patina was applied, the results seemed satisfactory
and an interesting, random color pattern emerged from the mixing of sheet copper and the pure electroformed copper. In this piece of sculpture the use of patina and copper were the primary discoveries. These techniques, in turn, made this third work in the series a success.

The fourth piece was simpler to assemble because I eliminated the many sections, as used in Sculpture Three, in the creation of a tall pedestal for the cullet. (Figure 7; Sculpture #4) Sculpture Three was a column and Sculpture Four was more of an obelisk; but both were monuments capped with the fragment of glass, the cullet, which continued to be the focus of the series. In this fourth piece I wanted to use plate glass, hot glass, and metal. While this piece had fewer parts, I viewed it as a more complex project.

The central section of the sculpture was a heavily carved piece of green plate glass formed by using the same diamond saw cutting and carving technique I had developed in the early works of the series. The sandblaster was used, but in this case, it not only smoothed and frosted, it also contributed to the carving. Patterns of spots and undulating stripes were laid out on the plate glass using Elmer's glue. Both were resistant to the abrasive sand and thus protected the underlying glass. The sandblaster removed material from the unprotected area, and thereby created a design on the surface of the piece.

The first layer of glass laminated to the side of this piece was a flat section of mirrored peach plate glass. The sides were notched by the diamond saw, giving them each a serrated edge. The cuts were made by pushing the side of the glass into the blade of the saw just enough to mark it approximately 1/8 inch, then by moving the piece over and repeating the process. The section was then laminated again with a piece of patterned, anodized aluminum. The bright colors resulting from the anodizing
contrasted well with the green and peach plate which was to be the background. The pattern on the aluminum resembled the serrated edge of the peach plate glass behind it.

There were two anodized colors used on the outer edge, and the metal was dyed a peach color. This metal was brighter than the peach color of the plate glass, but it matched the former color in intensity. The interior of the piece was dyed a dark green that complimented the green in the central section of plate glass. A sand casting was placed over this interior section. The casting was thicker and longer than any used in previous sculptures. It was also different from the others in that it had polished sides and the texture on its face wasn't extreme. The slight undulation of the surface was made by lightly patting the sand with the edge of a brick rather than indenting it with my fingers. The effect was less dramatic than the extremely uneven surface left by the finger dents; however both the calmer patterns of the castings and their broad polished sides went well with, and contrasted, the extremely textured center section of plate glass. This not only helped to balance the piece visually, but also the polished sides worked as view ports, allowing the green from the center of the aluminum to show through. The crisp, slick, reflective edges were a welcomed reintroduction to the original format. It was now my decision that the contrast of the highly polished edges of the castings were an essential part of the formula for which I was searching. Not only were they excellent leverage against the other roughly formed sections of the pieces, but they also emphasized what glass does best, they allowed the viewer to see into and through it and, at the same time, to reflect external images. These components were assembled with a base made of cold worked hot parts and the prominently displayed piece of cullet. Focus on the base served to isolate the central component of the final sculpture.
The final piece was probably the most successful of the series. In the last piece I drew from the techniques and designs of the previous four sculptures. (Figure 8; Sculpture #5) The base was the central element in the design. I decided Sculpture Five would be the smallest of this series. The base was a wide flat piece of plate glass notched on the edges. It rested on two strips of fabricated plate glass. Everything I learned about carving the glass with the diamond saw, casting, polishing, and the use of metal in my work, contributed to this final sculpture. Of all the sculptures there was less improvisation of technique in this final piece; and, in fact, it was completed expediently.

The central core in this piece was laminated plate glass that was carved into a tall spear shape. It was layered with decreasing sections of plate glass and decorated with a random pattern of copper and cast glass. The sides of the central piece were notched, giving it a look of decay. In this final piece the cullet was used as supportive balancing and was not the central visual element. However, its place of prominence was still evident and fundamental.

In this series of five sculptures, I sought to celebrate the accidental and discarded, by placing cullet in a prominent position within the sculpture so that my message would be clear. However in the final sculpture, the aesthetics of the piece demanded a supporting role for my celebrated reject, the cullet.

While glass is hardly a new material, and the working of glass into artistic designs has been done since men first had an artistic impulse, new techniques and materials have made it possible to create a new kind of glass sculpture. My series of sculptures took advantage of many of the techniques I had learned, to which I added techniques of my own device in order to solve a certain problem or create a desired effect.
Throughout this project I had as my goal to celebrate, or lift up, the most common refuse or trash of the glass-making process. Common cullet represented to me the accident that has inherent value; like a pearl grown from a grain of sand in the oyster's shell. In order to make this statement, I referred to the art of the Middle Ages, when with precious jewels, enamel work, and gold the artists celebrated their faith in the dynamic religious artifacts they created. In their art, which has lasted for centuries with strength, liveliness, and a certain element of crude forcefulness, I found inspiration that I might achieve the same kind of confirmation of my belief that cullet could express my exalted faith in artistic improvisation.
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