

The new frontier in contemporary American fine art glass

The works of **Michael Ashenbrenner** have been exhibited on the national and west coast fine art scene since the 1970's and have for the most part been a collective statement upon his experience as an injured veteran of the Vietnam war. The "damaged bone series" were and continue to be a stark visceral reminder of the cost of American conflict (s) throughout the world and its effect not only upon those who participated but on a larger public being made more aware of our warrior class and its many issues that they are facing as a section of our society with the many returning veterans from foreign wars.

The work can be often interpreted as an attempt at reconstruction not only wounds sustained during an event but of a nation attempting to heal from its foreign policy blunders. His wrapping and "splinting" devices act as therapeutic interventions of a fractured society coming to terms with various facets of conflict and how we as individuals and nations deal with our changing attitudes to our perception of war and that which has been called the American century. But, that was then.

Since leaving New York, Aschenbrenner has been living in California with his wife, Mercedes, working quietly in his studio as he built behind their suburban home in the foothills outside of Los Angeles. It was this writer's pleasure to share a studio visit with the artist to discuss his new work and see the new direction and concepts he is now working with in the contemporary fine art glass medium.

One of the series that stood out was the body of work called the "sighting devices" (figure 1) These totemic forms of various glass colorations were topped with an organically rounded, then flattened form that then gave way to various textures, each with having a hole of various size near the center of each one. These pieces reminded the writer of an instrument seen illustrated in a wood cut by Albrecht Durer. (figure 2) In this woodcut, the artist is seen peering through a frame that is used in foreshortening and drawing. Another art historical reference pays homage to Vermeer's camera obscura again used in drawing compositions of the northern Renaissance by having light projected through a lens to give a clearer map to draw accurately upon a surface.(figure 3) Here we see the artist as using technology to better craft his/her vision by carefully selecting and editing information of the world around him/her in a way to make better choices regarding decisions effecting the work in question. The writer to recalls using a similar device while engaged in landscape painting en plein aire, when attempting to isolate color with the use of a small piece of card with a hole in it that the

painter peers through to better study a given part of the vista that has become problematic in terms of color value or intensity.

With the use of repetition and variation to explore the idea that Aschenbrenner so often uses in his work he invites the viewer to participate with the work(s) by either looking through the orifice in the piece or imagining what might be coming back to the viewer with his/her aesthetic experience. It is with this “dialogue” he creates a powerful connection between his art object and his public. The title of the pieces themselves create a pun that asks us to question what it is we are seeing and just what it may imply. The work questions what means we may be using to filter the myriad of signals we now get from our electronic environments. It poses important notions of what kind of ability we have as individuals and as a greater society to being able to see clearly our direction as active participants in this grand experiment called democracy. The conceptual level of this work leaves open ended the kind of information we process when dealing with the work but does very satisfactorily provides a contextual metaphor with his sighting devices in which we view our world around us to pose the question “what am I seeing?” and what am i looking at and finally what it might mean.

Next, we must look at his “tools” series (figure 4) and the greater implications connected with this body of work. Artists, engineers, and builders et al have used tools since the beginning of recorded history to shape the world

around them. With this idea, the word “tool” dictates the idea of some kind of function or extension of the tool maker or of the artisan employing that implement.(figure 5) However here we see Aschennbrenner again creating a structural metaphor for us to engage with. His tools, in all their variation do nothing other than mesmerize with his facility of the medium glass itself. We still witness his binding and wrapping obsession but conceptually he has moved into a brand new realm of thought and ideas. His “tools” now refer to not only the “work” to be done but also make reference to the new ideas and concepts we as individuals and a society have yet to learn and embrace in order to “build” a sustainable future. His implements challenge us to self examine our own inventory of skills and technology we use and to what ends. The work forces us to question just how “sharp” and effective our modus operandi is and just where we might hone to better grapple with our modern lives. In short, his work using this direct literal approach works effectively to keep us plowing in the field of opportunity. It is a body of work that lets us begin to ponder just what does work and what does not. It poses questions concerning what is effective on all levels of our society and the kind of effort it will take to make this next century one that not just an American century but a global one that has the tools it needs to sustain itself.

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