

# Approaching the art of glass from viewpoint of sculpture

By CANDELORA VERSACE

**M**any artists who work with glass as their primary medium tend to think of the medium first — its properties, its texture, its processes — and what they do with that medium comes second.

Michael Aschenbrenner, however, is known to be somewhat of an anomaly in the art glass world.

Rather than create vessels, flowing forms or pretty objects that accentuate the characteristics of glass, Aschenbrenner has found that as a sculptor, glass is the best medium for his subject matter.

Aschenbrenner will be showing several pieces at the Garland Gallery, 125 Lincoln, until Nov. 11. An opening reception takes place from 5 to 7 p.m. today.

"I don't consider myself a glass worker. I'm a sculptor," he said in an interview from his home in New York City.

"Glass artists tend to go for those inherent, beautiful qualities of glass rather than the personal, expressive qualities.

"My work is very personal, but I think it transcends the formal to become humanistic and universal," he added.

Aschenbrenner found one subject that spoke to him the most clearly about the human condition and has spent his career working with it.

That subject is bones; that he uses glass to make them emphasizes their fragility as well as their strength as an image.

"I've tried making them in bronze, but it takes away the psychological edge of the image," he said.

"And as far as fragility goes, glass is actually very strong. They make whole buildings out of glass now. My pieces are solid, not hollow, and although you know it's fragile, it's not something you have to be afraid of."

Aschenbrenner does not fill his pieces with air like traditional glass blowers; rather he pulls the molten glass into the forms he wants, making each piece individually without a mold.

"It's called off-hand glass working," he said.

"I really enjoy the whole process, it's kind of like being in a foundry. By doing the whole process myself, I'm thoroughly involved.

"If I just hired guys to make this image, it would be completely different, the subtlety



Damaged Bone Series, mixed media by Michael Aschenbrenner

would be gone. This way, I feel like my spirit is part of each piece, but not like in a New Agey way or anything," he added.

Aschenbrenner's 20-year fascination with bones — many of which he wraps with gessoed fabric and twigs, splint-like — began with his own.

He injured his knee jumping from a helicopter in the jungle during the Vietnam war and walked on it for two weeks before getting to a medical facility.

"At first I think the image came from that experience," Aschenbrenner said, but he disavows the idea that he is still fixated on the war and its damage in his work.

"People really like to pigeon-hole that stuff," he said. "I was in that show that Lucy Lippard curated about Vietnam (*A Different War: Vietnam in Art*, which traveled around the country last year), so the tag has stuck somewhat.

"It comes up as my history and I don't deny my influences but my work has certainly transcended that. It's really about everyday life. It's not just Vietnam, it's the whole socio-political situation today and the myths of government.

"That was not a nice time for me, and I'd never want to be stuck in that era," he said.

"Rather, I consider myself a socially conscious, humanistic artist. I don't like the idea of politics ruling. I want to view things as simply as possible.

"But I could never say that I wish it never happened," he added.

"There are opportunities in everything. If you dwell on the part that keeps you from growing, you don't get any-

where. You've got to get on with your life."

He was clear on his perspective about the therapeutic aspects of his work as well.

"It's not really about emotional healing for me, it's much more about the psychic wounds of this country.

"It's more about other people's pain than my own, it's about other things than me. These are not self-portraits, they're just a vehicle," he said.

"I do see the image as a fragment of our bodies, which is another facet of my thoughts," he said, noting that the title of the show is *Fragmented Commodities*.

"When I was in the army hospital, I saw the kinds of injuries there, and I thought a lot about who owns you. Does the government own you? Who controls what you do?"

"All my life I've tried to sort that out. We're the freest country in the world, but there are still limitations.

"I never wanted to do a whole skeleton; the fragments I think speak more of the whole and make the mind work to piece the parts together. Of course, if the TV generation is not willing to ponder on it, that's okay," he added.

## DETAILS

**Who:** Michael Aschenbrenner  
**What:** Art opening  
**When:** 5-7 p.m. today  
**Where:** Garland Gallery, 125 Lincoln  
**Info:** Through Nov. 11