

# GLASS



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**M**uch can be said in defense of the glass aesthetic that emphasizes glass-as-glass, in all its light-catching opticality, liquidity, and solidity. Pure glass as sculpture, however, is problematic. It tends toward the icily transparent, the jewel-like and the prismatic, qualities that do not usually call forth much depth of expression. Perhaps this is why nineteenth-century art-glass sought to imitate the accidental iridescence of ancient glass, eschewing crystal; perhaps this is why the current movement toward glass sculpture so often uses glass in conjunction with contrasting materials. Even in vessel formats, satin glass and cut glass notwithstanding, glass is not the most tactile of materials. Pure glass is as nearly invisible to the touch as it is to the eye. Sculpture may not emphasize the haptic to the extent that all the nonglass crafts do, but traditionally it delights in tactility as well as three-dimensionality. The objectness of sculpture, necessarily in contrast to composition, is anchored by the overt materiality of particular surfaces. This is not to disparage the real achievements in pure glass by pioneer Harvey Littleton or more recently Dale Chihuly, who uses container and now vessel formats to sculpt color, as it were; nor do I wish to denigrate the glass vessel, which, with its roots in the utilitarian and the ceremonial, has a noble history. Nevertheless, it is well worth pointing out that some of the most aesthetically rewarding work now being done in glass as sculpture is in marked contrast to the largely nonarticulated but pervasive aesthetic of glass purity. Mary Shaffer, Howard Ben Tré, Jane Bruce, and now Michael Aschenbrenner, no matter what their allegiances to the studio glass movement, make glass visible *and* more sculptural by using it in conjunction with other materials.

**M**ichael Aschenbrenner, although his output is not limited to glass, has been exhibiting glass sculptures for at least a decade. He had a solo exhibition at The New York Experimental Glass Workshop in 1984, was represented in the Philbrook Museum of Art's exhibition "The Eloquent Object," and was seen in the inaugural group show at Franklin Parrasch's New York gallery this fall. He has also received considerable national attention for his wallpiece in Lucy Lippard's traveling exhibition "A Different War: Vietnam in Art." There is no question that Aschenbrenner's experience in Vietnam has influenced his art: Around the time of the Tet Offensive he injured his knee when jumping from a helicopter and, since he could not be rescued, had to walk on it for two weeks. After that he was no stranger to various orthopedic wards and lived among those who had fared far worse than himself. This was in 1968, and yet his wartime experience in Southeast Asia still haunts his art. The work itself, however, is by no means antiwar agitprop; it aspires to and I believe achieves a more complicated message. Yes, he makes glass bones that are bound up with and protected by found sticks and other materials, but these are not simple illustrations of the equation that fragile glass equals fragile bone.

## Michael Aschenbrenner: Glass Plus

John Perreault

**A**fter Vietnam, Aschenbrenner began his art studies with ceramics. When one of his instructors at the University of Minnesota pointed out that the linear forms he was trying to make in clay might more easily be made in glass, he shifted media disciplines. Certainly his commitment to glass must at least partly come from a personal affinity for the material and for the process of glassmaking, which he calls "the spiritual dance—in which there is nothing else but the artist and the furnace." More significantly, it is the surprising conjunction of material and subject matter that illuminates this commitment. The linear forms soon revealed themselves as bones, and once the autobiographical content emerged it rapidly moved toward the universal. Aschenbrenner makes bonelike shapes by joining heated rods of glass with a hot glob or bit. After the jointed "bones" have been properly annealed, he begins the orthopedic stage: splintlike arrangements of found sticks and metal are tied or bandaged to the bone form; turnbuckles are attached. The effect is shamanistic; we see outsized healing objects from some latter-day medicine bundle. Aschenbrenner is not using glass-as-glass but glass as symbol. Life itself, his sculptures announce, is fragile—like bone, like glass—and therefore all the more precious.

**Damaged Bone**  
Series: *delta ex*  
(1989), mixed media  
62" x 52" x 6".

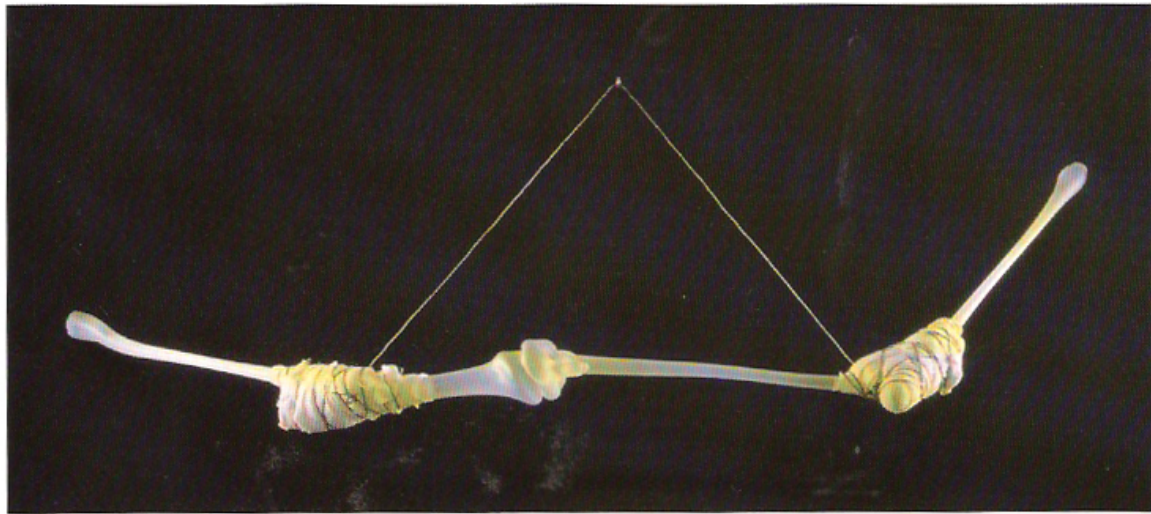
*Bones from the Damaged Bone Series: R.V.N. (1980), mixed media, width 32". Collection of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, New York.*

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**A**t this stage in his development, Aschenbrenner's most successful work—with a passing nod to his quirky drawings—is in the wallpiece and wall-installation genres, all using glass bones variously "protected." Some units now look like primitive musical instruments; others like weapons. According to Aschenbrenner, his decision to adopt the wall-display format came about by accident. Working in tight quarters, as is more and more the case for younger artists in New York, where studio space is at a premium, he stored his bone bundles by

hanging them on a wall, where they would take up less room. One day after a break in his work routine, he saw them in a new light: the wall was where they belonged. They came alive.

Aschenbrenner, no stranger to the larger nonglass art world, began using two formats that have been actively explored in art since the late 1960s. Some wall-oriented constructions by Picasso and proto-installations by the Russian constructivist Vladimir Tatlin foreshadow these later developments, but the wallpiece truly became legitimate when the minimalist sculptor Donald Judd began creating severely geometrical, three-dimensional works to be displayed on the wall as if, oddly enough, they were paintings. A little later, one also remembers Ira Joel Haber's twisted-landscape boxes, Lynda Benglis's knots, and some works of Richard Tuttle. In glass, one thinks of Mary Shaffer's slumped glass wallworks. Multiply the parts, using the wall as a negative space or a field, and one has the



wall installation; early Judy Pfaff, Donald Lipski, and any number of artists. Since elements are invariably three-dimensional, one supposes that both genres are sculpture rather than painting, but sculpture that you cannot circle, sculpture with its back to the wall—sculpture with only five sides, second-cousin to the relief, but more interactive with the wall. The advantage of the wallpiece is that as sculpture it is safe from harm, in Aschenbrenner's case a rhyme of sort with the theme of protection. A wallpiece will not be knocked over when you are backing up to look at a painting. Furthermore, it will not be picked up and handled, which is a particular hazard in small-scale glass. We



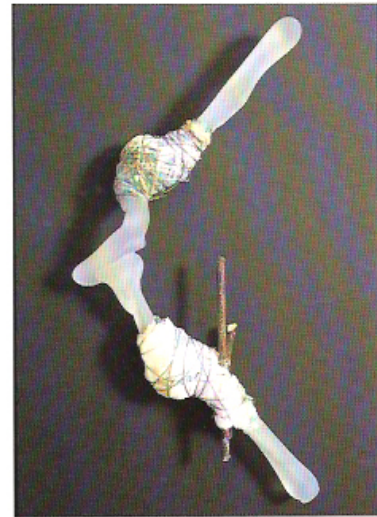
***Damaged Bone Series***  
(1990), mixed media,  
24" x 13" x 4".

are so conditioned not to touch what is displayed on a wall by the conventions of painting display that glass art on the wall is virtually immune to fingerprints. Another advantage of the wallpiece or installation is that the artist can fix positioning and display; thus the glass or glass-plus object is separated from everyday tabletop flux and de-chatchkaed at last. The viewer is less likely to touch the art—no great loss in regard to glass—but may be forced to look at the art more intently.

Aschenbrenner's bone-pieces, whether offered singly or in groups, are like trophies in a hunting lodge or fetish objects in a minimal museum of anthropology. They could also hold their own in a museum of primitive medicine. But trophies of what? Fetish objects designed for what magical effect? Aschenbrenner sees his artworks not as therapy for himself—his Vietnam experience was not pleasant—but as instruments of healing. The single bones (wallpieces) are particularly magical in their stark isolation; the multi-part installations have a slightly different effect—one becomes more conscious of the artist's inventiveness in exploring a formal and emotional theme.



***Damaged Bone Series***  
(1990), mixed media,  
18" x 9" x 3".



**Damaged Bone**  
**Series: Chronicles**  
 1968 (1987), mixed  
 media, 24' x 24'

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Will Aschenbrenner, burdened, alas, by his preferred material, be able to cross over into the world of sculpture *per se*? The key is that his work, although it draws a great deal of its strength from glass as a paradoxical material, is not strictly about the medium. Glass is forbidden. There are precedents for glass in the art world: Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* or *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, *Even* begins most slide lectures on contemporary glass, followed by Larry Bell, and I suppose soon to be joined by Sherrie Levine's recent three-dimensional glass versions of the bachelors from Duchamp's *Large Glass*. These exceptions aside, the art world sees glass as a threat, as contamination by a nonart or an offensively decorative material. Is glass automatically kitsch? Ubiquitous and tainted by use, glass suffers from class snobbery. The crafts gave birth to formalism, and the art world of painting and sculpture wants formalism for itself.

The separation of painting and noncraft sculpture from crafts and the decorative arts traditions is simply a marketing strategy that has nothing to do with aesthetics.

From a strictly aesthetic point of view, Aschenbrenner is making art of a high order of seriousness. Aschenbrenner has something important to say and he is saying it with glass because it cannot be said with any other material. Using color, surface treatment, and the ability of glass to freeze and present its own quality of molten liquidity—and emphasizing these attributes by incorporating other materials—his works are formally satisfying and symbolically coherent.

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