

*Michael Aschenbrenner:
Bones, Rags and Soul*



October 7–November 26, 1995

Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art

Pepperdine University

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J.A.L.L.Y., 1992, glass and mixed media,
11 x 5 x 3 inches

*The light you give off
did not come from a pelvis.*
—Rumi

These enigmatic lines by the 13th century Persian poet Rumi pose a question addressed by all the world's great religions: what is the relation of the light within us—our soul—to our physical body? And what happens to this light when the body undergoes the harshest trials?

Michael Aschenbrenner's art raises such fundamental questions about our material and spiritual existence. His characteristic work involves wall installations of glass sculpture. Individual pieces are organic; most resemble bones that have been twisted, broken, and then mended with chords and bandages. This imagery arose from his experience being wounded in the Vietnam War and addresses the theme of physical and emotional healing.

A native Californian, Aschenbrenner enlisted in the army upon graduation from Upland High School in 1967. He joined the 101st Airborne Division and was sent to Vietnam and to a base camp at Phu Bai. He served in a reconnaissance platoon in dense jungle for six months until he injured his knee jumping from a helicopter. Because of his patrol's location, he could not be evacuated immediately and had to walk on the injured limb for two weeks. Once hospitalized, he needed two operations to repair the damage. When he returned from Vietnam, Aschenbrenner enrolled at California State University, San Bernardino and then in the M.F.A. program at the University of Minnesota where he planned to concentrate on ceramics. When an instructor suggested that the elongated forms he was making in clay could be made more easily in glass, he began to concentrate on this medium.

In retrospect, the shapes he was producing at Minneapolis were bones, but he didn't know it at the time. As he pointed out, during the 1970s graduate programs focused on formalist art, on work that "didn't ever say anything. It's just shapes."¹ He looked upon his long glass shafts as pure abstract forms: "I saw them as constructions that had a joining point. I didn't see them as [human] joints."

Aschenbrenner felt that the atmosphere in graduate school was too critical for him to comfortably explore his personal Vietnam experiences. He also needed time to understand how his life had been effected. As with many veteran-artists, he found that he could only begin to address the war in his art about a decade after the fact:

"Ernest Hemingway said that it took ten years after the First World War was over before he could write about it. I understand this. It has taken me as much time to comprehend what happened to me in Vietnam and to start doing Vietnam-related images."² It was only after a "long period of denial and introversion" that he could acknowledge that his imagery had its origin in Vietnam.³

In 1978 Aschenbrenner moved to New York City and settled in Soho, which at the time was still a run-down neighborhood offering young artists inexpensive studio space. Once on his own, he realized the true meaning of his bone-pieces in the years 1979-80. Using facilities at the New York Experimental Glass Workshop, he perfected his vocabulary of forms. While most of the artists there worked as glass blowers, Aschenbrenner pulled and

stretched molten glass into organic shapes highly evocative of the human body.

The artist ties or wraps his bones, adding sticks or binding two glass rods together. This process, which one critic called the "orthopedic stage", reenacts the process of healing. "My thoughts on these pieces are filled with feelings of warmth, gentleness, and regret," said Aschenbrenner. "In much of my work there is a certain sadness, humility, and seriousness free of satire. If the glass is broken, it has been cared for and bandaged."⁴

His choice of material underscores his content. Bone is strong and solid yet also fragile and easily broken. Glass shares these qualities. On one hand, it is one of the few seemingly eternal man-made materials; pieces of ancient glass have been unearthed after centuries with almost no change. On the other hand, glass is delicate and can shatter with the slightest blow. In its dualistic qualities, glass reminds us of both the immortality and fragility of our own selves. In addition, glass is transparent. Light refracting within its boundaries alludes to the invisible energy—the spirit—animating living matter.

Once the artist had developed a sizable body of individual pieces—which vary in length from one to three feet—he began to arrange them in site-specific wall installations. For years, his favorite theme was the *Damaged Bone Series*, which exists in a number of variants with differing subtitles. *Damaged Bone Series: Chronicles 1968* (1982) directly addresses his tour in Vietnam. As in Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial of the same year, the visual impact lies in repetition. When so many similar forms appear together, subtle differences become more meaningful. Individual pieces assume distinct identities, as if each recorded the wounds of a unique person.

Color gives the bone forms visual interest and internal life. While a few of the bones are colored realistically—in shades of white and off-white—the majority are of bold, strident hues. In some pieces, candy colors—pinks, lime greens, sky blues—glow with a neon intensity. Others are in serious, somber tones—earth browns, deep blues and dark reds (the color of blood). Through vibrant color these pieces loose their association with dead, organic matter and take on new meaning as primal symbols of eternal life.

These installations are strongly theatrical. Theater creates an intermediate world that is at once both real and artificial. It allowed Aschenbrenner to fictionalize his war experiences, to distance them from his current life by presenting them on a stage. One can also find an analogy between his fields of glass sculptures and rows of toy soldiers. If so, this offers another level of psychological distance. The installations mark a regression to childhood when soldiering was a game, with no great stakes and no real casualties.

By the mid-1980s, Aschenbrenner felt his involvement with glass bone installations was becoming too obsessive. In search of a new direction, he returned to two-dimensional art and produced a number of paintings on canvas. However, the tangible

bone form possessed too great an appeal. "I like objects," he explained, "I like tactile things." He began to incorporate glass bones into flat, planar reliefs, creating a body of assemblages.

The relief panels establish a frame for the attached bones, setting them off from the wall and creating a transitional environment. The backgrounds are painted in an expressionistic manner, with rough scumbled surfaces. While they enclose the bone, offering the illusion of a safe environment, they mimic the instability of the world at large. When floating in this abstract field, the bone appears as a lonely object in a desolate landscape. In other assemblages, various objects and materials—toy soldiers, flags—are incorporated to enlarge the art's scope of reference.

Also in the mid-1980s, the artist produced a series of intimate drawings which he called the *In My Room Series*, after a song by the Beach Boys. In these highly personal works, which arose from a "trying and tearful time alone in my room confronting my fears," he exercised his more painful memories of the war by setting them down on paper. Recalling vivid personal events, he quickly developed a personal iconography of condensed symbols for the Vietnam experience: helicopters and parachutes, dogs and M-16 rifles.

The compositions all show the compression of space common to dreams and the intensity of vision found in nightmares. While the drawing may seem simple and cartoon-like, this does distract from their seriousness. Rather, the themes carried such a great emotional charge that the artist could only give them life by taking them lightly.

Aschenbrenner has continued to expand upon his glass bone installations. *Damaged Bone Series: Ghosts in the Eyes of the Ones Sent Away* (1993), which was inspired by a song by Bruce Springsteen, addresses two different but equally momentous forms of passage. On a personal level, it commemorates the artist's overnight passage from high school graduate to soldier. It also marks the AIDS crisis and the lives lost to this disease.

Most recently, the artist has embarked on a number of new directions, including the *Tool Series*. The glass forms, which resemble implements from a primitive culture, are tinged with nostalgia and with a desire for social healing. They "have to do with survival," the artist said, with the survival of both individuals and society. They point to an earlier period in human history when people were satisfied with their limited mastery over the environment and did not long for instruments of mass destruction.

While Aschenbrenner's art arose from his painful experience of the Vietnam War, any criticism is tempered by an elegiac mood. Time and distance turned his anger and frustration into a meditation on human life, resulting in art that is spiritual rather than activist. His argument is not with specific leaders or government policies but with humanity's basic metaphysical condition. He is concerned with human frailty, a universal truth of existence that is laid bare by war.

Michael Zakian, Director