

## Southern California

### Michael Aschenbrenner at Pepperdine University

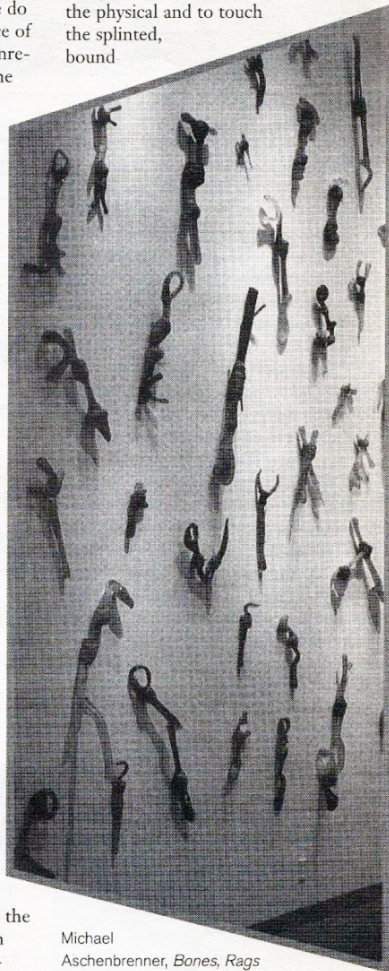
In Michael Aschenbrenner's *Damaged Bones* series, we do not confront a shrill voice of protest or a barrage of unremitting projectiles, but the cumulative effect of silent pain. Yet, Aschenbrenner does not foist a burden of pain upon the viewer. Rather, he has created an aesthetic that can be felt in the clarity of glass, and in the refinement of his craft and the thoughtful use of natural materials. As an exhibition, *Bones, Rags and Soul* offers a spirituality. These objects shape a new mythology that emerges through the regenerative process as "healing art," for the metamorphosis we see in the artist's work represents fifteen years of fusing a horrific past into a present reality. Each object symbolizes a distinctive act of setting a broken leg, whether pulled, splinted or wired together, an act that Aschenbrenner performs almost ritually. He stretches melted glass, fuses twisted, broken pieces together to form bone joints, then wraps and ties the glass in splints of lost and found material, string, rags, sticks. Labeled as glass and mixed media, these objects, hung on the hospital-like walls of the sunlit Frederick R. Weisman Museum, have cleansed away the shadows—we see no ghosts walking here, but we experience a fragile reality.

To say that the soul is revealed through Aschenbrenner's art is to feel the emotional presence behind his molten images. Individual pieces take on profound references to functional things. They form transitions, become specimens, tracers to a past that is embedded with toy soldiers, parachutes, helicopters. His iconography links his early bas relief works to these more recent glass sculptures. *Tool Series* evokes an archaeological perspective. *In My Room Series* and *Ghosts in the Eyes of the ones Sent Away* reflect the nightmare struggle with death and war.

"This first large-scale exhibit of Aschenbrenner's glass sculptures," according to curator Michael Zakian, "arose from Aschenbrenner's experience of being wounded in the Vietnam War—and addresses the theme of physical and spiritual healing."

"If glass is broken," the artist notes, "it has to be cared for and bandaged."

The experience, now abstracted as a sequence of beautiful objects, connects us to the limbs and dead bodies left behind. But there are some things we cannot let go. Once healed, however, the remembrances of things past, too horrible to countenance, can be articulated. Experiences, after they have been expressed, register a new awareness. The powerful dynamic of the installation makes a memorial statement toward the inner personal search to transcend the physical and to touch the splinted, bound



Michael Aschenbrenner, *Bones, Rags and Soul*, glass, at Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Pepperdine University, Malibu. (Photo: Brent Madison.)

thing we, as social beings, hold in common: our human frailty. As a survivor, Aschenbrenner tells us his story. And like a lightning rod, his splinted glass bones gather the "ways of the world" about him.

—Pat Leddy

Michael Aschenbrenner: *Bones, Rags and Soul* through December 1 at Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Pepperdine University, Malibu.

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