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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

The Internal Expression of the Phenomenon of Human Aspiration

by

Eunsuh Choi

Oct 2010

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Signature _____

Date: _____

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Introduction

Original Thesis Statement

My thesis investigates the phenomenon of human aspiration in life and was conceived from the new perspective I have about myself and my pursuits in a foreign country. Originally from Korea, I relocated to the United States and during this time asked myself many questions to determine my goal. When I was young, adults would ask me about my future even though I was not yet old enough to think logically about such questions. “What do you want to be?” they would ask. “What is next?” These are common questions in my country. I assume there are many different reasons adults ask children these questions. For example, people might want to revisit the ambition, goals, and wishes they had for their own life plan through children’s answers.

In turn, my Korean heritage makes me question my direction as an artist and an individual, especially after I came to the USA. What are my ambitions? How can I achieve them? What is their personal significance?

One of the characteristics that makes the human experience so unique is that we all share a longing for personal enrichment. The search for individual fulfillment is a deep-rooted pursuit within all of us and is not only approached in a variety of ways but also is a pursuit of various means of accomplishment. No matter how significant or

superficial one's ambition might be, the presence of aspiration beckons us as humans to somehow claim or further carve out our own understanding of ourselves within our lifetime.

Although there is much attention and sensitivity toward the things that make us very different from one another, an undeniable connection exists among us in that we desire something better for ourselves, and to find it we will try every possible approach toward achieving a certain goal. This act can seem like climbing steps. All of us are trying to climb higher, step by step, until we reach satisfaction. This impulse is the impetus within my thesis work that visually communicates the spiritual essence of human ambition.

To tell these phenomena, I will incorporate my personal experiences and my Korean heritage into my thesis to allow me to show my point of view.

Statement of Goal and Objectives of the Thesis

I am interested in portraying the human experience with organic forms. My work specifically focuses on communicating the graceful flow of our emotional tendencies through the plastic medium of flameworked glass. I prefer to work sculpturally, utilizing form and its surrounding atmosphere to portray narratives based on human encounters

with success and failure in the pursuit of personal ambition.

To address my interest in human aspiration, I incorporated my personal thinking and perspective about what it means to pursue one's own ambitions and the relevance of being ambitious within the human experience. I also integrated my personal philosophy and experiences of the subject, incorporating my Korean heritage into the work in an effort to merge my Eastern background with my Western experiences of how we, as humankind, are unified through the sensations of personal ambition. From my thesis investigation, I have given viewers a chance to identify with my portrayal of the human need to progress, and I also brought them to a state of remembrance.

To make life-size objects, I used a flameworking technique that allowed me to think about what it means to aspire—where I've been and where I project to be in a meditative progress of flameworking. Flameworking also gave me a sense of achievement and a chance to think about my objective for the piece throughout the time I worked on it.

Main

Implication of Symbols

The common objects I apply within my work serve as a duality of the significance of the objects rendered metaphorically and literally. I use these symbols to narratively convey the motion of ascension.

According to the Random House Dictionary, *symbol*¹ means:

- 1) Something used for or regarded as representing something else; a material object representing something, often something immaterial; emblem, token, or sign.
- 2) A letter, figure, or other character or mark or a combination of letters or the like used to designate something: *the algebraic symbol* x ; *the chemical symbol* *Au*.
- 3) A word, phrase, image, or the like having a complex of associated meanings and perceived as having inherent value separable from that which is symbolized, as being part of that which is symbolized, and as performing its normal function of standing for or representing that which is symbolized: usually conceived as deriving its meaning chiefly from the structure in which it

¹ Random House, Inc.

appears, and generally distinguished from a sign.

From the dictionary, I understand that a *symbol* is a suggestive expression or internal image. Using symbols in art, the viewer is expected to make psychological associations, and I hoped to elicit an air of empathy and a path in their hearts within my work. Because the symbol has different meanings for each individual based on background, experiences, and thought, I believe it is good to use *symbols* in my thesis investigation to make room for unlimited imagination and interpretation.

Tree. I used the metaphorical qualities of organic structures within the natural world as motifs for ascension. In a much more lively and asymmetrical composition, I used a similarly delicate assemblage of glass rods to create renditions of a tree form. Although the tree holds many sacred and symbolic connotations, I was interested in using it to make a metaphorical connection to the spirit of human aspiration. One sunny and windy day, I was looking at the trees on campus. Branches were swaying in the wind and facing the sky. To me, it looked like those trees were enjoying the moment. I was able to feel their vitality. In addition, the trees looked humanly to me because they had a similar movement and shape to us. For those reasons, I see the tree as a living object expressing the gesture of vitality similar to us.

Unlike the stairs and ladder, the tree is an object that lives and breathes, has the capability of growing, and is equally capable of dying. It is a mortal entity in itself and a thing that bears many human qualities. Although all trees start as seedlings, it takes a certain kind of environment and a certain set of circumstances for that seed to gradually grow to its full potential as a tall, budding, and healthy tree. A unique parallel exists between the development of any given tree and the human spirit- there is no redundancy among their own kind in how they develop or what they develop into. Also, there is no guarantee that either thing will develop to its full potential. The pieces that I create under the influence of the natural world read as individual narratives, perhaps even as portraiture of certain individuals or certain moments of my own personal growth. Nevertheless, I use the malleable qualities of glass to bend and curve the material into frozen renderings of limbs and branches that ethereally reach toward some invisible goal above them. Some of the more interesting pieces are those in which I integrate the organic motion of the limbs with the stoic stature of the ladder form. The tree is a portrayal of all things hopeful ambitions, aspirations, and strength that prove inspirational to our own development.

The tree has its common meaning in various cultures. For example, when a baby is born in Hokkaido, Japan, Sakhalin, Russia, and some areas in Europe, the parents plant

a tree to celebrate the infant's arrival and pray for the baby's health. If the tree grows well, it means the baby is also healthy; however, if the tree stops growing or dies, the baby also is at risk of getting sick or dying. In Asia, human beings are considered a part of nature because humans cannot survive without nature and must be in harmony with it. In Buddhist philosophy, the tree symbolizes not only vitality, but also Buddhahood. This Korean heritage affects my work even though I did not recognize it at first.

Sometimes artists use the tree to express human life because it is so similar to how people and nature develop and behave. Trees make a forest and live together communally, and humans also live their lives in the same way. That is why I was drawn to use the tree as a metaphorical reference to human beings in my thesis work.

Ladder and Cloud. Objects like ladders are man-made tools used to assist or aid an individual to physically raise someone to a higher level, to reach a destination that one would be incapable of reaching without such a device. These objects are associated with all things dense and structurally sound, whereas my renditions are light and airy, almost celestial. The ladder in my work is an object of strong symbolic reference to these thematic interests. The ladder symbolizes a tool to pursue the ambitions we want to fulfill in our lifetime. As we try to climb the ladder, we try all possibilities to achieve our goal.

For pursuing our aspiration, we make a plan and make an effort even though success is not guaranteed. The gloss and glisten that is reflected from the glass construction, coupled with the suspension of such pieces, further implies a spiritual or apparitional quality. It is as if these pieces were composed of light and were revealing themselves to the viewer as a holy vision, leading one toward a direction above and beyond where they stand. In this work, I am attempting to create a physical representation of what it feels like to have a personal moment of revelation when standing in the presence of the actual piece. The moment feels as if something sacred is taking place as the viewer visualizes climbing the dedicated structure in an equally dedicated manner, transcending one's self beyond the realm of physical possibility. Although beautiful -looking objects, there is an allure to these pieces that similarly surpasses their physicality in that the viewer not only becomes overwhelmed by what he or she sees, but, more importantly, in what he or she senses internally. The ladders in my work are installed upright, extending toward the sky to convey the power of all things hopeful and optimistic commonly associated with the act of ascension.

The cloud symbolizes the height of our aim and finding the distance between one's current position and the place to which one aspires. Achieving a certain goal may seem easy since it looks close enough to grab, like when we look at a cloud even though

it is not within reach. Therefore, imagine that it might be possible to catch the cloud using the ladder as a tool to ascend into heaven in terms of accomplishment. Once we accomplish our goal, we start dreaming of another goal that is greater and more complicated. The cloud also symbolizes the difficulty in pursuing aspiration, just as it is difficult to catch a real cloud. People try to achieve goals even though they may experience a sense of frustration and anguish and have an obstacle to success since it is not guaranteed no matter how hard we try.

Technical Information

I used the medium of flameworked glass as my primary technique to create objects and installations composed of intricately fused glass threads to express my interest in human ambition. This provided a meditative parallel between the process and the work's conceptual origin. Sitting diligently behind a small open-flamed torch, I bent and joined thin glass rods in a complex arrangement. It is an extraordinarily systematic structure no matter how organic or symmetrical the shape of my work becomes. To make life-size objects, I used a flameworking technique that allowed me to think about what it means to aspire— where I've been and where I project to be in the meditative progress of flameworking. Flameworking also gave me a sense of achievement and a chance to think

about the objective I had for the piece throughout the time I worked on it, and I stated my goal while at work. I would project the way in which I would continue creating the piece several moments from where I was currently in the process. Significant time was needed to finish the pieces due to the delicate nature of the material and the tedious standards of craftsmanship I hold while at work.

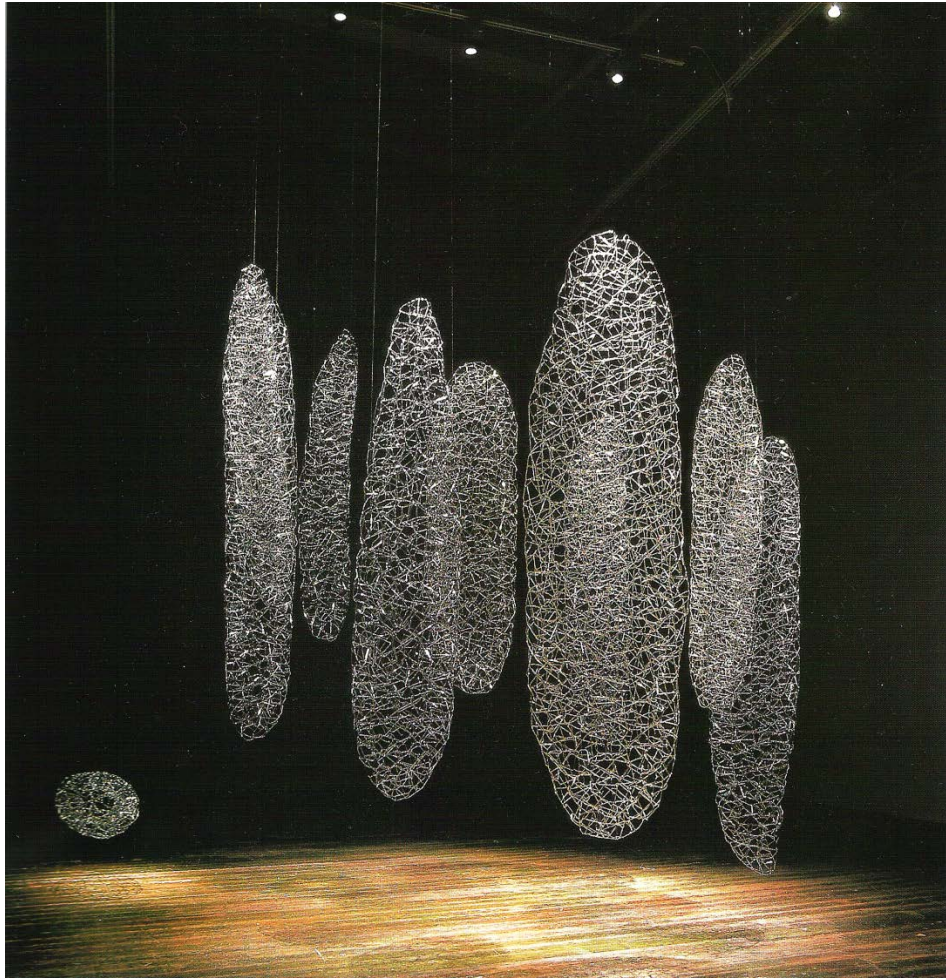
In my work, I incorporated evidence of my awareness of human fallibility, fault, and error within our pursuit of greatness. These elements clash with the glassy surface of the structure and act as a visual distraction from the upward motion of the form's progress. Gradually, these inserts change color as their verticality enhances, progressively obtaining richer hues of precious metal as it reaches the very top of the piece. These inclusions serve as the spirit of the piece and increase the value as the clear body of the piece rises to its maximum potential.

Through my work, I tried to show the possibility that I can make life-size objects as big as my aspiration. I used borosilicate glass, which allowed me to make life-size objects for my thesis work and resulted in much stronger finished pieces. They will stand up to great wear and tear without having to treat them as carefully as soft glass. At the same time, as all glass is breakable, the fragility represents how easily our aspirations can fail in the pursuit of personal ambition through the weakness of the material.

Artistic Influence

I remember that I always stop in front of sculptural work or installation pieces whenever I go to galleries and museums. Sculptural works always fascinate me. That is why when I had a chance to see Anna Skibska's exhibition catalog from a friend when I was in Korea, I was overwhelmed by the sense of association between objects' size and how they were installed.

I like to work sculpturally, utilizing form and its surrounding atmosphere to portray narratives to bring his or her own imagination into my own work. Her works showed me the possibilities to create atmosphere for viewers and how important the display can be to transform it into a powerful installation. Her work helped me observe and contemplate the visual aspects.



“One: Millenium Series” 2000

275 in (h) * 275 in (w) * 90 in (d)

Lampworked crystal clear and smoky grey transparent glass, suspended

Conclusion

My goal to create a physical representation of how it feels when standing in the presence of the actual work and have a personal moment of revelation was successfully achieved by the public response to this body of work. In my observation of the viewers, I noticed that people took their time to visualize themselves climbing the dedicated structure, transcending one's self beyond the realm of physical possibility.

Aside from the audiences, I greatly enjoyed the time spent making my work, where I was able to think about my own aspirations future and past and my direction as an artist and an individual. The frameworking technique gave me a sense of achievement and a chance to think about my goals while at work because it was a time consuming technique.

Audiences and committee members understood the artwork on a conceptual level as evidenced by the final critique and show. It is my impression, by observing the audience, that many people appreciated my interpretation of human ambition.

I would consider my thesis the first chapter of a series of works dealing with human aspiration because once a goal is achieved, another begins. Over the past year, I have been able to explore my own ways of making art and expressing my voice more clearly through the media as well as in my own life. Through my thesis exploration, I

have created my own language, which consists of visual metaphors and symbols that I will continue to use in the future.

As I made this series of work, I considered how important aspiration is and how much it can urge human beings to pursue their ambitions.

List of Works

1. “Aspiration”: Flameworked, Borosilicate glass, Painted, 28* 3.5* 130 in, Photo by Kwangpyo Kim
2. “Strategy of Dreams”: Flameworked, Borosilicate glass, Painted, Sandblasted, 60* 4* 48 in, Photo by Kwangpyo Kim
3. “Dreaming”: Flameworked, Borosilicate glass, Painted, Sandblasted, 30* 30* 36 in, Photo by Kwangpyo Kim
4. “Conscious of Dreams”: Flameworked, Borosilicate glass, 20* 20* 5 in, Photo by Sangyoung Lee
5. “Attaining Dreams”: Flameworked, Borosilicate glass, 18* 10* 28 in, Photo by Kwangpyo Kim
6. “Ascension I”: Flameworked, Borosilicate glass, Sandblasted, 13* 4* 30 in, Photo by Kwangpyo Kim
7. “Ascension II”: Flameworked, Borosilicate glass, Metal Leaf, 10* 4* 20 in, Photo by Kwangpyo Kim
8. “Ascension III”: Flameworked, Borosilicate glass, 10* 4* 20 in, Photo by Kwangpyo Kim
9. “Progression I”: Flameworked, Borosilicate glass, Silver, 8* 8* 10 in, Photo by Arthur Chen
10. “Progression II”: Flameworked, Bullseyeglass, Silver, 8* 8* 10 in, Photo by Arthur Chen
11. “Origin of Dreams I”: Flameworked, Borosilicate glass, Silver, Sandblasted, Variable, Photo by Kwangpyo Kim, Model by Sooji Kim

12. “Enhancement I”: Flameworked, Borosilicate glass, Silver, Variable, Photo by Minkyu Lee, Model by Soomin Suh

Images of Works



"Aspiration"

Flameworked, Borosilicate Glass, Painted
28* 3.5* 130 in



"Strategy of Dreams"

Flameworked, Borosilicate Glass, Painted,
Sand-Blasted

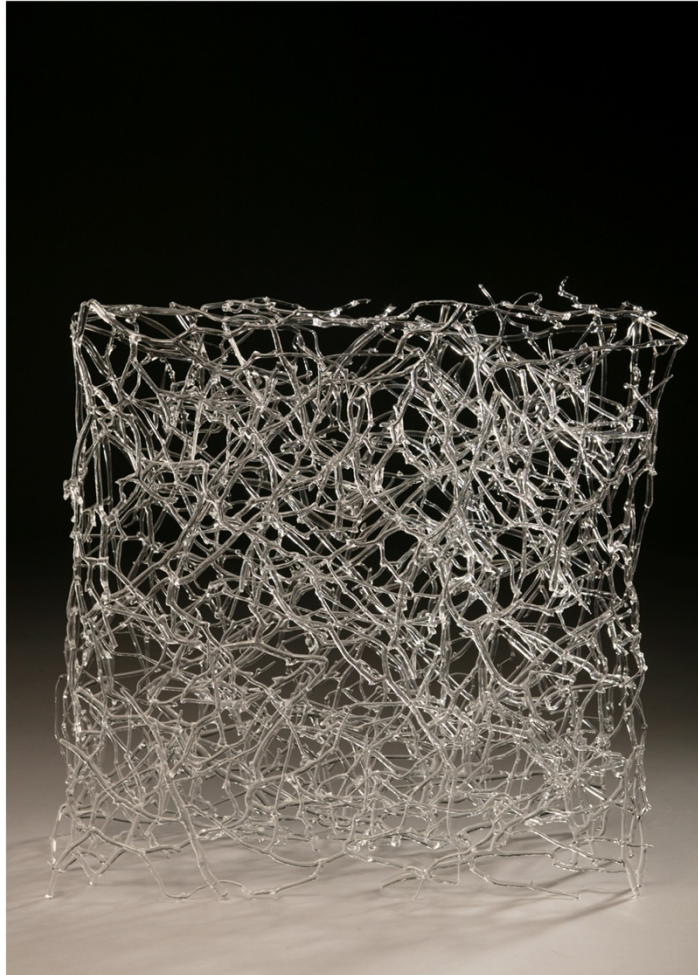
60* 4* 48 in



"Dreaming"

Flameworked, Borosilicate Glass, Painted,
Sand-Blasted

30* 30* 36 in



"Consciousness"
Flameworked, Borosilicate Glass
20* 8* 20 in



"Attaining Dreams"

Flameworked, Borosilicate Glass

18* 10* 28 in



"Ascension I"

Flameworked, Borosilicate Glass,
Sand-Blasted

13* 4* 30 in (Each)



"Ascension II"

Flameworked, Borosilicate Glass,
Metal Leaf

10* 4* 20 in (Each)



"Ascension III"

Flameworked, Borosilicate Glass

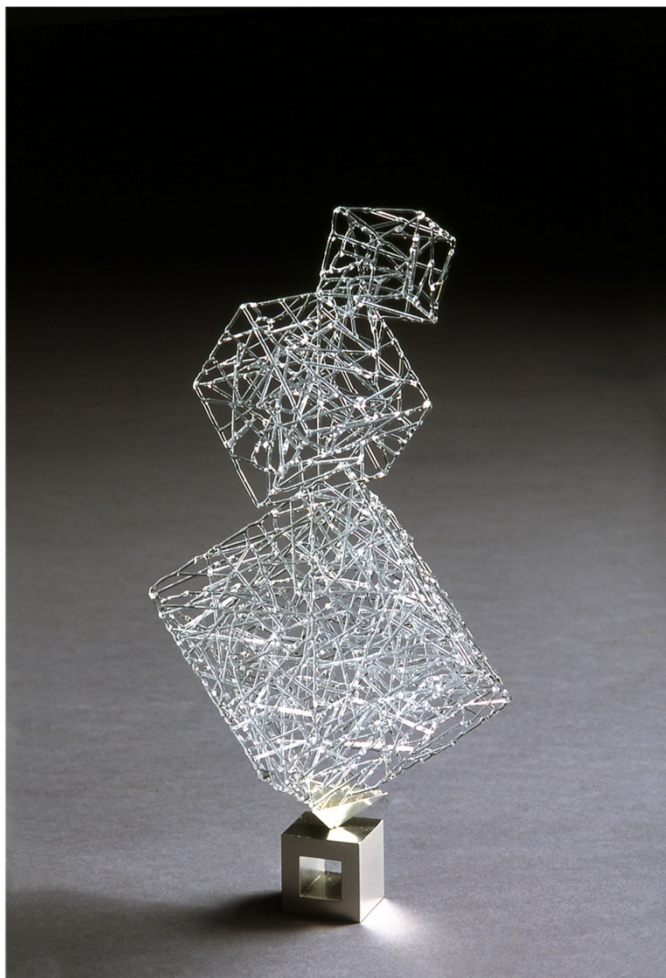
10* 4* 20 in (Each)



"Progression II"

Flameworked, Glass, Silver

8* 8* 10 in



"Progression II"

Flameworked, Glass, Silver

8* 8* 10 in



"Origin of Dreams I"

Flameworked, Borosilicate Glass, Silver,
Sand-Blasted
Variable



"Enhancement I"

Flameworked, Borosilicate Glass, Silver
Variable

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