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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
MASTERS OF FINE ARTS**

Reflection

by

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In this thesis I will explore and investigate the concept of using water as a means to encourage and physically demonstrate the concept of reflection. Although water is a topic which is potentially loaded with content and meaning I choose to concentrate my efforts and direct my viewer's attention to the physical capability of this substance to reflect light as well as water's cyclic relationship within our history, culture, and ecosystem. In addition it is my intention to offer the viewer the opportunity to reflect on the idea of water as a life giving source as well as an extinguisher of life. This will be done in three distinct ways, reflection of our society, reflecting on the relationship of the self to another, and reflecting on our relationship with the self.

The first work is a series of four pieces, which will concentrate on social reflection. The first three pieces of this series serve as three-dimensional sketches that translate the key components of country/place, home, and cycles. The series culminates in the fourth piece as elements of each of these pieces are combined to assist the viewer in reflecting on the events of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans Louisiana.

This Is My Country

The first in this series, titled This Is My Country communicates the idea of the river as a tree. Critical to this piece is the communication and the ability to connect the physical topography associated with landscape to the idea of a socially connected country.

From its back to the front, the work consists of a wooden platform on which two upright panels of glass plates are positioned behind a small three dimensional tree (Fig. 1). The rear most panels of glass plates reveal a map of the United States of America created from a canvas of dried Maple leaves. The outline of the Mississippi River has been deliberately cut and removed from this map.

Sandwiched between the second set of glass plates is the silhouette of the Mississippi River cut out from its background. This middle stage positioning of the two-dimensional river lifted from its original canvas and floating in absence of its original referent is the point which allows it to transform from tributaries of a river into the branches, trunk and roots of a tree (Fig. 2).

The viewers journey of comprehension is completed at the very front as the work finds resolution in the three dimensional tree of handmade paper which mimics the shape of its two-dimensional source.

I chose to use maple leaves as a canvas to illustrate two points: the concept of the individually connected forty eight states of our country, and to suggest the reference to a tree. It was very important that I not use a map or other readymade substrate as the foundation of this piece. It became critical to demonstrate the process of joining multiple known objects of significance together. My intention was for the viewer to know that this action was deliberate, that it had to be pieced together in stages in the same manner our country has been created over time.

Through my research for this project I discovered and transformed two ideas of Maya Lin's after viewing her exhibit *Systematic Landscapes*. In the "Atlas Landscape" series, Lin cuts into the pages of open atlases, which are displayed flat on pedestals.ⁱ I was

intrigued by the way Lin used subtraction and then began to contemplate this process and its similarity to the characteristics of water. Further research of Lin's *Bodies of Water* series -which features three pieces depicting the Caspian, Red, and Black seas, all constructed from layers of Baltic birch plywood. They are bathymetric models, which is to say they are the shapes you would get if you froze the waters in those seas and then popped out the ice chunk to look at itⁱⁱ. I began to experiment with this process of subtraction from a flat surface plane and then using an additive process to create a three dimensional form. When I analyzed the shape of the river outside of the context of the topographical landscape, the tree form became startling clear. To emphasize this point I positioned it perpendicularly to the flat surface plane.

The goal of this first piece was to create an icon and visual metaphor which was grounded in factual relevance and which could act as a starting point for my narrative. The Mississippi River can be thought of as the central spine of our country with its tributaries reaching out like massive branches across multiple states. Particularly important for my audience to understand is that this river, this tree with its limbs that spread across this country, is tied to a trunk which is rooted to only one place, New Orleans Louisiana. The tree form serves as the perfect vehicle to guide the viewer's comprehension and reflection of a country wide social issue by following the connective lines of the river as they pass, leaf by leaf and state by state toward their final destination, the city in which the disaster took place.

Home

The second piece in this series titled Home assists the viewer with continued understanding of the river as a tree narrative. The intent of the piece is to bring the

viewer to the point of understanding that nest equates to home in this series. The homes that are referenced by these nests belong to the victims of the Hurricane Katrina tragedy. While conducting research for my thesis I discovered the Matrix Series of glass artist Brent Kee Young and was drawn to the impetus for his ideation process. The idea came from looking at two things. One is an exposed root structure of a tree or plant. The other was a pile of rebar building rubble from a razed building. I had this image of making forms from that organic matrix.ⁱⁱⁱ

My approach to creating the piece was to provide the most direct and economical means of representing and linking the nest and house ideas. The piece consists of three millimeter borosilicate flame worked glass rods which have been manipulated, much like Brent Kee Young's, to form small tree branches. These branches have been woven together to form a bird's nest measuring 14 inches in diameter. Atop this nest structure rests a linear, glass, stick -figure representation of a house, which measures 16 inches in height constructed from five millimeter glass rod (Fig 3.).

My choice to use clear glass to create the piece serves two purposes. I did not want to clutter the statement by adding additional textures, colors, or building materials, which would identify or link this nest or this home to a specific region of the world. The important fact is for my audience to comprehend that when they again see a nest in this series that they should understand this icon to represent a home. Secondly, the flame working technique used to construct the nest has lent a deliberate sense of delicacy and fragility to the piece. This choice was made to assist the viewer in understanding the fragility of the homes located along the Mississippi river.

The Cycle

I faced a daunting challenge in the third piece of this series. I wanted to create a means to demonstrate the magnitude of the hydrological cycle, which creates the annual hurricane season in the Western Caribbean, yet bring it into a gallery setting to assist my viewer in understanding the natural forces, which allowed this tragedy to occur

The work consists of a glass cube positioned atop a four-foot tall wooden column (Fig. 4). The floor of the cube has been sandblasted to allow light to be emitted, yet obscures the ability of the viewer to see into the column. The interior of the cube contains a sixteen inch tall three-dimensional flame worked borosilicate glass tree and a small amount of water. The sides and top surfaces of the cube have been etched with patterns to assist the viewer in comprehension.

The forward side of the glass cube reveals an etched map of the South Eastern United States of America including the Gulf of Mexico. Juxtaposed against this outline is the actual path that Hurricane Katrina traveled from the Eastern Caribbean through the Port of New Orleans until its demise over the South Central United States (Fig.5). As the viewer looks through the glass cube to its back wall, the etched abstracted pages of the calendar months in which hurricane season takes place can be viewed. The layering of these images in front and behind the three dimensional tree was the resolution to the question of how to combine time, place and event together with an economy of design and form.

Etched into the top or ceiling of the cube is the swirling cloud pattern of a hurricane.

Aided by the metaphor gained from the first piece in this series, that tree equals river, the overlaying of this semi-transparent cloud pattern over the top view of the three

dimensional glass tree again aids in the comprehension of event and place (Fig 6.). This hurricane took place over that river system.

The piece engages a kinetic element and capitalizes on the comprehension of the hydrological cycle when the six, one hundred watt, light bulbs located inside the wooden column are illuminated. Employing the same elements that nature uses to create a hurricane, heat and light from the wooden column are transmitted through the sandblasted glass floor of the piece causing the small amount of water to evaporate. As the water vapor collects and condenses on the ceiling of the cube, the viewer is able to witness the hurricane cloud pattern as it releases its raindrops, which then collect onto the branches of the tree form below. The tree forms serves as a conduit funneling the collected water from its branches to its trunk and on to its final destination at the base of the tree whereby the cycle begins anew.

The limited use of only two materials in this piece is intentional and is very important. I chose to create the column from wood because it offers a referent to the tree form, and in this case it physically provides the supporting structure for the piece. My choice of glass for the remainder of this piece is my way of acknowledging the irony of this cycle and was inspired by a comment by the author Bryan Barcena during a review of artist Chantal Ackerman's exhibition titled *Macro to Micro*. He writes, "Ackerman allows the stories she wishes to tell, to tell themselves; she is faithful to the lens of the camera, allowing the brain to process what is obvious to the eye."^{iv} Like glass, this process is transparent; it is obvious, it is clear that this cycle has gone on for many millennia in the same place at the

same time each year. That is the crux of the social commentary associated with this portion of the series.

My goal of allowing the viewer to reflect both on a micro and macro level was achieved in this piece by effectively recreating the physical cause of the hurricane through the demonstration of the state change of water. Reduced to its elementary components; this process, occurring within this glass cube, in essence is the cause of any hurricane, yet in the Western Caribbean it occurs on a much more massive scale. The viewer is provided an intimate interaction with this process and can gain an understanding of this contained phenomenon as they walk around the piece during their observation. I invite my viewer to reflect on this method of interaction as it is in direct contrast to actually experiencing a hurricane whereby the storm fully surrounds and controls all parts of the viewer's environment.

8292005

The series culminates in the final piece titled 8292005, a large scale sculpture, which employs the ideas represented in the earlier three pieces. The title is the date that hurricane Katrina made landfall just east of the city of New Orleans.

The sculpture is constructed as a map of the lower ninth ward district of New Orleans consisting of five individual wooden platforms. The platforms have been cut to form the geographic boundaries of the lower ninth ward and have been painted and labeled with the actual street map of the neighborhoods to visually connect each platform. Atop each of the wooden platforms are massed collections of driftwood which support cast bronze bird's nests (Fig. 7). There are nine driftwood supporting structures, eight of which

harbor a nest. The ninth supporting structure appears barren and holds only a concrete slab. From the base of each of the supporting structures water is forced up through the platform filling the nest and overflows returning to its collection point below.

The choice to represent five platforms is centered in the timeline of the five events of this disaster. They consist of the formation as a hurricane, the Florida Landfall, the Gulf of Mexico, the Louisiana Landfall and the Aftermath. By physically referencing each of these events as a component of the whole, and then defining them by their geographical form as well as placing the street map information onto each: I feel the goal of visually synthesizing time, place and event together has been achieved.

Plywood has been used as the material for the creation of the platforms due to its dual connection as a building material of homes as well as its association as a protective covering for homes during storm preparedness and prior to evacuations.

I chose to create the supporting structures from driftwood which has gained its appearance and form from being submerged under water, much like the Lower Ninth Ward after the hurricane.

The process of creating the bronze nests was achieved after wax, positive, bowl forms were covered in wax covered tree branches. Molds of these forms were then made using a ceramic shell process and then fired in a burn out kiln to remove the wax and twig positive. After casting, the bronze surface has been patinaed by both citric and uric acid. Additional branches have been added to the finished bronze nest. A small hole was placed in the base of each of the nests, which has been fitted with tubing attached to individual aquatic garden pumps, which provide the cyclical flow of water.

Essential to the success of this piece was the choice of bronze as the material that the nests were created from. The intent is that the viewer understands that these forms are to be viewed as homes. Although disconnected from their foundations they retain their form as a home, however, the bronze material suggests that they are cold and lifeless (Fig. 8). The water, which swells up and out of them, further underscores their inability to be inhabited.

The choice to create nine driftwood platforms while utilizing only eight nests is intended to reference those homes, which were completely annihilated by the disaster. The ninth platform displays only a concrete pad from which water flows up from its center. The upward flow of the water from the base of each platform is designed to mimic the floodwaters of Katrina and represents the manner in which these homes were destroyed.

Waiting for Goodbye.

My intention was to offer the viewer the opportunity to reflect on the idea of water as a life giving source as well as an extinguisher of life.

This idea of provider and taker of life is explored in the work which I have titled, Waiting for Goodbye. A deeply personal piece, this work speaks of my first interaction and witnessing of the death of another human being in my presence. It reflects on the memory of my grandmother, Stephanie Florczyk, my first teacher and provider of wisdom, life lessons, and cultivator of common sense. Water was present in my first memory of my grandmother and in creating this piece it will again be present as I remember and reflect on her passing.

Culturally as Roman Catholics we learn to bless ourselves by making the sign of the cross after dipping our fingertips in Holy Water upon entering the church. The memory of my grandmother teaching me this process and then advising me, her three year old apprentice, to “place the excess water on your lips to ensure only kind words come out.” was the first of many life lessons I would be taught.

The piece is constructed of two large rectangular structures: one positioned on the floor, the other supported above it by four tubular columns. Completely black and measuring six feet wide, eight feet long, and four feet tall the base structure is designed to appear like a four posted bed. The top surface of this structure is actually a reflecting pool, which contains seventy gallons of water. A set of double doors painted black form the floor of this reflecting pool.

Appearing to float above this black base structure is the second rectangular structure. Created from white linen fabric secured over a wooden frame this second structure is lit from within by four, 100-watt electric lights. Equal in size, it also measures six feet wide by eight feet long and is four foot tall. Contained within the fabric walls of the lit white structure and suspended by monofilament above the reflecting pool, are thirty-four, folded, white paper, winged forms.

The piece is designed in the form of a bed to reflect the hospital bed in which my grandmother died. The color choice of black and white for the two structures is deliberate and defines the concept of life and the after life as two separate realms of existence connected together by an icon recognized as a passageway (a door). During a

class taught by Professor Roberlee Bell I became greatly intrigued by the materials used by Maya Lin in her public works. Further research provided me the opportunity to understand the reflective qualities of polished black granite and how Lin's use of this solid, cold surface in her Vietnam War Memorial allowed the viewer's reflection to appear on the surface of and become part of her work. Its reflective surface means that those who view it and read the roll call of names become immediate participants in the experience of remembering the dead.^v I chose to involve this principle of using a material to create a reflective surface and chose to use water to achieve this reflective result as it connects the material to the memory from which this idea was initially created.

As one approaches the base structure it becomes evident that, although the surface seems reflective, it is actually a container of water. Beneath the surface of the water the viewer will discern two large wooden doors. These black doors heighten the effect of a reflecting pool and offer the symbolism of an end and the finality of a journey. As the viewer attempts to discern what is beneath the water, they will encounter the reflection of the contents of the lit white rectangular structure above. Floating above them will be a large array of handmade, paper winged forms, which symbolize to me the continuation of that journey, the movement from one world to the next. In China and Japan cranes are symbols of longevity and immortality,^{vi} and it is this sentiment that I wish to tie to the memory of my grandmother.

It is my hope that the viewer engages in the process of looking down, yet seeing up; of viewing an ending, yet comprehending a beginning of a new journey as my

grandmother's children and grandchildren did when we stood at her bedside and looked down at her dieing body with the thought of her spirit rising to heaven.

The active journey of water is replaced in this piece by a passive and tranquil role which is the central element of the works' success.

The last piece of my thesis focuses on the relationship of reflection to the individual self and is centered on the duality of my personal journey as an artist.

Tumbleweed

Positioned above a water filled, reflecting pool measuring four feet tall, three feet wide and one foot in depth; a flame worked, glass tumbleweed will serve as an icon of my process toward becoming an artist. Created by manipulating and shaping three and five millimeter, borosilicate glass rods, the tumbleweed measures 28 inches wide by 33 inches long by 28 inches high.

By researching flame working artists and studying the process required to construct a tumbleweed form, I have become familiar with the work of Italian artist Mauro Bonaventura. I was inspired by his ability to draw from his personal experience and use that experience for the basis of his creative process. Every work of Mauro Bonaventura is an exclusive piece and it contains a dream, a secret. Every work seems to spring from that inner glance with which the artist touches on his inner life. All his works invite us to reflect.^{vii}

In 2003 Bonaventura created a series of pieces entitled *Spheres*, which feature human forms enmeshed within spherical glass orbs made of serpentine formed, borosilicate glass

rods. Using this image as a starting point, I distorted and tapered the uniformity of thickness utilized in Bonaventura's style, thereby lending a lifelike appearance to each of the clear borosilicate glass stems and thorns.

The existence of the piece positioned over a pool of water serves to demonstrate the duality of both lives I lead; one as an artist and the other as a corporate executive. Upon encountering the piece, the viewer will first be drawn to the glass form. The role of water in this piece completes the intended meaning as it allows the audience to comprehend the second form as it appears by reflection beneath the first (Fig 9.). The purpose of the water is intended to reflect and convey the constant state of being in motion between my two life roles.

The choice to create the piece from clear glass appeals to my desire for an economy of form. Both the water and the borosilicate glass are clear, transparent and clean. The formal element of the sculpture becomes animated and engages the audience when these elements are placed in opposition to one another.

The connection to a tumbleweed form and its selection as a signifier of self portrait is important on many levels; primarily the aspect of survival by way of adaptation, flexibility, morphing, and the resiliency required to do so. This is what weeds do; they resist drought, they survive temperature extremes, and they overcome manmade pesticides; point blank, they survive because they can adapt. This is very much the person who I have had to become to continue to balance life as an art student with life as a corporate executive. In addition, I relate to the plants process of reaching maturity only to loose its foothold to the earth and then begin its journey spreading seeds on a path,

which it does not control toward a destination it is not aware of. I see myself similarly losing my immediate connection to art academia while being aware that I will encounter new individuals and hopefully sew the seeds of inspiration and creativity through my interactions with them. This piece completes the process of reflection; it focuses on the self, myself.

The works contained in this thesis exhibition represent a cohesive examination of the three relationships I chose to explore: reflection of a relationship to one's self, a relationship to another and a relationship to society.

The use of water in the exploration of each of these ideas aided in the success of the collection as a whole due to the range and variety of ways it was utilized. By physically using pools of water, visually representing rivers through other three-dimensional forms and creating the hydrological state change of water, I invite the viewer to reflect on the presence as well as the process of water to connect meaning to the core ideas associated with each of these relationships.

My goal of visual clarity and the use of the most economical means to express each of these ideas was achieved by the utilization of only the most necessary materials to create each of the pieces. I was pleasantly surprised during the installation of my thesis show by the harmonious connection of each of the works to one another. This was achieved by using only the elements of wood, water, glass and the color black (Fig. 10). I believe this creates a sense of a unified whole which then invites the viewer to investigate each of the component pieces within the show.

Based on this investigation and through the research of the artists I discovered, I plan to continue working in flame worked glass sculpture. I plan to continue to work from a concept based starting point utilizing only the necessary elements to convey the intent of each piece.

This body of work has allowed me the opportunity to create work that is both large and small scale. The process of analyzing an idea and breaking it down into several individual thoughts is intriguing. By creating several smaller works, which represent each of the component thoughts of an idea directly correlates to my desire for clarity.

Utilizing these three-dimensional visual sketches to create a consummate whole in the form of an entire show for my viewer is the direction that my work is now following.



Figure 1. Stephen Brucker. *This is My Coun-Tree*. 2009, Wood, Glass, Maple Leaves, Pine Bark, and Handmade Paper. 34”L x 25.5”W x 21”H.

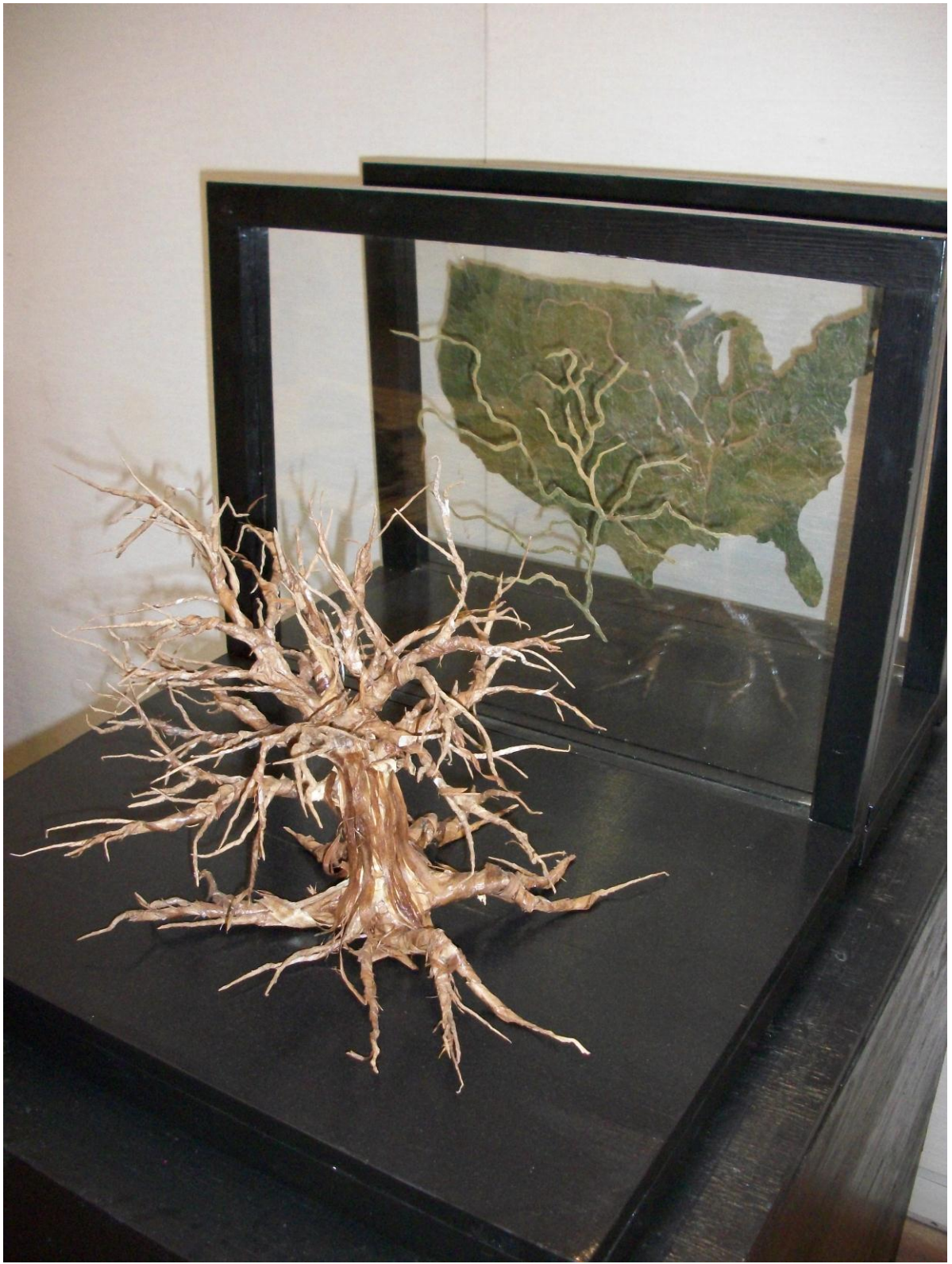


Figure 2. . Stephen Brucker. *This is My Coun-Tree*. 2009, Wood, Glass, Maple Leaves, Pine Bark, and Handmade Paper. 34”L x 25.5”W x 21”H.



Figure 3. Stephen Brucker. *Home*. 2008, 3mm and 5mm Borosilicate glass. 14”L x 14”W x 16”H.



Figure 4. Stephen Brucker. *The Cycle*. 2008. Wood, Sandblasted and Borosilicate glass, six, one hundred watt light bulbs. 24”L x 24”W x 59”H.



Figure 5. Stephen Brucker. *The Cycle*. 2008. Wood, Sandblasted and Borosilicate glass, six, one hundred watt light bulbs. 24”L x 24”W x 59”H



Figure 6. Stephen Brucker. *The Cycle*. 2008. Wood, Sandblasted and Borosilicate glass, six, one hundred watt light bulbs. 24”L x 24”W x 59”H



Figure 7. Stephen Brucker. 08292005. 2009. Driftwood, cast bronze, plywood, enamel paint, water, hydro pump and tubing. 13'L x 9'W x 2'H.

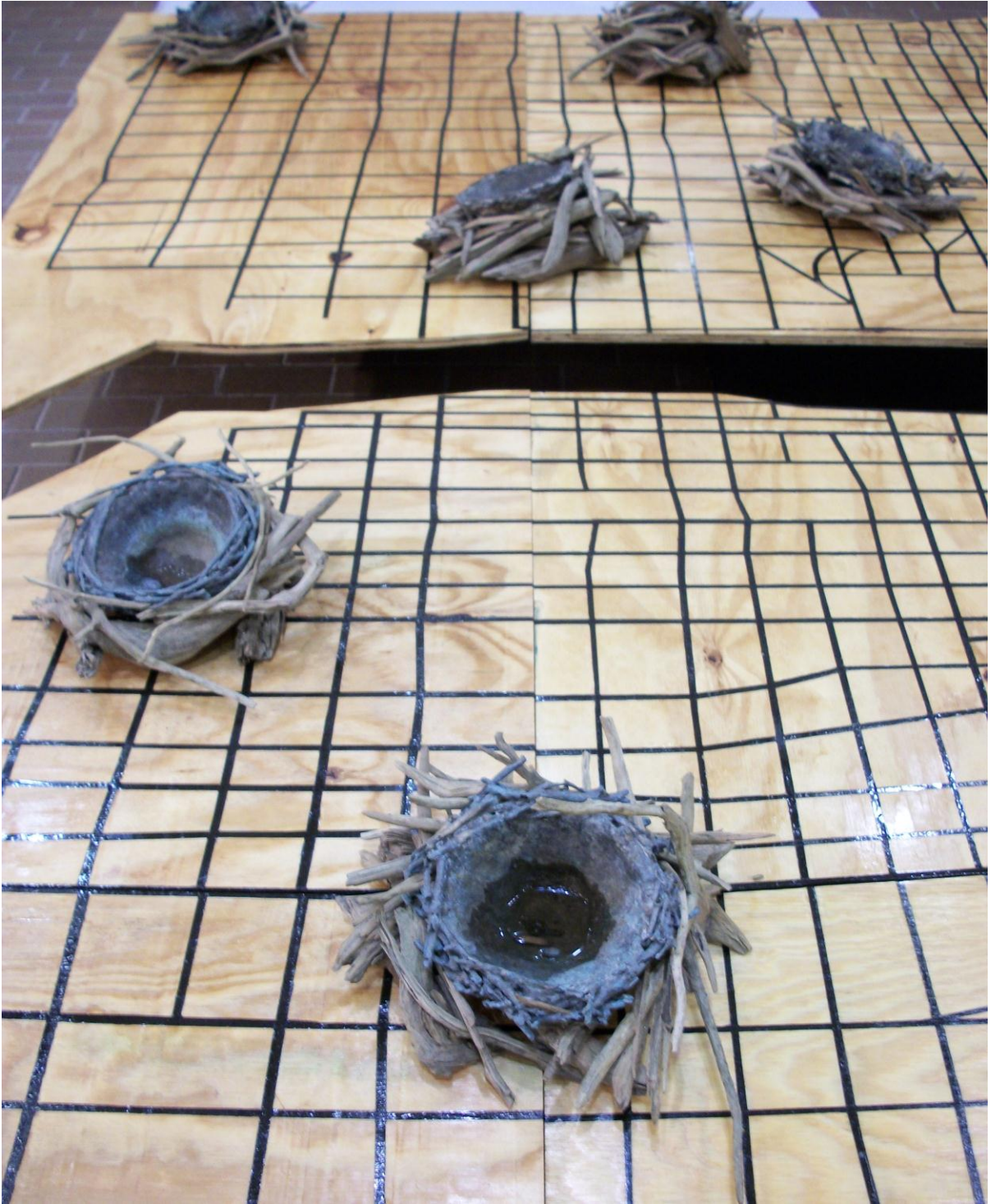


Figure 8. Stephen Brucker. *08292005*. 2009. Driftwood, cast bronze, plywood, enamel paint, water, hydro pump and tubing. 13'L x 9'W x 2'H.



Figure 9. Stephen Brucker. *Tumbleweed*. 2008. 3mm Borosilicate glass, wood, 13 gallons of water. 37”L x 37”W x 21”H.



Figure 10. Stephen Brucker. *Masters Thesis Show*. March 2010. Cast Bronze, Plywood, Glass, Driftwood, Borosilicate Glass, Maple Leaves, Pine Bark, and water.

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