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### Woman in Art

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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

Woman in Art

By

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May 30, 2007

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## I. Preface

In my life, art has encouraged me to reveal the intricate relationship between humanity and nature. The aspects of rhythm and harmony in art can reveal how human beings and nature interact and in some ways function as one. When this balance is changed, unknown results can transpire. Every interaction between nature and human beings can evolve and develop into a new and greater whole.

My artistic ability has developed over the years in disciplines such as painting, sculpture, ceramics, and printmaking. These interests evolved into a personal expression that has been manifested in my art forms. My art stands alternately as works of wearable form and works of sculpture. My art tends to test the boundary between realism and abstraction, as well as the boundary between jewelry and sculpture. I have attempted to transcend media boundaries by combining the figurative form, sculpted in metal, with glass. In doing this, I hope to force viewers to stop and think about their own beliefs about art. My work also introduces the delineation of jewelry through feminine design.

The fundamental impact of this collaboration in method and concept has led me to reveal the mystery of the human figure, specifically the female figure. Both internal and external human qualities have been amassed in the feminine form. This has resulted in work that functions as a vehicle that articulates artistic concerns involving the senses, thought, and the character of the female form. Essentially, the resulting collaboration of this metal work with glass not only includes acquired artistic abilities, but the complete compilation of my expression as a female artist.

## II. Introduction

### i. The motive and goal

The woman's figure has been objectified throughout the history of our human culture. Modern countries today have largely adopted the Western cultural ideal of feminine beauty. This contemporary image is one in which the ideal woman has become slender to the point of being too thin. Regarding thinness as an essential criterion of beauty in women has brought society to the point where it has lost a sense of the true beauty of women. Many studies indicate that repeated exposure to images of thin, air-brushed female bodies in advertising is linked to depression, loss of self-esteem and the development of unhealthy eating habits in women around the world. To counteract this development, my goal is to restore the feminine reality of a woman's form to artistic expression. My work emphasizes the natural aspects of the female human body, showing that a voluminous body shape, the voluptuous female image, a curvaceous body contour, and tender skin are all representative of womanly beauty.

My work does not propose to emphasize sexuality, but rather, it strives to show sensuality and the sensitivity of a woman's characteristics. Socially, as a Korean female artist, I want to emphasize the female body and incorporate Western influences in my work because the female form seems to be disappearing from Korean art. My work combines certain ideals of beauty within the traditional of Korean art, with the field of metal craft, and the forms of prehistoric Western sculptures, so that it approaches a transformed image of beauty and becomes contemporary art.

## **ii. The method and boundary**

I chose metal because fine silver reveals a rich and pure white color and a soft sensual surface, and because pure metal and copper are ideal for portraying skin tones. I also used translucent material because I believe that the transparency and sleekness of glass expresses femininity. The use of these two materials together became the main thrust of my thesis. It has led me to redefine the characteristics of both mediums and to optimize the interplay of two different materials in one body of work.

The small and medium sizes of my sculptural forms again refer to the feminine form. The appropriate function of the wearable work also dictates its scale, and suggests the female body as it follows the contour of a woman's body.

The form of my work is abstract. Even though I did not start out to create specifically "abstract" forms, in fact they are more effective (than realistic forms would be) in revealing the real feeling that I want to convey.

My work started with experiments based on the female body. As I was drawn to this particular form, I began to understand the correct medium to use. I have experienced a deep satisfaction using metal and glass together, and trust that this experimentation is leading to great things.

### III. Influences

#### i. Prehistoric Art

My work is influenced by prehistoric art, especially the *Venus of Willendorf*, *Venus of Monpazier*, and *The Armless Lady*. These three sculptures strongly emphasize the symbolic beauty of the female body.



**Venus of Willendorf**

One of the earliest sculptures of a woman is called “**Venus**” of **Willendorf**, a village in lower Austria. It was discovered in 1908. As of 1990 this sculpture was estimated to have been carved between 24,000 and 22,000 BCE. It shows an exaggerated female form and has become an icon of prehistoric art.

“As the earliest known representation of the female form, the **Venus of Willendorf** became known as the ‘first woman’, acquiring a sort of Ur-Eve

identity that focused suitably, from a patriarchal point of view, on the fascinating reality of the female body.”<sup>1</sup>

Her large breasts and round stomach, suggest that the sculpture refers to procreativity and nurture, and is seen as a fertility idol. Similar representations of the female body from Classical and Renaissance sculpture display a physicality and sexuality that is treated with a high degree of civilized restraint. As opposed to the Venus of Willendorf, the breasts of classical Venuses (such as Botticelli's painting entitled the *Birth of Venus*, or the *Aphrodite of Cnidos*, carved by Praxiteles in the fourth century) are small, the pubic area undefined or hidden by hands (no indication of the vulva, no definition of the labia), and the stomach, hips, and buttocks are given no particular emphasis. “In other words, she exhibits a tasteful, civilized response to female sexuality that involves both the display but also the suppression of its more physical aspects.”<sup>2</sup>

The **Venus of Willendorf**, on the other hand, is “an image of ‘natural’ femaleness, of uninhibited female power, which ‘civilization,’ in the figures of the Classical Venuses, later sought to curtail and bring under control.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the **Venus of Willendorf** has been an important influence to me as I pursued my work's ideal into the nature of female countenance.



**Venus of Monpazier**

The **Venus of Monpazier** is one of about sixty Venus figurines found in Western Europe from the Paleolithic period (about 20,000 years ago).<sup>4</sup> It resembles a pregnant female with large buttocks. The aspect of exaggerated pregnancy, shown by this figure's hips, belly and breasts, is another influence on my work.



**The armless lady**

The Armless Lady is yet another ancient sculpture that I have found influential. The body contours of this sculpture come from the particular type of ivory that was used to carve it. Some sources say that the ivory was from a mammoth.<sup>5</sup> This sculpture has no face. The other two Venuses have more detail in the face area (a chin in the Venus of Monpazier and braided hair in the Venus of Willendorf). Compared to other two Venuses mentioned above, this one is more similar to later Venuses (the Classical and Renaissance versions), even though it is more abstract.

## **ii. Traditional Korean metal craft**

Traditional Korean metal craft is another pivotal influence on my work. Early example of this work can be found in the Silla Kingdom, an isolated area in the southeast of Korea from roughly 57 BCE to 668 CE, produced works of art in gold and other precious metals.

Precious metals had previously been used exclusively by the privileged class. Some good examples of traditional Korean metal art are curved jades, in the ornamental form of crescent-shaped moons, with or without pure gold “caps.”

They were used as decorative elements in gold crowns, dresses, belts, earrings, and necklaces. Curved jades have several meanings, such as a religious charm for fecundity, or a display of class and position to enhance one's identity. Jade was also worn by the privileged classes in hopes that a male child would be born. However, the most well-known significance of the curved jade is its beauty as a sensual object. Upper class people used this ornament to show their position in society.



**[1] Curved jade pendants**

Silla Kingdom, 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century AD Jade, gold and glass, L. 2.4-6.7cm

From Kyōngju

National Museum of Korea, Seoul

The kogok or curved jades from Silla have a more open form than those from Paekche. They were made using a variety of different stones, especially jadeite, and glass, and are also varied in shape. The head is bored with a hole, for attachment with gold wire as a pendant, and the head usually has two or more radial grooves. The caps are distinct from those of Paekche, being made of smooth gold foil, with serrated edges and small leaf-shaped pendants attached.

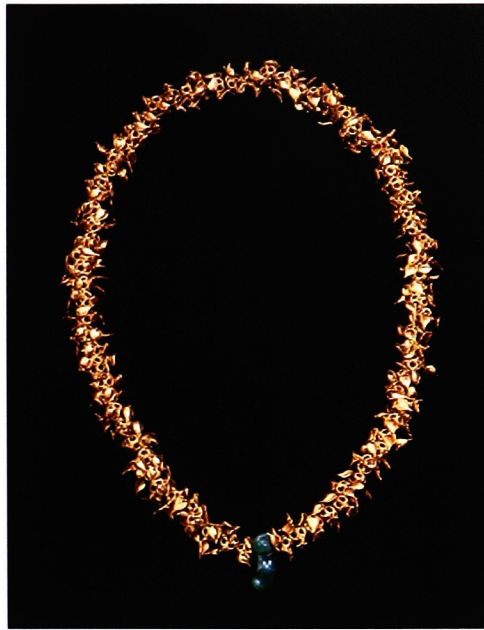
The sleekness of these jades was a visual reference for the pure glass pieces that I fashioned and came to symbolize characteristics of the female form such as smoothness and beauty. Additionally, I followed the lines of the curved jade specimens because their curved shape appeared female to me.



## **[2]Gold-capped Jades**

Silla Kingdom, 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century A.D From Kumnyongchong (Gold bell Tomb)  
Nuso-dong, Kyungju, North Kyungsang province L. 5.5cm National Museum of  
Korea, Seoul

Curved jades are known to have existed in prehistoric Korea, but the majority of specimens found to date were excavated from Silla tombs. Some pieces that have gold caps like tiny settings for glasses or semi-precious stones were found in the Gold Bell Tomb. In the pair at the right, the cylindrical ornaments on top suggest that this pair was once part of a pendant. The cap of the large brown jade at the left has small projections with a blue glass bead in each. A twisted gold wire goes through a hole in the cap and its two ends are tied to form a hook at the top, into which a small gold ring is attached. Thus, this jade appears to have hung from a necklace.



### **[3] Gold Necklace**

Silla Kingdom, 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century A.D From a tomb at No. 215 Nuso-dong, Kyungju, North Kyungsang province Treasure No. 456 L.30.3cm, L. of jade 3.3cm

National Museum of Korea, Seoul

While most of the necklaces excavated from Silla tombs are generally made of blue glass, amethyst, amber, agate, and green jade in the shape of beads, tubes, abacus beads, oval or faceted beads, etc. The necklace pictured above is entirely made of gold with a single curved jade included. Small hollow beads made up of gold rings carry leaf-shaped spangles, five to each bead, attached by means of twisted wire. This necklace was made of 24 karat gold and jade was another influence on my wearable art. I also used pure materials such as 24 karat gold, fine silver, and pure, transparent glass. The shapes are dynamic, with pointed edges; I used similar shapes in my work. The dynamic leaves and the organic shape of the curved jade piece on the necklace complement each other, and this influenced my thought in producing work using complementary forms and materials.

## IV. List of Illustrations

### Sculpture

[1] In the Thought	Copper, patina, glass	12.4"x 11.5"x 11.5".....	21
[2] Semi-nudity	Fine silver, glass	7.2"x 19"x 7.8".....	21
[3] Ostentatious	Fine silver, copper, glass	15.4"x 9.5"x 9".....	23
[4] Corset	Copper, glass	18"x 7.5"x 7.2".....	25
[5] Mammary	Fine silver, glass	6.5"x 11.4"x 6.5".....	27
[6] The Women	Fine silver, sterling silver, copper, glass	14"-39" long.....	29
	A square steel wire	14feet	
	black plexi-glass	4feet x 8feet	
	black car paint		

### Wearable art

#### Asphodel Series

[7-1] Asphodel (bracelet)	fine silver, sterling silver, glass	6.8"x 3.7"x 1".....	33
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#### Semplice Series

[8-1] "Semplice" (necklace)	24k, 18k yellow gold, glass	15.5"x 1.8"x 1".....	39
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[8-3] "Semplice" (Brooch)	24k, 18k yellow gold, glass	3.2"x 1.5"x 1.5".....	41

## **V. Body of work**

### **i. Technical issues**

When I first started to work with metal and glass, I researched the characteristics of glass, what kind of glass I was going to use and which glass-blowing technique would work best. I utilized two different techniques for my thesis work. The first technique for my sculptural work is that I made metal forms using sterling silver, fine silver and copper, and then I blew hot glass into the metal forms until the hot glass touched the metal and formed an integrated solid glass surface with raised mounds between the pieces of metal. This process is called "mold-blowing." It expands my visual vocabulary to think of positive-negative spaces and forms, and how they relate to each other. My body of work is abstract and explores simple forms rather than describing a realistic female body. The mold-blowing technique produces unique limited editions and singular forms.

Glass melts at a higher temperature than metal and cools down more slowly than metal. I found that a certain thickness of metal (about 1 mm) can hold the heat of blown glass without melting itself or getting damaged. I had to use welding and fusing techniques rather than soldering to make the original metal form, because while soldering was strong enough to connect between metals together, the solder started melting where glass touched any seam of soldered metal. After other experiments, I found that the interaction of silver and batch glass (used for large sculptural pieces) when they are hot is very incompatible

because of their different cool-down points. This incompatibility causes stress and cracking if the two materials are not cooled properly. To overcome this problem, I had to find another way to blow into the silver form without making any stress or crack. The solution was that immediately after blowing into the silver mold until the glass expanded into the raised mounds that I wanted to see (making bubble shapes touching the silver wire), I had to then suck in very briefly and lightly to make a tiny (almost invisible) gap between the glass and silver. This was the only way I could avoid stressing and cracking of the pieces. The second technique I used is called “flame-working,” used for small sizes of sculpture such as body ornaments of jewelry pieces, and also for the 19 pieces of my installation, “The Woman” (No. 6).

In flame-working, I heat up a glass rod or tube which is made of borosilicate glass over a torch and I blow it into my small, pre-made gold and silver metal form. This technique is more convenient to express detail and complexity on a smaller scale, because the cool-down point of the borosilicate glass is compatible with silver, copper and gold. Even if stress appears or a crack is formed while making a piece, it can be fixed by reheating the section where the stress or crack appeared.

A chemical reaction occurs when borosilicate glass comes in contact with silver in a certain temperature: the surface of the glass changes to a gold color and it can be changed from light to dark gold depending on the temperature. This is called the “fuming technique” and it is one of the flame-working techniques that I used to integrate silver and gold as elements of a unified body ornament.

ii. Interpretation of work

**Sculpture**



[1] In the Thought & [2] Semi-nudity

“In the Thought” is the first piece in which I combined metal and glass in one sculptural form. While it suggests a human head, it also reveals other aspects of women's bodies, such as the volume, body contour and softness of the skin. I always think that each different woman has her own physical beauty, regardless of her race, country of origin, or appearance. To depict the female aspects of beauty, the buxom body parts of the female body are rendered in this first piece by bodily-shaped patterns created with raised mounds of glass within forms of hammer-textured copper wires to show the most prominent points of femininity (voluptuous forms, curves, smooth surfaces, etc.). This piece, “In the Thought,” became an artistic vehicle for me to deliver my thoughts about feminine beauty to viewers.

On the right side of the picture on the previous page, “Semi-nudity” depicts a body form closely related to the ideas expressed in “In the Thought.” “Semi-nudity” depicts a “body” half clothed by metal and the rest as clear glass. It features the characteristic of a woman who is very shy about showing her beauty (reflecting a typical Korean female sensibility), but still she wants to be attractive.

This piece is formed of fine silver and blown glass. The bright, white color of the silver represents the innocent characteristics of women. While white is not an active color, it is a unique color. It stands out because of its brightness. In this piece the color of the fine silver signifies simplicity and purity, traits of the ideal Eastern woman who has polite manners and a calm and quiet personality.



[3] Ostentatious

If you describe something as “ostentatious,” you disapprove of it because it is expensive and is intended to impress people. If you describe a person as ostentatious, you disapprove of him or her because of a desire to impress people with wealth or importance. You can also describe an action or behavior as ostentatious when it is done in an exaggerated way to attract people’s attention. This piece, “Ostentatious,” relates to those meanings because it depicts that desire in every woman’s psyche to reveal her most splendid characteristic. I feel this piece is also the most splendid of my sculptures, because of its shape, the interplay of color, and freedom of movement inherent in the form.

The combination of silver and copper gives color and variation to the piece. The curved lines follow the contours of a woman’s body, and the volume of glass, extending beyond the edges of the metal, symbolizes the voluptuous curves of the female body.



[4] Corset

In the Western world, the outlines of women's bodies have been controlled by corsetry and petticoat constructions for thousands of years. The first recorded corset came from Crete,<sup>6</sup> even though the corset itself was only a decorative part of her underwear. Later shaping devices fit tightly around a woman's hips and waist, making her appear more curvaceous and emphasizing her curved lines.

This piece, "Corset," is an image of a simplified female torso wearing a corset to emphasize its female shape. The hammer-textured copper form represents human skin colors. The patterns made of copper are abstracted shapes depicting the female torso, from neck to breast, and also the lower portions of the female body, from waist to hips and down the legs.

The piece suggests a feeling of restriction and limits as compared to the first three sculptures. This sculpture contains more metal, suggesting the corset itself. The metal prevents the volume of the glass from extending beyond its borders or limits. Thus, the "corset" defines the form, which is exactly what a corset is meant to do. While this piece does not exude the freedom and vitality that the first three sculptures show, it has its own beauty due to the lines and curves dictated by the corset.

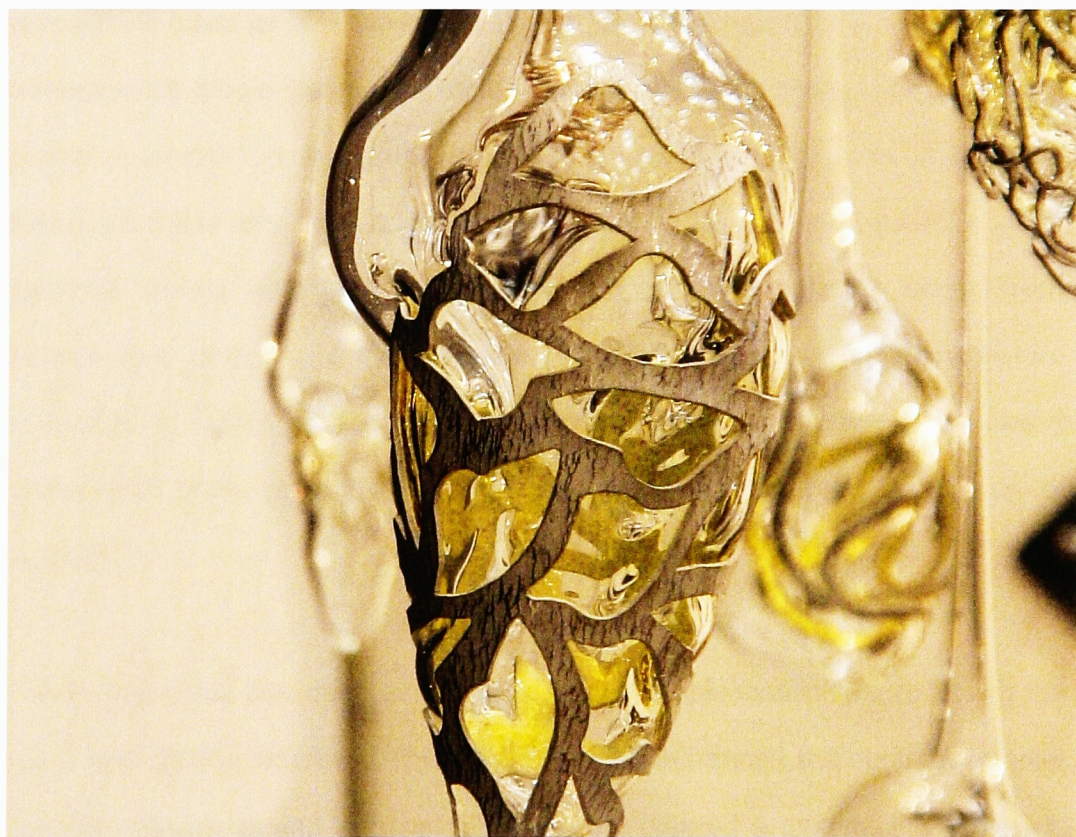


[5] Mammary

The term “mammary” relates to the breasts. Mammals are animals such as humans, dogs, lions, and whales. In general, female mammals give birth to babies rather than laying eggs, and feed their young with milk. This ability to feed the young is a special feature unique to females.

The sculpture “Mammary” deals with the female ability to give birth to babies and feed them milk. This phenomenon shows the natural and innocent beauty of women.

The fine silver components represent the fallopian tubes, or oviducts which deliver egg cells to the uterus. The glass component of the sculpture represents the phenomenon of the breast which feeds milk to babies. “Mammary” combines these two reproductive processes and integrates them as the internal beauty of women through this contemporary art form. While the reproductive process is complicated, here it is simplified to express its natural beauty.



[6] The Women

“The Women” is an installation work, a corporate body with both Eastern and Western influences. “The Women” consists of nineteen elements, each a unique form from a women’s body. Each element assumes a different posture of the body and each hangs from a steel wire at varying heights. Some of them hang as a group, as if they are having a conversation and as a whole, the piece follows the contours of a woman’s body.

Each of the nineteen metal forms was made of fine silver, sterling silver or a combination of copper and silver. Some forms were colored by being dipped into liver of sulfur for varying amounts of time to form various colors. The borosilicate glass for lampworking was then blown into each form. At this point, I annealed the blown pieces so that they would be evenly heated to prevent any stress or cracks on the glass. As the final step in the process, the fuming technique melts very small particles of silver parts, not copper. The melted silver particles merge with the hot glass and change its color. A lower torch temperature produces a lemon-yellow glass color and a higher temperature produces a darker gold color. This uneven variation of color looks like a “iridescent” gold—splendid and dignified, effectively showing the beauty of women.

Black plexi-glass was used as the background for this installation, reflecting the work and casting shadows. This backdrop also enhanced the contrast of color between the metal and transparent glass and created a dynamically contrasts with the organic forms, accentuating each shape in the work.

## **Wearable art**

My wearable forms are also organic, again, using shapes that suggest the female body. They are smaller versions of my sculpture pieces. Along with the five sculpture pieces and one installation (a compilation of the forms and ideas found in sculpture), I created two series of wearable art, which are simplified versions of the installation piece. The sculptures are non-functional, but this next category of wearable art is more “utilitarian” because it has a definite function.

This work is called wearable art rather than jewelry, because the term *jewelry* denotes commercialism and even an industrial product. My goal, on the other hand, has been to meld the traditional forms of early Korean “body ornaments” with Western pre-historic art depicting the female body, as shown in my sculpture. The term *jewelry* implies a jewel or stone at the focus of the piece. The focus of my wearable art, however, is the female form and beauty itself.

Both the Asphodel and Semplice series of wearable art are based on all the principles I had in mind for my sculpture, and in particular on the installation piece, “The Women.” This wearable art is “installed” on an actual body. In the installation piece, the nineteen forms hang in such a way that the lower edge of the installation follows the contours of the female body. Similarly in the wearable art, the elements hang at varying lengths from the wrist, ears, neck, in the hair, or on the body.

## **The Asphodel Series**

An “Asphodel” is a flower from Greek mythology which lives in a paradise and never withers or fades. Today the asphodel flower is in the family of lilies, usually with white flowers. From my perspective, this Western name for my first series of wearable art was part of the Western influence I felt. This series also has an Eastern flavor, because I was mindful of the traditional Korean jade shapes and of course the semi-transparent glass with which they were made. Some of the Korean jade amulets I studied were actually transparent with just a tinge of color.

The Asphodel wearable art is based on the white and yellow colors of the lilies of the same name. Only glass and silver were used, the silver for the white and the yellows were made on the glass from the fuming technique. The colors from the fuming technique enabled me to build the transition smoothly from this series into the next series of wearable art, the Semplice Series.

## **The Semplice Series**

Semplice, from the Latin root “simplex,” means innocence and simplicity. This series uses 24-karat gold as the metal for the forms into which the glass is blown. While the forms are based on the simple contours of the female body, the resulting wearable art pieces are sumptuous. Their beauty and precious quality are not compromised by the breakability of the glass.

## Asphodel Series



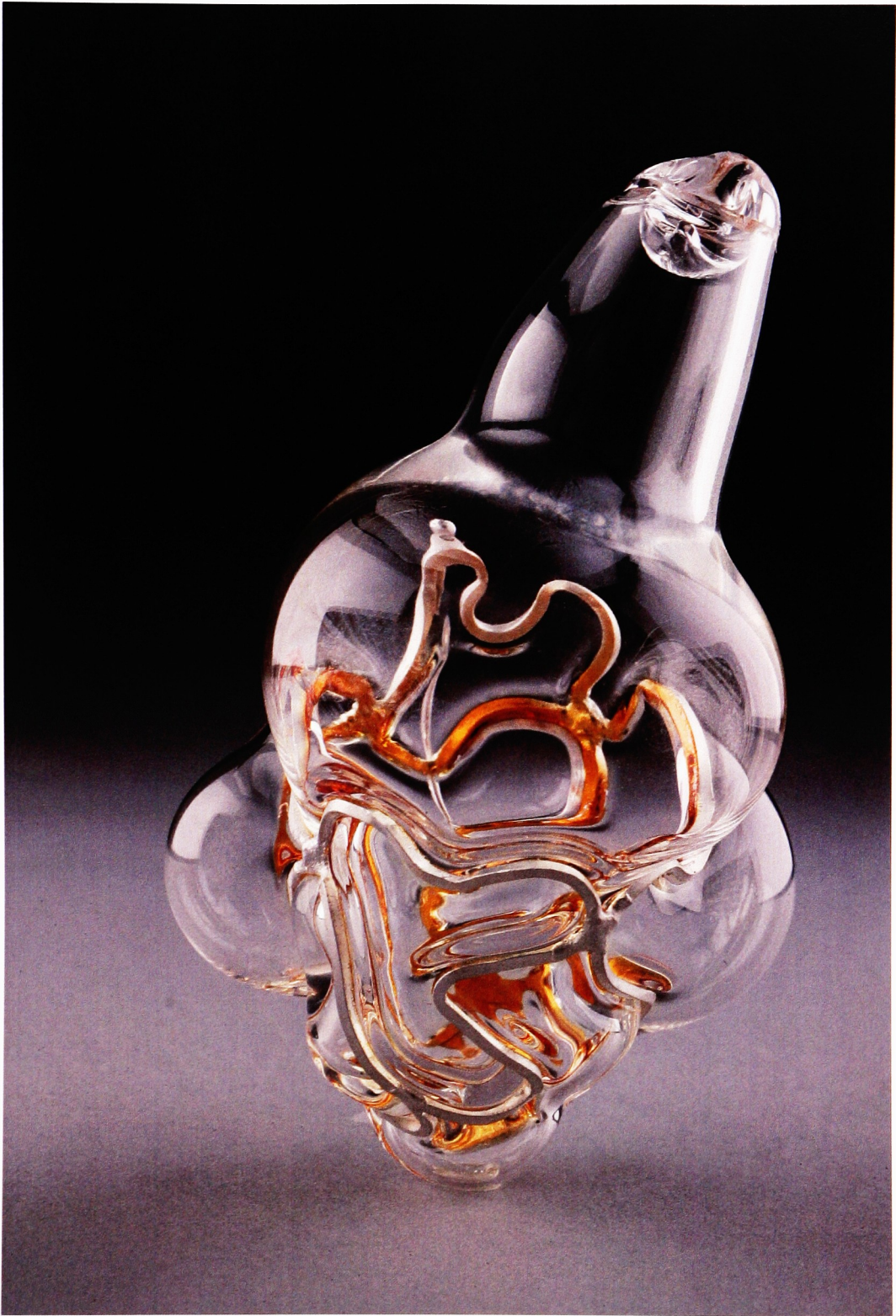
[7-1] Asphodel (bracelet)



[7-2] Asphodel (earrings)



[7-3] Asphodel (brooch I)



[7-4] Asphodel (brooch II)



[7-5] Asphodel (hair pin I)



[7-6] Asphodel (hair pin II)

## Semplice Series



[8-1] Semplice (necklace)



[8-2] Semplice (earrings)



[8-3] Semplice (brooch)

## VI. Conclusion

I've been studying the female figure for a long time, through drawing, painting, and clay, alabaster and marble sculpture, both in realistic and abstract representation. I came to RIT to experiment with wood, but after taking a metal elective class, I fell in love with the material. Although it is a hard substance, with control it can appear soft. I was used to working in three-dimensional space, and metal seemed to fit my needs, so I switched to the metal major.

During my metal major coursework, I took a glass elective class, and found that although the techniques for working with glass were very different from anything that I had done before, nevertheless manipulating glass could alter its form quite dramatically. Applying heat to glass determines its finish. I found many similarities between metal and glass—both can exhibit qualities of shininess, brightness, dark or lightness, hardness or softness, etc. And these qualities were exactly what I needed to express the female figure.

To express one's ideas, choosing the correct materials is important and the forms themselves are also critical. I was amazed to see that these materials could enable me to represent the qualities of a woman's body. Working with metal and glass requires patience on the part of the artist, and since this quality also is often seen as a female quality, I felt that my experimentations were actually helping me to zone in on my intended subject matter. I was happy to combine metal and glass and see what I could achieve.

Those who helped me with glass working techniques were also very interested in what they learned about metal and the interaction of the two mediums. As both metal and glass artists, we learned a great deal during the experimental phase of my thesis work, and were very happy to be on the “cutting edge” of a new form of artwork. People say that “art is discovering something,” and it really happened to me.

Many artists focus on what they are doing with their chosen material. However I didn't worry whether I belonged to the metal or glass department, but experimented with both, searching for ways in which their characteristics were compatible and could express my ideas. Just making art itself was the most important thing for me.

I learned three things from this work. First it is possible to express internal and external female beauty with the combination of metal and glass. Second, the reactions of the two different materials, glass and metal, to each other imposed certain limits on the form and size of the work. Third, taking influences from Western and Eastern cultures and integrating them into a single body of work can result in a contemporary feel to my artwork.

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## VIII. Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe. (2000.) "Women in Prehistory: The Venus of Willendorf," in *Images of Women in Ancient Art*. Accessed May 4, 2007 at <http://www.witcombe.sbc.edu/willendorf/willendorfdiscovery.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Akira Kato. (August 2002.) "The Paleolithic Venuses, Part 1 of 2." Beaver land International Press. Accessed May 4, 2007 at <http://barclay1720.tripod.com/hist/paleo/venus.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation. (May 14, 2001.) "Mothers of Time. Figurines: The Armless Lady." Accessed May 4, 2007 at <http://www.civilization.ca/archeo/paleofig/palf3eng.html>

<sup>6</sup> Pauline Weston Thomas. "Early Corsetry Fashion History." Accessed May 4, 2007 at [http://www.fashion-era.com/early\\_corsetry.htm](http://www.fashion-era.com/early_corsetry.htm)