

# Morgan Chivers

(USA)

*Morgan Chivers graduated from San Jose State University (2011) after spending a full decade earning four simultaneously conferred degrees and five minors: BA History, BA Global Studies, BFA Photography, and BFA Spatial Arts, with minors in Anthropology, Music, Religious Studies, German, and Environmental Studies. He is a current graduate student at the University of Texas at Arlington, pursuing an MFA in Glass & Intermedia.*

*Morgan has rapidly built an extensive exhibition record, with shows throughout the United States and internationally. His work has been selected for 32 juried exhibitions in the last 18 months, receiving 1st place honors from the Carnegie Arts Center's "Imagining the Real" exhibition, the ArtBUZZ publication, and the Glass Arts Society's International Student Exhibition Catalogue.*

*Untitled Cycle of an Unending Cosmos; Wasp  
2012  
6 x 10 X 6 cm*

*In contemplation of the big bang and the potential of a big crunch, I introduced found insect remains into a mass of hot, crystal clear glass. The fantastic amount of heat boiled the oils, waters, enzymes, and proteins that constitute any living organism, effectively nullifying any recognizability by returning the corpus to its elemental constituents. Though the individuality was destroyed by heat, everything that made the organism what it was is still entirely present within the egg.*

*The insect cannot be reconstructed or even discerned from either observation or deconstruction of the egg; this egg is inanimate, and will not incubate or hatch any living organism. By encapsulating the physical remains, I have enacted a temporary remove from the incessant cycles of the natural world. Despite having altered the biological ecology that would have digested the corpse and used the constituent materials to build new, living bodies, I hope to have germinated or fertilized a contemplation in my sentient viewers of what it means to be made of material that used to be other beings.*

**Morgan Chivers**



## An interview with Morgan Chivers

**Hello Morgan, and welcome to Peripheral ARTeries. I would start this interview with my usual introductory question: what in your opinion defines a work of Art? By the way, what could be the features that mark the contemporariness of an artwork?**

That question never gets easier... I feel uncomfortable with the idea of deciding for others whether a creative endeavor gets to be called "Art" IF someone earnestly believes it is.

So much of contemporary art is focused on a concept rather than an object or practice; when utterly mundane items only altered by the artist's nod of attention and even completely non-material thoughts/sounds/events are accepted as Art (and those were the respective revolutions of a century and half-century ago!!), it seems a minefield awaits on whatever border one might wish to establish. In this post-post-post-modern landscape, any potential perspective holds a certain legitimacy so long as it doesn't contradict itself (unless the irony of the contradiction is part of the point). All we can really do is discuss why we are more drawn to certain types of work over others...

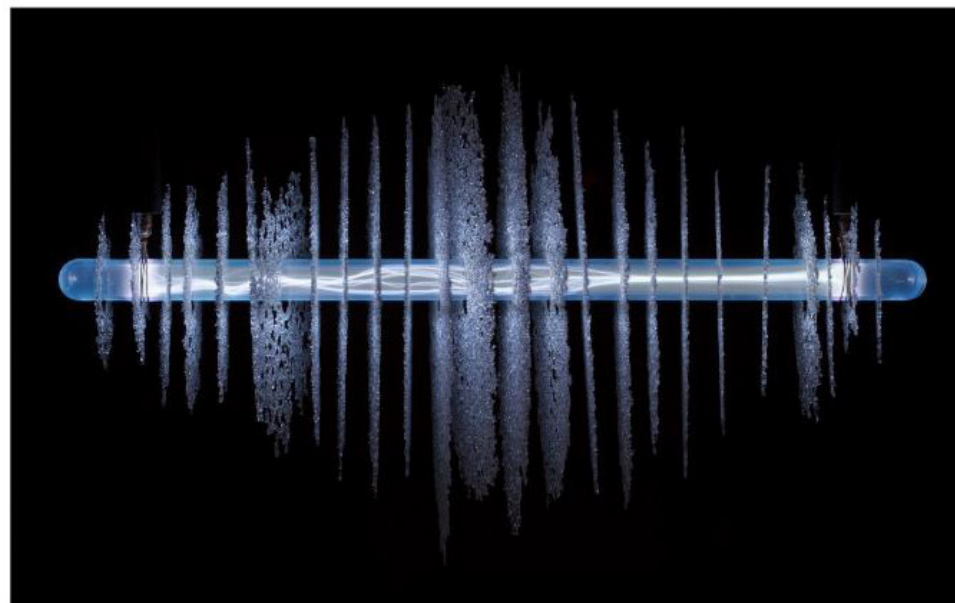
The hallmarks of contemporariness are easier to identify; to be considered contemporary the work should grapple with issues currently relevant to society, using appropriate methods and materials that both enrich the ideas the artist is working with and demonstrate an understanding of the ongoing and poly-factional concerns of the art-making/discussing community.

**Would you like to tell us something about your background? Are there any experiences that were particularly impactful on the way you currently produce your artworks? By the way,**



***I sometimes wonder if a certain kind of formal training could even stifle a young artist's creativity... what's your point?***

I can see your point, though my personal academic history proves that I don't feel stifled in the University environment. Some of those art students who feel muzzled may be attending programs with different educational goals than what the student is actually interested in learning, but I have a feeling the majority of those frustrated with the university art experience simply never get over the imposed structure and relative tedium of most foundations courses. Especially since painters, sculptors, photographers, film-makers, graphic designers, etc. are typically in mixed classes at the outset of a program, and the assignments have specific requirements that have to be met, the creativity in such courses is always boxed in by the need to fulfill the generalized rubric. Part of my experience pursuing the MFA in Glass & Intermedia at UT Arlington has been teach-



***Particulate Pulse (inertness is relative), 2014, 13 x 33 x 13 cm***

*clear glass, xenon, argon, krypton, copper, electricity*

*We come to know the universe primarily through our eyes; our visual explorations of worlds both vast and minuscule define the current era of scientific achievement. Yet the optically observable represent a mere sliver of the spectrum of interwoven phenomena creating our reality - we did not perceive ourselves in the midst of an expanding mist until we learned to see through radio waves.*

*Paper-thin glass discs are supported by a glass tube suspended from loops of live wiring. The radio waves generated within each loop elude glass' non-conductivity, introducing electrical stimulation within the sealed space, overcoming the inert tendencies of the gasses trapped in the tube, emitting photons through ionization. Surrounded by complete darkness, this echoes our condition: a delicate balance seen through radio waves.*

ing foundations-level classes, so I'm quite tuned-in to this concern. When I've taught 2D design, I tried to lessen whatever frustrations might arise by nipping them in the bud at the very beginning of the semester by telling the students that they would not make Art in that class; there were too many constraints placed on their creativity by the project parameters to honestly consider their work

anything more than exercises in design (which were supposed to help them build skillsets that would come in handy in subsequent classes/endeavors when they had the liberty to follow their creative impulses more freely).

But I've known lots of students who get so jaded by their experiences in the first years of university art programs that they just want to get the degree





*An Iconic Image, 2013, 33 x 33 x 42 cm, sintered clear glass*

*An homage to the tradition of the first few hundred years; depicting the perceived without being.*

and get out. I think we have a real problem in this society of seeing the degree as a trophy to be attained, believing that the doors of opportunity will open based on the possession of the degree-prize. Sure, the titles on one's CV hold a certain weight, but the experiences behind each title are what count. We need a pedagogical perspective-shift; if you are legitimately interested in something, what could be better than agreeing to meet regularly with a group of other people who are also interested in that same subject? At their core, universities are institutions set up to facilitate this type of interaction...

I was lucky enough to do my undergraduate studies at a (then affordable) state university with a wide array of strong programs. I didn't know what I wanted to do with life, so I wasn't in a hurry to get out, and I took whatever classes intrigued me. One semester I took both Ancient Art History and Ancient Military History, and it made the art so much more interesting (and easier to remember!) because I knew more about the sociological/political/technological forces driving that society. Since then, I've consciously tried to approach whatever I'm interested in learning about from a more holistic perspective.

***Before starting to elaborate about your production, would you like to tell to our readers something about your process and set up for making your artworks? In particular, what technical aspects do you mainly focus on with your work? And how much preparation and time do you put in before and during the process of creating a piece?***

For me, many variables are in flux from project to project. I follow my ideas where they lead rather than attempting to corral them into a skill-set I've already developed. Sometimes it feels a bit schizophrenic, as I find myself oscillating from inordinately repetitive tasks like tapping the same spot on a piece of paper with an ink pen for hours on end to outstandingly dynamic endeavors like placing the flammable remains of plants and animals into a two-thousand degree mass of clear glass... Other times I'm creating three-dimensional gestural lines with flowing strands of rapidly-cooling hot glass, or sitting in front of a computer in a dim room trying to get a handle on 3D modeling software... making molds... skinning a found road-kill cat... charging neon/plasma glass pieces... My process is all over the place; I enjoy learning and practicing new skill-sets and it keeps

me on my toes! What's truly important to me is that I build my ideas the most appropriate vehicles for their journey into the viewers' minds.

I put a lot of effort into the research component of each piece. I've developed strategies to intentionally load my brain with information on topics I'm interested in making work about while experimenting with materials and meditating; I curate conditions of subconscious cross-pollination, encouraging my analytical brain to collaborate with my creative brain along avenues I cannot consciously navigate.

***Now let's focus on your art production: I would like to start with your interesting works entitled Particulate Pulse (inertness is relative) and An Iconic Image that our readers have already started to admire in the introductory pages of this article: would you tell us something about the genesis of these stimulating pieces? What was your initial inspiration?***

These pieces are actually perfect examples of how the university is a uniquely hospitable environment for thoughtful art making! Both works also feature planes of sintered glass, which are extremely delicate. It took a lot of experimentation to develop

the techniques to create, handle, and transport the airy glass discs; outside of the university context, it wouldn't be reasonable for an artist to buy and fire a kiln that many times in experimental pursuit of such a fragile result.

*An Iconic Image* was inspired by a class I took on Buddhist Art History, where I learned that for the first 500 years or so after the life of the historical man who is supposed to have become so famously enlightened, none of the art celebrating his apparent achievement actually depicted him. As the religion spread, a lot of art was made about the man, his many past lives, and the events leading up to *parinirvana*, but his physical form was not shown because what made him special was that he was believed to have broken the cycle of reincarnation; he was unique in that he no longer existed. The Buddhist Art made during this "aniconic" period would show the natural, human, and supernatural worlds reacting to the presence of a body (all eyes focused on an empty spot in the composition, footprints, etc.), but the body itself was never sculpted or painted. This beautiful resonance between cosmology and artistic representation gives rise to questions about the overwhelming predominance of the iconography of the



Buddha in the contemporary religion... my answer is *An Iconic Image*. The icon you see has only been suggested by the fragile planes of glass; the image of man is actually made of emptiness.

The process of creating *Particulate Pulse (inertness is relative)* was even more indicative of the support structures a good university offers artists; the piece is the culmination of work for more than two years, which morphed, developed, and evolved as a result of numerous conversations and critiques with several professors and other grad students. One of the great things about attending a large university like UT Arlington are the interdepartmental opportunities; by being an engaged member of the university community, I was able to have several conversations with astrophysics professors who helped me understand how observations of deep space are actually made. The formal inspiration for the *Particulate* series came when looking at dozens of archived individual images made with radio telescopes for a method used to create 3D maps of nebulae by remarkably fine focus-control of the radio signal reception.

But the piece really came together after a conversation with Don Beck, artist-in-residence in the Art + Art History Department's neon/plasma studio rooted in Intermedia experimentation - he casually mentioned that it was possible to stimulate the plasma reaction in a piece without an electrode by generating a high-frequency radio field. I immediately asked him to show me how that worked; I knew I'd found a remarkable resonance between concept, materials, and form.

*All matter is composed of smaller entities held together by an energy invisible to human eyes.*

*All biotic systems are driven by an energy still mysterious to human minds.*

*The universal human urge to explore the unknown in the universe has led us to this moment.*

**Another interesting work of yours that has been particularly impactful on me and on which I**

**would like to spend some words is *Perceptible Particulates*: as you said, "The universal human urge to explore the unknown in the universe has led us to this moment."... So I would like to ask you if in your opinion personal experience is an absolutely indispensable part of a creative process... Do you think that a creative process could be disconnected from direct experience?**

I suppose it depends on how exacting you want to be with your words - the *Particulate* series has its creative origins in two scenarios which most people would probably consider to be quite removed from "direct experience": sifting a layer of crushed glass onto a shelf, pushing a few buttons on the kiln controller, and coming back the next day to see what happened; sitting in a crowded but quiet computer lab, clicking through hyperlinks in a spread-sheet on a government website...

Nonetheless, a complex of personal experiences are at the heart of every piece I make, though my work is often not actually *about* those firsthand events. For instance, travel has been an important part of my life, but I haven't been inspired to work about the act of travelling or the specific cultures interacted with while away from home. Instead, I embrace the remove from familiar surroundings as an initiating catalyst for new thoughts/insights, and as an exciting chapter in the unending quest for a more whole understanding of what it means to be alive on this planet at this moment.

I think it's important in this context to establish an inclusive definition of "direct experience" to allow for the moments of euphoric clarity as triggered by meditation, research, and the fantastic phenomenon by which our literate society allows the silent voices of other humans into my mind.

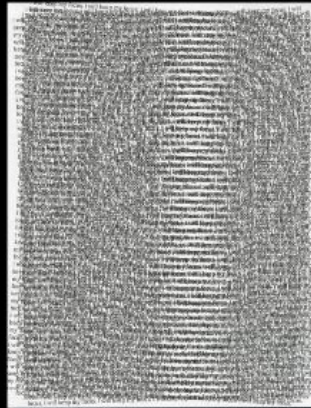


***Perceptible Particulates, 2013***

25 x 25 x 13 cm

sintered clear glass, charred oak





Reading is a central part of my process; the thoughts of other thinkers can interact with each other through the trough of my own thoughts, and the turn of a phrase can throw thoroughly new light on things.

I'm also interested in how our understanding of words is in constant contextual flux. At the right moment, certain words can evoke personal experiences of sincere profundity. While we can exchange words with each other, they are not always able to communicate the actual feelings that inspired them. The way words work in our minds is altered by the frequency of their repetition and the variable sincerity in each reiteration of what might otherwise be regarded as sacred concepts. The statement itself is not necessarily less true - nor the idea less powerful - due to the repetition of the words, though our minds tend to glaze over from over-stimulation and cease to absorb the significance of the sentiment.

The obsessive repetition of text in works like *Misanthropic Modernism Mantra* holds references to contemporary culture's complete overload of constant language intake, the din and blur of often

conflated understandings of inherently manipulated media, the difficulty of maintaining attention on anything in the presence of so much everything, the human connection with phrases and quotes of perceived significance studied in an attempt to internalize the significance of the words and/or repeated to one's internal self as mantra, and the conundrum of soothing bliss when the sensory hemorrhage is so intense that the subjective perspective mellows to a droning buzz...

***By the way, I'm sort of convinced that some informations & ideas are hidden, or even "encrypted" in the environment we live in, so we need in a way to decipher them. Maybe that one of the roles of an artist could be to reveal unexpected sides of Nature, especially of our inner Nature... what's your point about this?***

Definitely... there are so many interwoven layers to this existence, it'd be remarkably foolhardy to believe that only the most obvious interpretations are valid modes of understanding! In our increasingly data-driven, analytical society, using a tool to bring a previously invisible (or unnoticed) metric to bear is a numbingly common

experience. Without denigrating or devaluing (in the slightest) the novel new ways of looking at the world as provided by science and technology, we can assert that art provides a vehicle for potentially life-changing insights into the nature of the world around (and within) us. Under certain conditions, the impact of an interaction with a work of thoughtful art can be immeasurably profound, and the reverberations of the thoughts triggered by the work of art can far outlast the wow-factor of some app that lets you track whatever in a new and seemingly exciting way. Great art blazes a path into the mind with such intensity that the memory of the thoughts thus generated are not easily forgotten; even if the specific memory of the vehicle (the work of art) fades, the sensation's echo endures.

Everything is interconnected. From the neural networks that compose our thoughts to the webbed-strands of galactic density we exist within, electricity flows in a majestic cycle of continuous feedback. We are only able to see the microscopic structures within our brains (and gather the data that allows us to "see" the

macroscopic structure of the universe) through precise control of glass; we force glass to become a lens so that we may see what we are. In *Central Gravity*, I engage with glass in a symbiotic exchange, allowing the fluidity and grace of the material to reveal itself.

Again, this work required a lot of experimentation to arrive at finished results, and the object produced is inordinately fragile. One of my primary motivations for sustained investigation of these forms is their allusion to the Bolshoi Cosmological Simulation, which is the "best [visualization] yet made of the [...] large-scale structure of the universe, from shortly after the big bang to the present." I find resonance in making reference to the Bolshoi Cosmological Simulation in glass sculptures because the simulation is a super-computer generated set of data-derived images depicting the known universe as it would be from a theoretical position outside itself. By contrast, the most distant human-made observational equipment is Voyager 1, which has only recently penetrated the Heliopause in order to make direct photographic observations of interstellar space!





*inertness is relative* 2014 (variable)  
single-channel video

We have only barely begun to observe even our own small solar system from an outside position, and it seems unlikely under current understandings that it would even be possible to observe the universe from an outside position; these images I capture of my glass sculptures are simultaneously an homage to the wonders we have been able to witness through the lens and a testament to the limitations of such observations.

***I would like to mention "Inertness is Relative", an experimental short made through progressive focusing on your aforesaid plasma & glass sculpture "Particulate Pulse (inertness is relative)" as installed at the Bullseye Glass Gallery in Portland during Emerge 2014. Your artistic production is strictly connected with the chance to create a deep synergy between Art and Technology... and I'm sort of convinced that new media art will definitely fill the dichotomy between art and technology and I will dare to say that Art and Technology are going to assimilate one to each other... what's your point about this?***

I think this is a really important issue in contemporary culture - thanks for contextualizing my work as part of the conversation. There will always be some art that resists or denies the influences of technology, just as there will continue to be technological pursuits that do not intend to fulfill any of the requirements of even the broadest definitions of Art.



*inertness is relative* 2014 (variable)  
single-channel video

But yes, new media arts have been consistently fuzzing the line between the formerly siloed disciplines; some of the most interesting things humans are doing right now are rooted in the simultaneous devotion to both Art and Technology. Every so often, a silo-enthusiast will pipe up and lament what they see as the muddying of art's waters with the gimmicks of tech-happy creatives, longing for idealized days of raw emotion and intuitive art making. But they forget that there has always been art made for its own sake, for the simple enjoyment of the maker and the viewer, not intending to stir the philosophical pot any more than to say "check this out, this exists!" There must always be room for this type of activity, regardless of the chosen medium, though personally, I'm definitely drawn to projects that investigate the world with thoughtful curiosity and pose interesting questions to ponder and discuss with friends and colleagues. I think some artists just get tripped up on the new/old media divide because they are thoroughly invested in the old-school paradigm and feel they don't have the time left to master the new, so they resist. The same complaints were raised about photography when it was new-fangled and magical... the same was probably said about writing when this marvelous medium was first experimented with!

As a member of the last generation of humans to experience a more-or-less analog childhood and to harbor memories of a world sans Internet, I have



*inertness is relative* 2014 (variable)  
single-channel video

*The form is inspired by my conversations with an astrophysics professor at UT Arlington. I asked him how astronomers are able to create the three-dimensional maps of star clusters and nebulae when our observations (even at the furthest cardinal points in our telescopes' orbits) are made from positions that are far too close together for traditional stereoscopic techniques.*

*He explained that radio telescopes are capable of being tuned (focused) to such an extraordinary degree of accuracy (and a kind of equivalent to an extremely narrow depth of field) that they are able to make observations of whatever phenomena they are studying slice by slice... like an MRI of deep space.*

some inkling of the incomparable change brought about by the digital shift. Unless society collapses, Art will continue to become more thoroughly intertwined with Technology; soon it will no longer be an interesting question... it will just be what is. As far as *Inertness is Relative* is concerned, the video explores the sculpture by slowly pulling the focus from the infinite to the macro, allowing each

plane of glass to come into recognizable existence and fade into the haze before the next plane emerges into view. The photographic field of view is far narrower than with our biological eyes, so the viewer of the actual sculpture could never see the piece as filmed; the video becomes a technologically mediated way to see a sculpture inspired by the requisite technological mediation of science in space.



**Infinity Gaze**

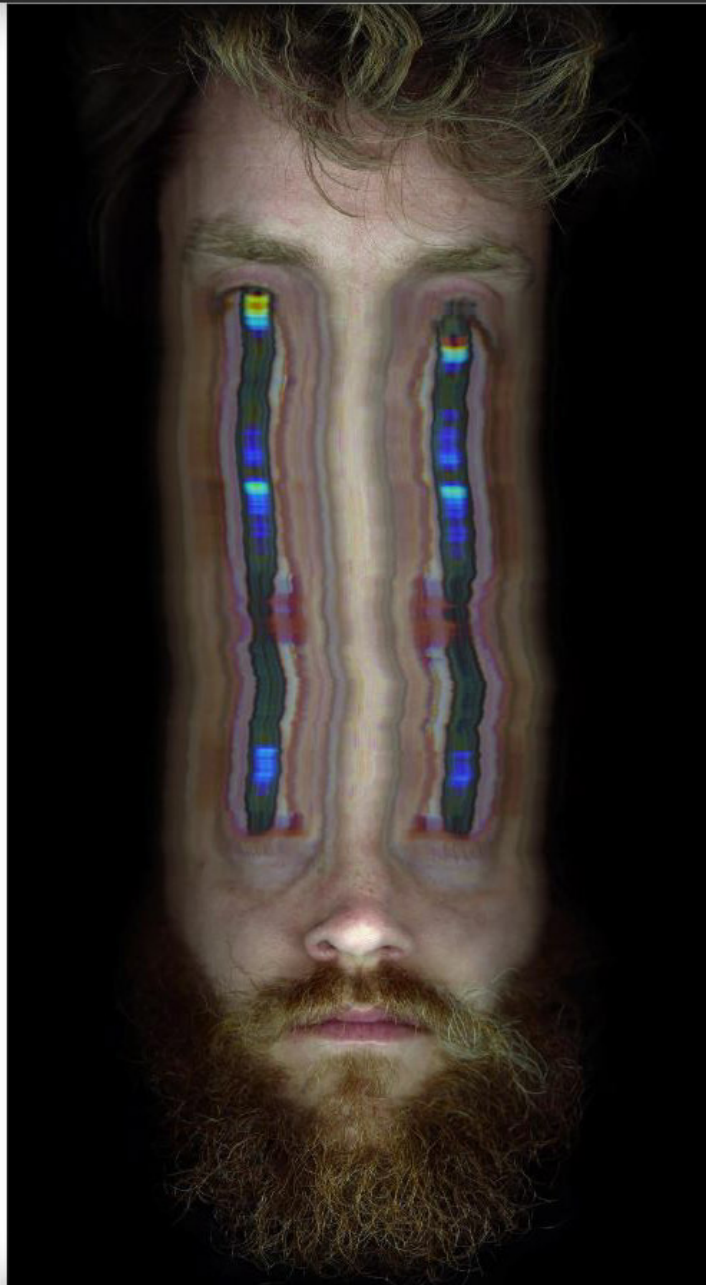
2013

106 x 50 cm

*performance conducted in solitude; giclee print*

*This work was inspired by becoming aware of the Dogon people, who express their cosmology through elaborate masks and associated rituals. Of the prescientific cultures who achieved some insights in alignment with modern cosmology, the Dogon have perhaps the most commonality. What was immediately of interest to me was the mask with dramatically elongated eyes, which I understand was designated to the character that looks into the infinite and attempts to bring back insights to the rest of the population. When I learned this, I had already been experimenting with a series of scanned works which were initially conceived to question the truth-value of our most objective tools of observation by moving the subject in a way that is inconsistent with the capacities of the method of investigation used.*

*For Infinite Gaze, the scanner has been manipulated to capture a non-real depiction of the subject, this time by actually calibrating my eyes to the traveling CCD and struggling to maintain alignment with what is normally a passing phenomenon in order to see the phenomenon and myself differently. This method of manipulating the scanner adds an additional conceptual layer to the image as the evidence of a performance conducted in solitude, for in my motions I simulated the social space an effective philosopher must occupy. If one considers the scanning session as a metaphorical lifetime, I began in position for a straightforward scan, as most eventual philosophers begin their lives as a part of the general population. I then began my quest to see the infinite, to bear witness to the force that gives form and power to everything in our lives and structure to our self-awareness, but I did not hold onto my locked gaze with the lens and the bright, white light. I gradually released the rigors of maintained meditation and readjusted myself to bring my mouth closer to the bed for a straightforward scan so that I could attempt to transmit my insights to those who had not endeavored similar journeys. Bringing in aspects of Hinduism and Buddhism, it took dozens of such metaphorical lifetimes before I achieved the balanced harmony necessary to complete the journey.*



***Infinity Gaze was inspired by the Dogon people, who elaborate their cosmology through masks and associated rituals: I have highly appreciated that way you manipulate the scanner adding an additional conceptual layer to an image, re-contextualizing it... Do you think that there's a dichotomy between tradition and contemporariness?***

Depending on your frame of reference, you could see a binary divide between the two notions, or you could see a relationship in which the contemporary is a (near?) inescapable reference/derivative/re-futation of its predecessors. The lineage can be convoluted and the connections counter-intuitive, but nothing is made in a vacuum; everything has an inspiration.

Many pre-scientific cultures and some schools of contemporary cosmology and mathematics have cyclical or omnipresent notions of time, but by and large the world we function in is a three-way interplay between ideas of the past, the experience of the present, and the premonitions of the future. Alan Watts once made a very salient point that history and future are actually non-existent; they are mere notions we've invented to help make some sense of "the eternal Now"...

*Infinity Gaze* grew out of a series of images produced using a scanner to document my body in various non-stationary states (*Scanning the Horizons of Truth*). The distorted images were sometimes unrecognizable, sometimes grotesque, sometimes abstractly beautiful. These works were an investigation into the notion that ill-fated endeavors to illuminate hidden truths with inadequate, ill-designed, or incomplete tool sets invalidate neither the truth nor the tool necessarily, only highlighting their inherent incompatibility.

***During these years your works have been exhibited in several important occasions and I think it's important to remark that you have received lots of awards... It goes without saying that feedbacks and especially awards are capable of supporting an artist: I was just wondering if an award or even the expectation of a positive feedback could influence the process of an artist... By the way, how important for you is the feedback of your audience? Do you ever think to whom will enjoy your Art when you conceive your pieces?***

The conception of a work is an intimate, personal experience for me; the vision often forms in my mind with my imagined self as the viewer of a work I've never seen before. Part of what motivates me to make a work is wanting to actually see it in real life, so the next thing I do is figure out how to translate the vision into materials that physics will allow to exist in some semblance of what I saw with



my mind's eye. Once I have a sense of whether it might be a feasible endeavor, I allow the imagined others into the still-mental installation; when I respect a person's opinion, I try to internalize their perspective and use the collective of these imagined voices to help hone a nascent work into something that could communicate the idea at the core of my vision.

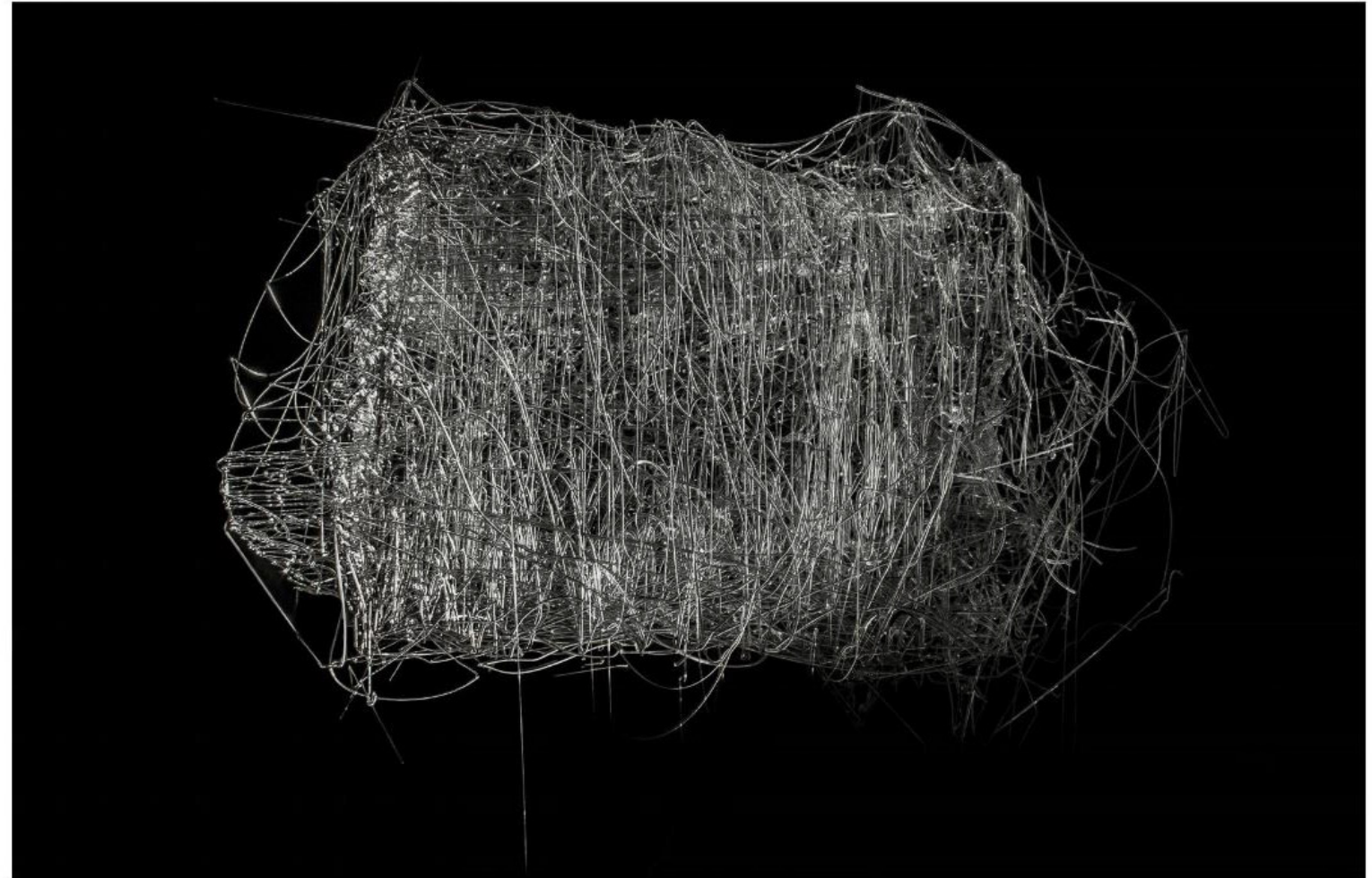
One change in my process I've noticed since I began exhibiting my work in galleries is that I think about the finished cleanliness of the piece a lot more while I'm actually in the process of working on it in my studio - I don't want to break the spell for some anonymous viewer with an unaligned corner or residual scratches on a polished surface. Something about the atmosphere of a shared studio facility with classmates and friends allows slight craft issues to be less of a concern in critiques than they are to someone who does not know the artist and has not seen them putting in the hours of effort to make the piece. There is a magically nuanced feeling of satisfaction when a curator I've never had any personal interaction with responds strongly to my work and selects it for an exhibition. The recognition that comes with an award is ultimately a humbling experience for me as I feel a responsibility to live up to that honor with my future works...

***Thanks a lot for your time and your thoughts, Morgan. My last question deals with your future plans: what's next for you? Anything coming up for you professionally that you would like readers to be aware of?***

It's been my pleasure... I've appreciated your thoughtful questions.

I've just started my final year of grad school; the thesis is looming large on my horizon. In addition to the exhibition, I'll be publishing a book of my art and writing in May, so I've got to keep my nose to the grindstone!

Here, we'll see where the trail of opportunities leads me...



***Central Gravity, 2013***

60 x 90 x 40 cm

*flowing strands of cooling hot glass*

*Everything is interconnected. From the neural networks that compose our thoughts to the webbed-strands of galactic density we exist within, electricity flows in a majestic cycle of continuous feedback. We are only able to see the microscopic structures within our brains (and gather the data that allows*

*us to "see" the macroscopic structure of the universe) through precise control of glass; we force glass to become a lens so that we may see what we are. I engage with glass in a symbiotic exchange, allowing the fluidity and grace of the material to reveal itself.*