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Nikolas Weinstein: Glassblower thinks big

Nancy Davis Kho, Special to The Chronicle
Saturday, November 22, 2008

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Eric Luse / The Chronicle

Nikolas Weinstein in his studio inside a glass project destined for Singapore.

At Nikolas Weinstein Studios in San Francisco, traditional glassblowing is merely a stepping-off point. The usual tools of the craft are there, but enormous metal and wood sculptural forms and car-size furnaces hint at a different spin.

"We get ourselves into all kinds of trouble with our work here," owner Nikolas Weinstein, 40, said cheerfully, "but that's what we want to do."

Weinstein grew up in an artistic family in New York City; his father was an architect and his mother was a sculptor. A part-time job during high school doing grunt work at a stained-glass studio nearly put him off glass. "I hated that job. I was the low man on the totem pole, so I did all the monotonous work for some schlocky stained-glass windows," he said.

Nonetheless, Weinstein was hooked on the idea of glassblowing and took classes at a public glass studio in New York and later did a semester in the glass program at the Rhode Island School of Design.

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"I didn't do too well at RISD," he recalled. "I really like organic, natural things, and the program there was much more conceptual." He ended up getting a job as a graphic designer but continued to make sculptural art vases on the side. He specialized in a technique in which he would line a wooden box with clay, carve out a shape inside it, then blow a parison (see glossary) of glass into the mold. Because the clay bakes and moves as it comes in contact with the hot glass, no two vases were alike.

His vases eventually got picked up by a few boutique stores, and a move to the West Coast in 1991 allowed him to focus on his craft full time. "For the first four or five years here, I rented studios to work in, plus the glassblower's time to help me," Weinstein said. "Glassblowing is definitely a team sport."

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One of Weinstein's sinuous, flowing shapes caught the eye of architect Frank Gehry in 1996, and he commissioned Weinstein to create a massive chandelier for a bank headquarters on Berlin's Pariser Platz. It was by far the biggest, most complicated job Weinstein had ever completed. "I was in way over my head on this one," he said. But it was also another reason to say yes.

The chandelier covers more than 2,000 square feet and weighs 2.5 tons. It is an assemblage of 34 glass panels suspended on thin cables. Creating it required him to move from a 500-square-foot studio to the much bigger space on Mission Street he and his crew have occupied for 12 years. They also had to design and build special kilns.

"In order to complete the piece on time, I realized I had to collapse two kiln cycles into one," he said, and he ended up designing a kiln that could do just that. The massive scale of the piece demanded precise engineering tolerances, so he brought in industrial glass engineers who had worked on the space shuttle, and a physicist who could develop models for each panel's complex structural matrix.

"The project was so complex that I learned a spectacular amount," he said.

The Pariser Platz chandelier, which took four years to complete, led to more architectural and commercial commissions. What you'll find in Weinstein's studio today is the half-completed piece for the atrium of the new Fairmont Hotel on Boston's Battery Wharf. It curves up toward the ceiling, a whimsical glass school of fish.

About two-thirds of Weinstein's work is for corporate customers now, although the studio has started putting out more functional production pieces like vases and bowls again. "It lets us riff on ideas from our larger sculptures," said Weinstein, holding up a vase with colors echoing a chandelier in progress across the studio.

It is not a traditional glassblower's studio: "Our emphasis is on inquisitiveness, on solving problems." His employees include traditional glassblowers but also an engineer who did robotics for LucasArts. Computers are as ubiquitous as blowpipes in the studio space.

"We're a bunch of geeks," he said. "We like getting under the hood, and we're exceedingly proud of what we're able to figure out."

Weinstein also is fascinated by laboratory glass tubing; ropes made of small beadlike tubing segments hang in swags around the studio like baling wire. "We're trying to transform lab glass into something completely different," he said.

E-mail Nancy Davis Kho at home@sfchronicle.com.

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Eric Luse / The Chronicle

Workers move one of a dozen 20-foot-tall glass trees from Nikolas Weinstein's San Francisco studio to a staging area for shipment to Singapore.

Photo: Eric Luse / The Chronicle

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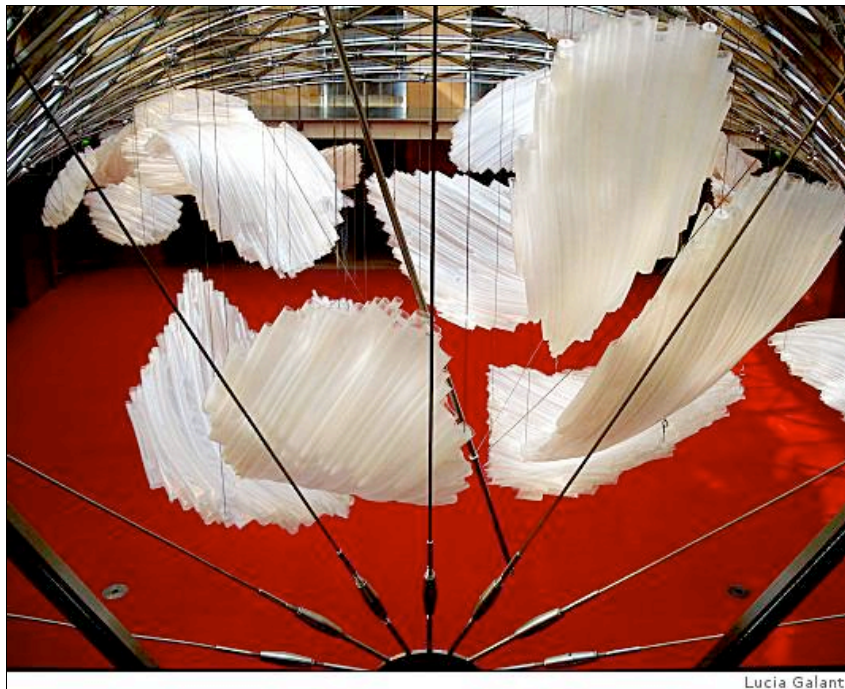
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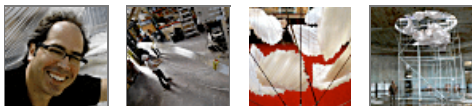


Lucia Galant

Architect Frank Gehry asked Weinstein to create this chandelier for a bank headquarters in Berlin in 1996. It covers more than 2,000 square feet, weighs 2.5 tons and took four years to complete.

Photo: Lucia Galant

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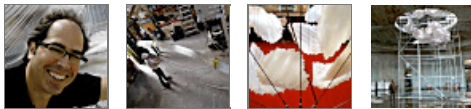


Courtesy / Nikolas Weinstein Studios

A glass chandelier in progress, mounted on scaffolding in Weinstein's studio, gives some perspective to the size of his creations.

Photo: Courtesy / Nikolas Weinstein Studios

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