

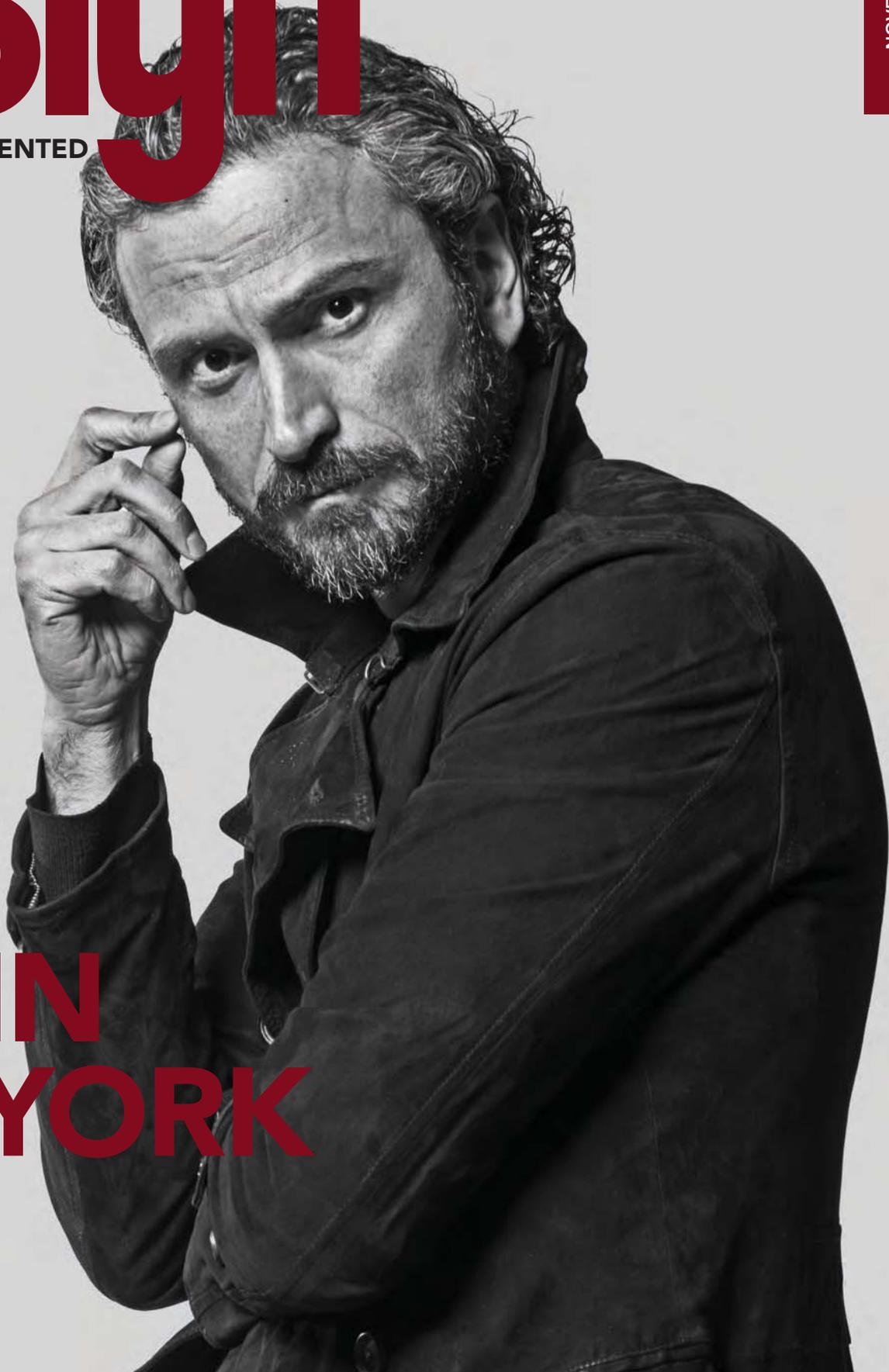
# BOUTIQUE design

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## NEW IN NEW YORK

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Q+A

# THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Nikolas Weinstein taps a diverse team of artists and techies to sculpt his own vision for the future of glassmaking.

INTERVIEW BY CHRISTINA GREEN

CAPELLA SINGAPORE

MICHAEL WEBER



COURTYARD BY MARRIOTT HONG KONG SHA TIN



NIKOLAS WEINSTEIN  
NIKOLAS WEINSTEIN STUDIOS

**THERE'S NO BETTER** way to think outside the box than to be outside the box. Just ask Nikolas Weinstein. Now principal of his own eponymous sculpture studio in San Francisco, the New York native never learned the tools other glassmakers use. Instead, he developed his own unconventional methodology, based on what he wants to accomplish, rather than what can be (or has been) done.

The result is a portfolio of innovative sculptural glass installations—many on a massive scale—crafted with proprietary, high-tech tools by a multidisciplinary team with backgrounds ranging from industrial design and glassblowing to computer coding, engineering and robotics. “I can teach anyone about glass, but I cannot teach them how to think,” he says. “In the same way, I think of myself principally as a designer working in glass and not a glass artist working in design.”

While leveraging new technologies has become his firm’s hallmark, Weinstein’s aesthetic was born from a long-standing interest in the natural world, one he says he established at a young age during internships at the American Museum of Natural History and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

His abstract, minimalist and organic works can be seen inside such hotels as the Capella Singapore, the InterContinental Shanghai Puxi and the Midtown Shangri-La Hotel Hangzhou in China, and the JW Marriott Hotel New Delhi Aerocity in India. His studio also received a 2013 Gold Key Award for Excellence in Hospitality Design in the Judges’ So Cool category for its glass sculpture inside the Courtyard by Marriott Hong Kong Sha Tin. Weinstein’s team is now working on an installation for the new EDITION hotel in Bangkok, and is in early talks for some hospitality projects in China.

**TELL US ABOUT YOUR EARLY CAREER AND WHAT DREW YOU TO THIS MEDIUM.**

I got into glass by chance. After studying at the Université de Nantes in France, I took some time off and was looking for an eccentric job for the couple of months before I would return to school. I answered a job for a trained artisan at a stained glass shop in Brooklyn.

Stained glass is far too meticulous for my taste. So I ended up taking a couple of lessons from a public glassblowing shop in Little Italy. There was smoke and fire and I thought, “This is far more interesting than the stained glass shop.” I kept doing that on the side and returned to school at

MICHAEL WEBER (COURTYARD BY MARRIOTT HONG KONG SHA TIN); ROBERT SCHLATTER (WEINSTEIN)

Brown University, where I studied comparative literature. Having finished all my credits at Brown early, I used some extra time during my last semester to take a beginning glass course at the Rhode Island School of Design. That got me hooked.

Ironically, after graduating, I worked for myself fixing old colonial windows in Providence's historic area before heading to San Francisco, where I worked as a graphic designer for about a half a year.

During that time I still blew glass on the side and managed to get my work into one or two small design shops. At this point they were small sculptural follies that were ostensibly functional, but really looked more like vegetables, flowers and sea creatures. I quit the graphic design job and started working for myself full time in 1991. I did this for about seven years, selling blown-glass pieces to small design boutiques and retailers such as Barneys and Neiman Marcus.

In 1997, the architect Frank Gehry saw one of my slightly larger one-off pieces at someone's home in Los Angeles and asked me to think about doing something for a project of his in Berlin. My first large commission was for Gehry's mixed-use development at Pariser Platz.

#### HOW HAS TECHNOLOGY EVOLVED SINCE YOU FIRST STARTED YOUR CAREER?

Two big things influenced me, and both are closely related to the Bay Area, where I came into my own and Silicon Valley came to life. Computers became faster and more prevalent. Not only did technology enter my shop, but so did people who really knew how to use it.

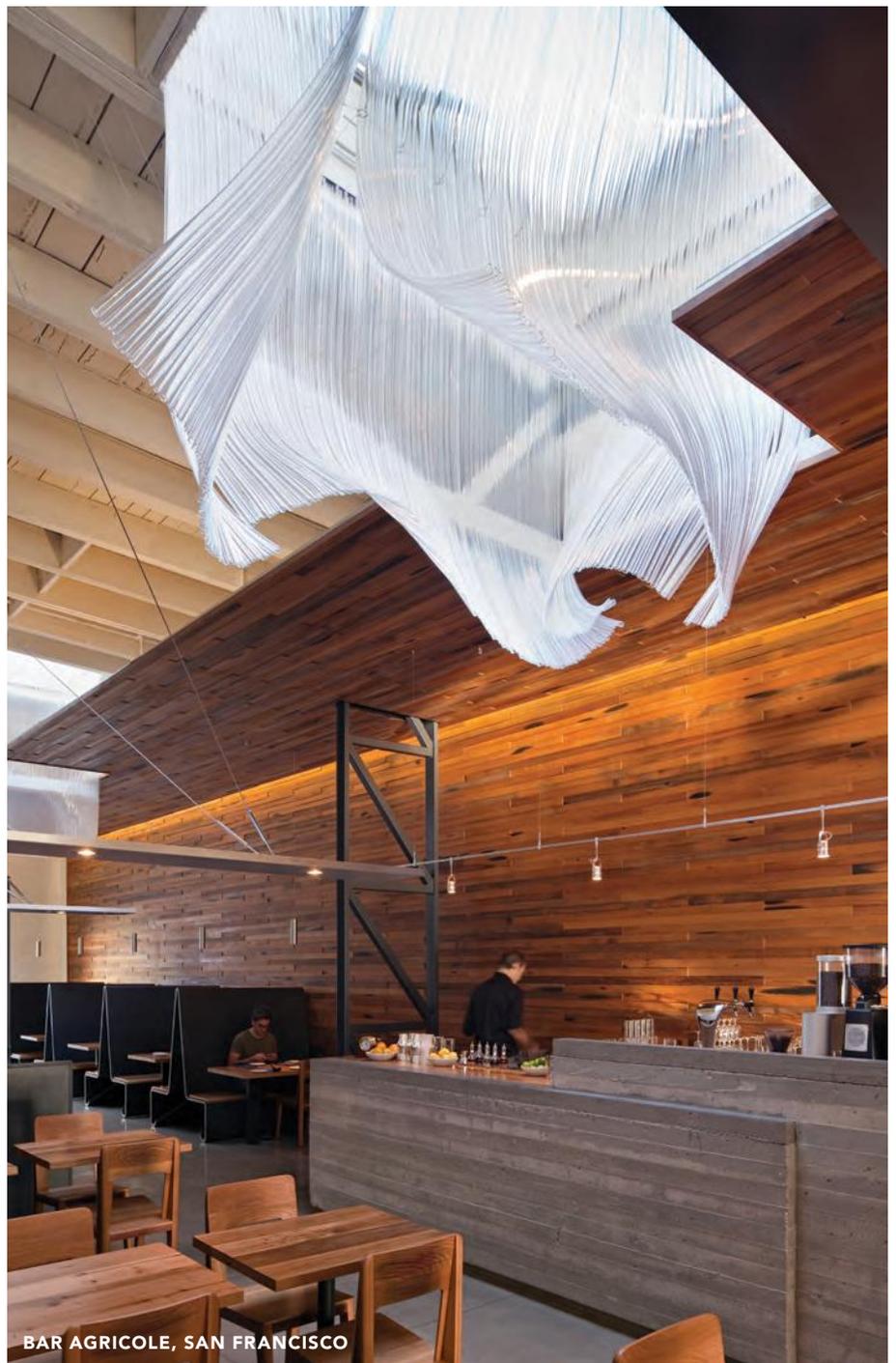
When I began, word processing was still pretty nascent and the Internet was barely a murmur. Now we monitor kilns remotely and feed data into automated tube-cutting machines. It wasn't just that technology became so powerful during this time, it's also that we were at ground zero. We were always able to try cutting-edge stuff early on, and this became a big part of how we thought about and approached the work. Innovation was critical.

In a related way, the industrial legacy of the Bay Area was collapsing. In its place came an empowered and democratic impulse to build: the maker movement. People became very comfortable with the idea of personalizing stuff that used to only happen on an industrial scale. All of a sudden it was OK to try all sorts of things that previously would've been left to specialists.

Surrounded by this notion, we were more than willing to buy old army surplus digitizing probes to get our sculptures into the computer. And we had no reservations about trying to build our own crazy mechanized and programmable kiln machine—it was in the air. If you faced a problem in which the tools didn't exist to fix it, you would just build it and figure it out as you went. All that was part of the '90s in the Bay Area. I definitely would not be doing what I do today without that.

#### IN TERMS OF HOTEL AND RESTAURANT INSTALLATIONS, WHAT ROLE DO ARCHITECTS AND INTERIOR DESIGNERS PLAY IN YOUR WORK?

It runs the gamut. I want to plug into the space so the pieces look as if they're literally growing out of the building. We prefer to get in early and be an integrated part of the design process. Unfortu-



nately, that rarely happens.

People think of us as part of the interiors package, so we usually get hired about eight weeks before the ceilings close and are being immediately hounded for all the structural loads before I've had a chance to develop a concept.

Of course, there are exceptions and it's great to be part of a holistic process. Interiors people should be involved early and architects late. This antagonistic and separatist notion of design—like doctors and nurses—isn't great for projects. So we like to collaborate and our better projects show that, but it's an uphill battle. Put simply, sometimes our clients present us with a space and tell us to have at it and largely leave us alone. Which sounds great and certainly allows us an enviable freedom, but it's even better to have colleagues who are smart and want to play. ●