



Interview Transcript: Sculptor Nikolas Weinstein speaks about the work and the studio.

Interviewer: Let me start with something basic. Why glass? What's special about glass?

Nikolas: Honestly, I fell into it. It wasn't something I woke up dreaming about as a child.

Interviewer: Why does it continue to attract you?

Nikolas: I think glass continues to attract me because it's "living" in a way that most materials aren't. For example, stone, metals ... they tend to be opaque. Glass is particularly sensitive to light, and so it's sort of an ever-changing medium, depending on how the light's hitting it and what the light's doing. It's constantly morphing.

Interviewer: But isn't there more to it than that? You've talked before about the fluidity of glass, the fact that you can capture and freeze these organic, moving forms.

Nikolas: Yeah. I think one of the things that's particularly different about glass is there's a synchronicity not only in terms of how it handles light but also how it's formed. In other words, glass, in its molten state, is very plastic; you can stretch it and pull it, and it doesn't have a fixed original state. It's a fluid, and there's dynamism in that, in sympathy with the way it plays with light even after forming.

Interviewer: Let's talk about your predilection for natural forms. Where does that come from?

Nikolas: I got into it totally by chance. When I was in school, I had a project where the teacher gave us the word "organic", and we were supposed to do something to play with that idea. I took it very literally, but the teacher was much more into conceptual stuff ... so I didn't do very well in the class. But I couldn't stop with that idea, and I really liked some of the things that I started developing out of that. I also spent a lot of time scuba diving—I thought I was going to be an oceanographer—but ultimately I realized, after several enjoyable but professionally wasted summers [laughs], that what interested me about the ocean was the colors and the shapes, not the science. I think I've always been interested in the very robust and sort of minimal forms in nature.

Interviewer: Nature is full of those things, where for instance it'll try to minimize the surface area in a certain condition...

Nikolas: Exactly, and I'm not simply interested in nature for its basic forms, and by basic forms I mean lobed shapes like pumpkins and squashes, or striated forms such as plant leaves, things like that. I'm also interested in the recurring patterns. So if you look at the way that arteries branch and rivers branch and branches branch, the scales are very different but the shapes that are generated are very similar.

Interviewer: That's a lovely segue into how you work, because in a lot of your work you use those same natural forces, like gravity, or surface tension, or stiffness, to help shape the glass.

Nikolas: The first assignment that I had in that class I mentioned earlier had us blowing glass into clay molds. And when you blow hot glass into a raw clay mold, it effectively fires parts of the clay. So the mold keeps changing, and as you blow into the mold again it's a slightly different shape. Parts collapse, and different parts of the glass get stuck, and when you pull it out of the mold, each new piece is different from the previous piece.

I got very used to this idea of forming glass as a process, rather than choosing the final shape and working toward that. I started getting interested in how it changed and why it changed; The process of forming it interested me as much as the finished piece. I think that resonates with a lot of the stuff that's found in the natural world, where it's never a fixed process, it's an iterative process. That appeals to me. A lot of the ways that we've ended up working with glass have been iterative like that, where I don't think of shapes as fixed, but rather as basic guidelines for exploring fundamental qualities of the glass and of the structures that we're working inside.

Interviewer: It occurred to me when you were saying that, it's a process of discovery. Like you said, it's not until you pull the glass out of that mold that you know exactly what shape it's going to take. So things change during the process, you discover things during the process that you may not find otherwise.

Nikolas: Yes, it's a very conversational way of working, where we might start to do one thing and then the glass starts doing other things, either because we made a mistake or because we didn't appreciate how one thing would affect something else. And then the process starts forcing its way back upon the intention, and you end up in a totally different spot. The best work that we do is always the consequence of being forced someplace that you didn't expect to go, or letting the process influence the objective on some level. You come up with an idea of where you want to go, and then [laughs] where you want to go starts pushing back.

Interviewer: Can you describe this in the context of one of your projects?

Nikolas: We talked a minute ago about how blowing glass into a mold doesn't always get you the same shape. You get these slightly varied forms, and taken together they become a sort of study in the possible shapes that all originate from a single point of departure.

So we've got a mold or a basic way of constructing the glass, like the glass tube matrix. And the projects explore the expression of that single idea in a bunch of different ways. Like the Berlin project: there were 36 panels, and they were all basically built the same way, some of them a little smaller, some of them a little bigger, some curving this way, some curving that way. Then they're put together,

and they create these more complex gestural forms in the sculpture. But they're all about this one idea.

Interviewer: Almost like a genetics of form, finding the variations that arise from that one starting point.

Nikolas: That's a great way of describing it. And when you look at our work through that lens there really is a pretty consistent interest in exploring different expressions of form or shape.

Interviewer: Let's touch on technology a bit. You tend to bring a lot of technology to bear on your process.

Nikolas: I don't think I was ever super interested in technology for its own sake. I mean, I was always a bit of a computer geek, but I never really pursued that interest as a goal unto itself.

What happens in that iterative process, where you don't know exactly where you're going, is that you end up in spots that you didn't intend to be in. You find yourself faced with a whole set of problems that you couldn't anticipate, and many of the problems we run into lend themselves to technological solutions. So the technology becomes an essential part of the process. Being able to problem-solve on your feet, and come up with solutions, technological or not, is fundamental to our work.

Interviewer: To be able to stay nimble during that process where, as you say, you might end up somewhere you didn't anticipate at all.

Nikolas: That's a very kind way of saying it. I'd love to feel like we're nimble. [Laughs] Fits and starts is probably a more fitting description of how the technology comes about. [Laughs] We're constantly trying to come up with ways to solve these problems, and we often come up with solutions that we never could have dreamed of at the outset. A lot of what we do puts the idea before the solution ... what we already know how to do is very rarely a limitation on how we try to answer design problems.

We also get excited when those kinds of problems arise. And that's important. Most of the people who work here are people who like to tinker, and so when we're faced with these problems, people usually amp up rather than shut down.

Interviewer: They're all compulsive problem solvers, and the work generates a constant stream of new problems. [Laughs]

Nikolas: [Laughs] Yep, and as much as the studio is a reflection of my interests and the kinds of shapes that compel me, it's also fundamentally a reflection of who has worked here. In other words, there's a connection or a thread that's common across all the work, and that comes from me. But where it goes in its expression, and how we solve the problems, and which projects we can take on ... that's a consequence of who we have here. I think there are certain projects that can veer toward a very computer heavy set of solutions, and there are other projects that are solved by coming up with new ways to just blow glass.

Interviewer: Let's talk a little bit about architecture and what you're trying to do with it, about the relationship between your work and architecture.

Nikolas: You know, the work started out with a focus on sculptural forms. And now we've developed a sweet spot for developing sculptural forms that respond to

architectural spaces. I don't know when exactly that happened, and it certainly wasn't a conscious decision on my part. But all the subterranean forces sort of, um...

Interviewer: ...conspired...

Nikolas: ...yeah, conspired to lead me toward wanting to build sculpture that can talk to architecture on its own terms. And in many cases that demands a certain scale, which can be anywhere from moderately large to quite large, because buildings are generally, well, big.

So we've started to pursue that weird little intersection where sculpture and architecture talk to each other on equal footing, where the sculpture is big enough to actually converse with basic architectural elements like columns and arches and skylights. And that's usually the starting point for every project, looking at the space that we're working in and figuring out what's special about it, what we can play off of, what defines the space. We try to respond to that in some way. So if the space has an oculus in the ceiling, we'll start to play with patterns that respond to that idea of a circular center above you.

Interviewer: And that response can take different approaches too, right? I mean sometimes you want to accentuate what's already there, like creating a circular form beneath the oculus, and other times you may want to play off of or contrast with what's there.

Nikolas: Yeah, sometimes you fight or push against what's in the building, and then sometimes you lean into, or work in sympathy with, the building. A lot of contemporary architecture is very clean and minimalist, lots of straight lines and right angles, and one of the things that our work can bring to that is a much more tactile, textured, organic, natural counterpoint, where things aren't quite as controlled, where there are asymmetries and deviations and complicated surfaces. I think that tension is where we want to be.