

# ANNA SKIBSKA Caressing Space

SKIBSKA MAKES AN ARMATURE, A PROLIFERATIVE SHELL, FOR THE SPACES WITHIN AND WITHOUT. IT IS LIKE A THREE-DIMENSIONAL MOSAIC WITH NO STONES, ONLY THE GROUT IN BETWEEN, A NEGATIVE/POSITIVE STRUCTURE THAT ALMOST MORPHS INTO FORM.

## BY JAMES YOOD

The first surprise in encountering a sculpture by Anna Skibska is discovering how sturdy it is. This cannot be so, you think — how could such a gossamer confection, a lattice made of slender rods of connected bits of brittle glass seemingly so fragile, actually be stable and secure? But it is. As with Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes, there's incredible strength in Skibska's structural adhesions and firmness in her filament — a skeletal logic that is more grounded than our senses can reckon.

This isn't spun sugar, though her work caresses space as if it were, no magical web of dew or pulled taffy, though it alluringly seduces and delights the eye. It is instead a thing of energy and depth, annealed through fire, soldered as securely as if it were steel and ingots. At its core this is an art of inspired constructivism, of sober logic meeting imagination and poetics. The carefully structured buttressing, bolstering, interweaving and interpenetrating take us to a wonderful juncture where reason and delight show themselves to be part of the same universe.

A Skibska work is a constellation of fragments, a proliferation of connections that seem at once inevitable and capricious, much like the paths through life. One turn leads to another, one juncture makes the next feasible, the pattern never clear at the outset but in retrospect strangely inescapable. In Skibska's case, various fusions, crossings and shifts brought her from Wrocław, Poland, to her home in Seattle, links in a chain as sequential as the construction of her work.

Skibska became an artist in Wrocław during the waning years

of rigid communism in Poland, a time when an underground spirit of freedom and investigation was met with restrictions, suspicion and repression. The sense that in such an environment an artist must veil his or her intent and speak out only through metaphor and allusion was deeply ingrained. And, when art materials are hard to come by, an artist must improvise. When she first decided to work with glass, Skibska was reduced to finding pieces of it in dumpsters and hoarding them. Her first efforts were an extension of stained glass assemblage, in which she used her shards as collage elements, responding to the rich traditions embodied in the cathedral windows of her home city. Soon, though, Skibska was drawn to expand her cache of glass by employing a small blowtorch to refashion it into thinnish rods. The blowtorch allowed her literally to stretch her glass, to take her found remnants and make them her own.

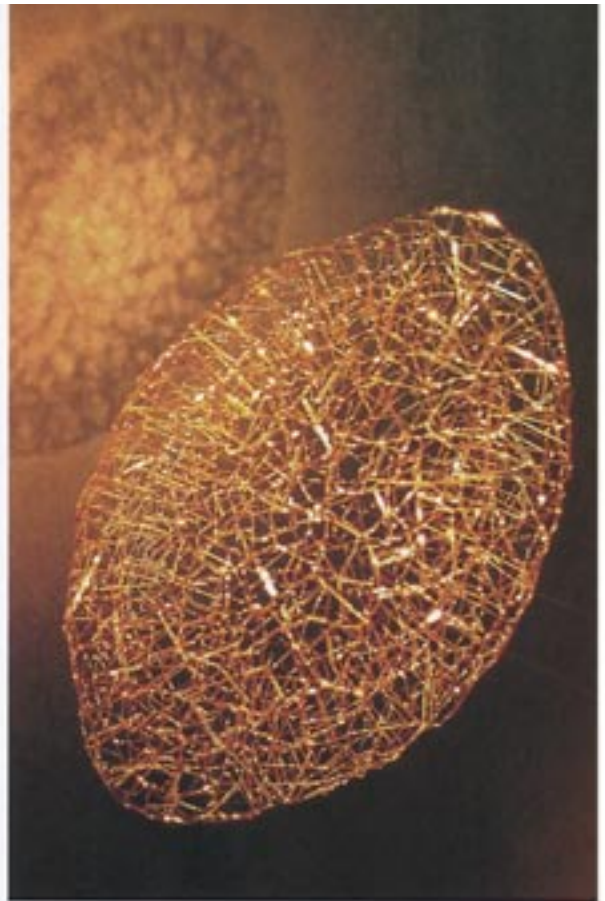
Innate curiosity led Skibska to reach out to the art world beyond Poland. Slides sent to the Corning Museum of Glass's *New Glass Review* led to several Merit Awards in that publication. She was able to secure fellowships to New York City (Kosciusko Foundation Scholarship, 1992-93) and Washington State (residency at Pratt Fine Arts Center, Seattle, 1996). She moved permanently to Seattle in 1996, but retains a residence in Wrocław.

The most mellifluous outpouring of Skibska's vision has occurred in the United States. Now her rods, flattish and thin, are fabricated for her by the Bullseye Glass Co., Portland, Oregon, but her procedure hasn't fundamentally altered. She begins, well, somewhere, using a small blowtorch to reliquify the end of one

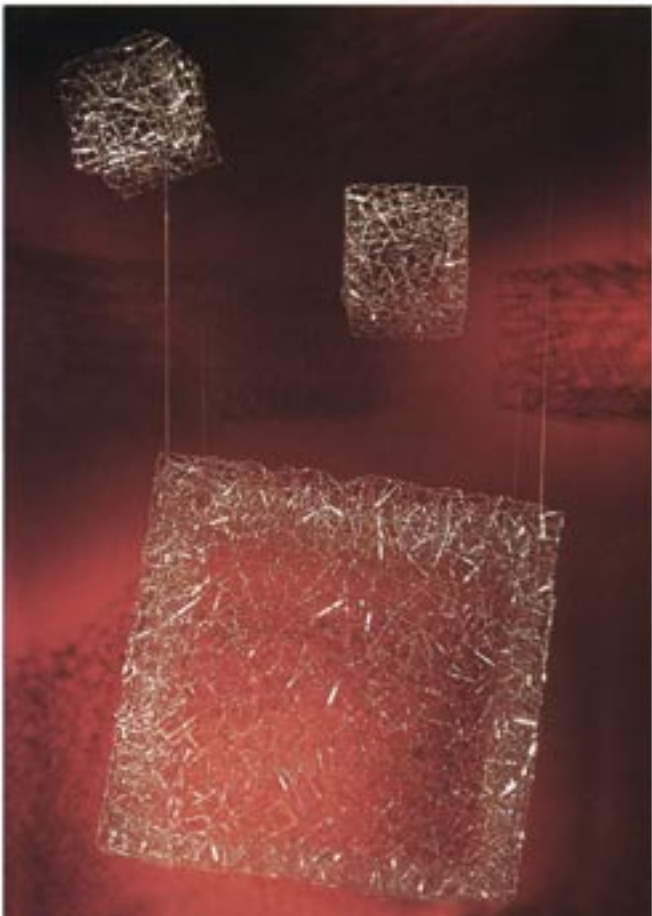


Celestial Landscape, 2001, 16%, by 19 1/2 by 19 1/2 feet, permanent glass installation at the Swedish Medical Center, Seattle, Washington.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Stairs, 2004, part of In the Neighborhood glass installation, 23 by 19 $\frac{1}{4}$  by 39 feet, at William Traver Gallery; Orb, 2002, glass, 26 by 17 by 17 inches; Ladder, 2004, part of In the Neighborhood installation; Cubes, 2002, glass, 39 to 12 inches square.





Skibaska's *Ten*, 22 by 26 by 14 feet, glass installation in the 2003 exhibition "Fire and Form: The Art of Contemporary Glass," at the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida.

rod and, while it's molten hot, fuse it to another. Repeat until art. In a way, Skibaska makes an armature, a proliferative shell, for the spaces within and without. It is like a three-dimensional mosaic with no stones, only the grout in between, a negative/positive structure that almost morphs into form. Or perhaps it's like stained glass without the panes, the rods functioning as interstices—not negative space but a wonderful sinuous construction unto itself. Or maybe her structures can be seen as organic, a kind of cellular profusion, as if one were looking closely at the surface of a leaf.

Skibaska makes triangles, rectangles, hexagons, squares, even circles, often as flat elements; these flow into volumetric forms such as pyramids, ovals, cubes, pods, globes, etc. There is an endless to and fro between the small intersection of a few glass rods and the larger schematic they combine to create. It's not quite pointillism, though there is a dappling intensity to this work, a process of reduction to points of fusion. It's not analytic cubism, either, though it has a rigorous, almost abstract formal rhythm, a web comprising thousands of linked strands of glass. Some of its calligraphic cascading may remind one of recent paintings by Brice Marden, but it's always Skibaska, incrementally creating a large work, while respecting the smaller generative impulses and actions that go into it.

She does a fair amount at tabletop scale, and though each piece is monochromatic, it is in such works that she uses color most actively, with blue, red, yellow and black dominating. But

one senses she is most engaged in the larger pieces, usually made of clear glass rods that glisten like white charges of energy under careful and dramatic illumination. Sometimes these are towers or cubes that rest on the floor or on a pedestal—in recent years the cubes, up to a square yard, have more or less become signature works. But Skibaska usually prefers to suspend these cubes on wires from the ceiling, adding the dictates of gravity to the profile of this work. The grids in these shimmering chandelier-like objects are mesmerizing in their fidelity to an ordered, reassuring geometry. Yet they're composed of explosive bursts of glass—a fiery stream of consciousness, a frenzy of snipping, fusing, blowtorching and accreting, unexpected in detail but soothing and suggestive in overall form.

Skibaska has come to delight in the opportunities museums—such as the Seattle Art Museum and the Norton Museum of Art—provide her to do complex installations, to set up an encounter of pieces that engage in a dance of reciprocal discourse. It is a challenge to make work transcend its specific objecthood and become an integer in larger dramas—to go from microcosm to macrocosm and create an environment. Anna Skibaska's success in this format is rooted in the same thing that makes her smallest tabletop pieces work: more than one could have imagined, in her hands bits of glass fused together become the ties that bind. ■

*James Yood teaches art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and writes frequently about glass.*