# Sculpture

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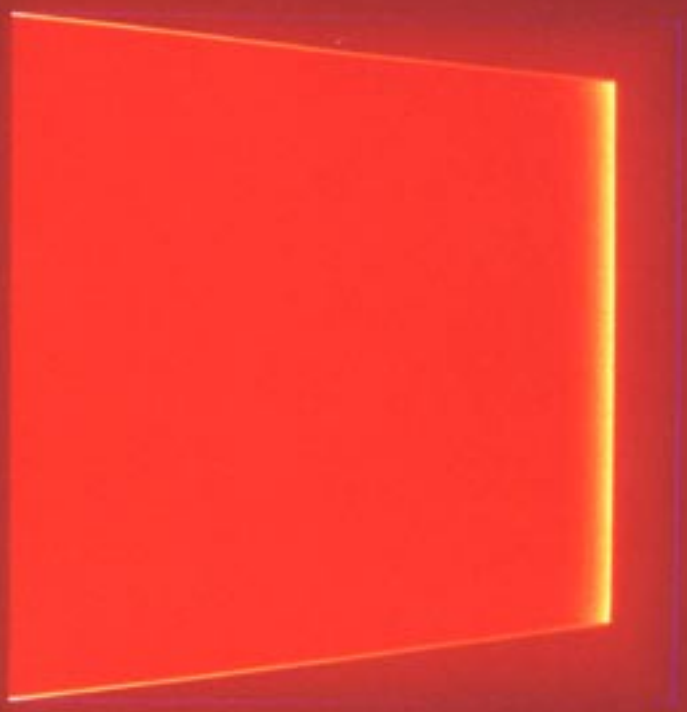

Sculpture as Light and Performance

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# Focus

## Anna Skibska: Splintering Space

by Matthew Kangas

Polish artist Anna Skibska's glass-thread sculptures have taken on additional size and unusual settings since her 1996 move to Seattle. Critics continue to see growth-oriented analogies in her clear-glass assemblages, but the overall range of her shapes suggests a broader set of intentions and goals beyond "how cells form bodies," as one writer put it. The sculptures may indirectly allude to 20th-century Polish history.

Although she continues to travel frequently to her native country, the 43-year-old artist exhibits mostly in museums and galleries within the U.S. Public and private commissions for permanent architectural sites have increased from small- and medium-size projects to large-scale ones, such as the forthcoming chandelier-like work for the Swedish Medical Center in Seattle.

Since Skibska attended the Wrocaw Academy of Art during the waning days of the Soviet occupation, it is not surprising that her American-period work concentrates on abstract organic shapes constructed of myriad geometric and linear glass elements, images without any overt identity or social reference. Yet her seemingly limited allusions to identifiable imagery may conceal contextual possibilities for other meanings. Artists under Communism devised many ways to survive; for instance, Czech glass artists Stanislav Libenský and Vera Brychtová used abstraction as a covert method of invoking the unique heritage of Czech Cubism. At the same time and after, Skibska, a much younger artist, confronted Communism obliquely by adhering to nonidentifiable shapes.

Over a decade later, Skibska returned to recognizable imagery in her Seattle Art Museum exhibition, "anna skibska's con.," with *Sit Down, Please* (2002), a giant 12-foot-high "chair" in a darkly lit gallery. The chair can be a metaphor for domestic stability (symbolizing the artist's search for a condominium), a stand-in for the human body, or it can suggest the absence of the human figure. Eerie

**Clockwise from above: *Tower*, 1999. Welded glass filament, 113 x 10.5 x 11.5 in. *Untitled*, 1998. Welded glass filament, dimensions variable. *...From Behind*, 1997. Welded glass filament, 140 x 180 x 22 in.**



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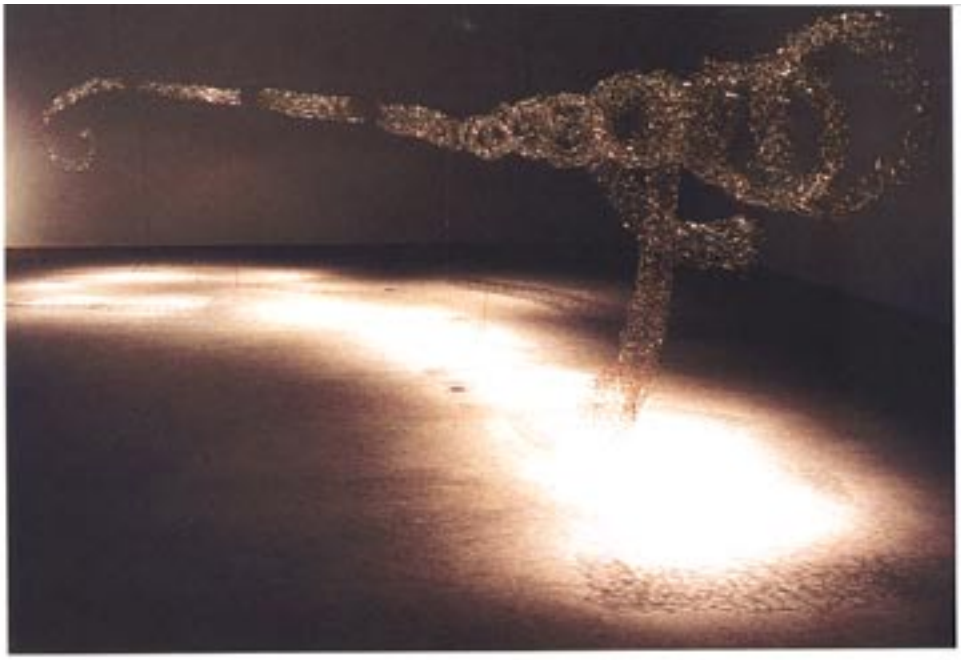

Left: *Smoki (Dragon)*, 2001. Welded glass filament, 140 x 560 x 68 in. Below: *Sit Down, Please*, 2002. Welded glass filament, 150 x 100 x 82 in.

and glowing, the work clarified one direction in the artist's current work, a possible return to realistic subjects 13 years after the fall of Communism and the advent of democracy in Poland.

Glass in general can be used to challenge conventional sculptural mass and volume. Skibska's filaments are usually transparent; their clustering into curved or straight forms further reinforces a see-through quality that co-exists with a sense of implausible weight or pressure. Because most of the works are suspended from the ceiling, Skibska defies traditional issues of sculptural positioning and placement as well. Though some pieces use transparent support-struts on the floor to hold them up, most seem to float in space.

After her arrival in the U.S. in 1994 as a guest instructor at the Pilchuck Glass School near Seattle, Skibska created her first American body of work, subsequently seen in her solo debut at William Traver Gallery in 1996. The fine glass filaments were welded together in ways that had not been seen in American art except for the work of Providence, Rhode Island, artist Toots Zynsky. A well-received New York debut followed the next year at Miller Gallery. Since then, she has shown in Poland, as well as at museums and galleries in St. Louis; Portland, Oregon; Casper, Wyoming; Paris, and Venice. With help from the Soros and Kosciusko Foundations early on in her American adventure, Skibska has managed to assemble several bodies of work. Using assistants, she continues to work at her studio in Seattle's Fremont district.

The welded glass technique is either a fascinating entry-point for viewers or a tiresome technical trick they cannot get past. With a few works using colored glass threads (*For Marge*, 1997), Skibska demonstrates further possibilities beyond the crystalline clarity she has by now mastered.

Lighting, presentation, and display are crucial elements for the proper perception of Skibska's delicate sculptures and, in this sense, her works roam closer to theater and installation art. However, they also exist as independent objects and operate successfully using natural daylight, especially when the filaments are colored, usually black, blue, or red.

In *One* (2000), created for a special "Millennium" series at Traver, a sequence of ghostly floating "figures" summons memories of groups of Poles and others who perished in the country's repeated historical cataclysms of war and occupation. Not nearly as explicit as Magdalena Abakanowicz's armies of figures, they still may be seen as references to forgotten individuals and groups caught up in Poland's long bloody history.

Skibska's journey from Soviet-occupied Poland to the United States, a nation of simultaneous affluence and hardship, has made her sensitive to contrasts of political systems. This combination of influences does not necessarily preclude a content that obliquely alludes to significant historical events in her background. Sometimes, the more we plunge into the universalizing anonymity of abstraction, the closer

we get to the tugging reminders of historical reality, as was the unwitting case for the Russian Suprematists. Skibska's impressive constellations of objects and arrangements here and in Europe conjure more than delicate light filtered through linear glass into space; they point toward memory and resolution.

*Matthew Kangas is a frequent contributor to* Sculpture. *His latest book is* Robert Wilson: Image-Maker.

LEFT: BRUCE NICHOLS, COURTESY NICOLAYSEN ART MUSEUM, CASPER, WY / RIGHT: PAUL MACAPIA, COURTESY SEATTLE ART MUSEUM



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