

AWKWARD ANGLES

A THESIS

SUBMITTED ON THE 13th DAY OF April 2017

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

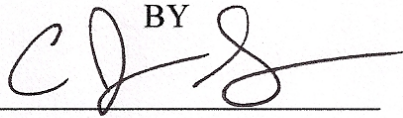
TO THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE OF

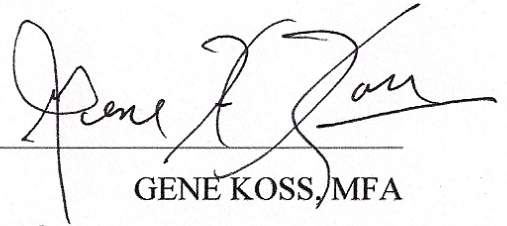
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BY

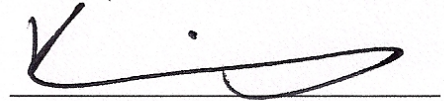


CHRISTOPHER JAMES GRAY

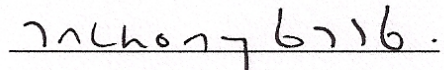
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I would like to thank many individuals for their continual support that I have been very fortunate to receive.

I would like to thank my mom Peggy for her continuous and undisputedly endless support. I would also like to thank my dad Denny for giving me the bug and passing on the tradition of working with my hands.

My partner Erin deserves a colossal thank you for putting up with me for the past eleven years. I love you and thank you for letting me be me.

I also would like to thank Gene Koss for inviting me to study at Tulane University in his World Class Glass Studio.

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And a very special thank you goes out to four very hard working, dedicated individuals that saw my vision and stepped up to be a part of the process of creating a monumental sculpture with me. They are Silas Fortuin, Malcolm Kriegel, Katie Reeves, and Demian Weidenhaft.

Last but not least, thank you Robert and Michelle Toensing for guiding and mentoring me through the most influential and exciting steps and years of my career.

Thank you all again.

Labyrinths can be perplexing and enlightening at the same time. One can be constructed to disorient, and another to involve meditation. Labyrinths may share a common design yet carry extreme polarity in their uses. Connecting with this duality, I have used this theme to show the dichotomy in my thesis exhibition titled *Awkward Angles*, and further the pursuit of attaining my personal goals. The subject matter of my work has always been heavily influenced by my environment. Deeply considering everyday forms and objects helps me assess my relationship with the present.

"I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future...I felt myself to be, for an unknown period of time, an abstract perceiver of the world."

Jorge Luis Borges.

My practice begins with seeing.

Architecture surrounds us, creating a type of net. As your proximity to large cities and rural communities shifts, so too does the density of this net. Growing up in rural Iowa surrounded by wide expanses of farmland has shaped the way I see the world. My father was a carpenter, my uncle was a bricklayer, and my grandparents were farmers. This, in large part, has led to my success as an artist trained to use my hands and see the world through a different lens. Religion and work were two of the most meaningful rituals my family shared. This established a lifestyle focused on the connections that we built and shared with one another. At the age of twenty I decided that it was important I saw the world from a different perspective. I enrolled in college, and Minneapolis, Minnesota was where I landed for the next ten years. I felt like I was re-learning, and re-defining everything I had once known. Unlimited access to a new set of tools became my new norm. I now had to learn how to see from a different angle.

Growing up surrounded by maze-like cornfields and picking through misfit antique treasures are some of the most distinct memories I have. My last memories of Iowa are of laying brick, building a facade for a house that acted as a protective coat of armor. My heart was filled with questions and I felt lost. I decided to veer left at the fork in the road, and resolved it was time to find myself in another place. In Minneapolis the cityscape now became my new maze or labyrinth. The mechanical end and beginning, of every sunrise and sunset, from different angles during this time highlighted my surroundings, which included changes that were noticeable through population, proximity, and architecture. This has largely impacted the way I see the world, and in turn make art to this day.

My life has been that of a builder and laborer. I see myself as a builder and a laborer, and as time passes I see myself evolving into more of an intellectual architect through my teaching practice and personal philosophy. By sharing knowledge through a medium that surrounds each of us with practical uses in our everyday lives, I attempt to highlight a material that has become banal and has already been highlighted in many other ways. Choosing to work with glass as an artistic medium for expressing the way I saw the world from my perspective was the only direction I could bring myself to take. The process of forging something from nothing gripped my attention and I have not looked back since. I grew up listening to good ole boys, standing in a circle and conversing over a stout cup of coffee. I remember them saying, "No matter what you do, you should follow your heart, don't worry about the path you take, just follow it, you'll get there." -The good ole boys

The use of traditional mechanisms such as tools, bricks, stairs, doorways, passages, repetition, and geometric forms have been an overarching theme in my work through the years. The significance of all of this is finally coming to the surface in more tangible ways. It is through the connections. Those connections have been in progress over the course of the twelve years that I have spent searching for something extraordinary.

With the work *The 25th Hour* I want the viewer to feel the sharpness of the glass, though it is not. I want them to be taken by the beauty and elegance that the material possesses in its most pure form through its clear and most translucent state. I want them to smile in wonderment while experiencing something new for the first time as I do every time I create something. Adversely, I also aimed to create the feeling and affect of having a structure towering over you. I aspired to fabricate something that was always changing, alluding to the disorientation that I felt when I moved to New Orleans, and I wanted to compel my viewers to interact with the art. This sculpture was made for everyone. The composition has largely been inspired by New Orleans architecture and has three seven-foot tall hinges that allow the sculpture's seven foot wide by twelve-foot tall rectangular frames to change and breathe within other possible locations. For this location and experience I wanted to guide my viewers through the space, compelling them to engage in a way they felt comfortable. I also made sure that it met ADA handicap accessible guidelines for the present arrangement so that everyone could share the experience.

Thirty varying sized, steel framed glass staircases suspend from the massive frames and suggests the objects are floating within the room. The glass labyrinth

folds into three other possible configurations as if it is ever, changing. The significance of the labyrinth is that it is a meditation device for me. Having had the experience of walking a classical labyrinth, it gave me the feeling of being possibly lost, while at the same time, it also gave me the sensation of being found or having a small amount of clarity within myself after reaching the end. This is where I connect with this theme. I believe we surround ourselves with necessary webs in order to make sense of our surroundings, gaining further insight into what makes us tick as individuals and as a culture. This work expounds upon the two steps forward and three steps backward notion that typifies the human condition. When the viewer reaches the back wall of the installation they are trapped within the space and the only way out is to retrace their steps. While the trap has been set, the bait remains on the wall of the gallery space and asks the viewer to further interact with a series of blueprints, which frames my visual language and tells the story of how the sculpture was conceived. Only when they have studied the blueprints will they realize and see the significance and symbolism embedded in the numbers. The story has no words; it only bears symbolic reference through its form and the numbers because numbers are how I see the world around me. The symbolism that I have connected with through the dimensions and systematic process of my time spent trying to discover something extraordinary within myself are directly referenced within *The 25th Hour*. The title is a concept I came up with during my undergraduate degree and is a mechanism for me to remember how it feels to yearn for an extra hour within each day to do one of two things. The first is to have an extra hour for reminiscing with loved ones; the second is to have an extra hour in the studio to work.

When you walk to the entrance of *The 25th Hour* installation the first image you see is a cascading, fragmented grouping of glass objects resembling staircases floating in mid-air, suspended by reflective stainless steel cables no larger than a toothpick in diameter. The second image that catches your eye is a bold, jagged black line made by the large structural steel tubing of the frames that divide the space and mimic the motif of the glass objects in view. The third image is of the shadows cast on the wall through the doorway of the final frame. The final frame has been left empty except for a doorway that in turn, casts a shadow of a doorway onto the wall that is surrounded by unsupported, fragmented staircases floating in space. When the sculpture is closed at the hinges it is complete. A few of the shadows are crisp and vibrate with clarity, while the others start to become more hazy and vague and the clarity begins to fade, some are not recognizable at all. This play with space, object, light, shadow, and experience are a few of the formal and conceptual qualities that add suspense to this sculptural installation. Each frame supports numerous glass objects; the importance of the support structure is in how each object is suspended from one another, alluding to the supporting factors that each fragment plays in all of our lives. The fragments begin to align and intuitively begin to make sense, forming complete paths within each chapter of this three dimensional autobiography. This story is told through an accordion style bound book written in glass and steel. The significance of the silhouette of a doorway behind the cascade of glass represents the story not being complete. The shadows cast through and around the sculpture alludes to the story possibly having already been written.

As we all move forward, most of us are trying to get somewhere comfortable or even extraordinary. We all share struggle and strife. Interrelationships and connections are a large part of the supporting structures we build that make life meaningful.

This is our affliction.

“A man craves ultimate truths. Every mortal mind, I think, is that way. But what is ultimate truth? It's the end of the road, where there is no more mystery, no more hope. And no more questions to ask, since all the answers have been given. But there is no such place.

The Universe is a labyrinth made of labyrinths. Each leads to another. And wherever we cannot go ourselves, we reach with mathematics. Out of mathematics we build wagons to carry us into the nonhuman realms of the world.”

Stanislaw Lem, Fiasco

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BIOGRAPHY

Christopher Gray, originally from Iowa, moved to Minnesota at the age of twenty to learn the art of glassblowing. He has been working with glass since 2005 and enjoys sharing his knowledge and love for the medium through teaching others. He studied glass at Anoka Ramsey Community College and at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls, where he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Glass and Sculpture. Since then he has traveled to Penland School of Crafts in the mountains of North Carolina and to Pittsburgh Glass Center and Pilchuck Glass School in the Pacific Northwest to work with many artists and learn new techniques. He also competes in local, national, and international competitions, receiving recognition for his glass creations. He is now an MFA graduate student and is currently working towards finishing his degree in May 2017.



The 25th Hour

Direct-cast glass, steel

thirty varying sized glass objects 10" x 3" x 4" – 36" x 3" x 4"

four hinging frames

84" x 144" x 6" each



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“I don't know where I'm going from here, but I promise it won't be boring.”
David Bowie