

Art:Design:Culture

# Glass

The UrbanGlass  
Art Quarterly

Nicole Chesney's  
Luminescence

Antarctic Inspiration

Colin Reid's Distillations

Andy Paiko  
Complexity  
Composed



US \$9 | CANADA \$9.95



NUMBER 135 : SUMMER 2014



# WROUGHT

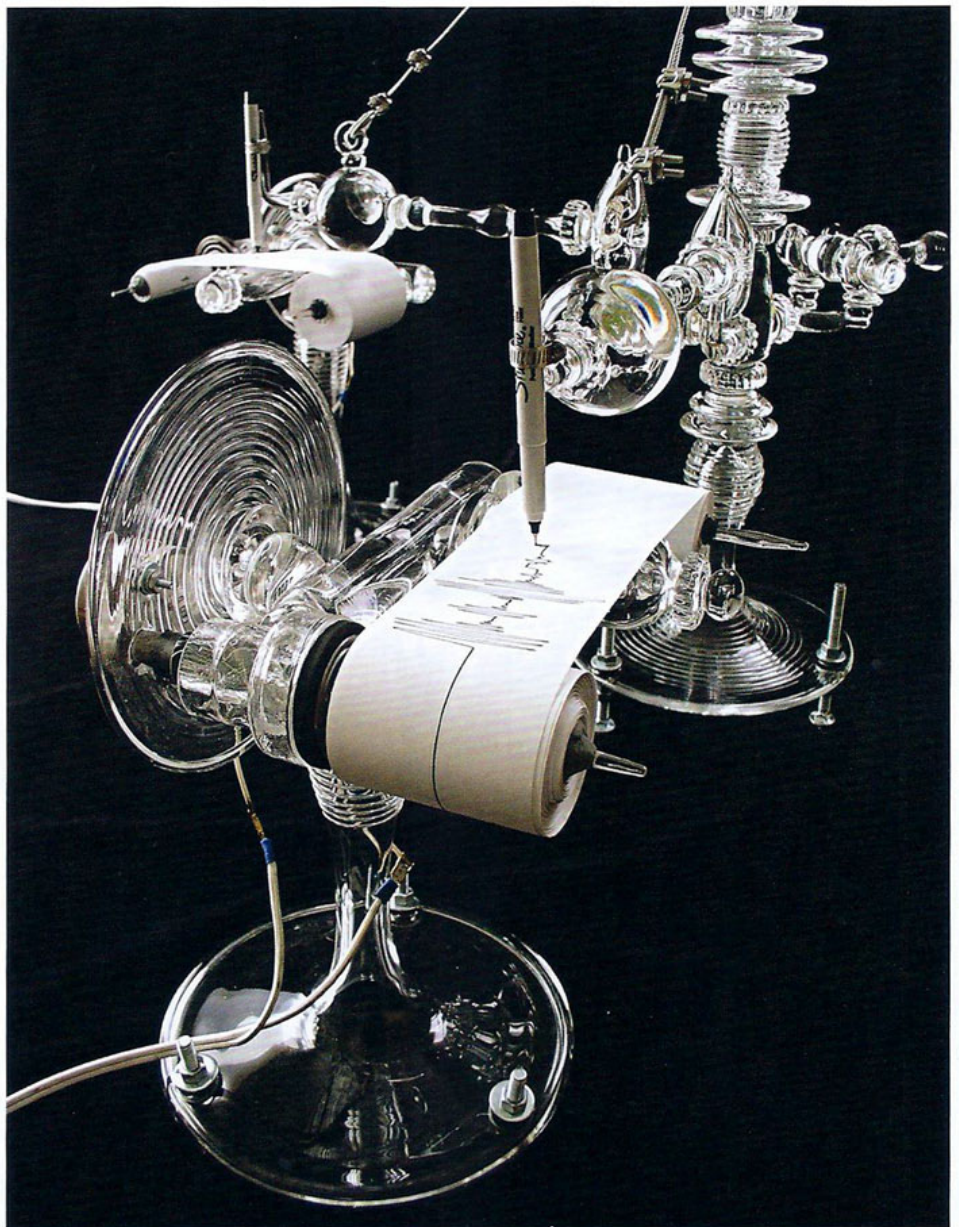
*ANDY PAIKO's elaborately worked objects intensify the visual glory of looking at glass and connect to an imagined era that diverges sharply from our own.*

BY ROBIN RICE





OPPOSITE PAGE: *Small Bell Jar Finials (detail)*, 2013. Blown, sculpted, assembled glass. H 8 in. (tallest)  
PHOTO: THE ARTIST



**T**he steampunk aesthetic, a self-consciously anachronistic movement in science fiction and fashion that connects Victorian-era aesthetics of high ornamentation with intricate machinery, is fueled perhaps by a romantic longing for an alternative history to the one that led to our sterile, frictionless digital era. Though glass artist Andy Paiko rejects the label steampunk for his elaborately wrought glass works, some of them actual functioning machinery with complex flowering finials, he admits that steampunk's romantic, post-apocalyptic motifs resonate for him and may even have influenced his glass sculptures.

A lecturer in the Distinguished Artist series at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery and chosen as a 2008 Searchlight Artist by the American Craft Council, Paiko has been identified as an artist with a strong point of view, but he has only recently had consistent art gallery representation, having shown primarily in design-oriented retail settings.

"Steampunk" is more a starting point than a definition of Paiko's work. Consider the shining elegance of Paiko's first motorized sculpture, *Seismograph* (2006), which contrasts with the often decaying machinery that usually falls under the steampunk umbrella. It is an emblem of the marriage of science and art, and self-consciously reveals its workings rather than hiding them in a microchip.

Seismographs record the movement of the surface to which they are attached (ideally bedrock). The first seismograph is said to be a second-century Chinese invention that included bronze dragons and

ABOVE: *Seismograph (detail)*, 2006. Functional kinetic sculpture from blown, sculpted, assembled glass, motors, magnets, receipt rolls, pens, steel hardware. H 32, W 44, D 48 in.

COLLECTION: PRIVATE  
PHOTO: THE ARTIST



OPPOSITE PAGE: *Air-Twist Candelabra*, 2012. **Blown, sculpted, assembled glass.** H 34, W 16, D 16 in.  
 COLLECTION: PRIVATE  
 PHOTO: THE ARTIST



*Ladder to Light (JDRF)*, 2013.  
**Blown, sculpted, etched, assembled glass, linen cord, wax.** Left: H 28, W 11, D 6 in.  
 Right: H 24, D 5 ½ in.

COLLECTION: PRIVATE  
 PHOTO: THE ARTIST

frogs among its working parts. In comparison, Paiko's components—mostly solid glass, with occasional curvaceous flourishes and spiraling threading—are restrained. Motion along any of three axes is recorded on rolls of paper. The spooling triad of white opacity is a fixed *and* evolving element within a dematerialized glittering frame.

The idea of a fragile glass object recording a massive and potentially destructive gesture of the Earth amused Paiko when he planned it for an exhibition in San Francisco. He hoped, he says, “for an earthquake during the show that would pitch it on the floor and ruin it,” but he had to be satisfied with simply selling it to a collector he never met in person.

The division of the machine into three physical branches perhaps hints at something about Paiko: A dichotomy may be too simple for him. He acknowledges a “latent, underlying mechanical-engineer facet to my personality. When I see an old machine—something that’s elegant in its function—I love to take that machine apart in my mind and figure out what combination of elements and components are essential in that object’s functionality.” A machine becomes an obsession. “Once I see that mechanism in motion, when I lie awake at night and can’t sleep, that piece is turning in my mind, and I have to figure out a way to interpret that in my practice.”

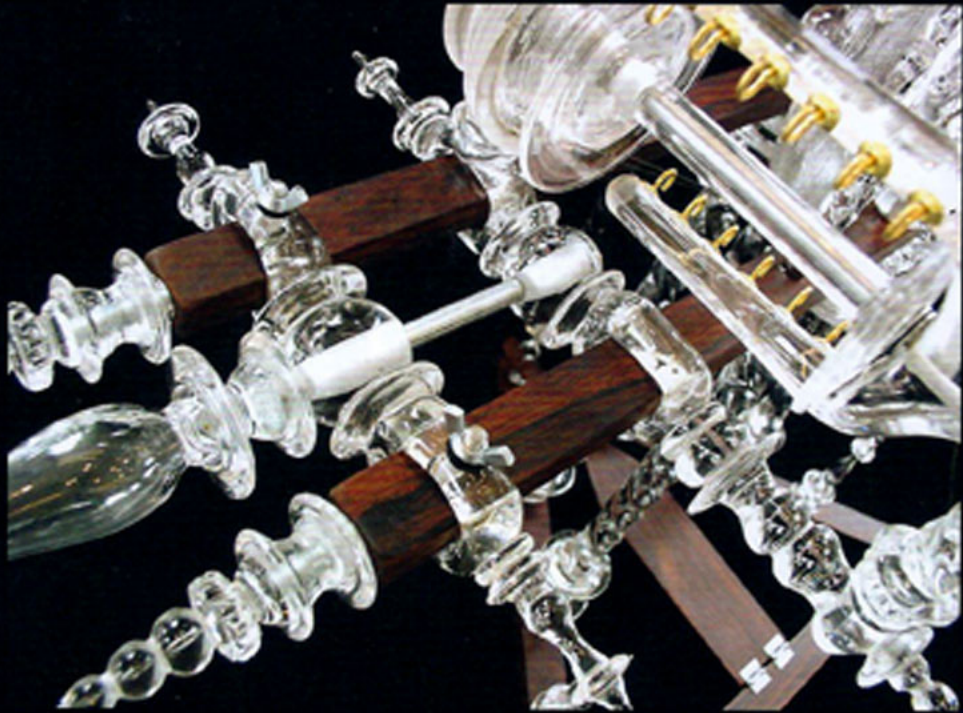
Paiko began blowing glass as a teenager in California, working with Fred “Sonny” Cresswell, who remained a mentor until his death in 2011. His early sumptuous vessels reflected the Art Nouveau colors and decoration of Louis Comfort Tiffany, Émile Gallé, and the Daum brothers, a great creative period for glass technically and aesthetically. In college Paiko turned toward more thoughtful conceptual content and less color, but, he says, “With all glassblowers ... a lot of stuff you make tends to derive directly from the pure joy of looking at glass.... I’ve retained that enthusiasm. From super Venetian, candy-like stuff to modern Czech glass—yeah, I study it. I love to look at it.”

For years he was fascinated by “the air twist, an English design, a twisted bubble that looks sort of like a double helix. That was always a mystery to me.” Glass is an art in which specialized skills are passed from individual to individual. Paiko recalls, “A few years ago someone showed me how to make an air twist, and I’ve incorporated that very historical detail of time and place into all sorts of sculptural things—just because the process is so fun.”

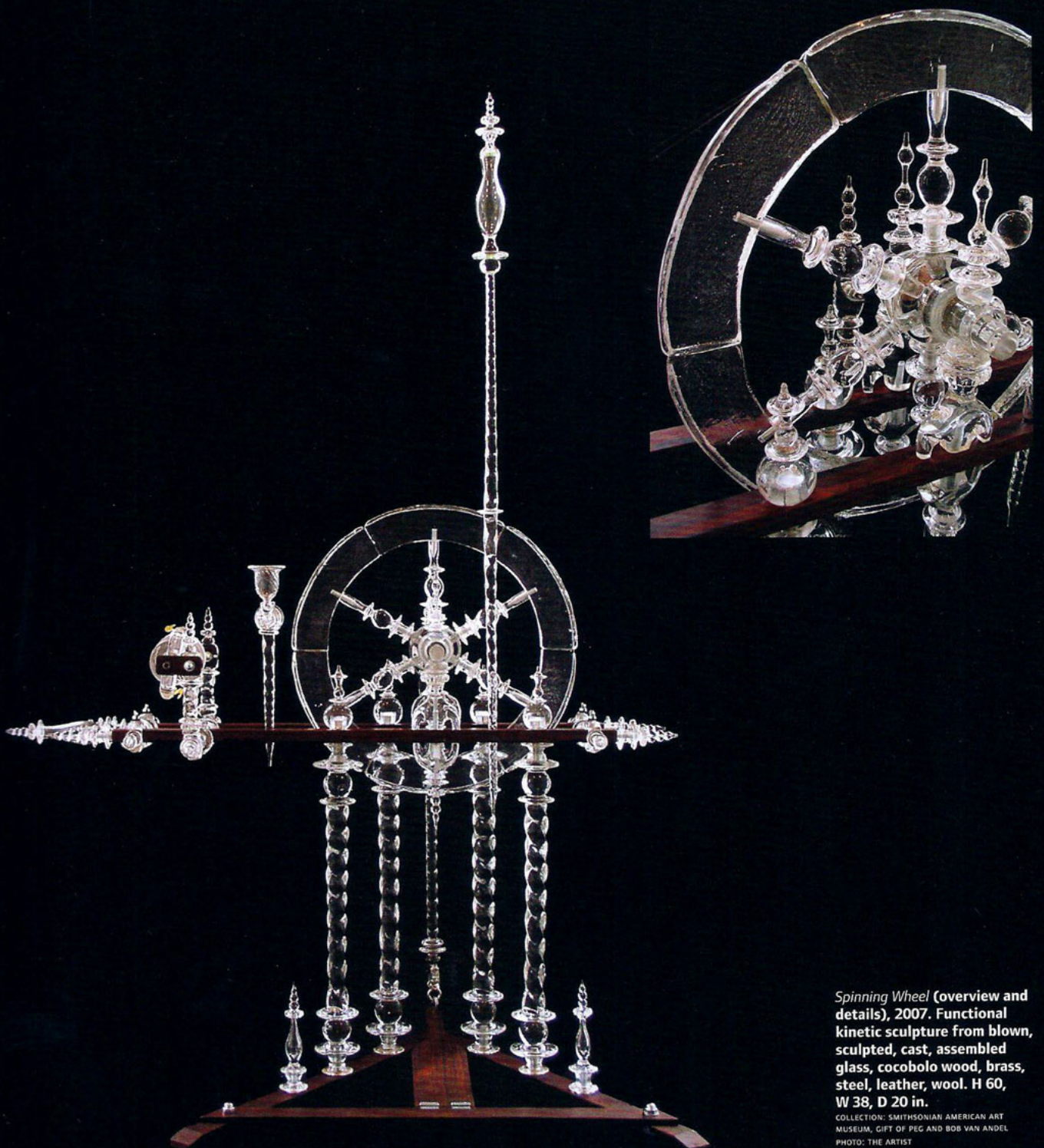












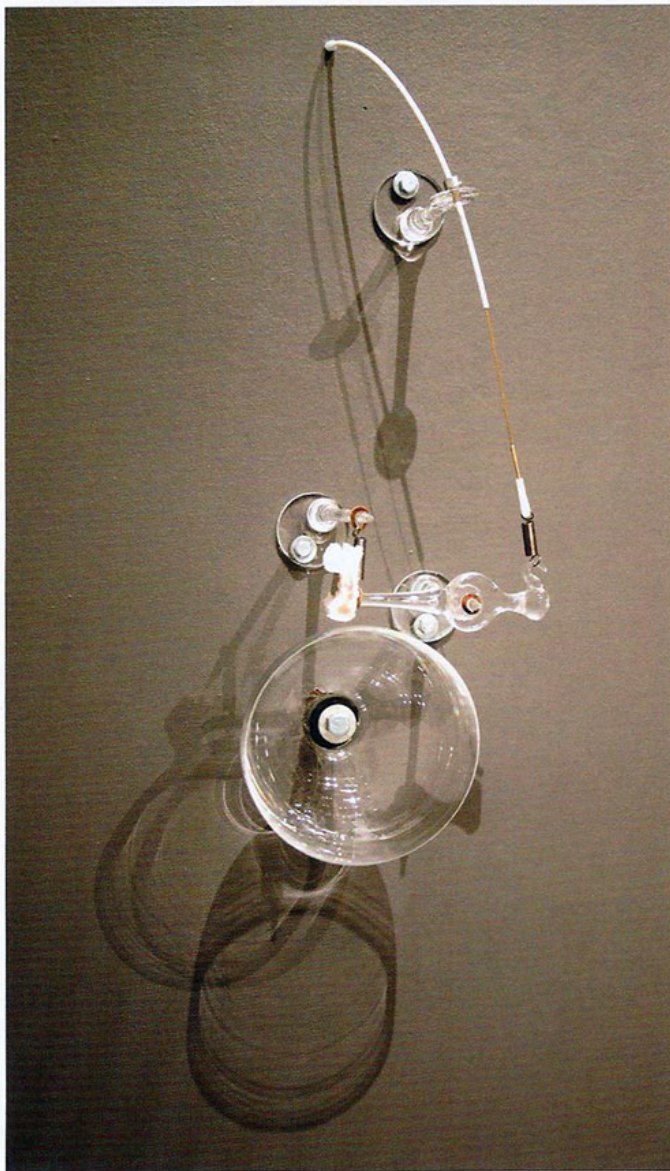
*Spinning Wheel (overview and details), 2007. Functional kinetic sculpture from blown, sculpted, cast, assembled glass, cocobolo wood, brass, steel, leather, wool. H 60, W 38, D 20 in.*

COLLECTION: SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM, GIFT OF PEG AND BOB VAN ANDEL  
PHOTO: THE ARTIST



BELOW: *Transference*, 2009-2013. Site-specific glass/sound installation with up to 40 blown, tuned glass bowls, sculpted glass hardware, motors, acrylic, felt, brass and steel hardware, wood, electronic controls. Dimensions variable.

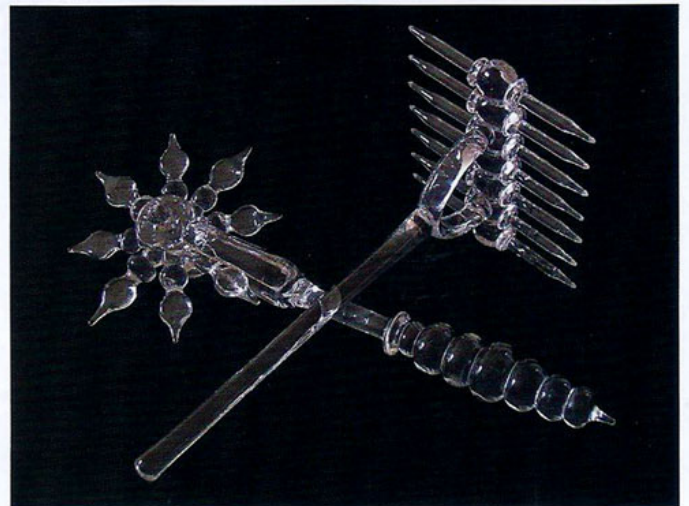
PHOTO: THE ARTIST



Paiko's popular on-going "Bell Jar" and "Reliquary" series manifest the "melancholic" nostalgia and mania for collecting celebrated by Celeste Olalquiaga in *The Artificial Kingdom*. The elaborate display vessels seem suited to an 18th-century cabinet of curiosities, or a steampunk interior. The first one he made was personal, a bell jar housing a single dandelion puff that remains intact today some 15 years later. He can enshrine most anything. Bones, especially spines, occasionally gold-leafed, are sometimes echoed in the shapes of the tall stacked glass. The Reliquaries are embellished with intricate finials reminiscent of illustrations in *Kunstformen der Natur* by zoologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). They, too, seem to comment on the contents displayed: Paiko assembles much of his work from individually blown components that he coldworks to perfection. The sense of historic Gothic splendor is as strong as a more enigmatic, contemporary gothic fantasy. "Even more than I like color, I like the optical density of glass, the eye-dazzling aspects of it. I'm a purist in a sense. I like the shininess; I'm like a crow."

At 60 inches tall, Paiko's fully functional *Spinning Wheel* (2007) is a monument to the optical potential of glass. Four months in the making, with wickedly flamboyant finials and twisting verticals, it awaits the midnight visit of Rumpelstiltskin and the spinning of straw into gold. The wheel's magical character is belied and enhanced by crystalline refracted beams that might illuminate a desperate princess's dungeon room.

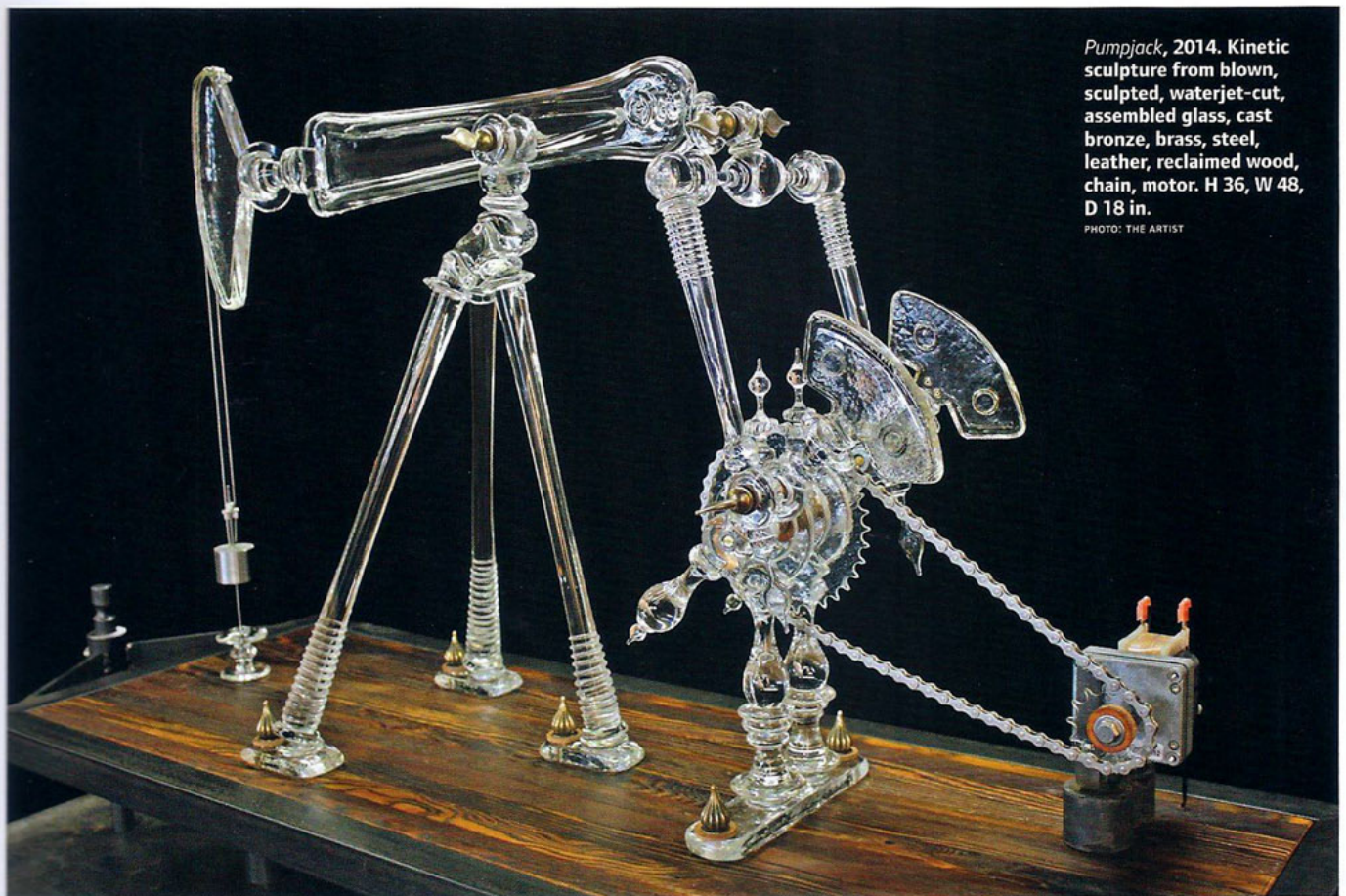
Paiko became intrigued by the way a respirator transfers motion from up and down to a lateral, bellows-like gesture, puzzling out how that can be accomplished by analyzing his own breathing. He interpreted the idea in *Pumpjack* (2014), noting that the pump "exhales" the energy "inhaled" by the Earth in the form of protons generated long ago by the Sun. Created for his recent show at Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia, the piece is "an iconic machine," partly supported on tripod legs bolted to a wooden wheeled carriage. Numerous leaf-like metal thumbscrews were fabricated by Paiko's friend Danny Schuler. A commercial bicycle chain drives a glass gear, and other small wood and leather parts somehow emphasize the mass of glass that makes up the structure. It is imposing in the sunlight.



ABOVE: *Harrow and Punch*, 2011. Sculpted and assembled glass. Harrow: H 7, L 12, D 8 in. Punch: H 6, L 13, D 3 in.

PHOTO: THE ARTIST





*Pumpjack*, 2014. Kinetic sculpture from blown, sculpted, waterjet-cut, assembled glass, cast bronze, brass, steel, leather, reclaimed wood, chain, motor. H 36, W 48, D 18 in.  
PHOTO: THE ARTIST

Paiko's recent work seems to increasingly emphasize precision and multi-step processes. He used a laser and a water-jet cutter to fashion *Chandelier* (2013), an unlit space divider of bubbles made in optic molds. The pattern of suspended silhouettes is utterly pleasing, simultaneously Baroque and modernist. However, he eschewed visual flourishes for *Transference* (2009–2013), a collaborative sound installation he designed with composer Ethan Rose for the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, Oregon. The installation is a gallery-size, mechanized version of a glass harmonica, an 18th-century musical instrument. It's based on the phenomenon of the sound vibrations produced when a moistened fingertip slides around the rim of a wineglass. The appearance of the work was minimal even though it filled the gallery, bathing visitors in subtle, penetrating vibrations as if they were inside a giant music box. Paiko says that the original installation, which has since been presented in several forms, contains more than 6,000 parts, "either made or modified by ourselves." Each sound-producing mechanism includes a hand-blown "singing" bowl carefully tuned by grinding. He undertook the project with his usual enthusiasm before he fully understood the number of materials and processes that would be involved. Simply finding ways to keep the "fingertip" moistened and controlling the pressure against the glass weren't simple at all, and almost derailed the timetable for the exhibition. A recent iteration involved a smaller group of notes selected by Rose. Paiko observed that although the sounds were randomly generated, the music had a melancholy air, an effect similar to the moods associated with Greek modes or Indian scales (ragas) for different times of day.

An 18th-century musical analogy, perhaps "Mozartian," seems appropriate to Andy Paiko's ongoing creative process. His projects are historically grounded and often suggest narrative. Science makes a contribution to his sometimes witty dialogue between the future and the past, and his rather formal explorations of theme and variation develop spatially and sometimes temporally. In Paiko's work, the strength and the clarity of glass is enhanced by voluptuous yet delicate ornamentation that overlies and underlines larger compelling structures. Each variation whets the appetite for what may come next. Andy Paiko gives every indication that he's an artist just starting to hone his direction, and it's one worth watching closely. ■

*ROBIN RICE is a Philadelphia-based critic and educator.*