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WHAT I'VE LEARNED: WORLD-CHAMPION ICE SCULPTOR, SHINTARO OKAMOTO

By **Andrew Steinbeiser** on January 6, 2014

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Ice has a special place because of its impermanency. It's that one time only. It's that one moment, and it's really amazing when we get to witness people who experience the



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memory, and it's really amazing when we get to witness people who experience the sculpture and say "Oh, my god it's ice. It's melting." I think it's that realization, that moment, that instant, that they become very aware of the present.

My dad had been an ice sculptor for thirty-five years or so, much of his professional life. So I grew up watching him and helping him out, in Anchorage, Alaska. No Alaskans played with ice, but I did.

We are in service of the material that we get. Glacial ice is not so great for sculpting because it's tightly compacted snow that melts, then freezes over in a process that goes on for thousands of years. There's a romance there to be able to sculpt something that's thousands of years old. When we have the rare occasion to sculpt from a single piece, in terms of that kind of seduction, I think any sculptor can feel akin to. As a wood sculptor, when you have a giant chunk that you get to play around with without any joints or seams, it's orgasmic.

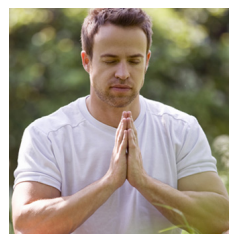
There's physics to everything, but in the heat of the moment and in process, it's pure muscle memory and pure gamble.

It's melting, so we can't really stand around making a dabble here and there and watch. Once we start, we have to commit and execute to the end. When we first get a block, we literally have to design and sculpt in our heads, and line up the tools we need to use. We don't want to touch the same tool twice. And that kind of finesse, I think, is very attractive. Compared to wood or stone or any of the other stuff, we really realize the volume and create a sculpture and an environment in a very efficient pace. I think that call for efficiency is very attractive, too.

Technically, yes, the label is that I was number one in the world. It meant very little to me, because that kind of placement and ranking is a bit subjective. It's so immediate and short-sighted. I think as an artist, you are judged in a much longer trajectory.

We did a twenty-five-foot-tall ice heart with the Times Square Alliance. Initially, it was supposed to be up for a week. But it stood so well and was so well balanced, so beautiful; it consumed all of the surrounding light and glowed. The Times Square people extended the project another week, even as it went through a rainstorm and snowstorm. It was breaking down, but that kind of transformation—while still being able to see what it was—was getting such public appeal that they kept it up there for another week.

At one level, it's about letting go. The only thing you take home is how different you are after that one project. I spend a lot of time painting and creating this work, but it's about



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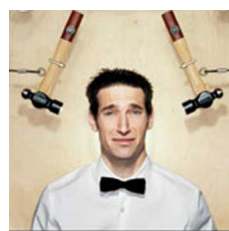
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that discovery and a lot less about the work. You go on. Ice sculpting is very literal in terms of that experience.

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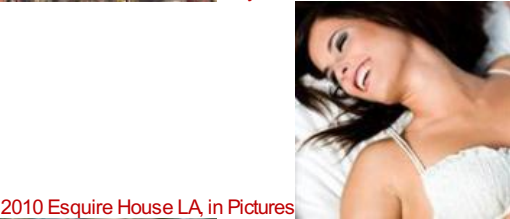
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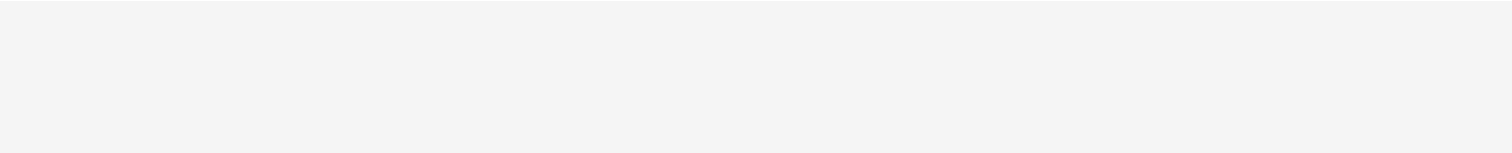


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