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Shintaro Okamoto and his father Takeo Okamoto are the owners of Okamoto Studio, an ice sculpting enterprise based in Long Island City. Shintaro was born in Japan and raised in Alaska, then moved to New York where his father opened the business while he finished his education (BA from Brown University and an MFA from Hunter College) He is a very serious minded person and as the marketing end behind his family business he has carried it far and wide: a guest appearance on Food Network's Iron Chef, the Princess of Qatar's wedding and dozens of posh Bar Mitzvahs.

I have to tell you when that when I was growing up, the thought of ice sculpture to me was tacky, and I just associated it with weddings and bar mitzvahs—and I think actually there still is a bit of stigma. How do you get on with that sort of image?

It's funny because when we first started it, the idea of starting an ice sculpture studio in New York, we realized there was this big gap, a dry-spell spot in terms of any kind of quality work one can do. And you're right, I think when people think of ice sculptures they think of cruise ships, swans and hearts and doves and really nothing more than that. If anything, for us, I think the benefit that you create something so far from that ... there's an unbelievable factor. Why is this made out of ice? It's the unexpected. For me that's a personal joy.

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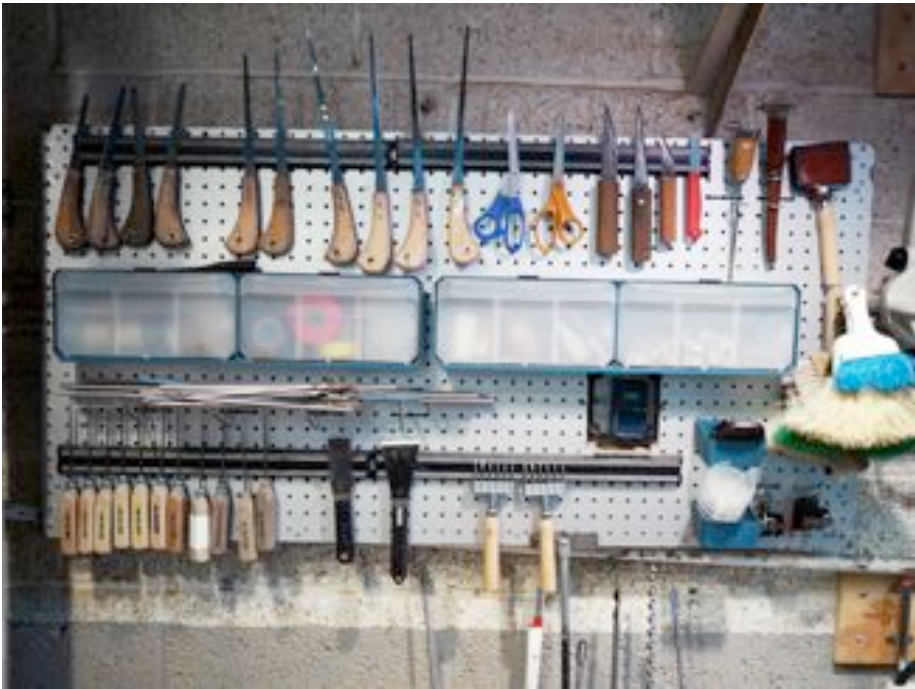
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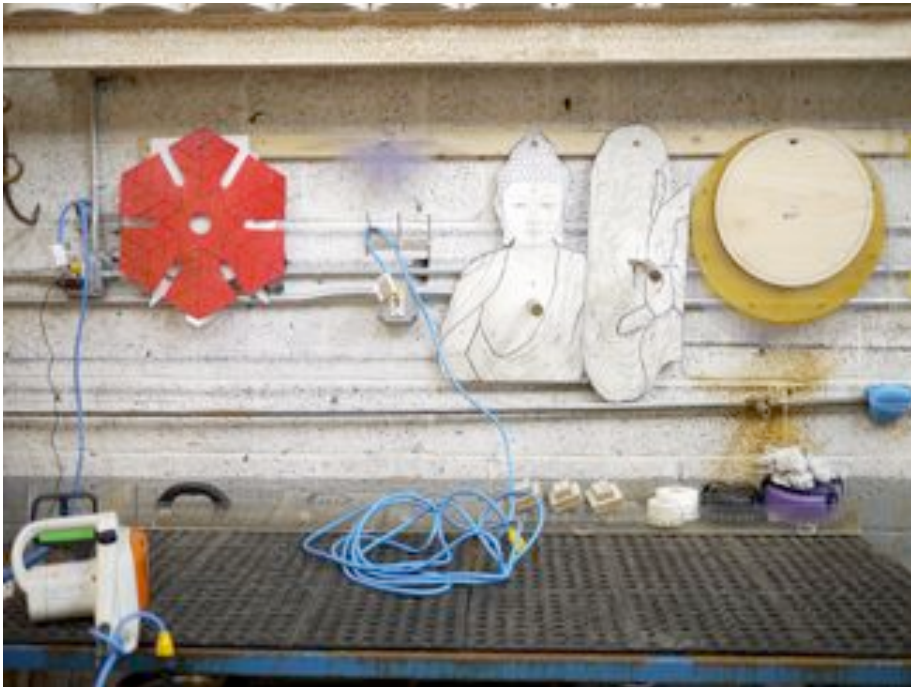
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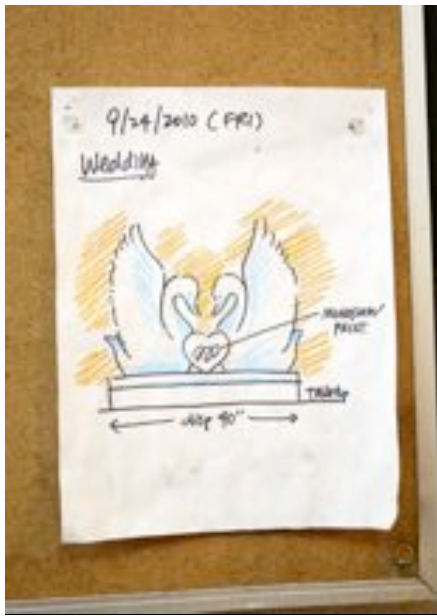
A selection of chainsaws.



Inspiration and reference models fill the studio shelves.



The Buddha was used as template for a project for the Tribeca restaurant Megu (the Okamoto Studio used to make a daily sculpture, over 2000 Buddhas, for the restaurant).



A pair of swans for a wedding.



Projects for the restaurant Le Bernadin.



A series of measurements is taken of a photograph of a Chesapeake Bay Retriever, then scaled to size for sculpting.

I guess the other part of it—you know I'm sort of the type of person who buys orchids instead of flowers because they last longer—and ice melts. So that whole feeling, how transitory it is ... I'm thinking why don't you just do it in glass?

It's definitely for the moment. And, yes you can make [a piece] out of glass or acrylic, if you want that aesthetic, but it's going to cost you ten, twenty or thirty times more. I think the attraction of working with ice it is that one time, one moment ... to physicalize this moment. It's a time piece and it forces people to be that much more present in the moment.

Right. I mean they're typically used for celebration and celebration is of the moment.

Yeah, yeah.

Speaking of the moment, how long does an ice sculpture usually last?

In general it's about eight to ten hours before it loses details. It takes days for it to completely go away. We use a very specialized ice where it is frozen without any air bubbles—that's where the clarity comes from. It is more densely frozen and it melts slower than a conventional ice cube.

Click to view a video of Takeo Okamoto creating a luge in the shape of flames.

How did you end up doing this?

I grew up with it, really. My father is the master sculptor and my partner in the studio. We started the studio in the spring of 2003. But before that my father was based in Anchorage, Alaska, and that's where I grew up.

Oh, you did?

Yes—cliché that it may seem!

So you grew up with ice!

I grew up with ice! I remember the first time that my father took out a chain saw on one winter's day, we went out to a lake and he cut out a block and sculpted a swan and gave it to a friend. It kind of had this ripple effect and people wanted more and more.

So he started doing ice sculpting in Alaska.

Yeah. He's lived many different lives. In Alaska he owned and ran a Japanese restaurant. In Japan we had a family business, a construction business.



Clockwise from top: Okamoto Studio branding; A hearty potted plant survives in the cold; Button's personal belongings.



The 'to do' list.



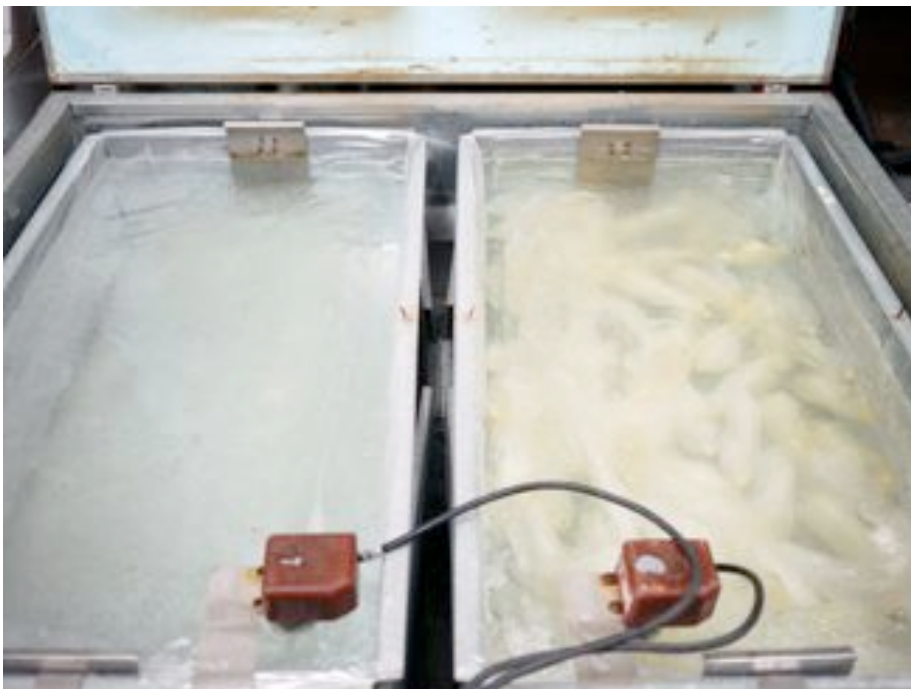
Gloves drying out on a heated surface.



A decorative flag depicts the Japanese symbol for 'ice'.



The Okamoto Studio makes its own ice in these custom ice machines.



On the right, dozens of filled condoms are frozen in a block of ice for project for the Museum of Sex.



Clockwise from above: An outdoor thermometer provides a reference point for the studio temperature; Shintaro's alma mater; NY Giants helmets were frozen in ice for a Bar Mitzvah.



Rows of light boxes to illuminate the ice sculptures are stored in the front entryway of the studio.



A much-needed ceiling heater provides a bit of relief in the otherwise frigid studio.



The studio, once a car repair shop, still uses the original drain for discarded ice.



Takeo, Shintaro's father, working on an icicle for a Neutrogena photo shoot.



Extra pairs of waterproof boots are a practical necessity.

Is there a culture that values ice sculpture more than others, like in Japan?

I don't know. I think historically France has the oldest court history of ice sculpture, like from Versailles. In general ice sculpture is tied to culinary prestige. Not only can you create something to accent, but you can also chill your food. But definitely in China and Japan, the sculptural element took a stronger hold. In China, [the city of] Harbin has one of the world's largest ice sculpture festivals where they make an entire city out of ice. And in Canada they have these ice hotels.

Have you ever stayed in an ice hotel?

No, I have not. I have friends and colleagues who are involved in that.

I guess after this, you want to go to the beach?

[Laughs] Yeah, there you go. I do enough with ice!



A view of the studio.



The studio freezer holds stores several 300 lb. blocks of ice for future projects.

Takeo wheels out a block of ice for a sculpture for a benefit at the NYC Fire Museum. The completed project will be a luge for drinks in the shape of flames.



Takeo taking measurements.



A rough sketch of the flames is drawn on the ice block.



Takeo Okamoto at work.







Shintaro and Takeo Okamoto before putting the finishing touches on the "luge of fire."

I absolutely have to ask you about Iron Chef because I'm just fascinated by that show and I was really excited to find out you were on it. Can you tell me about the whole experience?

We've been working with Iron Chef for the past three or four years and we often create the 'reveal' presentations. We've become very closely involved with the creative end of that. The executive producer there came to us with an idea of wanting to bring ice to the forefront. For me it was a great personal satisfaction because it was acknowledged that ice is an active ingredient.

Okay big question: did you know beforehand who was going to win?

No. They do a really good job of keeping the energy as real and sincere as possible.

But they obviously are forewarned. Those secret ingredients couldn't possibly be secret.

It is all kept pretty secret. When we do installations and stuff, they put up walls and no one gets to see. It is hush-hush. Whether the chefs themselves get to see [ingredients]—I don't know.



Top: The completed luge in the shape of flames destined for a benefit for the NYC Fire Museum.
Right: Landlord was created for a group show at Local Project in Long Island City.





Other Okamoto Studio projects. The skyline (*top*) is a seafood installation for a bar mitzvah at the Metropolitan Club.

I'm curious: how much does a typical ice sculpture cost?

It's a tricky question because we're known for doing a unique product but we have certain popular pieces. For instance ice bars – that's a very popular piece and those start at about \$2,800 and up, ice luges are popular for cocktails, they're about \$600 and up. I mean we've done a life size replica of the Alice in Wonderland sculpture in Central Park and we've done an upright piano with an entire keyboard that was turned into a bar.

I suppose clients can at times be over-the-top.

I try not to be tacky. The idea of tacky and cheesy is in the forefront of my head but it is my goal to go beyond that. I mean opulent and decadent can become so beautiful that it is no longer tacky but it's fantastic and dreamlike. It brings awe.

• *Sian Ballen & Lesley Hauge* • *photographs by Jeffrey Hirsch*



En route to Manhattan from the Okamoto Studio in Long Island City.

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