

# Force of nature

Natasha St. Michael's  
lush beadwork has  
unexpected  
inspirations

by Pam O'Connor

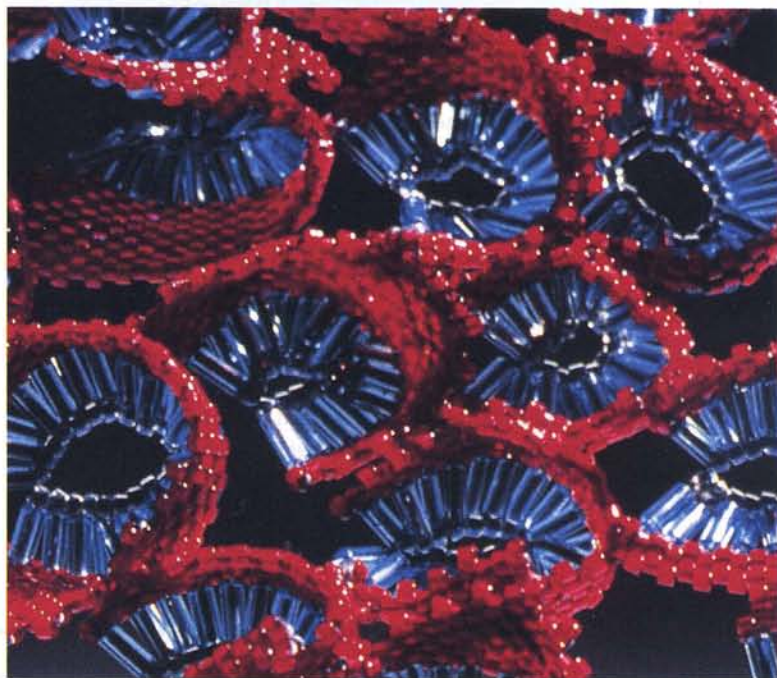
*Inhabited, Infested, Spor*...if you happen upon one of Natasha St. Michael's works of art in a dimly lit room, you might recoil at first, gasping, "Is it alive?" The forms in her intricate, bead-woven tapestries and sculptures are unmistakably organic. They resemble cell structures writ large. In each impressive construction, the individual constituents have been massed 500 to 1000 strong to convey Natasha's message of interconnection and life's infinite continuum – carefully couched in a language of contagion and decomposition.

"I've always been drawn to what some might find ugly or disturbing," explains Natasha. "I'm fascinated by magnified images of cells, particularly diseases. Perhaps I'm drawn to the fact that something awful is also beautiful."

The brilliantly hued *Spor* (p. 130 and at right) illustrates the beauty in this dissonance. Each unit, a whorl of iridescent blue bugle beads edged in vivid red cylinder beads, looks like a Technicolor dandelion ready to blow. But it's the sheer multitude that impresses and imposes the message. The carmine edging becomes a network, a mesh, and there's an undeniable feeling of imminent replication, even without knowing the work's title. Yes, there is strength in numbers.

## fibers to beads

It is obvious that Natasha's work is based on a strong background in fiber arts. Her bachelor of fine arts degree is from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. After graduating, she focused her talents on weaving, then fabric painting and dyeing.

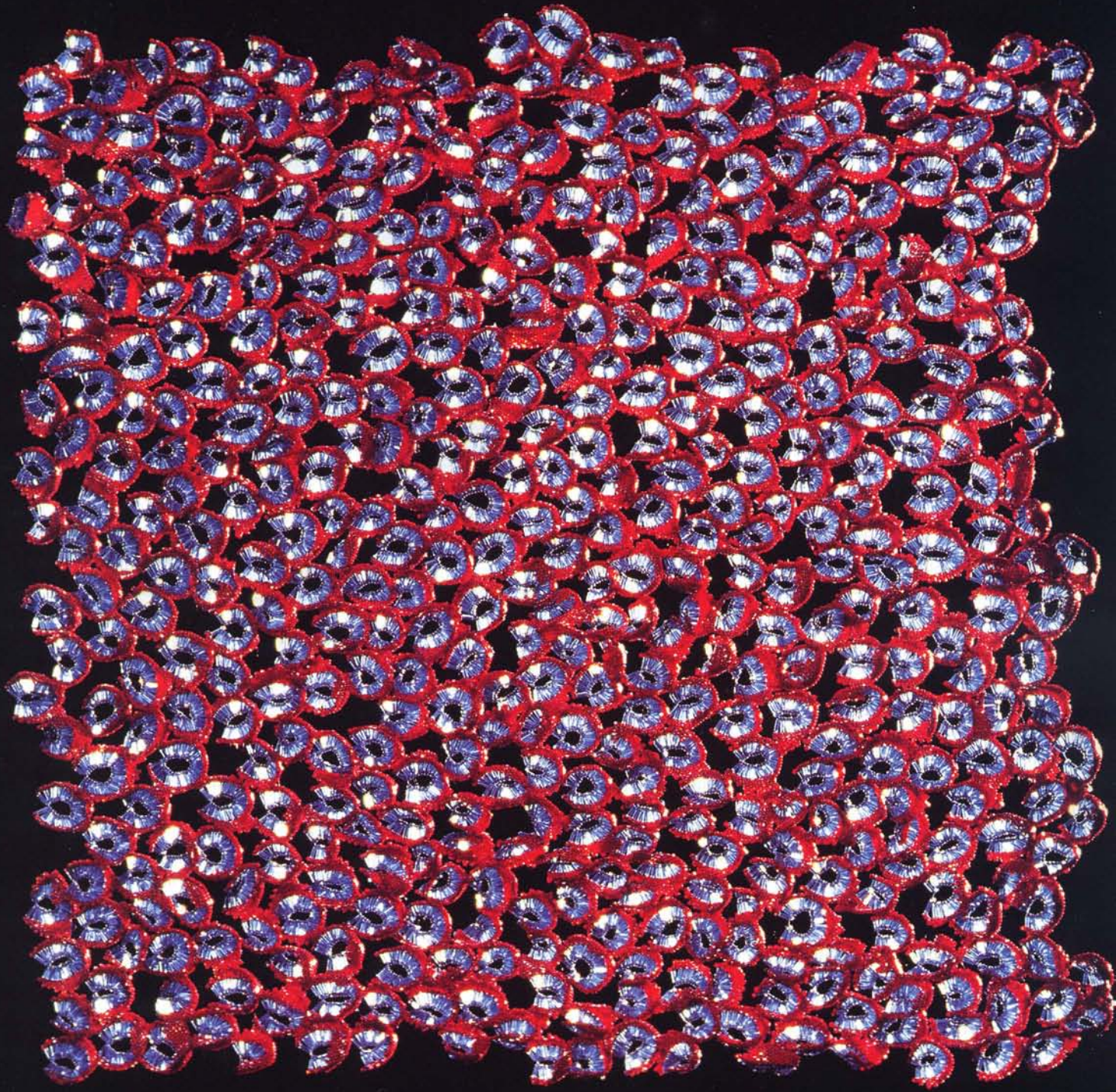


detail of *Spor* Photo: Jocelyn Blais

"I had a basic knowledge of beading stitches while I was a student, but I didn't really work in beads," says Natasha. The impetus to change came from a desire to move from two-dimensional to three-dimensional work.

"I still am very interested in exploring color, and the beads help me do that," says Natasha. Much of her prior work concentrated on aspects of transparency, so working with glass beads was a natural evolution as well as a practical one.

"I had lived in a toxic home surrounded by dyes and chemicals for so long," explains Natasha. "Then I moved to a loft apartment with a kitchen so small it couldn't hold a refrigerator." For all practical purposes that was the end of dyeing.





Installation of *Agglomeration* and *Pervious*. Photo: Zoe Bridgman, zoebridgman.com

### finding beauty in the repulsive

Somehow, though, a refrigerator found its way back into her apartment. When speaking about the starting point for her work *Ferment* (p. 134), she zeroes in on the mundane act of cleaning the refrigerator.

“Things are always going bad in the refrigerator.... You open something spoiled, and it’s repulsive. You immediately want to throw it out. But if you actually take a look at it, something quite beautiful might be growing there.”

A closer look at *Ferment* reveals a profusion of circular, peyote-stitched elements. They are mainly

Reaction to her stark titles is not always positive, St. Michael admits. But the names are important to her. There’s no mistaking what she wants to suggest with the title *Infested*. The piece has a delicate, lacy appearance, sewn mainly of bugle beads. It almost looks like filigreed metal. Even so, the title doesn’t feel incongruous to anyone who has seen the effects of termites or an invasion of spiders.

In fact, an interested buyer once asked Natasha to change the title before she would buy it. Natasha laughs, remembering the conversation with the dealer. “I couldn’t understand it, you know? Was she going to glue a card on the wall next to it in her house?”

Like many artists working with a craft technique, Natasha encounters frequent resistance to her work before it is seen. “Once people see it, though, they usually respond positively,” she relates. “Often it’s better if they approach it with no idea that it’s beadwork and find out afterwards. Their preconceptions are not interfering with their response, and they are open to it.”

### structure and concept

For Natasha, the concept of structure can be the inspiration for an entire piece. “I see my work as structure within a structure within a structure. First, there is the technique to create structure, the construction of the stitch. Then, there is the individual unit, or what I call a multiple. And then, there is the formation of the final piece when I assemble the multiples.”

Natasha’s particular take on the building block concept is evident in many of her pieces. *Pervious* (p. 133, bottom) uses a limited color palette to emphasize the barnacle-like shape of its individual elements. The “mouth” of each element is lined with a cobalt blue. The elements connect in varying

densities, creating an inconsistent fabric that evokes its title. *Agglomeration* (p. 133, top) seems to reject color altogether to focus on form. Its dense, rhythmic assem-

*Even though one piece can take up to five months, I already know what my next piece will be. This keeps me going.*

constructed of clear beads, though some of the larger ones transition to a vibrant blue, not unlike the color transition found when fuzzy mold gets a firm hold on a blighted leftover. The assembly of individual units seems haphazard, suggesting speedy population and generation. It looks like it is about to spread. Natasha works to show us the composition in decomposition.

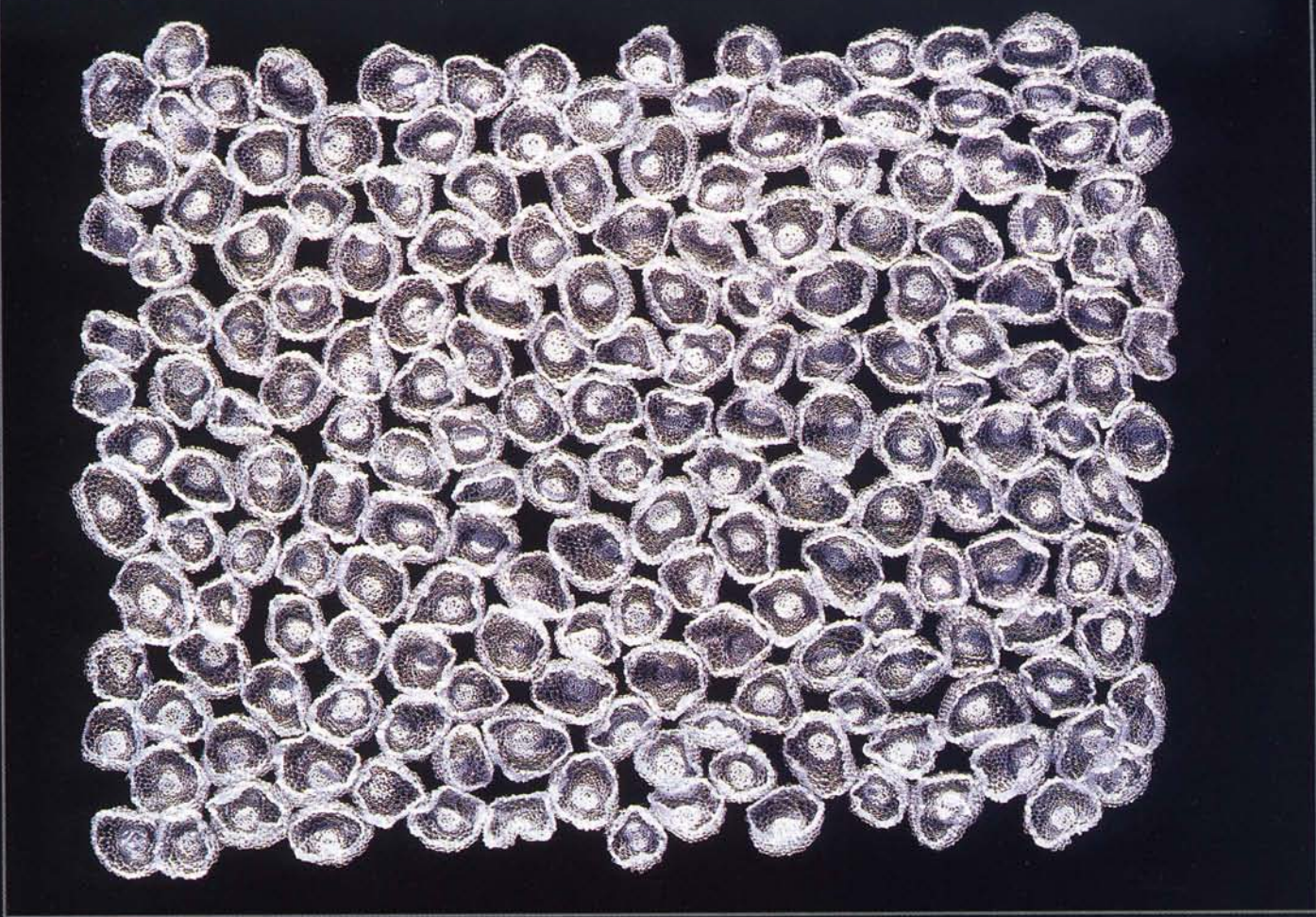
“I was always the kid who kicked open the decomposing log on a walk,” she explains. “I wanted to see what was happening inside...what force was turning what was once large and strong into dirt.”

bly of hollow, sac-like units is highly sensual.

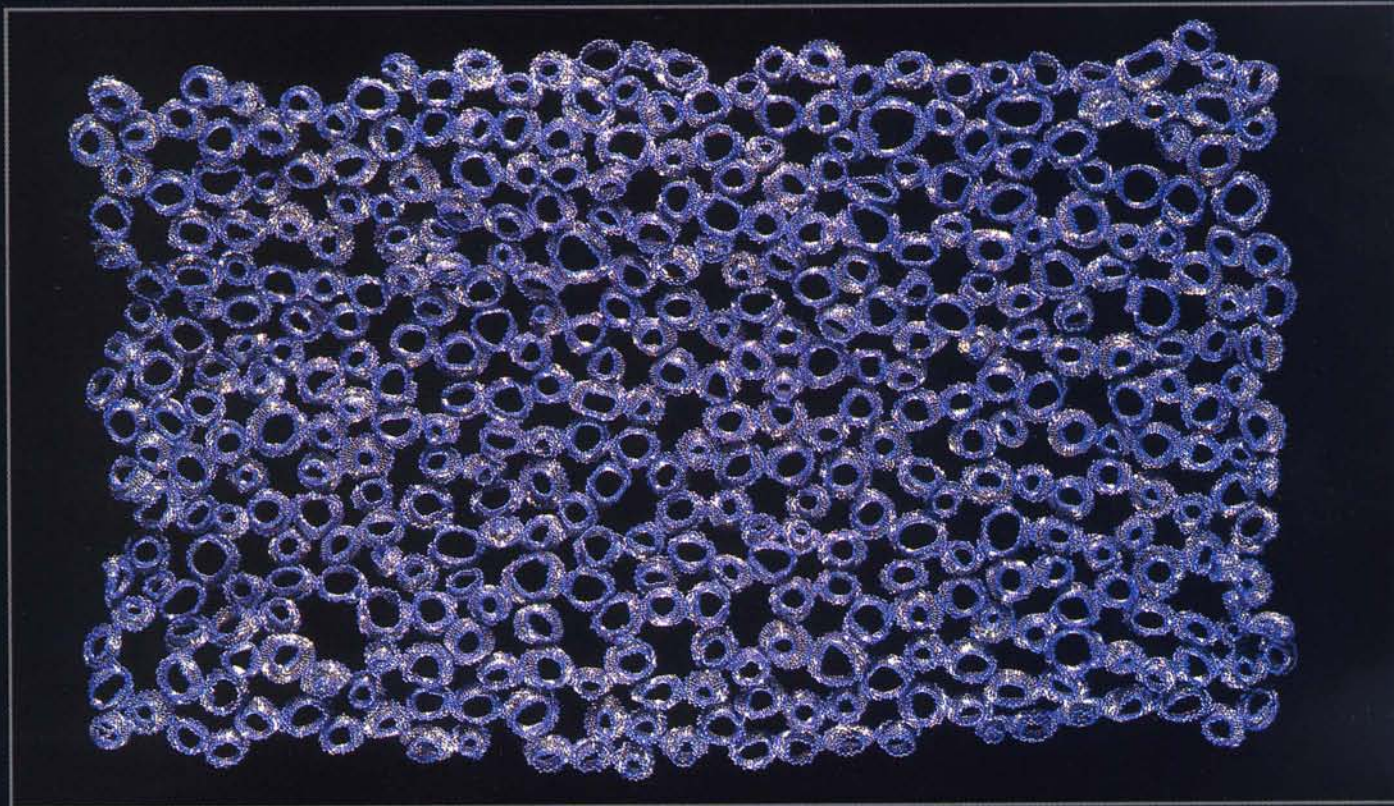
These two works and many of her others are rectangular in shape when put on flat surface, but Natasha doesn’t necessarily present them as conventionally hung pieces when she shows them. “I drape some over Plexiglas forms to give them intriguing shapes, while others can hold sculptural forms without extra support.”

### devotion to detail

The malleable sense of the work also indicates her confidence in the construction of her pieces. They



*Agglomeration* 23½ x 19¼ x 2 in. Photo: Jocelyn Blais



*Pervious* 20 x 13¼ x 1 in. Photo: Jocelyn Blais



*Ferment* 23½ x 19½ x 6½ in. Photo: Paul Litherland

can handle being formed and reformed – evidence of the technical skill and painstaking work that goes into each piece. Anyone who has tried her hand at off-loom beadwork understands the devotion to detail and technique that these large pieces require.

“A work can take anywhere from three to five months, if I am working fifty hours a week,” says Natasha. Once she decides on the components, she works steadily to create the hundreds of units she will need to make a piece. As she completes them,

Making a variety of experimental components is an inspirational technique she learned from an art school mentor. “She told me never to focus on a silver platter piece, just to keep working and completing pieces and moving on to the next work.”

“Every piece I’ve made, I always envision it ten times bigger than what it eventually becomes. Someday, I’d like to complete a huge installation of beadwork,” she says. When you realize that her pieces can be up to 2 ft. in length and contain kilos of beads, the concept is overwhelming.

But there’s no doubt she’ll find the resources to accomplish this one day. Her ability to bring into focus the enthralling forms and beauty of life’s

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she “throws them into a big bowl.” Once she has enough, she begins assembling the final piece. “It can be a frustrating process, even a little bit scary.”

#### **continued exploration**

To cope with the repetitive nature of the work, she continues to explore different concepts, making components that may inspire a future piece.

“I have a bag of ideas full of possibilities for other work. Really, I’m like a mini-factory. Even though one piece can take up to five months, I already know what my next piece will be. This keeps me going.”

essential constituents proves that Natasha St. Michael is herself a force of nature. ●

*Natasha will have a solo exhibition at the Galerie des métiers d’art du Québec, October 15 – November 14, 2004, in Montreal, Canada. Her work will also appear at SOFA Chicago, November 5-7, 2004. For more information, visit her website, [www.natashastmichael.com](http://www.natashastmichael.com), or contact her at [info@natashastmichael.com](mailto:info@natashastmichael.com).*

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