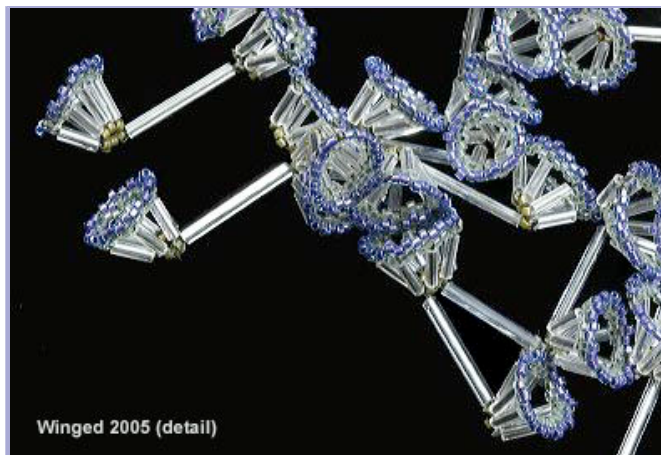
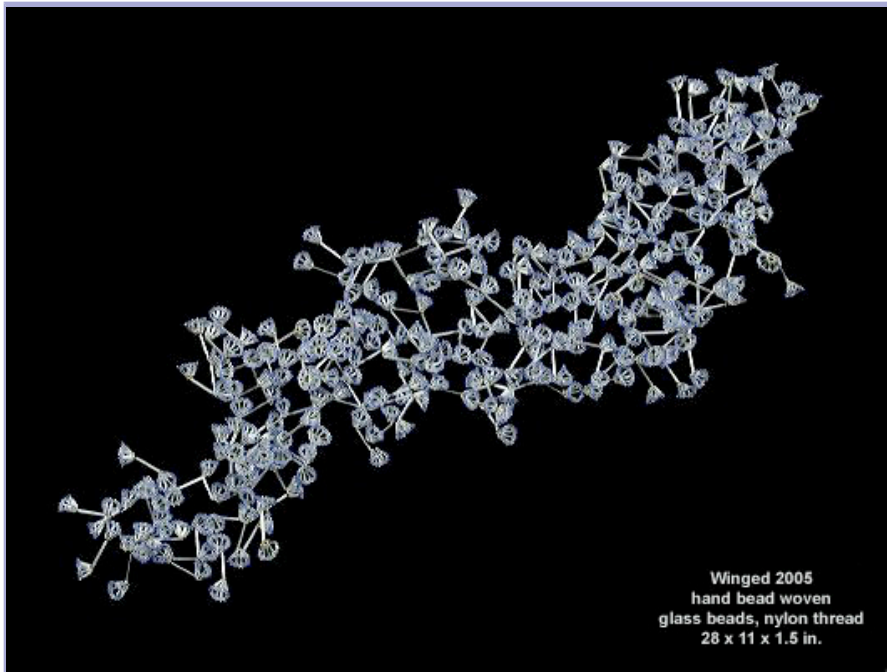




Growth and Decay: The Elegant Bead Art of Natasha St. Michael By Alice Korach

Natasha St. Michael is one of those rare creatures, a bead artist who is managing to support herself by making bead art. "It hasn't been easy," comments this young Canadian, but between grants from the Canadian Council for the Arts and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec and sales of her work, she has been able to devote herself entirely to the development of her artistic vision. Her ultimate goal is to weave

floor to ceiling pieces, but for now she's content with making 20 x 24 to 30 x 30-in. (51 x 61 to 76 x 76cm) beadwoven sculptural masterpieces, primarily using Delica cylinder beads. She spends an average of three to five months creating each piece. The pieces are designed to be displayed either hanging or shaped on a pedestal. Because of the way they're constructed, they can hold a form on their own, "and it's fun to play around with them," Natasha adds.

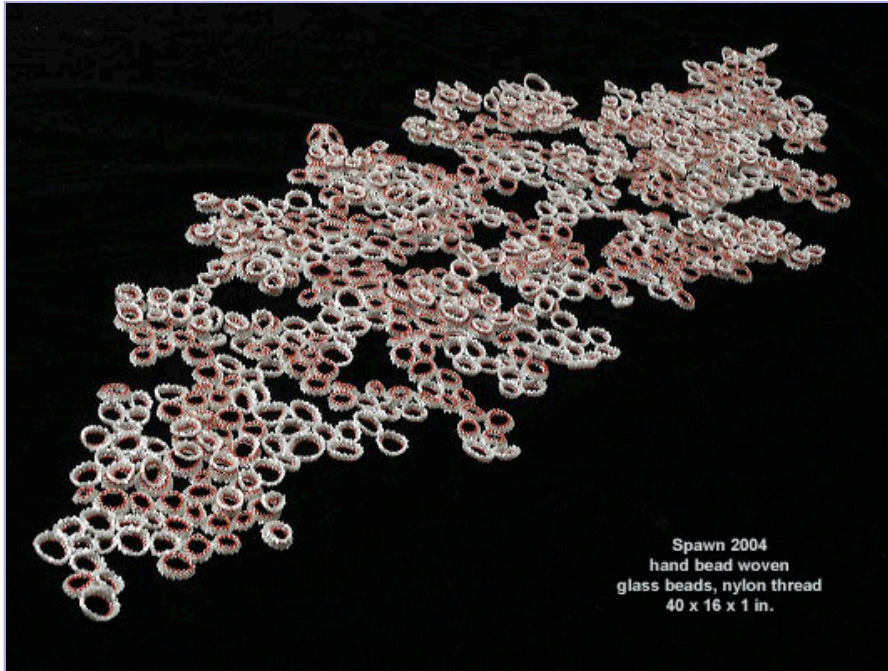


“I always work steadily on one piece, but I have another piece or two started. I need to know what I’m going to do next. I get depressed when I finish a piece, so I need to start the next one immediately. It’s my safeguard against creative blockage.” She adds, “Starting a piece is always exciting, but after working on it for two or three months, it becomes discouraging and monotonous.” That’s when she starts modeling the next piece. “Beading gives you lots of time to think,” she laughs. Instead of sketching, she beads a small model of her idea. One piece may have as many as 20 models. She keeps small vials of “tons of different beads” to do the models. When she’s satisfied with a model, she orders the beads for the actual piece. She keeps all the models, even the “ugly” ones. “They’re good to have because other ideas come out of them,” she says.

Inspiration

All of Natasha’s pieces are composed of hundreds of small units or multiples,

which she constructs first and then sews together. She is inspired by cellular formations. Pathogens appeal to her in particular. “I used to collect microscopic imagery on diseases. Their cellular structure is complex and beautiful. I am intrigued by it,” and she explains further that she is fascinated by things that grow in formations, that develop as clumps off of each other. In her earlier work, the units were all almost identical, but recently she has started looking at how things change and has become fascinated with how a normal cellular structure mutates. “I’ve been trying to show that change during the past year -- to show things growing out of a piece or transforming, mutating the multiples across the surface of the piece. It’s a big, big challenge for the idea to evolve.”

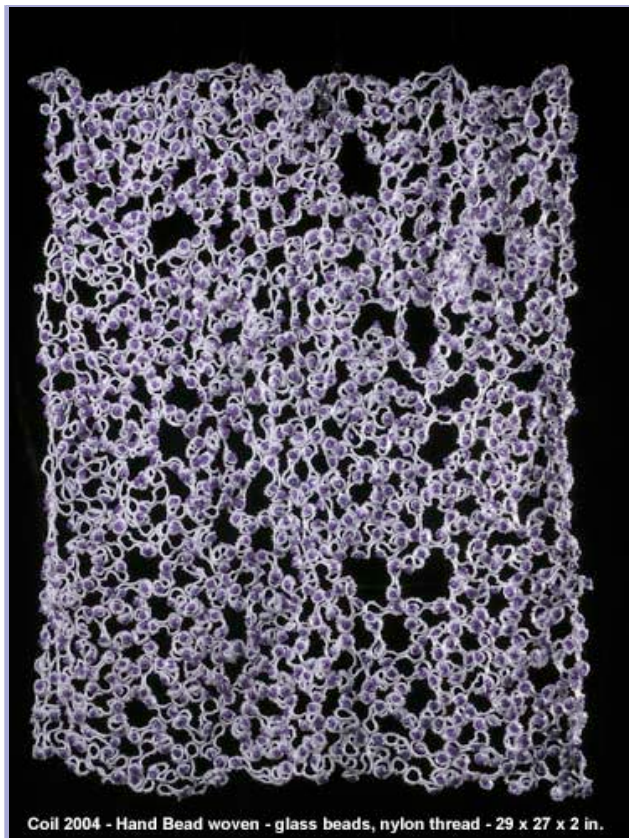


The next step will be to show that the forms have a life cycle all the way through to decay. She continues, “Because beads are sparkly, they look like they’re growing. It’s good to have the challenge of trying to show transformation or decay.” I ask her what it is about decay that appeals to her, and she becomes very intense. “There’s life in decay. Something is being born

in the process of decay. I'm drawn to things that appear to be repulsive like molds and fungus. But when you look at it, it's phenomenal. Think of a moist forest. All sorts of things are growing in there, and you can't help stopping to look. That's what the microscopic world is like. As chaotic as things seem, there's structure to everything!" she exclaims.

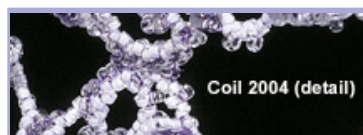
Fibers to beads

Natasha started out as a fiber artist and has a degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where she specialized in weaving, hand-painted fabrics, and fabric construction. She likens the transparency of glass beads to her former fascination with layering color with transparent dyes and adds that you can manipulate the color of the glass with the color of thread you use. But during her studies, she developed the desire to work more three-dimensionally. Most of her beading technique is self-taught, but she learned the basics in an embellishing class with Darrel Morris, a well-known embroidery artist. He had a diagram for circular peyote stitch, which Natasha wanted to learn. But every time she got to a certain point with the diagram, her piece started ruffling. Both she and Darrel tried over and over to weave a flat circular piece. But after two months, the two perfectionists gave up, deciding there was something wrong with the diagram. Natasha kept her beads, though.



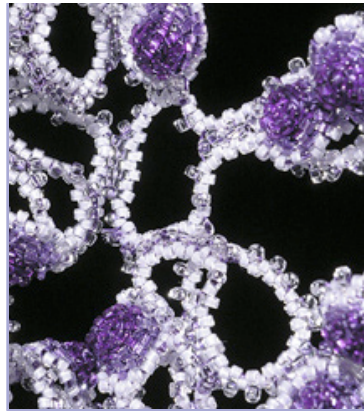
Coil 2004 - Hand Bead woven - glass beads, nylon thread - 29 x 27 x 2 in.

After graduation she worked for a custom designer of chenille upholstery fabric, designing fabric and handweaving it. "I love



Coil 2004 (detail)

the motions of weaving,” she says. “The rhythm is so meditative.” Her experience with doing production work continued when she went to work for a ceramicist, but that dream job turned into a nightmare, and Natasha’s life started falling apart. The unpleasant working conditions of the ceramics job led to migraines, and eventually Natasha quit the job. With no money and no job, things continued to worsen. One night, her apartment was invaded by an unknown man. For once, she had the telephone upstairs in the sleeping loft,

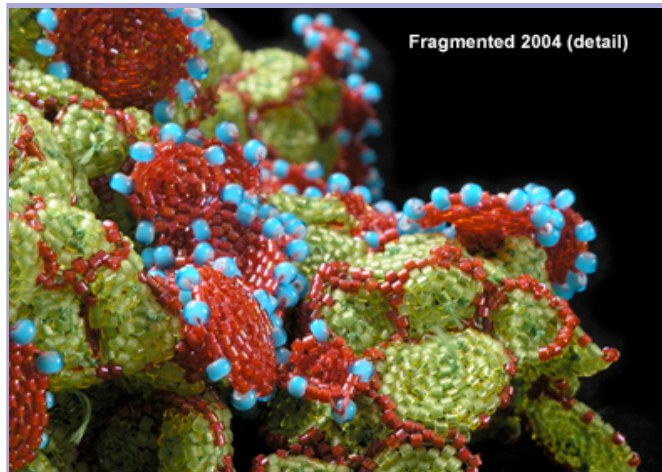
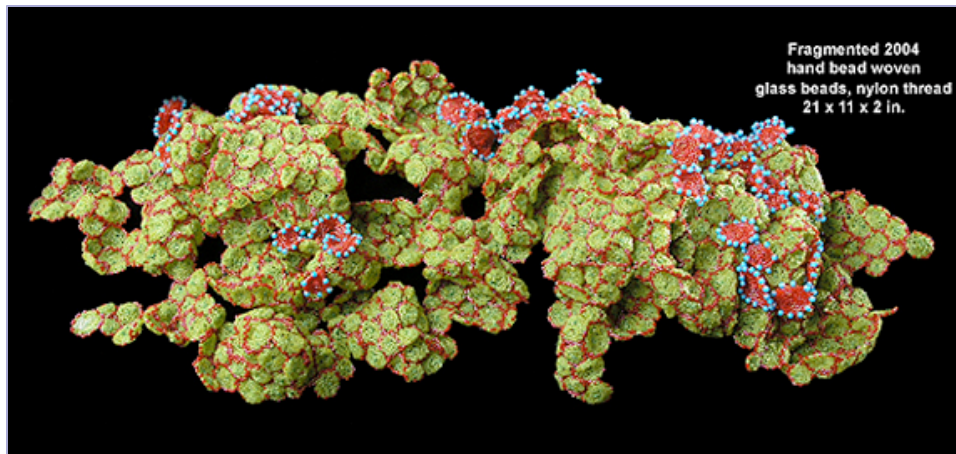


and the police came in time to scare him away. Soon afterward she was robbed and lost almost all her belongings. She continued to apply for jobs and went to live with her grandfather. A textile arts job with the Cirque de Soleil was offered if she could wait three months. So she made a deal with her grandfather to keep looking for work while waiting for that job.

One evening a friend of a friend, a collage artist, offered her the free use of a corner in his studio. With nothing left to lose, Natasha accepted the offer and cleaned off the corner of a table, arranged her beads meticulously, and started doing beadwork. This time she was able to make circular peyote work. After waiting the three months for the Cirque de Soleil job, they asked her to wait another three months. She says, “I had nothing. I felt like such a loser. Everything was so bad that I decided, why not apply for a grant. The worst that would happen would be that I wouldn’t get it.” She was working on a piece composed of little cocoon shapes that appeared to be opening. She had made a small model of what the finished piece would look like and used it to propose a piece on the millennium. As she continued to make her little cocoons, she wondered why they were going so slowly. She timed herself and discovered that each piece took about an hour to make. The final work would have more than 500 pieces. Natasha began to hope that she wouldn’t get the grant, but she got it and finished the piece by the deadline. “If it wasn’t for my losing everything,” she says with a smile, I’d still be a factory worker.”

How she works

Natasha is always trying to figure out how to work more efficiently. She’s used to production work from her previous jobs and enjoys it, which is good since each of her pieces is constructed with hundreds of multiples. She figures out how long a multiple takes and then sets herself quotas of so many multiples per day or so many bobbins of Nymo thread used in a day. She always makes her goal way too demanding so that if she gets close to meeting it she can feel good about herself. When she has completed all the multiples for a piece, she sews them together.



Circular peyote stitch is Natasha's technique of choice. "It's such a simple stitch, but there's so much you can do with it." She laughs, "Besides, I don't know any other stitches. I do beadwork, but I know nothing about beading. There's so much I want to do," she continues, "that I'm almost afraid to learn a new technique. It would open up thousands of new ideas." She has no interest in making jewelry. The problem with jewelry, she says, is that if it's not being worn, it's put away. She wants to make something large enough that a person can have it in her home and enjoy it every day. She thinks of her pieces as "artwork that's like jewels."

Because her pieces are so large and are intended to be hung or propped up on a pedestal, weight is an important consideration. That's one of the reasons Natasha works mostly with Delica beads. Their holes are so large that they have very little glass and are therefore much lighter in weight than Czech seed beads. She also likes the wide range of colors and has found them to be lightfast, an important criterion.

Unlike many seed beaders, Natasha works with short threads. This way, if a knot opens, very little will be damaged and it will be easy for her to repair. The many short threads in a piece also help to support and strengthen it.

Near the end of our conversation, she offers an excellent piece of advice. Her experience with that first grant has taught her to apply for as many things as

possible. After all, the only expenditure is slides and a little time, she says. "The more things I apply for, the more people will see my work. For that 10-20 seconds that someone is looking at my slides, he is absorbing my work. You never know what will come as a result of someone having seen your work."

You can see Natasha's work at the following galleries:

Galerie des métiers d'art du Québec, Montreal, Quebec, Canada (ongoing)

Sandra Ainsley Gallery, Toronto, Ontario, Canada (ongoing)

Morgan Contemporary Glass Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA, USA (January 21-March 31, 2005)

And be sure to visit her website, www.natashastmichael.com

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