

GENE  
KOSS  
SCULPTURE



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# Foreword

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BY ARTHUR ROGER

**G**ENE KOSS ceaselessly pushes the boundaries of his medium—glass—as he pursues evocative meaning, beauty, and elegance. He brilliantly conceives monumental glass-and-steel sculptures that take more than a year to realize. He assumes enormous upfront financial expenditures and must bring together, inspire, and sustain the commitment of a team, often comprised of undergraduate assistants.

After months of collective toil assembling tons of glass and steel to be displayed in my gallery's main exhibition space, Tulane business majors who chose simply to take an arts elective with Gene Koss have confided to me in my office that their collaboration in his creative process has been a life-altering academic experience.

Much acclaim has been directed to Gene's large-scale, farm implement-inspired sculptures, with their reverie on memories of rural America. The craftsmanship and artistry of his smaller glass works are in peril of being overlooked. Yet the delicate etched lines and visual complexity of these pieces regularly intrigue many visitors to the gallery.

Representing and interacting with Gene Koss for more than 36 years has been an instructive and deeply positive experience for me. I am fortunate to have become good friends with Gene and his wife, Mary. I have observed that Mary is quietly but unquestionably a crucially vital source of insight and strength in Gene's life and work.

A product, as I am, of a caring, hardworking blue-collar family, Gene developed his work ethic from his rural Midwestern upbringing, which continues to be an abiding influence. Gene has extraordinary dedication to his vision as a glass sculptor and his responsibilities as a teacher.

His ability to probe for and accomplish new and startling possibilities in glass is anchored in his gratitude and love for his family, friends, and students, which is evident in his demeanor and smile.

**Arthur Roger,**  
the founder and director of the Arthur Roger Gallery in New Orleans,  
has represented Gene Koss for nearly 40 years.



**STONE BOAT SKID, 2011. Cast glass, steel. H 6, W 11½, D 5½ in. Photo: Mary Koss.**

utility of glass objects. Koss's alma mater, the University of Wisconsin at River Falls, is 250 miles northwest on the interstate but spiritually and intellectually adjacent to the Madison campus where Littleton taught. Not surprisingly, a Littleton acolyte, Doug Johnson, directed the River Falls studios. When Gene continued his studies in Philadelphia at the Tyler School of Art in the late 1970s, another Littleton and Johnson protégé, Jon Clark, was leading the glass program. Clark had also spent an extended period in London. The relationship with Clark and the exposure to the artistic currents of the East Coast were transformative for Gene. So from the start he was drinking from a well of new ideas, change, and ambition for the medium of glass.

Perhaps we can look to his training as a source for the openness of Gene's practice and his willingness to employ direct and indirect metaphor in his sculpture. His sketchbooks, rich with images and abundant with ideas, continue to be sources of creativity. Again, this approach shows him to be an evolving artist, always ready to rethink and reimagine in the abstract. By the early 1980s, he was incorporating found objects into his small pieces. This practice is certainly reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg or even Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp, but it was not the norm among studio glass practitioners. In his large and monumental works, he often employs forms that emulate found objects. Situating Gene Koss within this historical context is not meant to diminish his originality but instead to raise the stakes as we consider his artistic production.



**BRIDGE SERIES #2, 2010. Cast glass, steel.**  
H 14½, W 24, D 10 in. Photo: Mary Koss.



**WHEEL, 2013. Blown glass, steel. H 13¼, W 12, D 3½ in.**  
Photo: Michael Smith. Courtesy of Arthur Roger Gallery

Hard labor, perseverance, resilience, and concentrated thinking and doing, along with a deep respect for the land, are qualities we often attach to modern images of country life. In art and literature, we can trace the course of these assembled ideas from Gustave Courbet's *The Stone Breakers* and Jean-François Millet's *The Gleaners* to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*. Those who know Gene Koss will undoubtedly recognize them as some of his personal characteristics as well. Like a number of his male peers, Gene came to the study of art after a stint in the military. Add that to his youth on a Wisconsin farm, and you may appreciate his inherent discipline and readiness to work hard. These qualities are also at the core of his artistic process and in many of his most prominent works. His glass-and-metal sculptures are imbued with references to farm or manufacturing life. But like Thomas Hart Benton or Grant Wood, Gene Koss is aesthetically modern and unmistakably Midwestern. Like those earlier painters, Koss values the subtle complexity of the symbolism of the land. The implements that appear in many of his larger sculptures have an edge that moves far past an earnest love for rural simplicity. They emphasize toughness, masculinity, and even the hint of a threat. This combination of modernity with a full appreciation for the heartland is engaging. For me, it is the defining characteristic of Gene Koss's art.

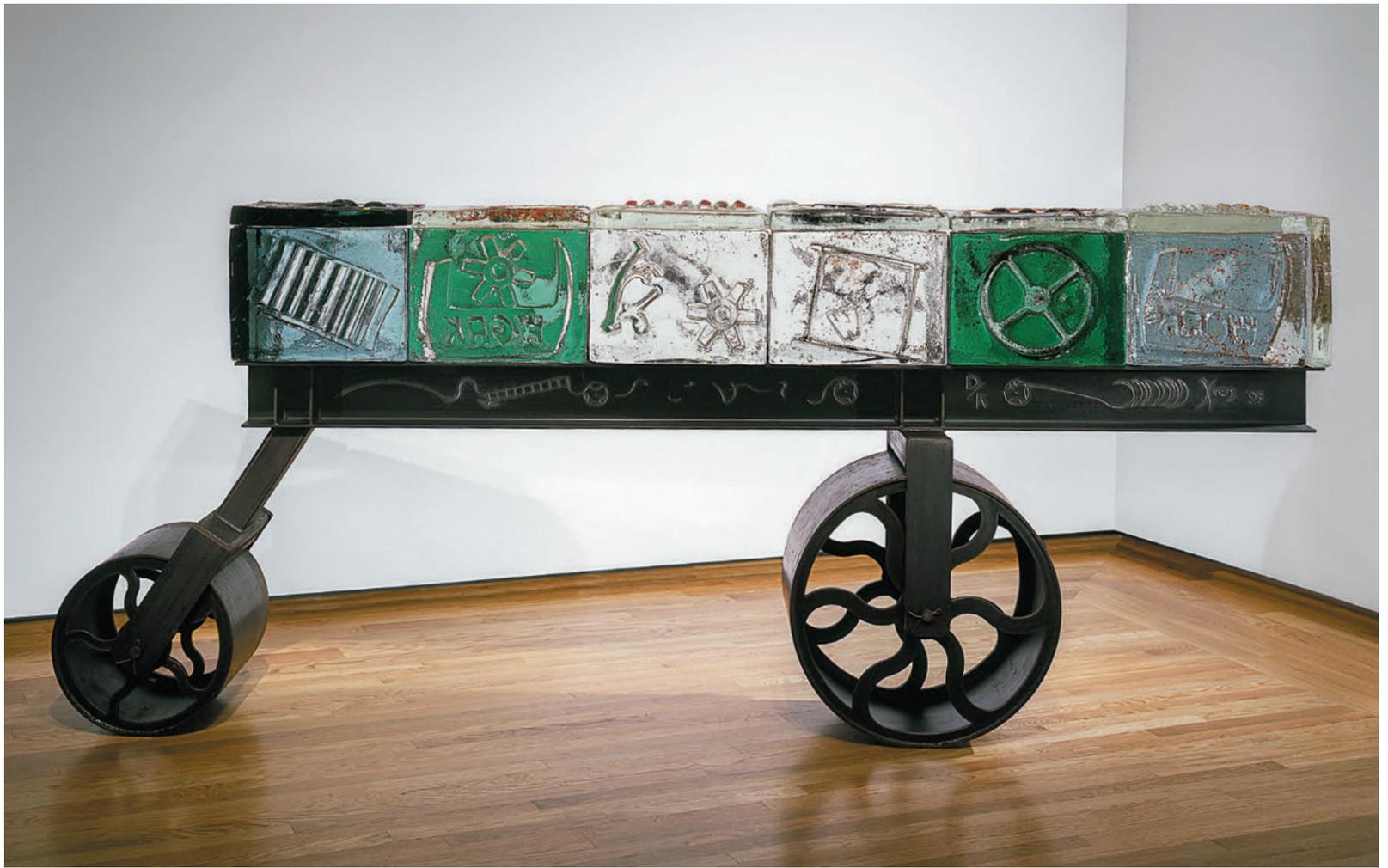
**Erik H. Neil**  
Director, Chrysler Museum of Art  
March 2017



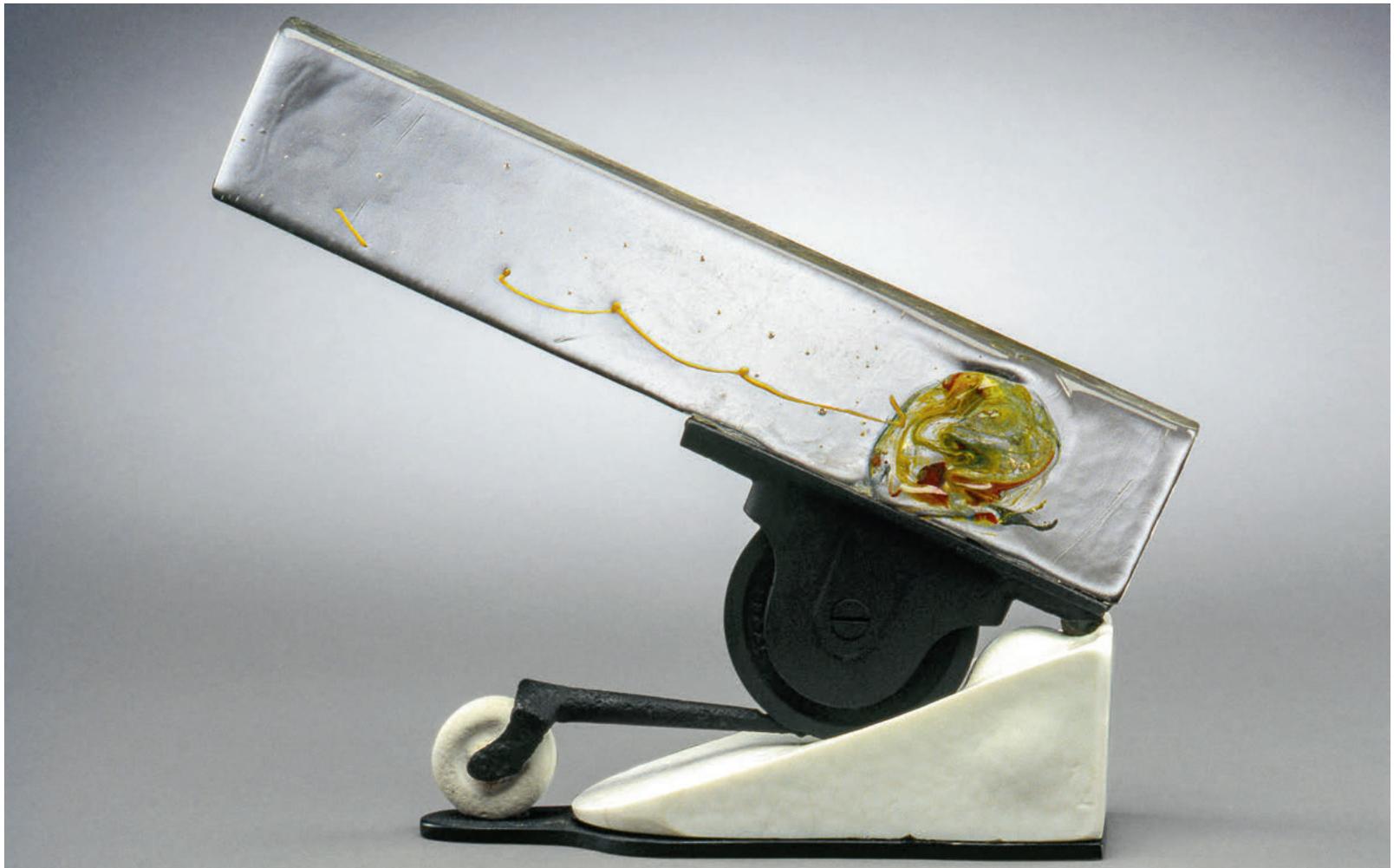
CREVASSE SERIES 1 NO. 2, 2016. Cast glass, steel. H 39, W 39, D 60 in. Photo: Michael Smith. Courtesy of Arthur Roger Gallery



SCULPTURE ON THE RIDGE, 1997. Cast glass, stone, steel. H 3½, W 5, D 1 ft. Photo: Gerard Perrone.

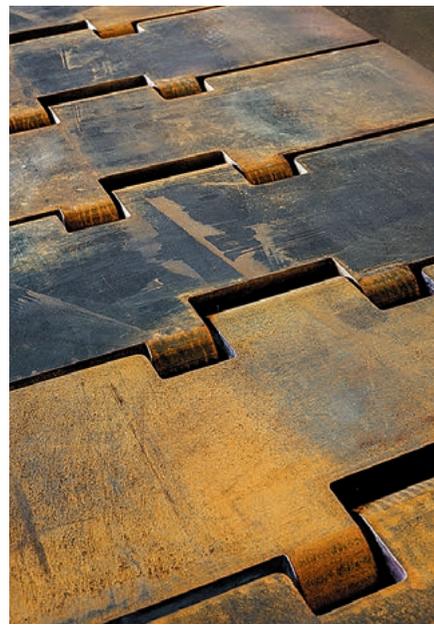


WORK WAGON, 1992. Cast glass, steel. H 46½, W 110, D 12 in. Photo: Owen Murphy.



HURRICANE SERIES, 2002. Cast glass, steel. H 10, W 7, D 10 in. Photo: Owen Murphy.





**FROM A DISTANCE, 2015**

Cast glass, steel. H 12½, W 19, D 6 ft.

Photos: Owen Murphy (top); Michael Smith (left).

Courtesy of Arthur Roger Gallery

The title of this work was used for a 2016 exhibition of the same name at Arthur Roger Gallery in New Orleans. A monumental work in glass and steel, *From a Distance* was inspired by the city the artist has called home for four decades. Referencing the sweeping views seen while driving across the massive Crescent City Connection bridge, the southernmost crossing of the Mississippi that connects the city to the Westbank neighborhood, where Koss's studio is located, the glass elements in this work evoke the movement of the mighty river as well as the light reflecting off the numerous ships and barges. The steel elements reference the plentiful machinery as well as the architecture of the industrial buildings in the landscape. The sculpture is cantilevered, an echo of the massive bridge's structure, but also conjures that precarious feeling of being suspended high over a flowing, ever-changing river.

**BRIDGE, 1996.**

**Cast glass, neon, steel. H 12, W 26, D 13½ ft.**

**Photo: Owen Murphy.**

A suspension of literally tons of glass from chains hanging from a symmetrical angled steel arch, this work is surprisingly graceful, perhaps even peaceful in appearance. Illuminated by neon, the elongated glass element floats in space in defiance of the force of gravity. Closer inspection reveals an unavoidable undertone of tension and danger as the main element is suspended at only two points. Experience of this work up-close is visceral; the engineering feat of dangling three tons of mass just above one's shoes is a breathtaking sight that references the engineering marvel of bridge building.







**TIMBER, 1990.**

**Cast glass, neon, wood, steel. H 13, W 16, D 4 ft.**

In this work, the unexpected combination of materials, blending wood with steel and glass, maintains a feeling of rawness. With a direct reference to personal history, *Timber* was inspired by the dangerous but exhilarating work of dragging logs down steep inclines, in which keeping control of the weight and mass is always a risk. The artist sought to achieve a visual equivalent by creating a work that is challenging to install. The precariousness of the glass suspended from the wood adds tension while the neon lighting transforms the heavy mass into something that appears ephemeral.



**LINE FENCE, 2010.**

Laminated glass, stainless steel. H 5, W 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>, D 2 ft.

Photo: Owen Murphy.

This is one of the artist's most personal works and refers to his experience, during a sabbatical year from his university professor duties, when he discovered a section of an ancient wooden fence along a ridge in rural Wisconsin. Some of the supporting posts had rotted at

their bottom and yet still hung, suspended by the wires of the fence and the remaining posts. The work is unusually stark, with the stainless steel offering only smooth surfaces and almost no color or texture in the glass.



