

April Surgent: Forging Relationships in Reflections

This young artist creates engravings on glass that explore connections between people and their environments. **by Naomi Ekperigin**

"I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw how glass was made," April Surgent recalls of a trip to Vancouver, British Columbia, shortly before her 15th birthday.

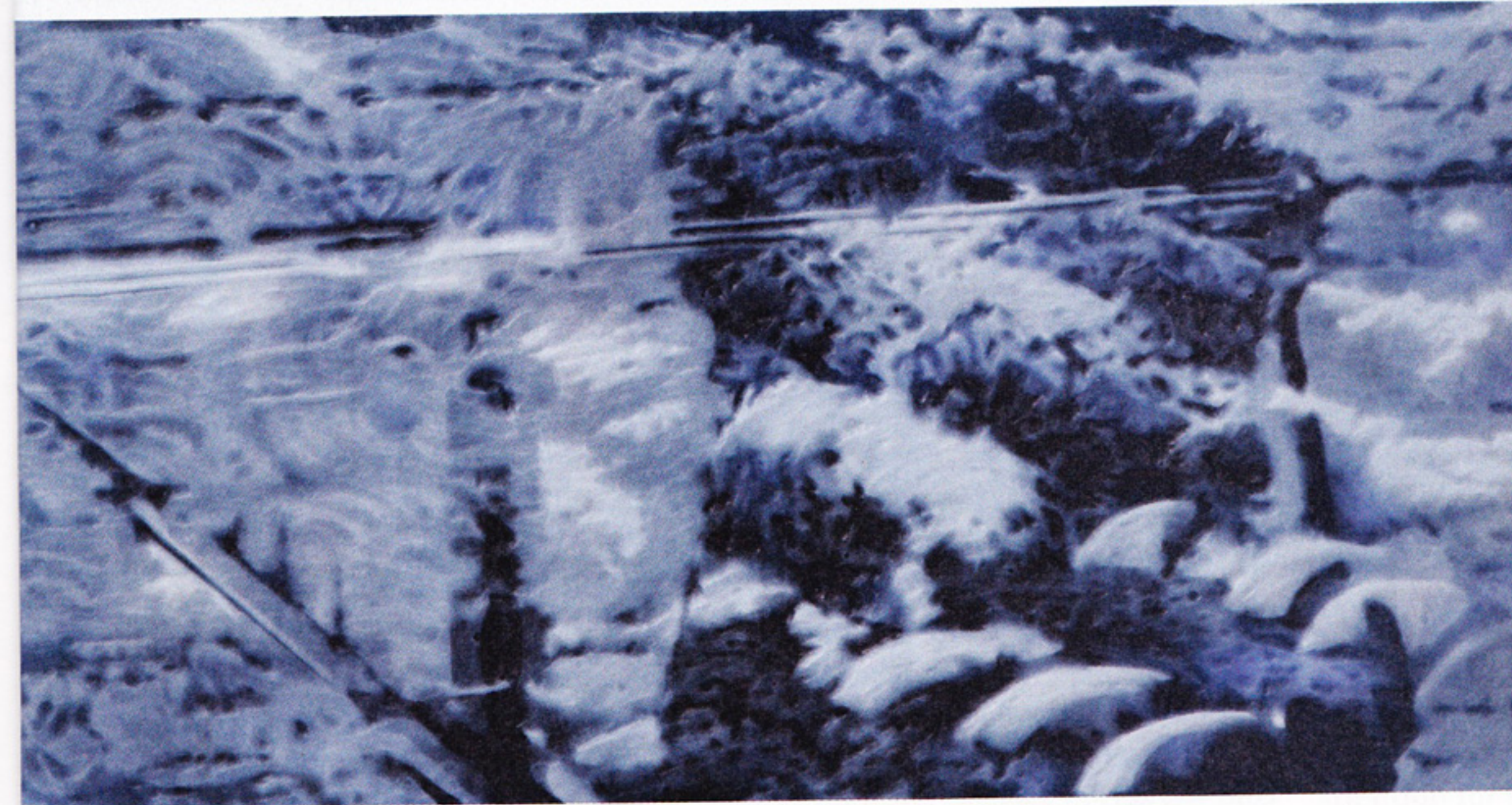
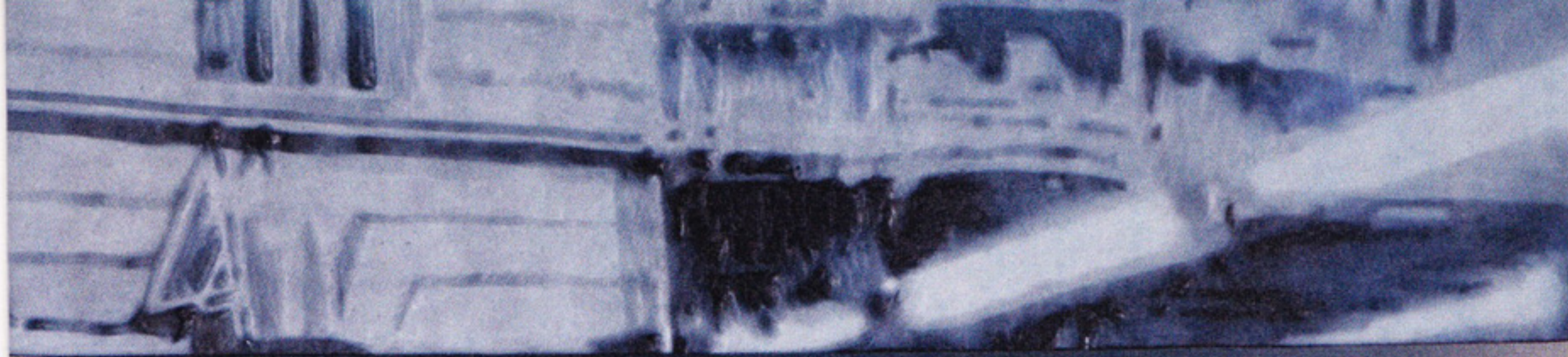
"When we came back home to Seattle, I scoured the phone book and found a listing for Seattle Glassblowing Studio. It turned out that they offered beginner classes, and my parents signed me up as a birthday present." Nearly 15 years later, Surgent is one of the country's top lecturers and instructors on the art of *cameo engraving*, a rare form of cutting on sheets of glass.

Surgent dilligently studied glasswork throughout high school and earned a scholarship to the College for Creative Studies, in Detroit. From there, she transferred to the School of Art at Australian National University, in Canberra, where she majored in glasswork.

This period of study on the other side of the globe not only introduced her to the process of carving on glass (known as *cold work*) but also encouraged a level of introspection that still informs her art today.

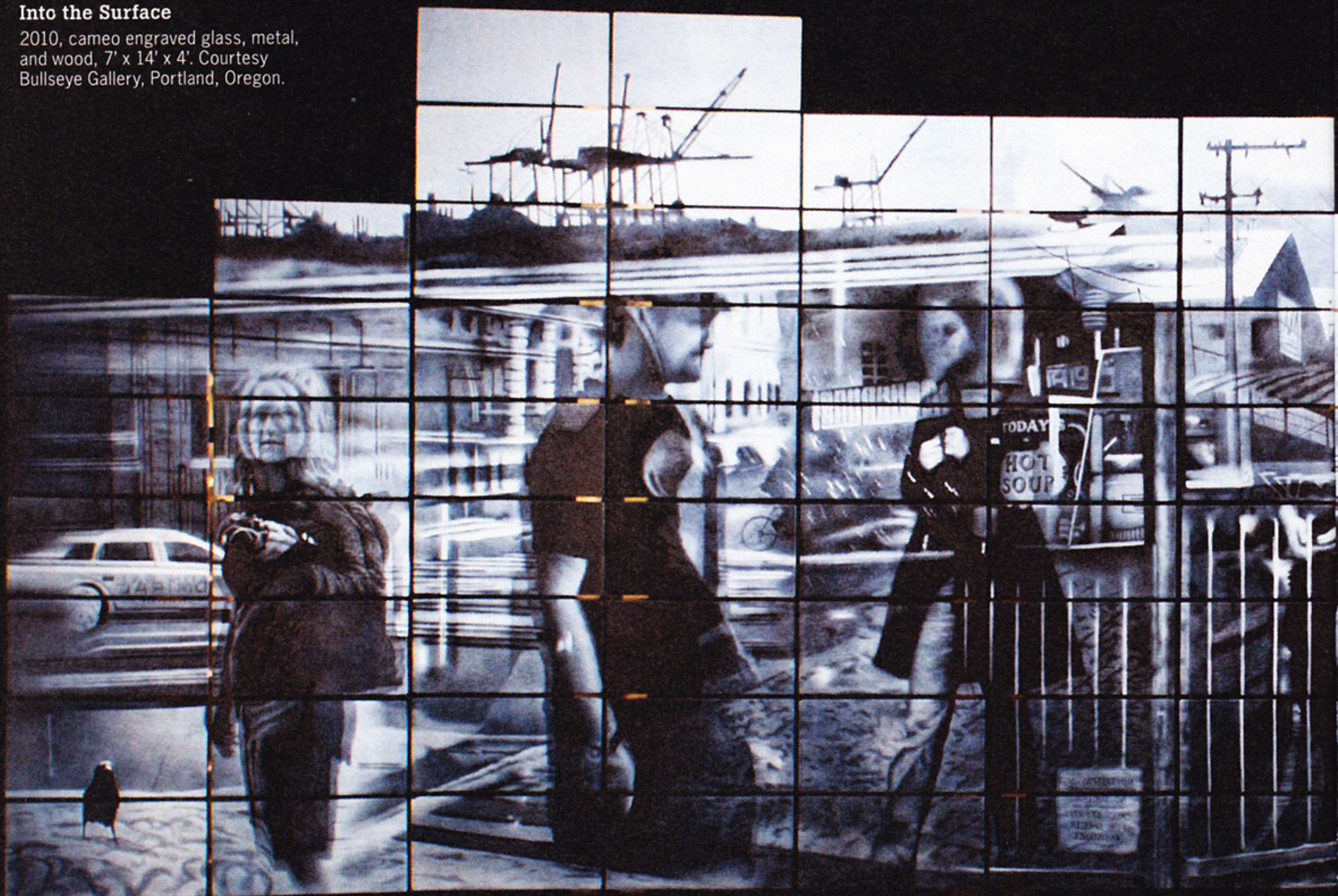
"While I was overseas, I was confronted by challenging questions that got me thinking about where I was from, who I was, and what it meant to be a young American woman out in the world," the artist says. "As a result of thinking about these things, I started to make art about the places where I had lived and traveled. I focused my work on the connections I had made in different places and started my long study of the inherent link between person and place."

Early into her undergraduate studies in Australia, Surgent became frustrated with glassblowing, finding that it didn't enable her to fully express the ideas that she was



The Window Shopper's Supper
 2009, fused and engraved glass,
 34 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 20. All artwork
 this article private
 collection unless
 otherwise indicated.

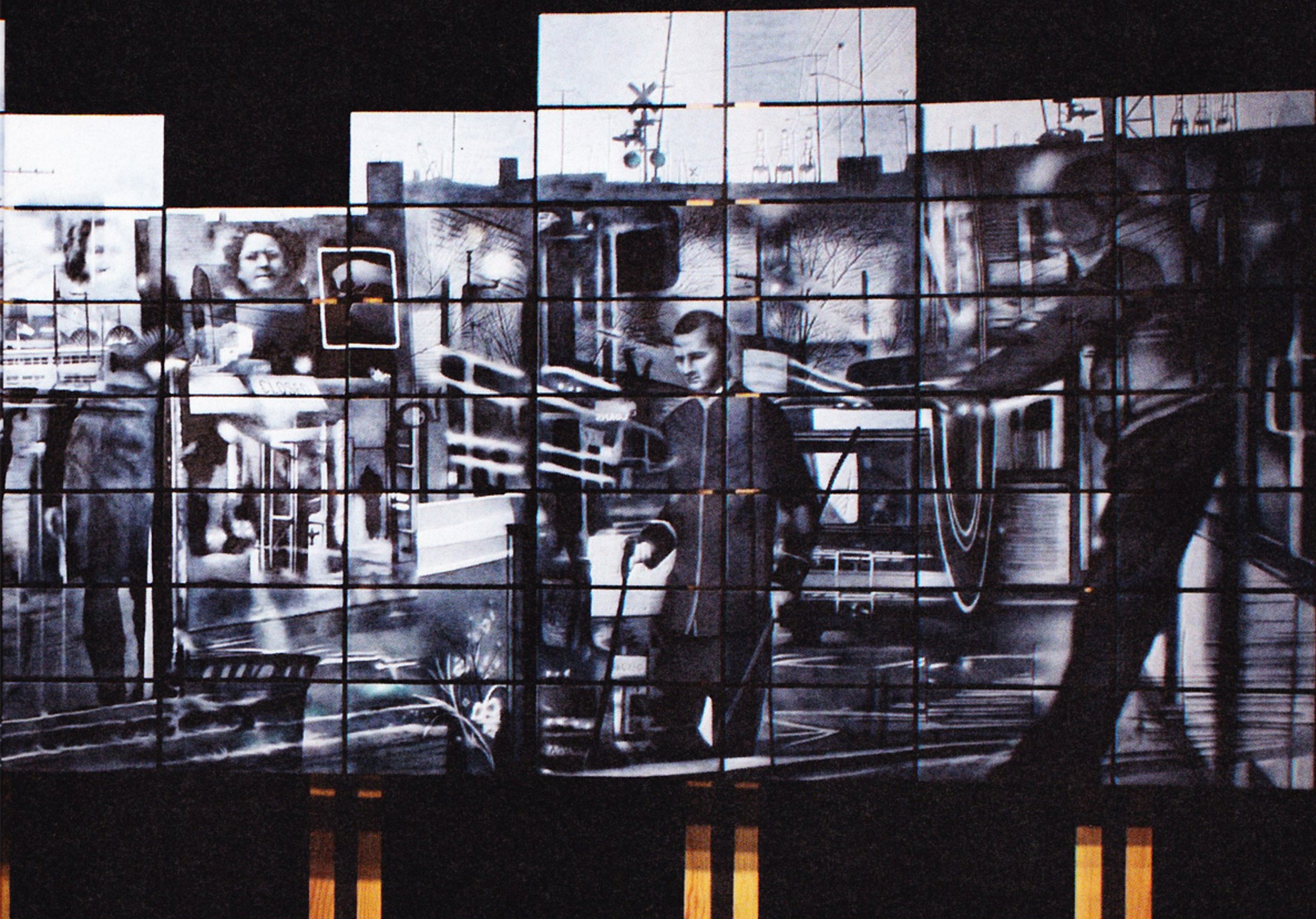
2010, cameo engraved glass, metal,
and wood, 7' x 14' x 4'. Courtesy
Bullseye Gallery, Portland, Oregon.



ruminating upon at the time. During a summer vacation she returned to Seattle, where she took a three-week course at the Pilchuck Glass School with master engraver Jiří Hrcuba. "I'd been looking for other ways to work with the material, and Jiří taught me how to get the figure onto glass," Surgent says. "When I got back to school I continued to experiment with engraving and

Of course, the technique of engraving has been employed for centuries as a means of decoration and depicting information. Cameo engraving, which is Surgent's area of expertise, is far less common, with only a handful of artists who focus on the technique. On her website, she explains it as "the technique of engraving upon a gem or other stone in such a way that an underlying stone of one color is exposed as a background for a low-relief design of another color." Surgent's process differs in that rather than carving on stone or shell, she uses a sheet of flat

Drawing has always been a part of Surgent's creative process, although it wasn't until she attended the College for Creative Studies that she took any formal classes. "Throughout my four years in Canberra, I continued to take courses on figure drawing," she adds. "In my glasswork classes we were encouraged to use and value our sketchbooks. This has never been a challenge for me, because I've always had a dozen or so sketchbooks lying



around, and I really enjoy mapping out my ideas."

If Surgent didn't enjoy the planning process, she probably wouldn't be engraving on glass at all. Glass is expensive, and engraving is a lengthy and labor-intensive process. Working out the concept and composition before starting to carve is the only way to ensure maximum efficiency and clarity of the image—after all, if the artist's hand isn't confident and steady, the entire engraving could quickly fall to pieces.

"Deciding what I want to engrave is often the most time-consuming part of the process," Surgent says. She usually begins with an idea and then walks around the city with her

digital camera, snapping photos of images that catch her eye. Back in the studio, she reviews her shots using Photoshop. "I look less for great pictures and more for images that have strong compositional elements that relate to the story I want to tell in the final engraving," she says. After settling on a photograph, she begins transferring the desired elements onto paper, using any tools that best serve a given composition. "It really depends on the scale of what I'm drawing and what type of line quality I'm looking for," she says. "I'll use anything from charcoal to Sharpies to brushes and ink. It's whatever suits me and the type of paper I have on hand." The artist also notes that these

drawings are rarely very detailed, as she prefers to save that level of attention for the engraving process.

After working out her ideas and composition on paper, Surgent begins preparing her glass surface. She selects thin (about 1½ mm thick) sheets of different colors, cuts them into the desired size and shape, layers them, and melts them together to make a single panel. "Most of the blanks that I make are three layers thick," the artist says. "Although the glass comes in a multitude of colors, I tend to use a muted palette—opaque white on the front surface with dark transparent colors underneath." Using her photograph and sketch as a reference, she draws directly on the



glass with a wax pencil, adding more detail if it will help guide her hand during the engraving process. “Much like scratchboard, cameo engraving is reductive,” the artist explains, “so I start with the white surface and then carve through the white to expose the underlying color.”

Surgent’s primary tool for carving is a glass lathe—a stationary machine with a grinding wheel attached to the end of a turning shaft. “For glass, this wheel is either diamond-impregnated brass or a stone abrasive,” the artist explains. “Water is used as a lubricant so that the glass won’t get hot and crack—hence the term ‘cold working.’”

Surgent uses primarily two machines: a cutting lathe and an engraving lathe. “I use the cutting lathe to remove a lot of material quickly, and the engraving lathe is for cutting the details,” she says. As with any artist’s tools, engraving wheels come in a variety of sizes and weights, and each one makes a different mark

on the surface. Surgent attaches the desired wheel to the shaft of the lathe and brings the glass up to the wheel, slowly sanding the material away. “It’s just like drawing, except instead of bringing the pencil to the paper, you bring the paper to the pencil,” she says. After the engraving is done, the glass often appears dull. To bring back the color and sheen, Surgent places the panel in a kiln and fire-polishes it.

“At first glance, people assume that my work is a drawing, a painting, or a photograph,” Surgent says. “When they come up close and discover that it’s actually glass, I think it surprises them and challenges them to think about their preconceived notions of glass as an art medium, which I like. For those who stick around to think about what the imagery is saying, I hope that it’s just as captivating.”

Over the last couple of years, Surgent has been inspired by photographs of reflections in glass, and the resulting engravings were recently the subject of a solo

ABOVE LEFT

City Speak

2011, fused and engraved glass, 15 x 15.

ABOVE CENTER

Beside Calamity

2001, cameo engraved glass, 16 x 16.

ABOVE RIGHT

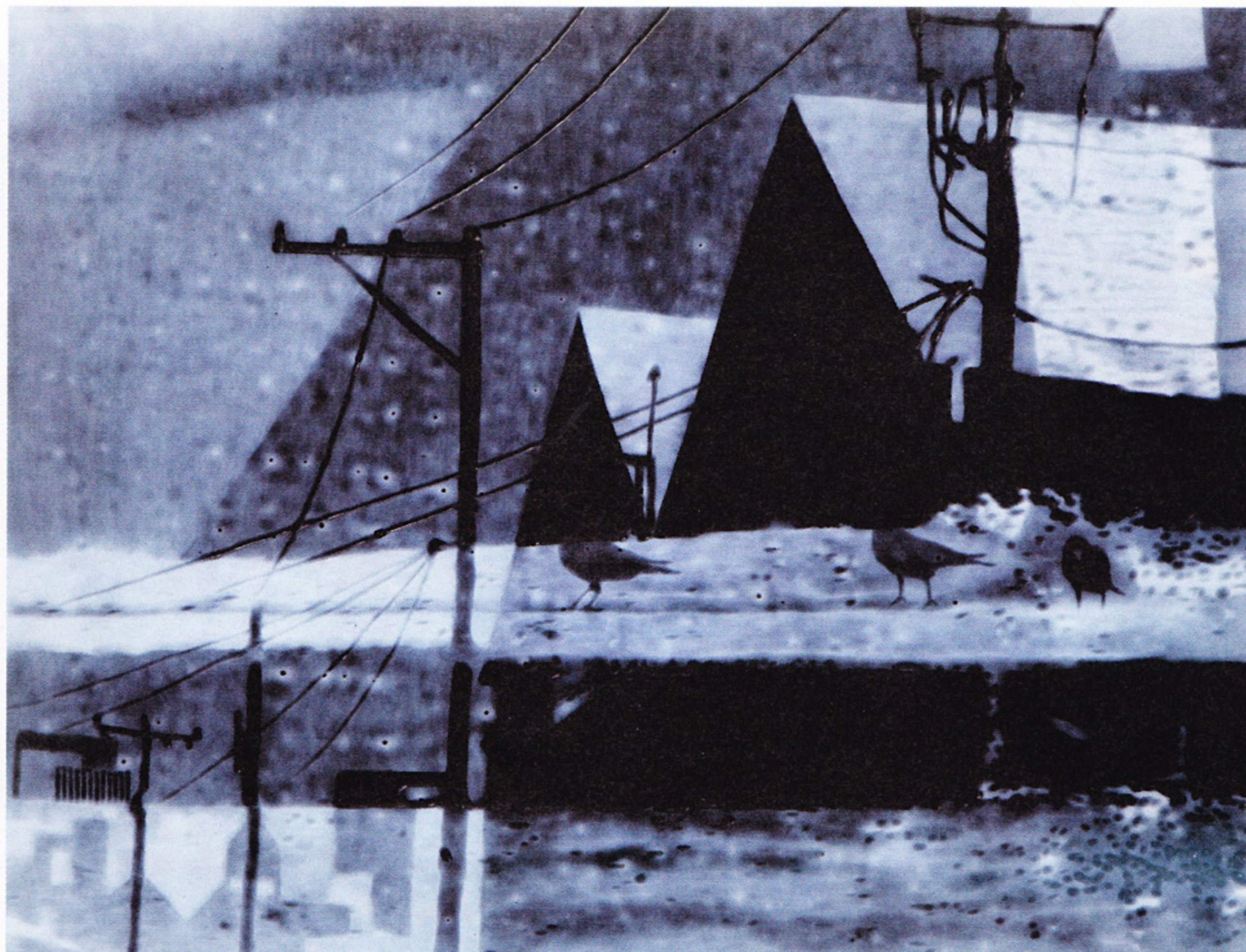
The Scavengers

2009, cameo engraved glass, 13 x 17 x 2.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

Surgent at work in her studio.

exhibition, titled “Reflect,” at Bullseye Gallery, in Portland, Oregon. “Reflect” featured 18 pieces, all of which explored themes of identity and the connection between person and place. “During one of my travels, I took a picture of the reflection of a woman looking into the window of a deli-bakery,” the artist recalls. “I looked at it for many years, completely fascinated. She became a reflection of her surroundings, and her surroundings became a reflection of her. I eventually made *The Window Shopper’s Supper* from that first reflection picture, and I’ve continued to work with ideas of reflection—both metaphorical and literal—ever since.”



With such a keen interest in the relationship of people to their environments, it's not surprising to hear that Surgent wants to create larger pieces. Although cameo engraving doesn't lend itself to working on a long, heavy sheet of glass, she was able to create her first billboard-style mural for a recent exhibition at Bellevue Arts Museum, in Washington. The completed engraving, *Into the Surface*, is made up of 105 glass panels, each measuring 6" x 12". The total piece is 14 feet long and 7 feet tall and

depicts a fractured landscape with an assortment of people the artist photographed the previous year. Video and audio elements accompany the engraving, working together to create a multidimensional, fully realized portrait of the artist's hometown.

At only 29 years old, Surgent teaches and lectures internationally, serves on the artistic program advisory committee of Pilchuck Glass School, and has already had her first museum exhibition. One might wonder if there's anything left for an artist of her

standing to accomplish, but Surgent is quick to brush off such egotism. "Even though I went to art school and majored in glass, I've only taken a few short courses in engraving—none of which focused on cameo, which is what my work is," she says. "With every piece I make, I learn something new about engraving. I just want to continue to challenge myself. I feel that every time the work changes—big or small—you're evolving and growing. I think that's all an artist can really hope for." ❖



About the Artist

April Surgent began working with glass in 1997 and went on to study at the College for Creative Studies, in Detroit, and Australian National University, in Canberra, where she majored in glass and graduated with honors. Upon changing her focus from blown glass to cameo-engraved glass six years ago, she returned to her hometown of Seattle and began working on her art full-time. She exhibits, teaches, and lectures internationally, and her work has received numerous awards. In 2010 she had her first museum exhibition, "Into the Surface," at Bellevue Arts Museum, in Washington. She is represented by Bullseye Gallery, in Portland, Oregon. For more information, visit www.aprilsurgent.com.