

# CAST

## Art and Objects

Made Using Humanity's Most Transformational Process



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*There are things known and there are things unknown,  
and in between are the doors of perception.*

—Aldous Huxley



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Diamond and Emerald Salamander Brooch, ca. 1880. 18K yellow gold, diamonds, emerald, cast and hand engraved, 1.4" × 0.5" × 0.3".  
Photo: Susan J. Sifert, Courtesy of Susan J. Sifert, Lind House Antiques.

# PREFACE

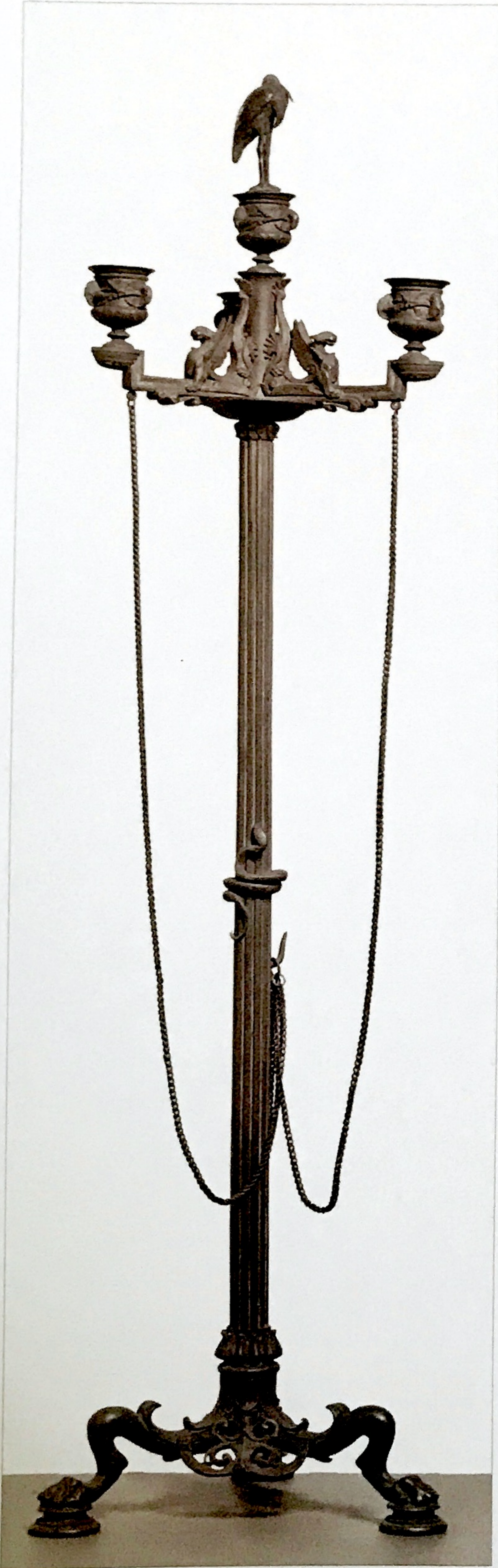
## Genesis

This book developed through a series of conversations about casting, our love of the process, and our unrequited desire for great reading material about it. We have taught casting for many years and wished we had a book for students that showed casting's many strengths in the creation of art and objects. As artists who cast, we have wished for a book that we could look to for inspiration—a place to see the pinnacle of the process in the work we admire most. Many manuals address the technical side of casting and all of its complexities, but we have never seen one that reveres the process, shows its many unique and beautiful applications, and inspires makers to use casting in their own work. Since the book we longed for didn't exist, we decided to write it.

Initially, we planned to write a small book on casting in jewelry and metalsmithing. We are well versed in both the history and the contemporary landscape of our native field, but as our conversations unfolded and we considered the multitude of mediums used in contemporary jewelry making, we started to see the book's horizons expand.

Then came the conundrum of the odd and often inconsistent division between the sculpture and the metalsmithing traditions; the work can be interchangeable at times, but the roots of fine art and craft education are quite different. These divisions have always confounded both of us—but they seemed even more arbitrary as we began to realize that casting was impossible to compartmentalize in any way that made sense. We see merits in all areas of the process and wanted to take an inclusive approach to this book.

Why aren't there any books on the topic of casting as it relates to craft and fine art when it's such a pivotal process? While we see a spectrum of making rather than separate entities, the differences in the cultures of fine art and craft make us suspect our question may actually have two very different answers.



Antoine-Louis Barye, *Candelabra with Three Branches, Chains, and a Stork Finial*, nineteenth century. Paris, France, bronze, 31.8" tall.

Courtesy of The Walters Art Museum, Acquired by William T. or Henry Walters, CC-by-0, GNU FDL.

## Craft: The Handmade vs. Industry

In general, craftspeople are defined by their materials and processes. It is not uncommon to hear them wax poetic about the importance of the handmade, the traditions associated with their techniques, the unique qualities of their chosen materials, their favorite tools, and their commitment to keeping ways of working alive that might otherwise be lost in the postindustrial age.

We (the authors) come from a jewelry and metalsmithing background. Our field is steeped in pride of process, but for many craftspeople, casting is resented rather than revered. It is taught in almost every academic institution, but can be treated as a necessary evil and is often taught with little know-how or affection. Why is this the case? Even though we use casting very differently in our own studio practices, our passion for the process is matched, and we have never understood the apathy (sometimes verging on distaste) for our favorite way of working. After much thought, we have come to the conclusion that this aversion most likely has to do with the industrial use of casting and our consumer culture.

Some say industry is the nemesis of craft. Mass production floods the world with cheap, poorly-made, disposable “stuff,” creating expectations in the public about the value (or lack thereof) of objects. Industry has undeniably put craftspeople in a very tough spot. As a jeweler, how can you compete with mass-produced work being sold for barely your material cost? How can a ceramicist compete with \$1 mugs? The world has been oversaturated with manufactured objects since the Industrial Revolution. This glut of mass-production has distanced the public from how things are made; the process, materials, and labor invested in the design and creation of objects have become a mystery to non-makers, leaving craftspeople trying to find their footing.

To further complicate the matter, there is a wide range of quality available in mass-produced cast objects—some are poorly made, but there are also many finely designed and well-produced items that are hard to compete with for a maker with a small studio practice.

Craftspeople are therefore challenged to educate their audience about the value of their work. What is the value of pieces that are well considered, unique, finely made, loved, and labored-over?

Industry does some things well and some things poorly, but one of its undeniable strengths is casting. American malls are filled with affordable and functional cast jewelry, glass vases, and ceramic dinnerware. Big-box stores are filled with rotocast- and injection-molded plastic items, from kitchenwares to toys. Industry has mastered casting.

When you consider these ideas, it is easy to see how there is a resentment toward industry (especially casting) within the crafts.

Stepping away from the perspective of the craftsperson, industry’s contribution to humanity through casting is undeniable. Take the simple yet indispensable toilet as an example. Modern life as we know it—with basic sanitation—is defined by casting.

Because casting is so linked to industry today, modern craftspeople have a complicated relationship to it. Many makers have therefore chosen to focus on processes that do not lend themselves to industrial applications as easily. It is common at contemporary craft fairs, for example, to hear an exhibitor proudly proclaim that “none of their work is cast.” We would argue that this is a myopic thing to say.

Casting is a process like any other. It can be executed and applied well or poorly, it can be the right or the wrong choice in the creation of any given work, but it offers certain undeniable possibilities that can’t be achieved any other way. It is our hope to illustrate this point and create a renewed interest in the process by showing the incredible depth and breadth that it has to offer. When we look at a piece of jewelry like *Rapture* by Lin Stanionis, we don’t see how casting could be anything but worshipped. The same goes for the works of Zsolt József Simon, Jamie Harris, and David Umemoto. These makers use casting in such a skillful way that their work could never be the same without it.

# Fine Art: Idea vs. Object

Turning from craft to fine art, we suspect there are other reasons behind a lack of books on casting. Ever since conceptual art took hold in the mid-twentieth century, there has been an elevation of “idea over object.” This value system has affected everything from the education of fine art students, art historians, and critics to what is studied, discussed, and written about in fine art journals and books. Because technique has become a footnote, there are many sculptors graduating with MFAs who are wonderful thinkers, but haven’t actually been educated in the creation of objects. Craftsmanship is often seen as secondary and is sometimes dismissed as menial and prosaic. If process is craft’s pride, it’s fine art’s dirty little secret.

We believe, though, that truly exceptional fine artists must understand and value the technical. It’s through process that strong, well-developed ideas come to fruition. What would Marc Quinn’s work be without an extensive understanding of all aspects of casting? What of the brilliance of Dario Robleto’s “alloying” of bizarre, touching, and profound materials to create completely unique casting mediums imbued with meaning?

The most interesting works, whether in the fine or the decorative arts, are those that are well developed in conception and adroitly executed. Ai Weiwei’s *Sunflower Seeds* is one such piece. *Sunflower Seeds* is an installation piece made up of 100 million handmade cast porcelain sunflower seeds, each painted and finished individually, and collectively weighing over 150 tons. They are displayed on the floor in a 4.5-inch-deep “carpet” intended to be walked over. The seeds were made by 1,600 Chinese workers in the town of Jingdezhen over the course of two and a half years. The piece comments on mass production and the Western demand for cheap Chinese labor, individuals

(represented by the seeds) contributing to (but getting lost in) a huge group, the power of groups, the potential of seeds to grow, and on and on. Sheena Wagstaff, the chief curator at the Tate Modern (one of the venues where the work was displayed), has commented that the work incorporates “an epic sense of scale with an exquisite level of craftsmanship.” This piece in particular comments on so many areas of interest to us—the importance of molds, multiples, industry, craft, fine art, and the fact that the piece is entirely dependent on casting. It touches on so many of the reasons we feel the topic of casting is important for makers of all kinds and the public at large; makers are liberated through an understanding of process and are then able to actualize ideas to their best effect.

Everyone will benefit from thinking about how objects are made, the implications of mass production, appreciating what goes into the creation of the objects we interact with every day, and understanding the value of the handmade. As importantly, we hope we have made a beautiful book that will inspire anyone who picks it up.

We have been stunned by our research into casting; the breadth and depth of its history and impact are too vast to capture in a single book. Even with more than 800 images, we feel we’ve barely scratched the surface of this behemoth topic.

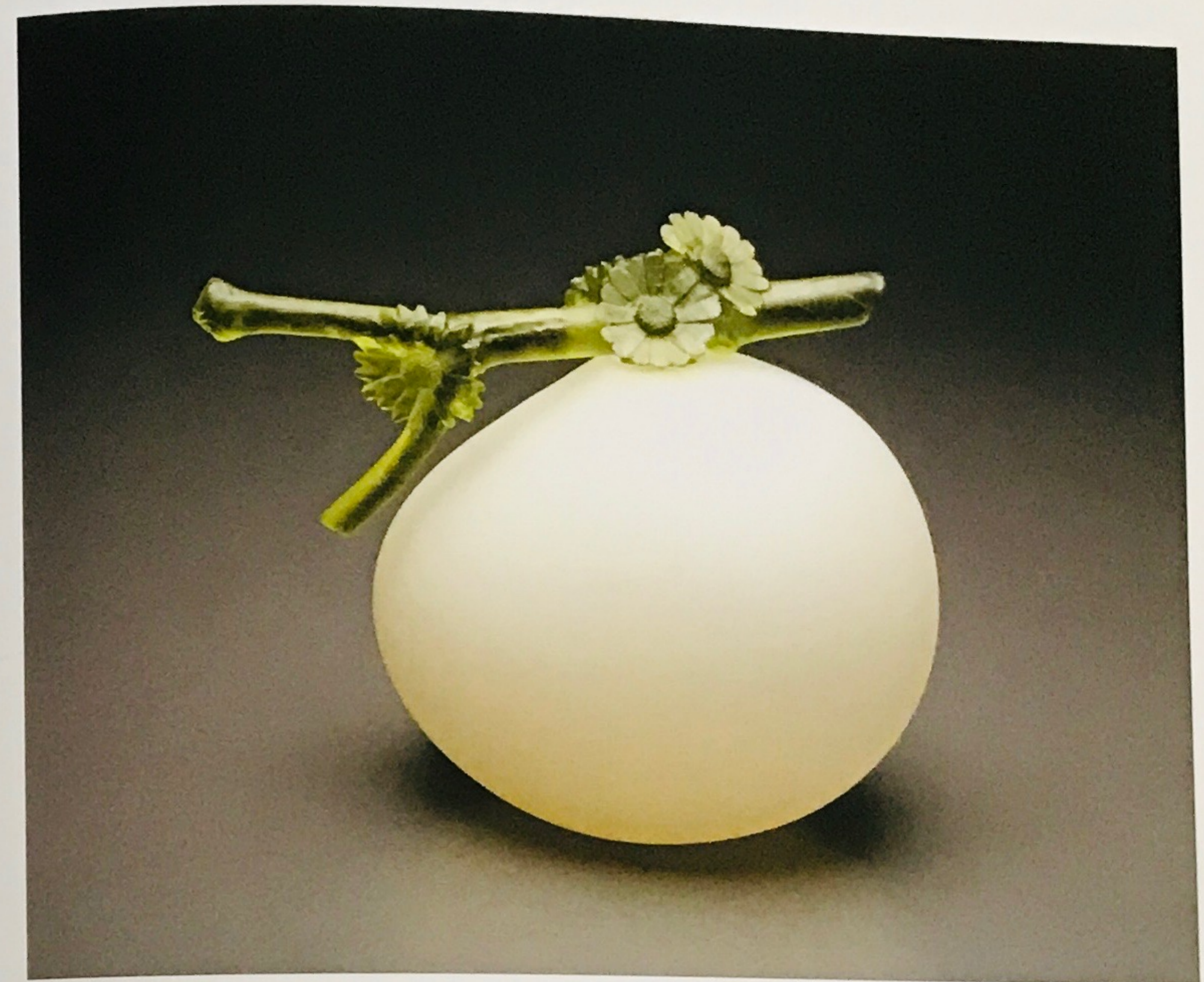
At the heart of all of this, we are just two people who are passionate about casting. We are drawn to the cast object. There is a kind of magic—almost that of alchemy—when a bit of ephemera is turned into bronze, that has enchanted both of us since the first moment we tried it. We hope to share with you our love of the process, some of our favorite cast works, and how casting has transformed our world with the objects that inhabit it.

Jen Townsend and  
Renée Zettle-Sterling

\* Faurschou Foundation website, “Ai Weiwei Sunflower Seeds.” 20 July 2016. <http://www.aiweiseeds.com/about-ai-weiseis-sunflower-seeds>. This website also offers detailed information about the piece.



Sayaka Suzuki, *Gentle Play: Hunting For Animal Spirits*, 2011. Glass casting: 3' × 7" × 2".  
Photograph by Thomas J Condon (collection of Sayaka Suzuki): 30" × 20".



Top Lisa Zerkowitz, *First Flower*, 2008. Glass,  
10" × 12" × 7".  
Photo: Mike Seidl, Collection of Steve Sereboff.



Bottom Erwin Timmers, *Green Monkey's Fist*, 2009.  
Cast recycled glass, 7" × 7" × 6".  
Photo: Anything Photographic.