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GLASS FANTASIES

INSPIRED BY THE NATURAL WORLD, NIKOLAS WEINSTEIN STRETCHES THE CREATIVE AND AESTHETIC POSSIBILITIES OF GLASS, INVENTING NEW TECHNIQUES TO ACCOMPLISH HIS ARTISTIC VISIONS, WRITES SONIA KOLESNIKOV-JESSOP

Mounted just below the 27-foot-diameter dome-shaped skylight in the new Capella Hotel's subterranean ballroom, the giant transparent sculpture of Nikolas Weinstein folds and unfolds like a glass accordion. Made up of over 10,000 tubes of borosilicate glass "stitched" together over a flexible wire armature, the sculpture seemingly floats like a giant ribbon letting the natural light flood through during the day, while reflecting the surrounding colours and lights of the ballroom at night, giving it a shimmering effect as guests move around.

"It's essentially a pliable glass fabric, literally a woven network of tubes," explains Weinstein, when he was in Singapore to complete the installation ahead of the hotel's opening later this month.

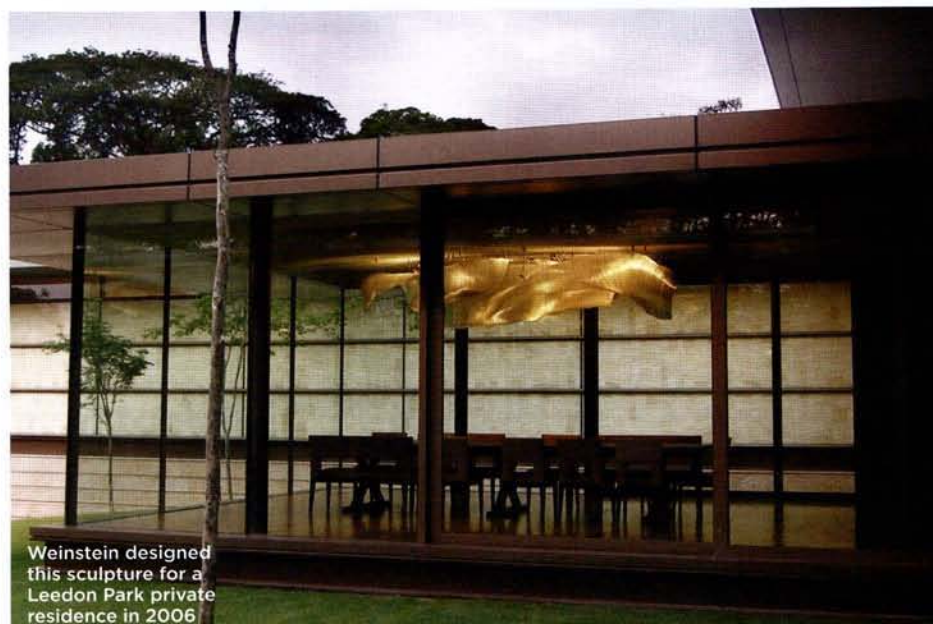
Straddling a thin line between art and craft, the San Francisco-based glass artist first emerged on the international scene when his sinuous, flowing shapes caught the eye of architect Frank Gehry in 1996. Gehry commissioned him to create a

massive chandelier for the central atrium of DZ Bank's headquarters in Berlin, which he was then working on. Weinstein came up with an airborne constellation of 34 glass panels suspended on very thin cables. The ambitious installation, which took four years to complete, covers more than 2,000 sq ft and weighs 2.5 tonnes.

The Pariser Platz chandelier, as it is now known, led to more architectural and commercial commissions. In recent years, the American artist has worked on

several corporate and residential projects in Singapore. "It's kind of crazy, but I've done more projects in Singapore than anywhere else. And the funny thing is that the Singapore couple, for whom I did the first piece, literally found me in the phone book when they were in San Francisco," Weinstein quips.

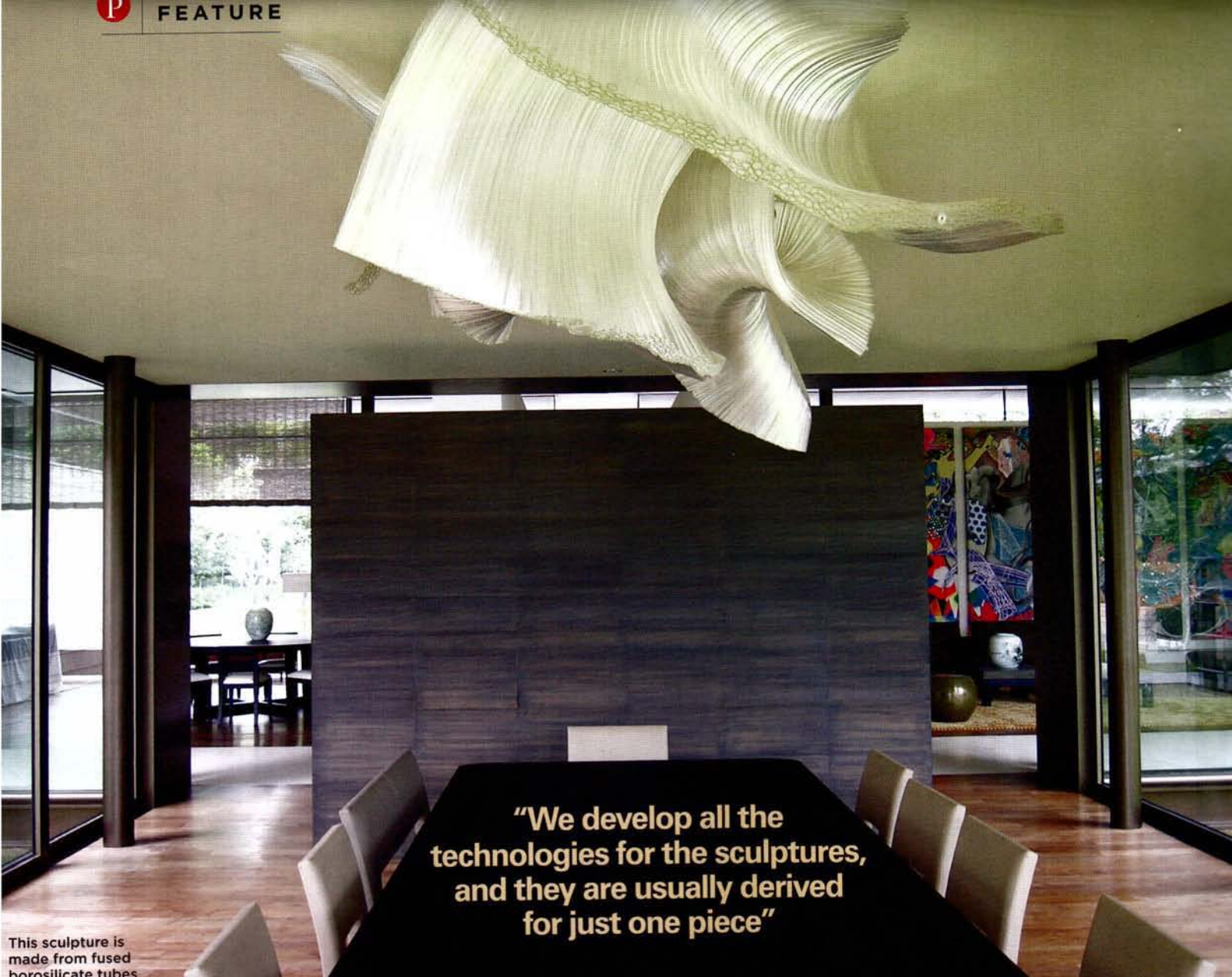
That first project, in 2004, was for a renovated shophouse on Emerald Hill, where he designed a tall, flower bouquet-like glass and stainless steel sculpture for



Weinstein designed this sculpture for a Leedon Park private residence in 2006



Weinstein putting the final touches to the Capella installation



“We develop all the technologies for the sculptures, and they are usually derived for just one piece”

This sculpture is made from fused borosilicate tubes



A 1:5 scale model of the Capella installation

PHOTOS: NIKOLAS WEINSTEIN STUDIO

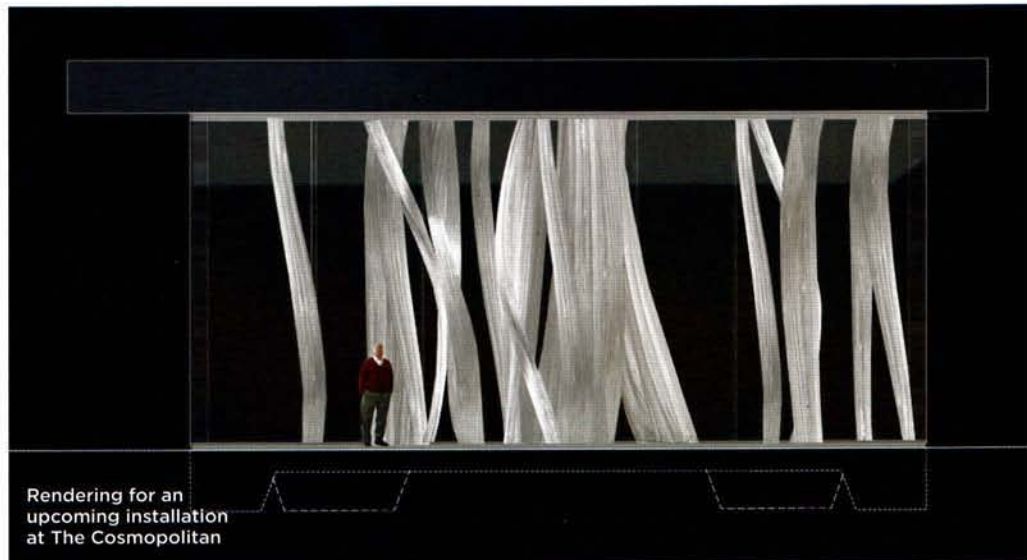
a central wall. Weinstein recalls, that the installation — stunning blue glass shapes sitting on stainless steel rods that bend according to the height and weight of each piece — was a delicate installation as he was unable to connect cables to the skylight above. “We had to install a very delicate set of cables, parallel to the ground, that weave among the glass and hold the pieces from falling out too far,” he explains.

Weinstein’s interest in organic shapes and natural glass is also apparent in a project for the glass-enclosed dining room of a Leedon Park private residence designed by Norman Foster. Using borosilicate tubes, this time in a rigid structure, the artist created a series of rolling waves with the chameleon-like glass tubes taking on the changing colours of their surroundings.

“Some of my works are a little more representational, others are abstract, but I usually don’t put colour in because I’m

more interested in the movement and the shape,” explains Weinstein, adding that all his pieces are created in response to their surrounding architecture. “My father was an architect and my mother a sculptor, so the architecture has always been a big thing for me,” he notes.

One of his on-going projects is a large installation for The Cosmopolitan, a condominium on River Valley Road still under construction. “The architecture of this site is all about columns with two twin residential towers built on tall pillars. My piece will be located at the end of a walkway before people enter the complex and I wanted it to talk to the architecture on its own terms, both



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in form and scale,” explains Weinstein.

The artist has therefore designed a forest of semi-transparent, 20-ft high glass stalks, emerging from a bed of stones, and weaving back and forth behind a screen of wooden columns in front of them. The sinuous, gently curving lines of the 12 to 16-inch in diameter glass stalks play against the regular linear elements of the wooden columns.

“The glass stalks are enormous. We had to design a custom-kiln, nearly the size of a railroad car, and built it just to form the glass,” he says.

Weinstein describes glassblowing as “a team sport” and points out that he has a studio of 10 to 12 people working on each project, including an engineer who uses computer graphics to analyse the stresses on the sculptures and calculate how much glass will be required.

“We develop all the technologies for the sculptures, and they are usually derived for just one piece,” he explains. In the case of the installation for the Capella hotel, Weinstein first worked with a paper model to get the general conceptual gesture of the piece, before moving on to a smaller scale working model. The result is a stunning piece that not only perfectly fits its surroundings, but also seems to morph as one moves around the room. □