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Bruce Chao

Bruce Chao must have been drawn to Minimalism and Process sculpture, in which raw industrial materials either record a process or suggest an ongoing one. A famous example is Richard Serra's *House of Cards* (1969), which consisted of four 48-inch-square lead plates leaning on each other as the title suggests. The viewer knows the lead is extremely heavy and that the configuration is unstable: the thought of the whole thing crashing to the ground is vivid and threatening. Chao decided to use glass similarly, exploiting what we know of its fragility and our fear of breaking it.

In a series of installations he made while still a graduate student, Chao used large sheets of plate glass as his medium. In one, he leaned large sheet of glass against an outdoor stairway. The steps were still visible but completely covered and therefore useless. One could easily imagine somebody absent-mindedly approaching, not noticing the glass and trying to climb the stairs. The imagined consequences—shattered glass and serious injury—were part of the artwork. In another, Chao set up three 3-by-8-foot sheets of glass indoors. Ropes and rubber plungers hold two of the sheets at an angle to the floor, with concrete blocks as anchors. The whole arrangement looks tentative and improbable, likely to collapse as soon as any one of the plungers loses its grip. Like the stairway barrier, the setup vividly suggests a scenario of noisy destruction.

In these works, it's not the glass that Chao manipulated so much as our memories and imaginations. Conceptually, these pieces have nothing to do with craft traditions. Chao did not craft his glass in any way; the material is industrially produced. All he did was position it. The

only connection to craft is the material itself. So how should he be categorized? He continues to make sculptures and installations in glass, metal and wood, often with strong overtones of architecture. Perhaps because his work rejects the vessel convention and the marketplace so thoroughly, Chao is mentioned in only a few of the many books on American studio glass.