

Starting From Scratch

For the glass artist **GINNY RUFFNER**, her brain damaged in a car accident, learning to make sculptures again wasn't the hardest part. She had to teach herself how to see beauty again. BY ELLEN PALL

A FEW PAGES INTO GINNY RUFFNER'S 1989 sketchbook is a small, hasty drawing of a woman's head in profile. Inside the head stands a Doric column that has been cut so a wafer of stone floats just above where the middle of the brain should be. The artist's scribbled note beside the drawing reads, "3 D wire head w/broken column."

The rest of the sketchbook, which Ruffner recently donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is a yeasty jumble of thoughts, titles and diagrams for the elaborate, intellectually playful glass sculptures for which she is best known. There are also notes on where to eat in Hong Kong, sketches for projected paintings, a recipe for gold leaf and a magazine clipping that cites the George Bernard Shaw epigram "Next to torture, art persuades most." Like Ruffner's sculpture, the book is a witty amalgam of the domestic and the abstract. Stuck between the pages is a family photograph: amid a large, handsome clan, smiling diligently at the Polaroid, sits the artist. Her usually flamboyant clothes are toned down for the visit home, her hair is a mass of dirty-blond curls, her face is soft, almost girlish.

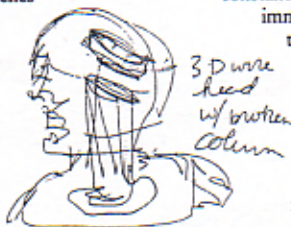
But it is the sketch of the broken column that resonates most fully, because in 1991, two years after Ruffner drew it, her brain was severely injured in a car crash. She emerged from a coma six weeks later impaired in almost every way: speechless, unable to move and in such a blank mental state

Ellen Pall is a novelist who writes frequently about the arts. Her last article for the Magazine, "Painting Life Into Sammy," was a profile of the painter Vincent Desiderio.

that she did not know her own taste in books, food or, most important, art. Paintings that had once thrilled her now left her politely puzzled; her deepest pleasure had been rendered inscrutable.

The accident also confirmed her profoundly absurdist world view. "I think the universe said, 'Oh, let's see, you don't want to turn 40?'" says Ruffner, at home in the downtown Seattle loft where, nearly four years after the accident, she once again lives and works. "Take that! Now you have to work at turning 40."

Her words are slow and slurred. Her breathy voice quavers constantly, and her face, still beautiful, is half immobile, so that it is sometimes impossible to tell whether she is laughing or filled with excruciating emotion or both. "What else? You want a challenge? You're an artist — how about we make your eyesight bad? Like to exercise? Let's make it so you can't get up." I think the universe," Ruffner concludes, "has a really finely tuned sense of humor."



RUFFNER IS SURROUNDED BY EVIDENCE OF HER own finely tuned humor. Her loft, a sort of residential analogue to the fecund miscellany of her sketchbook, is a large, crowded, funk- and art-filled space overlooking the Seattle waterfront. From the ceiling hang eight chandeliers that Ruffner designed, abloom with sunflowers and tornado-like whirls.

The humor is in her sculptures too, which often tell stories — about a failing relationship, for example ("The Tunnel of Love Wears Heartbreak Pajamas"). Other pieces assemble, as poems do, a set of richly suggestive

From the artist's sketchbook, two years before her accident.

"I'm not having any abstract thoughts," then you're having one.

"This was exciting to me," Ruffner says. "I began to visualize what I'd like to see in there" — a huge, swooping glass-and-metal chandelier that had "cornered" what Ruffner describes as a "cart-boat-vessel thing on wheels." The ability to theorize returned a few months later, when she suddenly "noticed" herself thinking an abstract thought. (She no longer recalls what it was exactly.) "I hadn't realized until that moment that I was not thinking abstract thoughts. It's one of those wonderful contradictions — if you can think, 'I'm not having any abstract thoughts,' then you're having one." From that point on, as an exercise, she deliberately forced herself to think abstractly, quizzing herself often about her values and beliefs.

Though her imagination was stirring, she had yet to reconnect with her old self in any detail. "I knew who I was," she wrote some time later, in notes for a planned book, "but I didn't know much about me." So, on the Fourth of July, 1992,

emotions — sentimentality, pathos," she says, messy feelings that have been "banished from 'tasteful' objects, including art, for many years." And she is slightly less infuriated by nonenigmatic art, the kind that bluntly argues a point of view: "Now I just feel *sorry* for the artist — and the viewer."

She returned to New York and began to draw, then paint. (In the early days, her arm trembled so badly that Kursh would tie on an ankle weight to steady it.) She finally resumed making sculpture, starting with pieces she had designed or begun before the crash, communicating by fax with assistants in Seattle as to how each should be executed, then having them shipped east, where she finished them. Some pieces designed before the crash were titled afterward, notably the 1992 glass cornucopia "In Case You Wondered, the Glass Is Half Full."

Among the other works that straddle the wreck

tion to assistants she once called in only when she had an overload of work. (Such use of assistants fits into what Jane Adlin, of the Metropolitan Museum, calls a huge historical tradition in glass art, including Tiffany and Gallé. Dale Chihuly, probably America's best-known contemporary glass artist, stopped doing hands-on glasswork in 1976 after a car accident cost him the sight in one eye.)

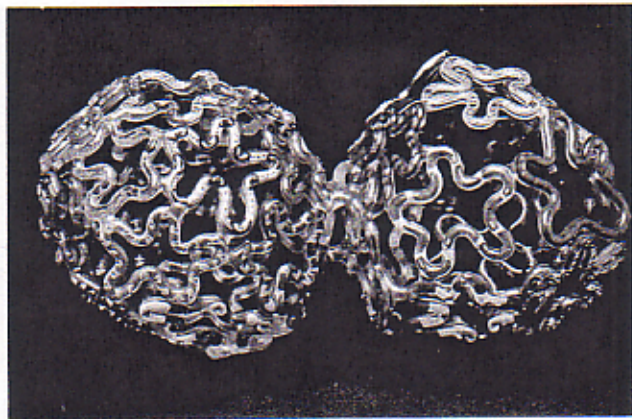
The content of Ruffner's work has changed, too. "Patterns of Thought," a series on which, for the first time, she collaborated with Kursh, features patterned glass spheres in steel baskets that suggest skulls. (The crash may have solidified their relationship, but she and Kursh "still fight like cats and dogs," remarks Ruffner, whose recent piece "Collaboration" — which she did alone — shows two figures, tied together at the ankles, falling off a paintbrush-beam.) Her new work includes more personal history, less art history, and the humor is slightly less oblique. And Ruffner's sense of her work's "purpose" is more ambitious. She had always wanted it to make people think. Now, she says: "I want them to think about life. Like, what are they doing here?"

Are the subtler changes in Ruffner's work deliberate artistic choices or emotional fallout from a dire trauma or the result of her maturation as an artist or perhaps traces of neuroanatomical injury? In "The Shattered Mind," Gardner discusses a study of four artists with right-hemisphere damage (Ruffner's right hemisphere was probably more damaged than her left.) In the post-traumatic work of all four, Gardner discerned a "bolder, more direct," perhaps more impassioned execution. But case histories are too few to support conclusions.

A better question might be why Ruffner has yet to make any art about the trauma of the crash itself — no pieces about violence, violation, rage or loss. (She came closest, perhaps, with the threatening glass-and-metal chandelier she conceived for her show at the Mint Museum, now scheduled for 1999.) In her new sculptures, everything is recovery, healing. Even when the damage is alluded to, the mood is relentlessly upbeat. "Don Quixote, Eat Your Heart Out" (1992) features bright, flowerlike windmills. In "It's All in How You View It" (1994), a tiny, beribboned wheelchair is escorted by bluebirds.

Asked if she will address the accident's darker aspects in her future work, Ruffner suddenly bursts into racking sobs. But she impatiently shoos away a comforting hand, blaming the tears on her injury. (In brain-injured people, passing drifts of mild emotion sometimes explode in bouts of tears, rage or laughter, a result of the destruction of neuroanatomical connections between the older, emotional structures of the brain and the higher, cortical ones that normally monitor them.)

Ruffner soon recovers her poise. "I think art is magic," she says, describing it as a transcendent force that can lift the viewer out of ordinary life. "I'm not going to make any magic about loss." ■



The brain has long been a muse for Ruffner's art. From left: "Secrets of Eye Hand Coordination" (1993), "It's All in How You View It" (1994), "The Hemispheres of the Brain Containing Pattern" (1993), "Balance Series/Roots" (1994).



she and Kursh flew to Seattle. At first, the loft, the clothes, the books, the half-finished sculptures were unfamiliar. But gradually, they came back into mental focus.

"Long-term memory is about retrieval," Dr. Kay says. Things that are learned or developed over time, like a second language or math skills — or esthetics — may seem to be lost altogether, but "sometimes they are simply inaccessible," he explains. "Once a person is re-exposed to them, the memory and the experience begin to come back." By August, Ruffner was sufficiently grounded in her own world to make art again.

Her esthetic sense, like her tastes in food, had returned slightly altered. "I have a much more tolerant definition of beauty now," she says. "I include things that earlier would have been 'gaudy' — lots of gold, swirly decoration." While still excluding it from her work, she also has a new appreciation for the "tacky," which she now says is an elitist appellation rooted in class prejudice. "Tacky" things are often not afraid to have

is "The Hemispheres of the Brain Containing Pattern," a linked pair of brilliantly colored globes fashioned of curled and kinked glass rods. Ruffner's interest in the brain — and her pleasure in her own — long predated her injury, and her fury and despair in the wake of its violation were considerable. "It's a good thing my brain has come back on line so slowly," she wrote a year after the crash. "If it had been here any earlier, I'm sure I would have killed myself."

SINCE THE WRECK, RUFFNER HAS HAD half a dozen solo shows. More are scheduled, including one Oct. 7-29 at the Heller Gallery in SoHo. Though it turns out that Ruffner's esthetic sense is not all that different than it was before the crash, her work certainly is. Most of her sculptures are sturdier because she no longer trusts her still-clumsy right hand with very fragile pieces. And the sculptures are less highly worked, since she must still delegate much of the hands-on execu-

or having blue eyes." Even as she began to wonder what else was left of her brain, she says: "I knew I would make art again. *That* I had no doubt about. I think that probably was what brought me back."

Her doctors did have doubts, though, and with good reason. Beyond motor skills, making art involves a complex alchemy of emotion, perception and intellect. Given the widespread injury to her brain, Ruffner could have lost all sorts of crucial faculties. In the past, it might even have been feared that some discrete "creativity center" had been destroyed. But after studying the subject for many years, Howard Gardner, a developmental psychologist at Harvard who has written about brain damage and creativity in "The Shattered Mind" and other books, says, "I don't think there is such a thing."

Still, Gardner points out, brain-injured patients can lose the ability to conjure up an image and manipulate it in the mind. Reasoning and linguistic abilities can be vastly reduced, emotion blunted (or, paradoxically, sharpened). Frontal-lobe injuries (Ruffner's CAT scans showed a mild frontal-lobe contusion) are particularly associated with loss of the ability to make and carry out plans. Even a mild injury can cause subtle changes in judgment. Thomas Kay, a clinical neuropsychologist and professor at New York University's Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine, has treated a number of brain-injured artists. Many see their work change, he says: "A certain fluidity may be lost, or their work may become much more detailed. How it's affected is different for everyone."

In some ways, Ruffner was lucky. While she lost the use of her drawing hand, it may have helped that she was left-handed: whereas right-handed people tend to rely mostly on a single hemisphere of the brain to accomplish a given task, some left-handed people may use both, providing a measure of insurance against complete loss. Also, according to Gardner, there is increasing evidence of greater bilateral representation in women's brains than in men's. Moreover, he says, as a professional artist, Ruffner had probably "overlearned" her art skills, which may have therefore been represented bilaterally as well. She was also lucky to have an extremely high I.Q. (She was once a member of Mensa.) Diffuse brain injuries tend to slow thought; very high intelligence provides a margin to spare.

Most of the brain healing after an injury as severe as Ruffner's takes place within the first year. But functional improvement, in which the patient deliberately stimulates the brain by practicing lost skills, may be a lifelong process. The common belief that we use only 10 percent of our brains is, unfortunately, "complete bunk," according to Antonio Damasio, a neuroscientist and head of the department of neurology at the University of Iowa College of Medicine. But through stimulation, the surviving nerve cells can make new connections, maximizing their efficiency by creating new neural pathways.

From the start, Ruffner was fierce about her recovery. She spent four months at the Charlotte

Institute of Rehabilitation, then continued at Rusk in New York. Today, though still in a wheelchair most of the time, she works out three days a week at a gym. At home, she uses a stair-stepper while doing eye and speech exercises. She starts the alphabet at Z and goes backward to A to exercise her brain as well. Though the jumping motion of her eyes is so extreme that she did not notice objects moving when the 5.0 earthquake struck Seattle last winter, she forces herself to read an hour each morning.

Ruffner's focus on mastering her body pervades her "Balance Series" of sculptures, which she began late in 1992, barely a year after the accident. Each piece shows a cat, fox or Martian performing some feat of physical or psychic balance. In "Roots," for instance, a Martian does a perfect handstand on a piece of fruit and a pile of tiny planets. Ruffner chose animals and an alien as her "alter images," she says, to suggest "how strange and foreign it feels not to be a biped."

Her recovery has already far outstripped her doctors' early expectations. "A family trait is, well, whether you say muleheaded or pigheaded, either one, we are all that way," Ruffner explains.

But her own will and the loving support of friends and family (which doctors say is a key factor in recovery) could not rehabilitate her esthetics. Ruffner had gone into the crash gleefully opinionated about art. When she came out of her coma, she could look at a van Gogh and have no idea what she used to see in it. Even more baffling were modernist sculptures and late Abstract Expressionist paintings. "I like enigmatic objects that invite me to fill in the blank," she had written in her 1990 sketchbook, "that don't allow me to be a couch cerebellum."

A bit of explication might have come in handy now. "Not to know what you like was really bizarre," Ruffner says. She had long been curious about why certain things are deemed beautiful. At the time of the crash, she was using a figure she called "Beauty" — a headless, winged, rather athletic woman in a tunic — in a series of sculptures that explored the concept of the beautiful in Western art history. In her 1990 piece "Beauty Deconstructing Portraiture," gold-framed reproductions of female faces by Leonardo, Matisse, Picasso and others are placed atop "Beauty" figures arranged like acrobats in a human pyramid.

Now the question of what beauty was recurred with visceral urgency. "It became much more real to me," Ruffner says. "I got a real lesson in taste." Scary and strange as that was, she also found it exhilarating. "It's freeing, starting with a tabula rasa." More basic tastes would return on their own, although somewhat altered. (Before the

wreck, she was a vegetarian; now she craves burgers.) But her esthetic memory needed wooing. Kursh visited her at Charlotte Rehab with pictures of her own work. In a tone of bemused recollection, he says, "She'd say, 'Oh, yeah, oh yeah,' when something would come back into existence in her mind."

Ruffner, describing the slow sensation of recognition, says: "Did you ever clean out your closet and find things you've worn and think, 'Oh, yeah' — something you used to love, but it's been so long out of your existence?"

As Ruffner's difficult recovery at the rehab center continued, she began occupational therapy, which at one point included sorting cans by label. Kursh, disturbed by seeing a superbly accomplished artist rehearsing such primitive skills, smuggled her out to a mall to buy pencils, pastels and books of illustrations to copy. (At this time, drawing from imagination was beyond her.) He



chose botanical illustrations similar to those Ruffner had recently incorporated into a series of paintings. "I was trying to tell Ginny who she was," he says. "She didn't know."

Ruffner doggedly set about learning to draw again from scratch. Her first, inept efforts "terrified" her, she says, but her sense of composition, always strong, soon returned. "I can remember thinking about the placement of the objects on the page. They were god-awful drawings, because of my eyes and hands, but they were well composed." (In fact, some of the hospital drawings — mainly of plants and flowers — are strangely arresting, conveying the intensity of their moment.)

At the end of May, she left the hospital for a month at home with her parents. Stimulated by an invitation from the Mint Museum to do new work, she began to regain her ability to conjure artistic images out of the air. Early in June, her mother drove her back to the Mint, where Mark Leach suggested she do an installation to complement the show they had been discussing before her accident.