Mortal Art

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"I need another brick," Francais (pronounced fran-swah) muttered from behind the viewfinder of the camera.

"Get your own brick," I thought but didn't verbalize, "I sure am not missing this." Oh, a brick is film-jargon for a camera battery—aptly titled by camera assistants required to carry multiples of the weighty objects. The cold weather was dropping them like flies.

Getting bricks wasn't my job, yet for some reason all of the unpaid production assistants (a fancy name for a go-for) had made themselves scarce in the cold weather, and that left me as the most expendable; I was the unfortunate go-for. And, while I was as eager as the rest of my film-fellows to watch Junichi Nakamura cut the supports from his magnificent sculpture, *Attacking Claws*, Francais, my cameraman, couldn't run out of battery. So, through snowflakes smacking my face, with boots freezing into the ground from the weather and snow pants trying to fall off, I ran to grab and return with a load of bricks.

Three minutes later I stood next to Francais again; Junichi Nakamura was just beginning to cut out the supports of his sculpture; Francais, oh-so-surprisingly, hadn't run out of battery. *Attacking Claws*, Junichi Nakamura's sculpture, was a magnificent structure of artistic accomplishment. A moment captured in ice, a lioness, contoured and muscular, had its large curved claws buried into the back-shoulder blades of a magnificent wildebeest, having pounced onto its back, hanging on in a deadly piggyback manner. Reared up on its hind legs, the wildebeest—front hooves kicking the air like a bucking horse—curved down and in, its head turned back and to the right, attempted to shake the attacking lioness from its back. The entire structure was almost eight feet in length. Both beasts' hind legs rested on a sculpted mount of dirt and curved savanna grass, which was the only three feet of the sculpture that touched ground, other than the supports that currently held the torsos of the beasts suspended in the air. Other than these two tiny supports,

seeming stalactites reaching downward from the massive structure, the upper bodies of both beasts hung out over open air like a tree off the side of a cliff. The tiny, several-centimeters-thick hairs of the wildebeest's mane glistened, and the same sized teeth that filled the roaring mouth of the lioness did similar. The ice had a blue tint to it, and you could see the lines inside the sculpture where the blocks had been glued together with water. Bent over, hands on my knees in exhaustion from my running to get bricks, I watched shimmering bits of ice, like beautiful sawdust, arc out from the blade of the chainsaw, the heavier bits falling quickly, while the snow-dust hovered several seconds more. This was the moment when the stalactites were removed; the structure above would either stand or fall—a masterpiece would either be glorified or ruined. A single piece of ice hit my nose from the flying bits coming off the chainsaw.

Junichi Nakamura, the man cutting fearlessly under the massive structure, is a bit of a celebrity amongst ice sculptors. He speaks terribly broken English. A simple beet farmer from Japan in the summer, the cold weather draws the best out of Junichi Nakamura, crafting masterpieces on the scale of *David* or *Atlas*, except through a medium of ice. Easily one of the greatest sculptors on the planet, Junichi Nakamura has won an Olympic gold in his craft, as well as an American National Championship on his one and only attempt at participation. Similarly, every year Junichi Nakamura sojourns to the town of Fairbanks, Alaska for the Ice Alaska Annual Sculpting Classic, and since 2004 has won 11 golds and four silvers, never placing under 4th since 1999, as far back as the records go.

Ice Alaska itself has been running since March 1990, before I was born. On its 22nd year, it has grown from a week-long competition with eight American teams, to a month-long event with over 70 international teams competing, and almost 50,000 visitors annually. It is the largest annual ice competition in the world. Teams from over 40 countries including the United States, Australia, Slovakia, Romania, Portugal, Korea, Mongolia, Morocco, and dozens more come to compete in the only town in America that has the weather and resources to host such an event. Every year, the event brings over 40 million dollars into Fairbanks, and a large dose of culture for the otherwise isolated city,

freezing in the Tanana Valley at 20 below zero. By day, the blue skies of February in Fairbanks light the park, but by night, lights colored blue, green, yellow, orange, and every other color on the spectrum illuminate the finished sculptures, shining through the transparent ice, painting the sculptures with the fluorescent strokes of light rays.

The event consists of three competitions: the quaint single-block, the gargantuan multi-block, as well as the amateur competition. The park has space for all these competitions, as well as a fully-functioning ice slide for children, immature adults, and cameramen to slide down (creating a slide out of ice may seem to be a lawsuit waiting to happen, yet surprisingly nobody has ever been seriously hurt).

All of this madness seemed interesting to The Learning Channel, or looked like just another way to make millions of media-dollars, or a bit of both. So, in 2009 the documentary, "Chainsaw Ice Sculptors – The Challenge" was born. I was hired on as a grip/camera assistant. That placed me with the responsibilities to my camera operator: his lights, his equipment, his camera (when he needed a rest), his safety, and his coffee. Francais himself was a late thirties, skinny Frenchman, who commonly liked to pronounce American swear words in his native accent, which made for some healthy comedy amongst the crew—imagine the vowels of our beloved four letter f-word pronounced like the word 'book'. Over the week-long multi-block competition the crew and I had covered four teams, mainly Junichi Nakamura and his team, covering the process from blocks to artwork.

Junichi Nakamura, with his incredible talent, has one quirk: he's insane. Not the mental illness type, but he has an odd fetish for defiantly disproving gravity with his structures. Several times gravity has won in this man-versus-laws-of-nature conflict; one sculpture's collapse nearly killed him in 2008 as he removed the supports. Unswayed, this year's sculpture was the most tedious yet, a six-foot in length structure supported by a puny three-foot space of ice touching the ground, the rest hanging out over nothing but empty air, and a few small supports. It was these that Junichi Nakamura was removing, and while everyone hoped for the best, no one knew whether it would stand or fall after the supports came out. Every single news crew, as well as my documentary crew, were on-site for the moment.

One support was out, one more to go. The crowd was on edge, the cameras were all on record. No noise but the chainsaw was picked up by the boom-mic, as all the onlookers held their breath. The bit of Junichi Nakamura's chainsaw cut into the top of the final support. This was the moment, the moment that defined the whole week for Junichi Nakamura and his team. I thought back on the amazing process it had taken to get here, and poignantly mused about the mortality of it all.

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I could see through the five feet of ice, freshly shoveled, on O'Grady pond, endearingly titled "Arctic Diamond" for its light blue radiance and transparency. The ice is pristine. In other seasons of the year it's shipped to places such as Anchorage, the Bahamas, and even as far as Israel. But between April 21st and March 25th exclusive rights are given to the homely Fairbanks event of Ice Alaska.

Every year 1,500 tons of ice are "harvested" from O'Grady pond for use in the competition. A moderate portion of the 400-some volunteers who dedicate their time and effort to the event every year are assigned to help harvest. The harvest starts well before the sculpting.

Tom Gullichson is one of those volunteers, and he is in charge of getting the ice out of the pond and to the sites. A round, bearded man sporting brown-suspender Carhartts and a beanie, his loud, boisterous attitude is addicting. At six a.m. on day one of the competition he was already spry. He had to be: each site had to contain at least one block before the 7:30 a.m. start of the competition. His booming laughter could be heard across the park as he, and about thirty others at all times, cut the ice with his own invention: a six-foot chainsaw attached to a wooden cart, slowly eating away at the frozen liquid shimmering in the sun. Gullichson cracked a sexual joke to the operator of the front end loader. Francais was filming and chuckled himself, but I doubt anyone told Gullichson his comedy would not be included in the final cut.

I glanced from Gullichson and the operator and then away across the park. The teams were just now entering their sites for the first time, waiting for the blocks to be delivered, and joking with each other and the other teams. Further away, a local teenage couple was holding each

other close in the cold weather, looking into each other's eyes as well as at the one-block sculptures which had already been finished. Off to the side, the park and slide were full of children with skin colors as varied as the lights that illuminated the site, all playing with their families and each other. Near them, a father filmed his child jumping down the death-slide face first. I could almost hear the heart of Fairbanks beat. Francais smacked me out of my musing and gestured that we were moving on.

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Junichi Nakamura raised the Huskvarna 20" 60cc Rancher chainsaw high above his head, revving the chain and making a noise similar to the call of the Sand People in *Star Wars*. The onlookers cheered, getting an odd sort of pleasure from a five-foot Asian man in a pink jacket hefting a chainsaw bigger than he was above his head. The chainsaw came down, biting into freshly harvested ice, carving away unnecessary H_2O.

This was Day One of the competition, and spirits were high. Spectacles like Junichi Nakamura's were breaking out across the park. The "Ice Queen," a member of one of the other teams being covered, wore a dress and tiara the first hour on the job. A team of hairy, pasty-white Vikings (okay, they weren't Vikings except for the beards and demeanor) removed their shirts and performed seal slides across the frozen road. Many clapped, but none dared join them.

Large, dirty yellow front-end loaders beeped as they delivered 7,500-pound blocks of ice to each of the particular sculpture sites. After delivery, the large chainsaws went to work cutting down the blocks into specific sizes already predetermined in each sculptor's plans. At Junichi Nakamura's site an ice-ball fight broke out between team members, culminating with the dumping of a bucket of snow on the head of unsuspecting Kareki Koji's head. The blocks, after they had been cut down to size, were stacked strategically on each other by the same front-end loaders. Even now, precision and patience were virtues, as one false slip of a cable could end someone's life. But time was plentiful; each team had a whole seven days ahead of them to complete their projects.

Nobody seemed to notice the clock subtracting seconds rapidly, which was raised up over the park and its temporary residents.

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Day Four, a yell. I smacked Francais' shoulder and my finger became a bloodhound, pointing up and to the left. The camera lens swung quickly and caught the image of little Kareki, holding on desperately to a scaffold, not for fear of him falling, but something else. The toe of his boot was hooked on the hundred-pound, head-of-the-lioness portion of ice, intricately detailed, that had been placed up on top of the sculptures by the front end loader and had yet to be water-glued on. He was holding on, preventing its fall and subsequent crash, which would reduce it to simple freezer cubes and a dozen hours of work lost, which would have to be redone.

Five minutes later Kareki and the block were saved. The group of four stood in a square formation, not really speaking except with their eyes. The cameras caught this unspoken conversation: this was a reality check. There would be no more screwing around, practical jokes, or loss of focus as there had been in the previous days. It was crunch time—or maybe that's a poor choice of words.

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Junichi Nakamura cast his cigarette to the ground, grabbed another from the package, lit it, and returned to work on the mane of his wildebeest quickly. This was the only type of break that I or the rest of the camera crew had seen him take in the last twelve hours. His brow curved inward to his nose as he focused closely in on his work on the final day of the competition.

As one of the other sculptors had said in interview, "Precision makes a good sculpture into a masterpiece." The final stage of the work was one of patience and gentleness. Small tools had been brought out: chisels, small punches and screwdrivers, drills and custom drill bits to create fantastic texture on the outside of the sculptures. Kareki was carving small ice canyons into the side of the lioness, and her muscle sinews

were becoming apparent. Behind the statue, Shinichi Sawamura, one of Junichi Nakamura's teammates, was using a blowtorch to melt the outside of the finished ice, giving it the gloss and transparency of glass. No unnecessary talking was heard throughout the entire park as the teams worked hard to finish their sculptures. Chainsaws, the crunch of snow under Carhartt boots, the backing-up-beep of the cranes, and the low hum of the work lights were the only sounds now, except for an occasional command from Junichi Nakamura to his teammates. The large clock crane in the middle of the park was less than ten hours from hitting zero, and before that happened, the sculpture had to be finished, and the supports had to be out.

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Over the course of the previous week, Junichi Nakamura and his team had built something incredible, something few other individuals on the planet could craft from several multi-thousand pound blocks cut from a simple pond. Yet, the incredible thing for me was that, regardless of the results of the cutting away of the supports, whether or not Junichi Nakamura's creation stood or fell, within a month this masterpiece would be nothing more than runoff into the gutter outside the park. Gallons and gallons of lioness, wildebeest, and savanna grass would slowly trickle down the road, either evaporating or ending up in the Chena River, which runs near to the park. Junichi Nakamura would not retire this structure to his mansion; he would not donate it to a museum for the delight of millions; he would not make mega-bucks off of its sale; Junichi Nakamura would not even see it again. The only remnants of this gorgeous structure would be in the three megapixel point-and-shoots pressed up against the onlooker's eyes, and the HD footage rolling inside of Fransais' camera to my right. Nothing would remain except memory and film.

The ice sawdust floated in the air. Every moment the chainsaw got

closer to completely removing the support. Francais, Tyler, the director of the film, and Natalie, the producer, inched closer, heads slightly forward, mouths slightly opened, and eyes not blinking for fear of missing the moment. The work lights hummed and the chainsaw roared. The clock above ticked down from thirty minutes. As he sawed, Junichi Nakamura's legs were tense, ready to throw his small frame backwards if the worst should happen. The little red record light in the top right corner of Francais' viewfinder blinked. Junichi Nakamura's team stood less than five feet off, their arms over the shoulders of their comrades, patiently waiting for the moment where...

The support fell to the ground.

That moment, the moment of expectation, everyone paused, waiting for the structure to fall, breath held, heart skipping a beat. That moment came, and that moment passed. Everyone knew when it had passed; simultaneously everyone began to cheer passionately, cheering in victory, clapping in admiration. The structure had stood on its own four feet, reaching out over nothing, defying gravity and logic alike, artistically, mathematically, and structurally brilliant. The crowd increased their revelry as Junichi Nakamura's fist was thrown into the air and his teammates jumped onto his frame, tackling him to the ground, his fist still skyward in victorious reach.

Junichi Nakamura can speak of his art as few other artists can: his art is truly mortal. Unlike literature, unlike stone sculpture, unlike painting, film, or any other manner of known art, there is no final project to go back to after a month except a Polaroid and video recording; few artists can say that they have outlived their masterpiece. Like human existence, his art is at its finest one moment, completely gone the next; nothing tangible is left of Junichi Nakamura's art after the life of the work has been spent. Yet is it not the mortality of life that partially allows us to truly enjoy it? In the end all Junichi Nakamura has are those precious memories of laughing with a comrade, spending hours perfecting the mane of his wildebeest, and raising his fist in the air as he is tackled by his team after his sculpture stands firm. Like Buddhist sand painters, something tells me it was not the glory, reward, final product, or the artistic transcendence of time that Junichi Nakamura and his team toiled late hours, early mornings, and uncomfortable weather for.

It was for the doing, for the process, the comradery, and for the pleasure derived from seeing a lioness and a wildebeest struggle, even for a fleeting few weeks, in a sculpture of ice.

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