



THE

ICEMAN CARVETH

IN THE BEGINNING THERE'S ELBOW GREASE. THEN, POUNDS OF SNOW, SLUSH AND ICE ALL OVER THE FLOOR. AT THE END—AN EXQUISITE

WORK OF ART, GLISTENING IN ONE OF THE MOST SHORT-LIVED MEDIA: ICE.

VIVAT HONGPONG OF ABSECON IS AMONG THE WORLD'S MASTERS OF THE CRAFT. NATURALLY ENTHUSIASTIC AND A TRUE LOVER OF LIFE, HE FLASHES

A HUGE SMILE WITH LITTLE PRODDING. A COMPACT, MUSCULAR MAN WITH EYES THAT SPARKLE LIKE HIS HANDIWORK, AT 59 HE EXHIBITS THE ENER-

GY AND HORSEPOWER OF MEN HALF HIS AGE. IT'S A PREREQUISITE OF HIS

LINE OF WORK, WHICH IS QUITE THE PHYSICAL ENDEAVOR.

Story by Sal Emma
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The blocks are unstable because their edges are smooth and tend to slide. He grabs an ice saw that resembles the open maw of a shark, with two-inch stainless teeth.

Like sand sculptors and practitioners of the curious art of *mandala* sand painting, Vivat works in a transient medium. Even the largest, most elaborate examples of his work rarely last longer than a few hours. Melting even as it is being created, it quickly returns to its basic form.

Cramped into a small vestibule adjacent to an Atlantic City hotel kitchen, when *Envision* caught up with the world-champion carver, he was peeling cardboard to expose his quarry: 300-pound blocks of ice. Frozen under controlled conditions, crystal-clear carving ice is sheathed in plastic and cardboard to protect it from dirt and damage in transit.

Vivat begins orchestrating the heavy-lifting portion of the project, stacking the blocks atop one another to make a monolith taller than anybody in the room. He works by himself, except when he and his son, Art, carve together to create large competition pieces. Sculpting 3,000 pounds of ice into an enormous, delicate expression of the fantastic, the pair won gold medals at the Olympics of Ice Carving in Provo, Utah, in 2002.

Today it's just Vivat, and as many chefs as he can cajole into helping him heft the blocks skyward. They are enthusiastic about helping. Vivat's something of a legend in the biz. It's a precarious process made more so by the fact that the ice is hard to grip. In the end, they prevail with gloves, brute force and old-fashioned iron ice tongs, stacking the blocks edge-wise to build a wall four feet wide and nearly eight feet tall. By evening, it will become a seven-foot bald eagle clutching a pair of flagpoles, bedecked by stars and stripes.

Another chef stops by to inspect the monolith. He points to the paper toque chef's hat perched on his head and informs the artist that the sculpture can't be any taller, or it won't fit through the freezer door for overnight storage. Vivat dispatches the problem with his electric chainsaw, buzzing a few inches off the top.

Now the real work begins. The blocks are unstable because their edges are smooth and tend to slide. He grabs an ice saw that resembles the open maw of a shark, with two-inch stainless teeth. If it weren't so clean, it would make the perfect horror movie weapon.

Grimacing from the effort, Vivat forces the blade between each block and slowly saws a kerf along its length. He's huffing and sweating like a marathoner by the time he's finished. The sawing has roughened the edges and tightly mated the blocks, making the column much more stable. Now he mortars them together with handfuls of ice sculptor's sawdust—the snow all the sawing has produced at the column's base.



A chainsaw (above), a high-speed rotary cutter (right) and chisel (far right) are just some of the tools implemented by Vivat while creating his glacial art work.





Above: World champion Vivat Hongpong.

Working quickly, glancing back and forth to his paper drawings, he scratches details of the great bird of prey.

When satisfied with the column's integrity, he dons earmuffs to contain the noise and a rain suit against the blizzard his power tools are about to unleash. He looks like a commercial fisherman. With an angle grinder right out of the local auto body shop, he planes all the surfaces perfectly smooth.

Now he roughs out the basic shape with the chainsaw. He's not tall enough to reach the top, so he stands on two plastic milk crates, shuffling them like snowshoes across a floor that quickly grows slick in an avalanche of snow and ice bombs—some bigger than a basketball—that shatter and skitter beneath him. We discover why the hotel has assigned this particular small, dimly lit room: it has a floor drain.

When the sawing is finished, he unfolds the simplest tool in his arsenal—a Swiss army knife. Working quickly, glancing back and forth to his paper drawings, he scratches details of the great bird of prey.

He goes at the knife marks with a high-speed rotary cutter, slowly releasing flesh and feather from their icy prison. Within a few minutes, the ice begins to betray hints of the creature's future magnificence.

Snow and sleet fly as the animal takes form. Flat surfaces gain dimension as the head, beak, eyes and neck come into view, as if by some talisman's magic. He cuts lightly at first, to prevent removing too much material. As his confidence in the piece grows, he cuts deeper, and the features emerge in more dramatic relief.

At times, Vivat seems to merge with the animal as he brings it practically to life. He stares intently at the bird-to-be and lifts his arms to mimic the position of its wings. It's as if his goal is not to make the ice resemble a bird, but to become one.

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Left: Putting the finishing touches on the icy eagle.

Below: Unleashing a blizzard while carving.





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Iceman - continued from page 29

He's in the zone, a blur of movement—hands, arms and body orchestrated in motions he's made a thousand times before. Time is of the essence, since the blocks are melting. The speed at which he works is both astonishing and a little unsettling, when you realize the sharpness of his implements. Like all great artists, he makes it look effortless.

Nearly four decades of experience have made him comfortable in his element. Food art is his lifelong passion. As a young man in his native Thailand, Vivat worked as a hotel artist, carving ice and tallow, and painting with chocolate. When he moved to New York, he discovered no such position in the American hospitality industry. So he took various jobs that put him inside hotel kitchens, where he looked for opportunities to practice his art.

He became noticed and received better assignments when his work started winning awards, a trend that has continued to this day. Along with the gold medals earned with son Art, himself a master food artist in Washington, DC, Vivat has amassed a string of awards both at home and around the world. He was named the National Restaurant Association's Grand National Champion and won the World Championship of Ice Art in Austria.

And all he really has to show for it are photographs, the work itself long returned to earth as plain water. His eyes flash as he runs through his album, betraying an incredible breadth of subject and style: animals, mythical creatures, cars and trucks, corporate logos. As an in-demand freelancer, there isn't much outside his experience or ability.

Back in the carving room, there's a break in the snowstorm as he switches to hand chisels. In his hands, they cut as if the ice were no harder than cold butter. Suddenly, what was rigid minutes ago is transformed into the elegant curve of the eagle's spreading wing tips, the fluff of down above the feet. Alongside the eagle are the lathe-turned flagpoles, the textile furl of the stars and stripes—complete with

tassels, gold in the mind's eye. It's uncanny.

With his hands, he mimics the eagle's grip on the flagpole before deftly carving wrinkles in the skin covering the talons. He steps back, then deepens them for greater realism.

By now the slush and ice are six inches deep on the floor and Vivat takes a break from carving for some house-keeping, using a stick-mounted squeegee to clear his work space.

Next he uses the very tip of the chain-saw to tunnel through the ice, rather an unnatural process to create natural cavities—the negative space between the wings, under the beak, between the brow and flagpole.

He steps back to regard his handiwork and takes the chisel again, putting on the finishing touches. He creates a perfectly-beveled edge on the pedestal supporting the flagpoles, deepens the folds of the flags, touches up some feathers.

The rotary cutter comes out again and he conjures up stars in the fields of blue, deftly following the peaks and valleys of the ice-become-flag.

Near the end, he brings the great animal to life by carving detail in the eye. Suddenly, we imagine the beast can see itself in its glory, a fleeting image before the ravages of room temperature melt it away. In a sense, Vivat's work is a metaphor of life itself.

Nearly four hours since the start, satisfied with the illusion he has created, Vivat finishes. First, with a whisk-broom, he brushes away the snow left from the carving process. Then, dipping a soup bowl into a large stockpot, he flings hot water over the piece, transforming it from frosty white to gleaming clear. Then, his signature is applied near the bottom. He pauses the take snapshots before the sculpture is rolled away to cold storage. There it will stay until its one-night performance, standing guard over hors d'oeuvre and buffet table at some tony awards party.

Next week, the cycle repeats. Another assignment, another challenge, another meltdown. And Vivat will be put his heart and soul into it. 📷

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