

# transparent destiny

THE GLASS MOVEMENT: ELUDING DEFINITION THROUGH THE TRANSFORMATIVE

Words :: Lana Bortolot // Images :: Corning Museum, Heller Gallery



*Antilles*, 2008, Shayna Leib, 6" x 6" (each)

AS WITH ALL GOOD THINGS, there comes a time when "what's old is new again," and right now in the contemporary art scene, the hot new/old thing is glass. This most ancient of man-made materials has never really left the scene—it has long enjoyed periods of prestige as fine crystal and as decorative *objet*. But as function has made way for form, and that's been nudged out of the way by concept, there rages—yes, *rages!*—a great debate about glass as art or craft that has kept the market going strong. >>



*Head I*, 1957-1958  
Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová



*Imprint of an Angel II*, 1999  
Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová



*Red Pyramid*, 1993  
Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová



Seated Clown Impression, 2005  
Karen La Monte



Ocean Dance, 2005  
Vladimira Klumpar

You can lay the initial blame on the studio movement of the 1960s, when the production of glass moved out of the factory and into the studio. For the first time, glass was considered as something more than a vessel: it was a material that defined the output, or as artists say about this, “the glass knows what it wants to do.” Working within those alchemic demands, artists explored and exploited color and transparency and form with little attention paid to function.

But, was it craft or concept?

“It was a time of merging craft with industry,” says Tina Oldknow, contemporary glass curator at the Corning Museum of Glass in upstate New York. “This was a time of increasing the size and complexity of objects because of new casting and glass-blowing techniques.”

OK. So, craft, we say. But to wit: Czech artists working at that time took it further, using the material as an expression of political times, creating an underground art movement that influenced a new generation of sculptural glass artists who are still represented and collected today.

“Mid-century Czech glass is widely respected for its originality and innovation,” said Oldknow. “Czech artists used glass as a medium of abstract expression when the Communist government did not allow abstraction in the arts.”

Glassworks from behind the Iron Curtain, an aesthetic pioneered by the husband and wife team of Stanislav Libensky and Jaroslava Brychtova, were among the first to explore ideas of volume and positive and negative space, as well as glass’s more familiar properties of light and color. The work is abstract, somber—as though it can’t escape its own history, but it reflects the philosophy of Josef Kaplicky, professor at the esteemed Prague Academy of Applied Arts: “Abstraction in art is like an egg. The geometric shape on the outside is enlivened

by the warm and mysterious life inside it.”

It’s a philosophy that Douglas Heller, owner of the Heller Gallery in Manhattan, a premier dealer in glass, echoes half a century later.

“Sculpture in glass deals with interior space as well as exterior form because its translucency and ability to let in light offers the viewer a glimpse of what some artists have called a fourth dimension,” he says, adding “It’s a transformative, ethereal process that eludes definitions, but it’s always been a material with an approachable aspect.”

Heller’s 3,000-square-foot gallery is full of such interpretive art. With works by post-modern, contemporary and emerging artists from all over the world, he hasn’t missed an opportunity to tell the story of glass. In the 25-plus years he’s represented glass artists, the gallery owner has seen the form evolve from utilitarian and decorative to works that contain narrative themes, and explorations of emotions and the subconscious.

“We’re seeing a deeper exploration of glass that is content-driven while clearly demonstrating craftsmanship,” Heller said. The gallery represents a number of emerging artists who use the material to convey large themes such as birth and death, but that also contain wit and cultural commentary. A number of his artists cast glass with mixed media, using universal elements—environment, nature and popular culture, for example—to create one-off art.

“Younger artists are freeing themselves from working exclusively in glass,” says the gallerist. “There’s a new philosophy that combines other forms of painting, ceramics and found objects that borders on installation, where people are completely free of restrictions.”

These emerging artists are creating their own traditions and are particularly interested in dispelling myths and creating



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The conquest of space



Jackalope, 2007  
Christina Bothwell



Nourishing Words, 2007  
Marc Petrovic

new mythologies. Christina Bothwell's "Three Bears," for example, reinterprets the children's storybook tale, while her "Jackalope" cast-glass sculpture creates a new imaginary beast. The use of children and animals gives her work whimsy, but also explores the most vulnerable forms of life—an underlying theme in all her work—and a strong emotional pull that one usually associates with painting or sculpture.

German artist Sibylle Peretti uses emotion, as well as her painting and sculpture background, to inform her glass work. She often uses photographs and other ephemera creating painterly works that explore humanity. "Silent Children," a series of portraiture on glass uses pigment and 19th-century medical illustrations to examine the state of disease, yet gives her subjects a tenderness and dignity that transcends clinical scrutiny.

Though Heller's artists often offer up quiet contemplation, they also present works of good humor. Susan Taylor Glasgow describes her work as the "result of homemaking skills gone awry." She uses glass to examine gender and domestic expectations, particularly focused on 1950s imagery and mythology. Her series of "Glamour" legs and girdles, rendered in glass, metal and enamel, recreate the perfect woman—a morphing of housewife and pinup. A former seamstress, Glasgow also stitches together glass, fabric and applied illustration (sandblasted into the glass) to create mundane household objects that are anything but ordinary.

Crafty, yes. But is it art?

"The work is whimsical, but taken very seriously," says Heller.

There's plenty of support for that in art fairs such as SOFA (Sculpture Objects & Functional Art Fair), where works derived from both concept and craft are well represented. But even here, in the most democratic of venues, the debate continues.

Oldknow, who admits to having a strong sculptural bias, says the contemporary world tends to be "suspicious about someone who comes with a material background."

"When you mention the word craft, the

door tends to slam," she said. "But a lot of young artists are using materials and craft and doing great things. There's a lot of going back and forth between craft and design. No galleriest can tell you where art is right now because it's so pluralistic."

And that's why art fairs such as SOFA exist: There's something for everyone. Held each year in Chicago and New York City, the show attracts 100-plus dealers from more than 13 countries. More than 50 percent of the floor space at the Chicago show—some 22,000 square feet—will be devoted to contemporary glass.

SOFA founder/director Mark Lyman says the collections and the collecting are across the board.

"The themes are very diverse and not limited to formal terms. Some [artists] are working from historical roots and others are expanding new horizons," he said. "The only association between these artists is the commonality of glass and an amazing virtuosity with the material."

Canadian artists will be represented at SOFA Chicago (Nov. 7-9) in a special seminar, "Oh Canada, Distinct and Diverse." Look for Tanya Lyons, whose exquisite dresses combine hot worked glass and metal meshes; Jay Macdonell, trained in traditional glassblowing and working with sculptural vessels; and Peter Powning, a sculptural artist whose work fuses glass and other natural elements. From a curatorial perspective, these artists are more about craft than concept, but as Oldknow says, there are interesting intersections happening between the two, fueling the industry's lively debate between art and craft, from which even glassmaster Dale Chihuly isn't exempt. The recent Chihuly at the de Young show received a biting review in the San Francisco Chronicle, which damned the work as little more than knickknacks. Ouch.

"The attitude—and we hear it loud and clear—from the mainstream art world is craft is not art ... The divide comes in how craft artists approach the material and what kind of meaning they create," she notes, adding, "There is quite a lot of actually healthy confusion as art, design and craft are all expanding out of their traditional boundaries." 

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