

Contemporary glass in Europe 2013

Glass has unique properties that no other material has: transparency, translucence, optical effects and reflections. Glass is beautiful in its essence, which is also its biggest challenge as a material. By comparison, clay is basically a neutral material, whereas glass has many inherent visual qualities. A Danish glass collector and curator once referred to glass as a “hooker or cheap” material. When you work in glass you can get away with almost anything, because the material is beautiful in itself. This also makes it challenging to leave your mark through the material based on an artistic idea. On the other hand, glass requires in-depth knowledge of the material itself to be able to work with or counteract these properties. Not to mention the craft itself, that is difficult to learn and takes a long time to master.

The mudac Collection

The collection of glass at mudac stems from the original founders and art lovers Peter and Traudl Engelhorn's personal passion and interest in glass. What was particular about their fascination was that they wanted to share it with the public. Their fascination founded the base of mudac's collection, showing a broad range of studio glass objects mostly from central Europe. With this starting point mudac's collection is not a historical collection *per se*, in comparison to traditional collections that you would otherwise find in a decorative arts museum.

The collection contains interesting significant and historic works from artists such as Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso, Jean Arp, Jean Cocteau, Max Ernst and Jean Lurçat – artworks that were created as a result of cooperations between skilled Venetian glass maestro and distinctive contemporary artists of that time. Looking at the early works of Salvador Dali in a studio-glass context, they are not so advanced. In his later works, Dali's unique surrealist characteristics are easier recognized, as he gained experience in exploiting the techniques and the opportunities of the material.

Mudac holds a significant of contemporary glass art from Europe. It is clear that this collection corpus of works has gone from initially being stemmed from passion, to now being characterized by modern professional curating. The works in the collection have a strong Central European concentration.

Among the newly acquired artworks, there is a strong representation of industrial designers experimenting and working with glass as a material.

An example of this is Pieke Bergmans' *Water // Caraf*. The shape of the object shows the genuine authenticity of the hot working process and that of the material. The expression of the object shows the technical naïve little whoops and is in a way like glass poetry in its flaccid shape, in contrast to today's otherwise strict form requirements. There seems to be a movement that uses the materials authenticity and technical beginners expression in a way that takes distance to the industry's otherwise technical perfectionism.

Looking at the collection and the new acquisitions with the eyes of a Scandinavian, there is remarkably little glass from this region, with the exceptions of work by Swedish artist Bertil Vallien and the emerging artist Simon Klenell¹. When the collection is to be documented again in maybe 10 years, it would be a pleasure to see more Scandinavian, North American and Japanese artworks, to achieve a greater breadth.

Times of change

In recent years the Scandinavian glass tradition and industry has been experiencing radical changes. From being part of the Swedish cultural and industrial heritage with a large number of glass factories under the brand name Orrefors Kosta Boda, the glass industry has now been reduced to 1-2 production units. The brand names are still strong, with prominent artists and designers connected, although the objects that used to be produced in The Swedish Kingdom of Glass are now being produced in countries like Turkey, which on the other hand are experiencing growth and expansion.

Anne Louise Sommer, former Rector of the Royal Danish Academy of Architecture and Design, now executive director of Design Museum Denmark, states in her essay in the exhibition catalogue of European Ceramic Context 2010:

We feel at ease talking about the conditions of the post-industrial era and have been doing so for a long time – even if this trend is more prevalent in some areas of the world than others. Yet in Europe, change has occurred concurrent with the spread of outsourcing and new manufacturing methods. This has profoundly impacted both the production of ceramics and the ceramicist. The age-old alliance between manufacturer (and thus the industrial manufacturing system itself) and

¹ Simon Klenell's installation *Frigger Tactics* (2012) is not illustrated in this book although it belongs to the collection. The reason for this is that the book finishes in 2012. *Frigger Tactics* has been acquired in 2013.

craft artist has been waning for quite some time, and the historically unbreakable alliance between ceramic production and location has been broken. Europe's proud "ceramic centers" – where a city's growth and greatness were founded on industrial mass-production of superb ceramic articles for everyday use – are disappearing, and with them the dynamic interaction between prescient, business-minded manufacturers and artistically endowed ceramicists.²

Although Anne Louise Sommer talks about ceramics, this certainly also applies to glass in Scandinavia today. For the last 10 years we have been experiencing the breakdown of the industrial era within glass production in places like The Kingdom of Glass in Småland, Sweden. In this area a large concentration of industrial production factories for glass employed glassmakers, artists and designers for centuries, has now been reduced to only very few production units with reduced staff. Change also opens up ways for new opportunities. Many smaller companies and entrepreneurs, often sole proprietorships, now have the opportunity to enter the market with small production series. These smaller companies and their brands are characterized by trendy design with expressive references to the handmade craft. These entrepreneurial businesses initially produce everything themselves in the tradition of arts and craftsmen. Later on, when a certain customer base is built, production is usually moved to Turkey or China where labor and production cost is lower. It seems that in Scandinavia these often more flexible crafts businesses have taken over the role of the large renowned design and production companies.

Driven by passion

Passion initiated the mudac collection of glass. The same thing happened at the beginning of the studio glass movement in the sixties and seventies. Glass production had previously been defined by the industry. Established and young artists and sculptors wanted to have access to this medium and that started a kind of counter movement against the industry's perfectionism and tradition-bound form of thought. Studio glass pioneers wanted to make works by having their hands on the material and exploring its possibilities by themselves.

In Europe, the studio glass movement flourished particularly in the eighties and nineties and vast quantities of works were produced. Many collectors were excited about the new wave of enthusiasm that came with

² Former Rector at The Royal Danish Academy School of Architecture, Design and Conservation Anne Louise Sommer writes in the essay: *Times of Change* European Ceramic Context 2010 exhibition catalogue page 12. ISBN 978-8789059-86-0

the movement and the passion works were produced with. This resulted in large and important private collections. This was also true for the collection of mudac, which however had a public purpose from the start. This history reflects quite well the development of studio glass movement. The movement has gone from being driven by cheering enthusiasm and passion to explore the possibilities of the material for personal expression to now being a medium for artistic expression, which not only belongs within its own genre, but also subdues sculptural concepts and art criticism.

50 years of studio glass

In 2012 the studio glass movement celebrated its 50th anniversary as an independent artistic practice. Half a century is a significant amount of time, yet the movement still seems young in the perspective of general art history. This anniversary called for an opportunity to take stock of and look ahead for future opportunity, relevance, positioning, development, discussion etc. This was the focus at the Glass Art Society conference in Toledo in 2012 and also the focal point at the conference at European Glass Context 2012 on Bornholm (DK).

These were the questions we asked at the conference on Bornholm (DK): What did the studio glass movement set out to do, and what did they achieve? How does the studio glass movement identify itself in a craft and art context? How can glass position itself in the consciousness of a larger audience in the future? And where lies the responsibility to do so? Do we need any changes at all in the way we think about and make glass..?

Jutta-Annette Page, curator of glass and decorative arts from the Toledo Museum of Glass (US), explains in her presentation at the conference at European Glass Context 2012 that:

Studio glass took root at a time American contemporary art was rife with the spirit of experimentation with industrially produced materials. Most importantly, glass as a medium for artists could take hold within the academic system of colleges and universities that encouraged and assured free exploration. It was here that these ideas evolved most rapidly and firmly. They were unimpaired by the demands imposed by the economic concerns of the centuries-old European glass industries regarding designs and production that much defined college-level design curricula. Still called "artist craftsmen" in contemporary exhibition catalogs, publications, and the press, the pioneering generation of the 1960s was fighting the material's visual appeal, then particularly of blown and hot-formed glass: the inherent "glassiness" was considered detracting and hindering their

work to be recognized as art rather than craft. As the sculptor and painter Erwin Eisch (born 1927), an eminent German pioneer of work in glass, remarked, "From the beginning, the glass movement claimed itself as an art form, and so it must be evaluated by those corresponding values."^{3 4}

The overall conclusion of the conference was that the contemporary glass scene is experiencing changes. Interest and focus are going in various directions, pointing both towards the past and the future. Róisín de Buitlear from Ireland talked about the project "Glass is Tomorrow" for which European artists have come together to collaborate in workshops carried out in significant industrial glass locations in Europe. The aim is to preserve and develop the traditional skills of glassmaking, in a time where factories are closing and skills are presumably disappearing.

The focus of the speakers representing the glass museums both in Europe and the US was to take stock and be aware of the history of studio glass and the contemporary glass scene of today and to point towards the future by naming and discussing the field of glass with contemporary definitions in a time where, according to Jutta-Annette Page: *some of the best new work incorporates sculpture, video, performance and sound in sophisticated installations, and the range of professional options and opportunities for young artists working in glass is also significantly different from those starting decades earlier.*

But there is still much to develop in terms of naming and defining the use of glass. Glass is used in many different contexts including design, crafts, sculpture, video and performance. The only thing that binds these works together is the use of the material glass. At the same time as the material requires in-depth knowledge to masterly execute artistic ideas, it is also just a material that can be brought to use in different contexts where the use of its specific properties seems suitable. In earlier years of the studio glass era, glass was mostly used for making functional and decorative objects. Glass is now much more often used for sculpture, performance and even video, where the specific properties of glass are brought to use. Many of these artworks are still being related to the so called glass world, rather than being exposed to freer art criticism and display in art galleries and museums, as they should in my opinion.

In connection with the 25th anniversary of Glasmuseet Ebeltoft a group of 5 artists working with glass, including myself, got together to discuss

³ Erwin Eisch, Frauenau February 21, 1983, quoted in Helmut Ricke, *Neues Glas in Deutschland*, 1984, p. 68.

⁴ Jutta-Annette Page, Toledo Museum of Glass in essay "50 years of studio glass – from avant-garde craft to a medium for art" European Glass Context 2012, page 13. ISBN 978-97-98059-89-1

contemporary glass, a field that we were urged to define. During the debate facilitated by Niels Houkjær, it became clear that there are many different attitudes towards glassmaking and artistic practice using glass, and that a singular definition could not be made. However, we could all agree that skilled craftsmanship is important and at the very basis of the artistic practice.

The Danish artist Tobias Möhl describes his working process with these words: *One learns an enormous lot, by standing around playing about with it. You learn the knack through your hands without realizing it. What we call art-craftsmanship – in contrast with industrial glass – becomes interesting through the very fact that we work it with our hands, and that we are searching for our own personal expression and refining it. For me it means keeping on chasing something that is right under my nose, and hoping that some little detail will develop, which I can refine and perhaps use in a new combination. I never jump up with an artistic eureka and know that I have just had a brilliant artistic idea. Quite the opposite: it is systematic hard work, which progresses in small hops. For me it is crucial to have the material in front of me and keep my eyes open while I work. It means finding one's own little path as an artist-craftsman, to a point where one is quite alone. What really happens is that new things evolve out of something I am already working on.*

Contemporary Glass

I was invited to participate in the presentation of the glass art collection of mudac and to comment on the choice of the new acquisitions, in my capacity of having a broad background within glass. There are three elements of my professional activities: an organizational catalyst of activities, teaching and my own artistic work. I consider all three elements as creative development processes which I use to varying extents, depending on the nature of the task at hand and the time frame.

I was once asked: *How do you envision the prospects for studio glass? What kind of role will glass play in contemporary art?*

My answer was that there is a tendency for works to be more narrative and conceptual, instead of practical-oriented, podium-based works. In some areas, I would venture to say that glass has distanced itself from the craft of glassmaking and is increasingly exploring the world of free art forms.

In my opinion, studio glass as an artistic practice risks becoming insular because it uses a specific material and not an artistic concept as its

starting point. The discipline could easily stagnate. But this situation is evolving and galleries devoted explicitly to glass are no longer as common as they used to be. Artists who work with glass are represented to a greater extent at fine art galleries and to a lesser extent at galleries exclusively exhibiting glass. In terms of highlighting a general trend within the last decade of art practice in using glass, the works of art in 2013 are definitely more sculptural and conceptual. Far more large installations and fewer podium-based works.

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