

ART REVIEW

SHATTERING GLASS: NEW PERSPECTIVES AND STEINUNN THÓRARINSDÓTTIR: HORIZONS

CURATORS: ELLEN J. KEITER & NEIL WATSON
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“Shattering Glass” is a group show of 30 pieces by 20 artists, conceived by the curator as shattering conceptions about glass as an art medium. From the title and conception of the exhibit alone, we are reminded that glass shatters. Entering an exhibit of glass pieces is to become aware of fragility and resilience, tenderness and aggression. The viewer becomes not only the tip-toe around that which is known to be shatterable, but also the bull in the china shop. Inside the refined aesthete is a wild child, and from the works displayed, the glass artist knows how vulnerable glass art is, and how wild the child that views it may feel.

Thanatos is ever-present in these often ethereal, wond’rous works of art. The world in decay, the transience of the beautiful, the echo of death in the memento mori expressed in many genres, are familiar themes in many art traditions. We find the aesthetic value of “mono no aware,” sadness at the transience of beautiful things, in Japanese art. Throughout the centuries European art has exploited the still life genre to convey the presence of death and destruction. Luscious arrangements of fruit reveal patches of decay, or insects crawling around, looking for the vulnerable softness, access to the core through the point of rot. Skulls are nestled among ordinary household objects. Dead game, bloodied and inert, lies sprawled on kitchen counters. In “Shattering Glass,” a number of artists overtly take on the theme of Thanatos. If we are the bull in the china shop, then these artists take us by the horns.

Beth Lipman’s *Still Life with Metal Pitcher* (2007, glass and wood) is a spectacular play on 17th century Dutch genre painting, on still life and household objects. The word “spectacular” is specific. Lipman’s installation consists of spectacle, an eight foot in diameter round wooden table laden with a display of opulence, over 400 glass objects, tableware and victuals and linens, all made of glass, urns and lidded vases and that “metal pitcher,” bottles, bowls, goblets, ladles, ruffled linen, a cheese plate, eggs, fruit arrangements of pears and cherries, apples and grapes, a fish head, pumpkins, cake, candles, parrots, snails, and more. As we circle the table we see not only delicately poised opulence, we see decay and destruction. A shard of glass, a fragment of something undefined, lies on the ground. Other glass fragments litter the table. Bits of gooey-looking glass cling to the table legs. A huge goblet, tipped over, slightly flattened to convey perspective, becomes an ominous token of destruction to come. Things begin

to seem precarious, slightly off balance, spilling, tilting. A ladle handle sticks out over the table. How easily it could be knocked into, knocked to the floor, one feels. Those pieces that seem melted at the top – are they candles or has the entire display begun to melt, to decay? Everything is poised on the verge of disaster. And we imagine that disaster. We imagine the entire contents of the table, so glorious, so abundant, so promising, being knocked over, and shattered. Shattered. The sense of disaster is intensified because everything is glass.

Lipman analogizes her glasswork to life by using every possible means of working glass. Her objects are blown, solid, sculpted, torch-worked, kiln-formed, acid-etched, and slumped glass. Every 17th century sign of abundance rests precariously on the table, rendered in the multitude ways of working glass.

The tension between creativity and destruction, libido and death wish, makes its demands on the viewer. If all flesh is grass, then all material bounty is glass, all transient. The tension lies in whether destruction is what we desire, even more than delight.

Angelo Filomeno's *Cold* (2007, hand-blown glass with crystal, onyx, and silk), is an approximately 80 x 40 x 4 inch sculpture of a larger-than-life humanoid skeleton, lying in a semi-fetal position on a white surface, one arm extended, the hand clutching a piece of black silk. The skeleton is black, shiny, and not quite human. Spiky bone spurs protrude from the joints, from elbows and ankles and shoulders, its ribs are tangled, and a tongue-like emanation of onyx and crystal pours from its mouth. The skeleton is quite dead, and in its icy blackness, quite cold. One way to read it is an amalgam of André Green's dead mother with dead baby, the inert coldness and inhumanness of a depressed and alienated caretaker creating a deadness within the nascent baby-self. Is the dead baby-self reaching for the soft black silk of a potential transitional object? Is the transitional object useless if the dead mother is that depressed and the baby-self is that alone? The jewel-like objects flowing from the skeleton's mouth could be redemptive or definitively hopeless. Could the jewels be speech, just the slightest hope of contact, of recognition? Is the speech-act, that variable that stands between desire and enactment, redemptive? Speech means life. It floats on the breath, that which animates, the "chai," the "anima," the "pneuma," the "prana" that keeps us alive. Or has the spirit died, are the jewels representative of the spirit leaving the body? The object is a skeleton. The flesh is gone, the structure is all that remains, ready to be scattered. The hard cold efficiency of the skeleton needs the softer tensions of the musculature to hold it together.

Sharyn O'Mara's *Untitled (Cloud)* (2007, optical fiber and monofilament) is unsettling and haunting. Access to viewing her piece is through three peepholes placed at several heights, and in the sudden privacy of peephole viewing we see a post-nuclear blast mushroom cloud made of over sixty miles of optic fiber sewn together by a microfilament with a glass core .125 millimeters thick. The cloud is dainty, lovely, enchanting, and ultimately obscene. We become voyeurs, gazing with wonder at a pornography of death. Just as under the male gaze women in peepshows (and men too) are beautiful and degraded, so the delicacy of the image, under our curious gaze turned prurient by the mere act of peeping, turns pornographic. It is an emblem of suffering and

death. John Berger helped us understand the meaning of the male gaze. Sharyn O'Mara, like Goya, helps us understand the gaze of the living.

Mark Zirpel's *Leaf I* (2002, sand-blasted, enameled glass and light/pedestal, 28 x 54 inches) is an image of a dead magnolia leaf sandblasted on a beveled sheet of green glass plate. The leaf looks perfect. And it is dead. Once again, the fragility of something once living and intricately formed is captured in glass. The fragility of life glows in the fragility of glass. William Morris's three blown-glass pieces, each from 2000, each entitled *Trophy*, are at first glance exact reproductions of the skulls of horned, deer-like mammals, one perhaps an elk. Once again we have glass as bone, these particular pieces rendered in a variety of techniques, using etching and acid washes, and powdered glass and minerals applied to the hot glass. The surfaces are crackled and opaque, with decorative red and black lines. They are reminiscent not only of the animal skulls they represent, but also of ceremonial masks. We are left to wonder about the ceremonial taking on of identity after death. Trophies by their nature are dead, but they hold symbolic value for those who use them, either as displays of valor or in religious rites. The quality of the animal lives on in what remains, and is absorbed by the keeper of the trophy. We define ourselves by what we have captured. In our earliest identificatory processes, we become aspects of our parents. We cannibalize them, in ingestive fantasy, and we take on their character traits to participate in their power. To take on the power of a woodland animal, by rendering the animal in glass in such a way that the medium is not recognizable to the eye, involves a fantasy of transformation. In a sense, we wind up believing the animal is not dead and the trophy cannot be broken. To protect ourselves from our destructive fantasies, we deny the complexity of what is before us. And in that denial, we create an alternate complexity.

Karen LaMonte's two pieces, *Dress Impression with Drapery* (2005, cast glass), and *Dress Impression with Train* (2006, cast glass), evoke ancient Grecian sculptures. She shows draped dresses in a thick cast glass, only the dress, with no human head or arms or feet peeking beneath the hem, but with the sense of the torso, the suggestion of breasts and belly beneath the dress. What seems fragile is not the dress, not the glass, but the missing presence of the woman, the woman's body that fills and shapes the dress but has disappeared in every other respect.

To return to the notion of spectacle, Richard Klein's *Transparency* (2007, eyeglasses, found ashtrays, glass jars, brass, 65 x 42 and ½ x 5 and ½ inches) is just that, a glittering assemblage of spectacles that dazzle you rather than helping you see. What is fragile is knowledge. The assemblage vaguely suggests an American flag, with the ashtrays grouped together where the field of stars would be. We are so dazzled by the reflecting light and the notion of understanding that we run the risk of not seeing what is before us.

Ann Gardner's *Fog* (2007, glass mosaic, composite material, concrete, stainless steel cables, steel rings) and Kait Rhodes' *Blue Dome* (1995, blown glass, cut, ground, and sandblasted, steel frame, metal wire, 102 x 73 x 73 inches) are grouped together, forming a fantasy environment. *Fog* hangs from the ceiling, cone-shaped grey and blue objects that here and there catch the light. Like fog, *Fog* simply is there. Light seems trapped

within it. It suggests a veiling. *Blue Dome* is a tepee, a home, a womb, a place of safety, an enclosure. Once in, there is nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. One is either safely held and hidden, or one is trapped. The question in both pieces is whether a holding environment is trustworthy or insubstantial.

In addition to the show “Shattering Glass,” the Katonah Museum of Art has a site-specific installation by Steinunn Thórarinsdóttir, *Horizons* (2007, cast iron and glass), consisting of 12 figures. Eleven figures are arranged in the sculpture garden, a gravel-bedded space surrounded by stone walls and Norwegian pines. The 12th figure is at the entrance courtyard of the museum.

The figures are humanoid, a rusted hollow-cast iron form on bases sunk into the ground, with thin panels of green-blue glass set into the chest or shoulders. The faces are barely formed, with eyes downcast or closed or merely suggested as slight depressions in the face. The postures are inhibited, held in, held back, closed-in, with hands pressed against the body or over the groin, or with one arm held slightly outward. One figure is seated on a bench, with arms crossed over the chest. The seated figure has no glass inset. The figures are unrelated to each other. If they seem to be capable of seeing anything, if they are looking anywhere, it is not at each other, but into the distance or into the ground. When the viewer looks into the glass panel, the viewer sees through to the other side. One does not see into the figures. One sees through the figures. There is no there there. We are left with a sense of anomie, alienation, intense loneliness and emptiness. What kind of being does not have an inner world? If the eyes are the windows of the soul, there are no eyes to look into. If the glass panels are placed in the area near the heart, there is no heart. The figures are inert, but full of yearning. One is left wondering, what is being yearned for? What is the essence of being human? Psychoanalysts assume that we all have an inner life. Here are representations of creatures resembling humans. The viewer wants to believe these beings have an inner life. They look so lost, so lonely. They summon up our own loneliness. But we become Pygmalion, longing to bring these inert beings to life. They are cast iron and glass, not flesh and blood. We have projected our innermost sadnesses and thwarted desires into them. But the intensity of our feelings do not bring them to life. Our feelings, reflected back to us by the artist’s vision, may bring us to life.

Reference:

Shattering Glass: New Perspectives, Ellen J. Keiter and Neil Watson, curators, and Tina Oldknow, guest essayist, Katonah Museum of Art publication (2007): Katonah, New York. Images of the art work can be found at the website of the Katonah Museum of Art, katonahmuseum.org.