Glass Acts

New approaches to the traditional craft of glass are propelling the medium into the slipstream of contemporary art **BY MICHAEL SLENSKE**

"**I HATE MOST GLASS** that's out there," says Thaddeus Wolfe while sitting in his new basement studio in East Williamsburg, just down the hall from his previous space but nearly twice its size. "No offense to people who make it," he adds, "but most of them are drawn to it for the wrong reasons—it's flashy, colorful stuff that's easy to like." With his shoulder-length hair, smoked eyeglasses, and retro mustache, Wolfe carries the aura of some kiln-crisped craft hand from the 1970s. But make no mistake: At 36, with a sizzling market for his seemingly salt-cured Brutalist sculptures, snapped up by such tastemakers as Kelly Behun and Christophe van de Weghe, Wolfe is being hailed as the American studio glass movement's bright young hope. And even if he too cops to employing bold color in his work, "hopefully there's more depth because you don't see the hand in it," he says. "You can keep investigating and learn more about the details over time. I like when it's confusing whether it is even glass. I think mystery is good."

Judging from the crystalline remnants of Saharan fulgurites, created when lightning strikes sand, and cooled lava flows, glass is probably as old as the planet itself. Yet mankind did not harness it as a medium until around 3500 B.C. in Mesopotamia, and glass-blowing didn't surface for another three millennia. Starting in the 13th century, specialized guilds arose in Venice, and their glass traditions eventually birthed lauded modernist vessel makers like Carlo Scarpa (whose masterworks were celebrated at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2013) and Ercole Barovier, followed by Murano master Lino Tagliapietra (still alive at 81 and enjoying his first solo presentation in London next month at Mallett). In parallel, an Eastern bloc in Bohemia gave rise to contemporary conceptualist Gerhard Ribka and to the severe Minimalism of Martin Hlubucek, while the mid to late 20th-century American studio movement, which advanced glassmaking toward sculpture, delivered standouts such as Harvey Littleton, Joel Philip Myers, and Michael Glancy.

But according to Tina Oldknow, senior curator of modern and contemporary glass at the Corning Museum of Glass, the picture is widening beyond the decorative realm to which those names are often confined. "There is a critical mass of really good work that is moving way beyond its origins in craft, and I love that we can tell that whole story," she says, referring to the upstate New York institution's new 100,000-square-foot wing, which opened in

Jean-Michel Othoniel's *Peony, the Knot of Shame*, 2015, in mirrored glass and stainless steel, is indicative of shifts in scale and sculpturalism by contemporary glass artists.

CLAIRE DORN AND GALERIE PERROTIN

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JOE KRAMM AND R & COMPANY, NEW YORK. OPPOSITE: KRISTINE LARSEN

March. The light-drenched, Thomas Phifer–designed space showcases the Corning Museum's encyclopedic historical collection against newer, large-scale sculptures, panels, and installations. "As the field has grown, so has the museum," says Oldknow.

And collectors are taking note. Evan Snyderman, one of the principals in New York's R & Company, which represents studio veterans like Jeff Zimmerman alongside upstart talents like Wolfe and the Haas Brothers, has clocked the shift. "The glass market is very different today because the buyers are contemporary art collectors, a lot of museum trustees, not just glass collectors," he explains. Snyderman should know. He started blowing at age 13; lived above the long-running Philadelphia craft nexus Works Gallery (now Snyderman-Works), founded by his mother, Ruth; and traveled the globe with the B-Team, a performance art troupe that poured the molten form and fashioned it into red-hot dance floors.

Thirty years ago, Works was a hub for the best of American studio glass—the gallery gave early shows to Littleton, Dale Chihuly, William Morris, and Tom Patti, among others. "In the mid-'80s heyday, the glass artists were far above the other craft mediums. You could sell a Jon Kuhn glass cube for $100,000," Snyderman recalls. "What's happened is those collectors have never regenerated because the artists never developed the way they should have. They got stuck by the beauty of the material."

In the view of dealer Clara Scremini, a veteran glass specialist in Paris, too many studio practitioners fell into the cottage-industry trap, churning out pretty, nominally unique pieces that did little to push the medium forward. She advises her artists not to overproduce and to channel their energies into conceptual ideas. "There's a new generation coming up," she says. "But it's the dealers who have to put it in the right collections. Excellence should be the only goal."

For now, the decorative stigma prevails, and many artists—regardless of whether most of their work is produced with glass—are quick draws on the "I'm not a glass artist" gun. One is Josiah McElheny, who won a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" in 2006 for the virtuosic mirrored vessels and cosmic installations he produces in his Brooklyn foundry. "I was never interested in glass as a material," he says. "I became an artist in a circuitous way, starting with my interest in the sociological history of glass factories and then finding out that art can be a home for idiosyncratic research like my own," he says. But there are plenty of other adventurous practitioners whose curiosity and personal journeys have led them to embrace the medium with gusto.

THADDEUS WOLFE

Having worked for a decade as a blower and cold-working assistant, for Zimmerman and Josiah McElheny, respectively, Wolfe was baptized in the material's polar fires of raw craft and conceptual innovation. "I'm more of a maker than a conceptual thinker," says Wolfe, who grew up the son of a commercial architect in Toledo, Ohio—one of the hotbeds of the 1960s studio movement He began his glass education by wandering through the Toledo Museum of Art's vast glass collection (in the days before SANAA gave it its own translucent pavilion, in 2006), then studied the medium at the Cleveland Institute of Art. "I don't really consider myself an artist or a designer," Wolfe says. If anything, he would hope to model his career after that of ceramic innovators Ken Price or Peter Voulkos, "a master of his craft who really took it far."

Technical proficiency aside, there is still plenty of intellectual rigor that goes into his chunky forms, which evoke everything from Cubist ceramics to

Opposite: Thaddeus Wolfe's "Unique Assemblage" vessels in white with colored markings and amethyst interior hand-blown, cut and polished glass, 2014.

Left: Wolfe torches a rod at Brooklyn Glassworks.

Chinese scholars' rocks. Wolfe claims more immediate inspirations, too, from natural rock formations and mushrooms to his industrial Brooklyn environs. Many works begin in molds taken from found Styrofoam containers or beer coolers he has carved with repeating geometric patterns that sometimes reveal a valanching accumulations of the packing material's beads. Once the silica-plaster mold is set—and he rarely ever reuses them because they crumble—he'll blow a white, black, clear, or colored cup form into it, striping the hues or adding pigments, sometimes neon, that appear like digital or Abstract Expressionist marks. "Now that I've got this new studio, I'd like to do some experiments," says Wolfe. He's looking into working with solid cast panels and making organic sculptural works from bronze and light fixtures in neon. "I love using glass as a material. It's very addictive," he says. "I want to challenge what it can do."

KIKI SMITH

Born in Nuremberg, Germany, to the polymath artist-theorist-designer Tony Smith, Kiki Smith has never been one to be tied down to a single material. Thirty-five years ago she wanted to make a stomach in glass and some sperm in shocked crystal, which lends them a "liveliness" akin to what is seen under a microscope. While Smith made the sperm herself, she had the stomach blown by Chris Hartman at Experimental Glass Workshop (now Brooklyn's UrbanGlass), which started a lifelong fascination with and exploration of the medium and its makers. "It's been an opportunity to learn about the different forms and different ways it's been used," says Smith. She has since worked with blowers from Dale Chihuly's Pilchuck Glass School in Washington State to make tear shapes and blood drops, and more recently with Gil Studio in Brooklyn and Mayer'sche Hofkunstanstalt in Munich, which helped her assemble the glass starbursts, forests, and eagles in that appeared in her 2014 show "Wonder" at Pace Gallery. Smith spends weeks at these studios working with the technicians—painting, firing, painting, firing—to craft her lustrous tableaux tipped in gold leaf.

Smith says has been inspired over the years by the glass experiments of everyone from Marc Chagall to Olafur Eliasson and Dutch sculptor Rob Voerman. She's also a bit disturbed and flummoxed by the critical snubbing of Chihuly, who is often derided for peddling kitsch despite his early institutional success and technological achievements. "Chihuly was an enormous influence on why I used glass and why anybody uses glass," she says. "People made those same criticisms about Rauschenberg, that he made too much work, like it's inconvenient. His job is not to be producing less; his job is to have his own experience." Bolstered by the scientific and fabrication knowledge Chihuly and his protégés have amassed, Smith encourages more artists to try working in glass: "It's a fantastic and very large medium."

PAULA HAYES

"I don't like façade; I like to see through what's happening to the other side," says the landscape designer turned multimedia artist Paula Hayes about her love for glass and similarly translucent media. That impulse is on full view in her first public installation in New York, "Gazing Globes"—techno riffs on her highly coveted glass terrariums filled with used batteries, discarded computer parts, shredded rubber tires, and plastic detritus—in

FROM LEFT: FRANCESCO ALLEGRETTO; THOMAS PHIFER AND PARTNERS. OPPOSITE: JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

"I loved that it changed form. It's unstable and you have to go fast because you don't have much time."

Opposite, from top: renderings of the new Thomas Phifer–designed contemporary wing at the Corning Museum of Glass; Paula Hayes's *Giant Terrarium GT07*, 2011, incorporating both sand and ground-up compact discs in its microenvironment.

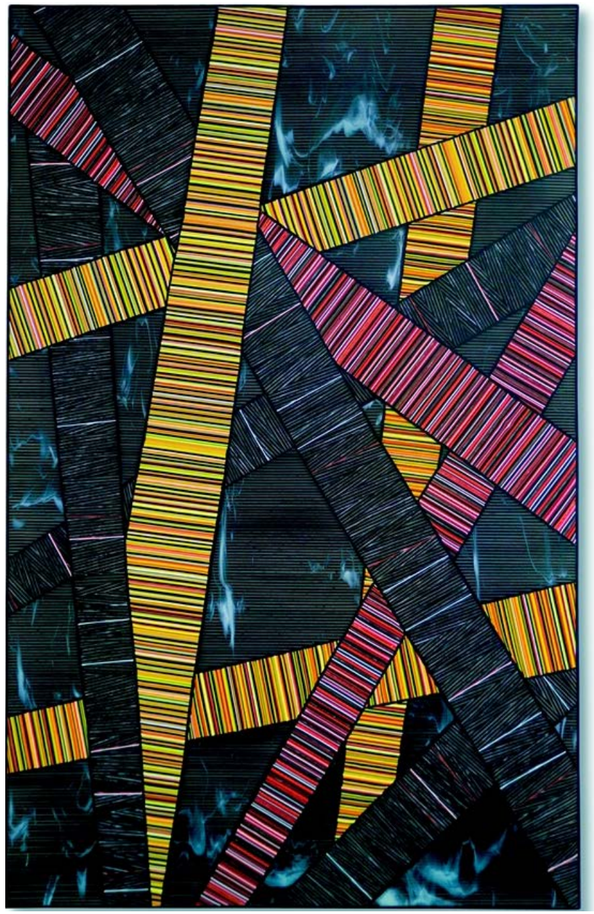
Left: Installation view of Dashiell Manley's multimedia exhibition "Time Seems Sometimes to Stop," at Jessica Silverman Gallery this past winter.

Madison Square Park through April 19. Her first exploration in glass was designing water-capturing trays for potted plants, but her investigations went deeper when she presented her first "living terrariums," Lilliputian landscapes housed in blown glass, in a 2004 show, "Forest," at Salon 94. "To this day it just blows my mind what those did as a cultural object," says Hayes, who has since completed hundreds of these vessels (some of which were actually crafted by Wolfe as a contractor), which can measure upwards of five feet in diameter.

Craft in general, Hayes believes, is wrongly viewed as "the stepchild" of art. "I tend to be attracted to those materials. There's a lot of room to move them along." She is now looking at the big-picture environmental threats posed by the industrial objects she's using in her microcosms. "I don't want to be afraid of the truth of these materials and their durability," she says. "It's a poetic response. I don't think any artist makes his work to be recyclable; you kind of want it to be a time machine for another period or group of people." Looking forward, the New York–based artist plans to show a suite of "salty, crystalline" barnyard animal–shaped vessels made with the glassblowers at the Wheaton Arts and Cultural Center this summer.

Top: *Rogue Stars*, 2012, in opal white antic glass, by Kiki Smith.

Below: A detail of *The Portland Panels: Choreographed Geometry*, 2007, by Klaus Moje, in the collection of the Corning Museum.



JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL

The French Othoniel first encountered obsidian, a volcanic glass, on a trip to Vulcano, the Italian island just north of Sicily in the Tyrrhenian Sea in the 1990s. With help from glassblowers in Marseille, he made a series of three abstract black faces—like islands with holes in the middle—from a synthetic form of obsidian. "It was really difficult to make it in an artificial way," recalls the artist, "but I loved that it changed form. It's unstable and you have to go fast because you don't have much time to work in this moment of metamorphosis." In the ensuing quarter century Othoniel has only ramped up his ambitions, erecting giant glass installations—in the forms of beds, walls, even ships crafted from massive bricks and beads blown in studios from India to Murano—at the Centre Pompidou, at the Brooklyn Museum, and in Chanel's Peter Marino–designed stores.

Othoniel is also the focus of a new traveling exhibition at Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, where his massive peony in 1,000 beads hangs from the ceiling of Renzo Piano's glass expansion. The exhibition previews his forthcoming installation at Versailles, which opens next month. Among his crew of engineers, architects, and 3-D designers are two teams of blowers in Venice and Basel (the former for "beauty and sensuality," the latter for "precision and technique"). They are providing 1,751 Murano beads made with 22,000 sheets of gold leaf, with which Othoniel will trace a path in space that mimics the calligraphy of dance instructions written for Louis XIV. "The world of glass can be closed-minded because the technicians are so proud of their techniques, but I push the limits of size and color. I have to push my own limits of craziness," says Othoniel.

FROM TOP: KIKI SMITH AND PACE GALLERY, NEW YORK; RYAN WATSON AND BULLSEYE GALLERY, PORTLAND. OPPOSITE: EVA HEYD AND HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

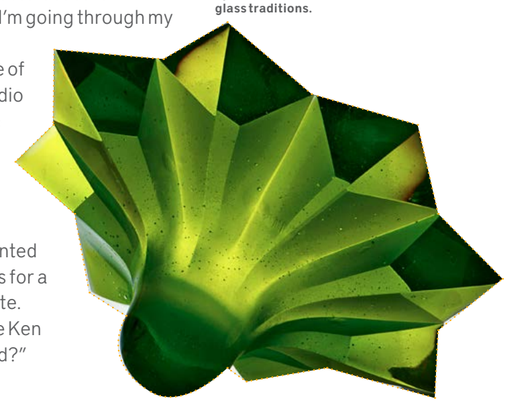
DASHIELL MANLEY

SoCal native Manley came to glass as he was finishing his MFA at UCLA in 2011 and making text-based stop-animation films. In lieu of movie lights, he was using overhead projectors with colored sheets of glass to produce tinted light on the walls where he had drawn his cels, which he then photographed and animated. "I used glass instead of gel mainly to protect the projectors," says Manley, in his densely packed Echo Park studio. "After the productions I would end up with stacks of glass with these accidental collages." Tired of repainting his studio walls, Manley began using canvases for his cels and sandwiching them between the panels of colored glass. He has since moved on to tonal studies with gouache on linen covered by a single sheet of colored glass; the panels are all meant to lean on shelves and be rotated so as to encourage viewer participation. Manley's work caught the eye of LAXart founder Lauri Firstenberg, who put some of his pieces in the Hammer Museum's first "Made in LA" biennial, which her organization curated in 2012.

He was also included in the 2013 Whitney Biennial, but his show "Time Seems Sometimes to Stop," earlier this year at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco, may be his most sophisticated achievement to date. After months of what he dubbed "luxury waste"—unread copies of the *New York Times*—piling up on his doorstep, Manley decided to transcribe the entirety of the Gray Lady's front page into 10 large canvases covered in handwritten newsprint (in four directions, and in various pastel watercolor hues) that name-checks *ISIS*, *Ebola*, and *Ferguson*. "I like the function of the paper to date a moment or give context," says Manley. The canvases were washed and then hung opposite mirrored blocks (the same size as the unfolded newspaper), atop which the artist positioned four crudely soldered boxes made from stained glass recycled from previous film projects. With formal elements of replication, reflection, and erasure, the works stand as a meditation on the role of the newspaper throughout art history, filtered through what Manley describes as the hues of "a window in a Laurel Canyon flat, or these glass bongs by Jerome Baker you get in Venice. One of the reasons I used this type of glass," he adds, "was to resignify what it symbolized."

FORMER SOTHEBY'S DESIGN honcho James Zemaitis, who is now a visiting curator of decorative arts at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, argues that "hybrids" like Wolfe, Hayes, and Manley will show the medium the way forward. "This new generation of younger polymaths, they consider themselves artists first who then make things," says Zemaitis, crediting Glenn Adamson at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York for his "Makers" concept, highlighted in a show there last year. "What's great [for collectors] is that it's still primarily a primary market."

While these innovators, and many others, will no doubt continue to expand the possibilities of glass as techniques and technology develop, it will be up to gallerists and curators, says R & Company's Snyderman, to ensure the medium's masters secure a place in art history. "I'm going through my parents' archives and seeing the importance of some of the 1960s studio movement artists," he says. "These guys were doing phenomenal, challenging work making political statements. They invented something." He pauses for a moment to contemplate. "Who is going to be the Ken Price of the glass world?"



Vladimíra Klumpar's cast-glass *Flower*, 2013, updates Czech glass traditions.