

## Gladly Glassy-Eyed at American Craft Museum

By Grace Glueck

Though glass is quite declassé in art circles for its long association with "crafts" and decoration, in the right hands it's a spectacular sculptural medium. Hard,

**Gallery** durable, light-reflecting  
**Watch** and highly workable, its  
versatility is legend. All

of the above is amply demonstrated in *Glass Installations*, a six-artist extravaganza at the American Craft Museum, 40 West 53rd Street (through July 4). This is said to be the first site-specific glass installation show in a New York museum (there's a first for you!).

Although they're artists as well as artisans, the participants—Michael Aschenbrenner, Bruce Chao, William Morris, Mary Shaffer, Carmen Spera and Steve Tobin—are not players in the "name" game of the auction-bounded art world. The work of each is more concerned with process and materials than with SoHo dialectic. This, along with the fact that—as pointed out in a catalogue essay by the art critic Nancy Princenthal—visual interest is now devalued by the art community in favor of "conceptual" experience, makes for a wildly unfashionable show. All the more reason for seeing it.

The two most theatrical installations, each using thin glass elements, are by Ms. Shaffer and Mr. Tobin. Ms. Shaffer has produced a room teeming with fiber-optic filaments suspended from the ceiling. Brushing against the viewer, the hanging strands glow on and off at various points and intervals to suggest a duskful of fireflies. A glittering floor-to-ceiling column of glass rods forms an incandescent focal point. Mr. Tobin has made, from discarded glass medical tubes, an exuberant frozen waterfall that descends in tiers down the 41-foot atrium formed by the museum's spiral staircase. Reaching the

floor, it splashes back up in an explosive burst of icy glass straws.

Mr. Aschenbrenner and Mr. Morris use glass with equally good effect to evoke animal structures. A whole wall of "damaged" bones, cast in opaque glass of subtly nuanced colors and splinted up with other materials, is Mr. Aschenbrenner's affecting contribution, derived from his experience in the Vietnam War and suggesting both human frailty and the place of bone as a life-supporting scaffold for the body. Mr. Morris, influenced by Native American ceremonies of the Pacific Northwest, has fabricated from glass a dazzling ritual display of tusks, horns, shells, primitive tools and other relics that fill an enormous trestle set diagonally across the gallery's space.

Less site-related, and rather less innovative, are Mr. Chao's and Mr. Spera's entries. A house constructed of old, weathered windows and sheltering a palm tree bespeaks Mr. Chao's preoccupation with the architecturally useful transparency of glass. And Mr. Spera's presentation, a baroque Venetian "card room," devoted to the ancient Italian game of Scopa, boasts glass furniture, painted with playing card motifs, that can actually be used. This campy but functional room seems slightly out of place, however, in a show whose strength is metaphor.

Still, kudos to the American Craft Museum for one of the season's most viewer-friendly events.