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Review/Art; Glass Sculptors Whose Work Transcends Craft

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The cold war between contemporary art and crafts is still on. The Pattern and Decorative movement of the 1970's tried to effect a truce, but negotiations faltered in the 80's. A furniture-as-art vogue came and went overnight, and craft objects showed up in the work of consumerist artists like Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach chiefly for their irony value. The present trend toward multiculturalism might reconcile the two categories, and exhibitions like "Africa Explores" at the Center (now Museum) for African Art a few years ago demonstrated how it could be done. But crossover figures in New York City galleries are still rare.

All of which gives "Glass Installations," at the American Craft Museum, more than usual interest. The six participating artists have created large-scale, site-specific installations from glass, a medium long identified with discrete functional forms and highly specialized techniques. In doing so, they obscure -- with varying degrees of success -- the line between traditional craft and the kind of politically and psychologically motivated installation art popular today. While none of the work in the show is earthshakingly radical -- in fact, some of it feels vaguely familiar and expressively tepid -- it represents a step in an interesting direction, and a good one for the American Craft Museum to be taking at this time.

Michael Aschenbrenner's "Ghosts in the Eyes of the Ones Sent Away" comes closest to the preoccupations of current installation work. Its dozens of small glass sculptures, spaced apart across a high wall, have the smoothness and opacity of sea glass but are shaped like human bones. Pairs melted together or bound with strips of cloth, they suggest the aftermath of carnage, with stray body parts assuming an oddly abstract beauty of their own. Beauty is important to Mr. Aschenbrenner's piece, as it is to the other works in this show. Although he shares the body-as-subject theme of an artist like Kiki Smith (who has also used glass as a sculptural medium), he exchanges the expressive harshness she brings to the subject for a lightness of touch, perhaps dictated by the medium at hand.

The same is true of William Morris's "Cache," another work that activates space by multiplying individual objects. On a low platform running across a black-walled gallery, he has lined up side by side a long row of curved, hollow glass forms shaped like animal tusks, their surfaces powdered with pale pink, green and yellow pigments and textured to simulate ivory. The image that results, translucent under overhead spots, is striking but disturbing. Piece by piece, it is full of gorgeous detailing; collectively, it suggests both a sacrificial altar and a poacher's camp filled with animal and human remains.

Less didactic and object-oriented pieces by Bruce Chao and Mary Shaffer feel closer in spirit to the interactive multi-media environments of the 1970's. (Both artists are in their 40's.) Mr. Chao's "Eyelet" eliminates the craft associations of glass. The gazebo-size kiosk he has set up within the museum's street-level gallery is constructed entirely of discarded windows, complete with their original wooden frames and paint. The enclosure, like a giant cold frame, holds a single palm tree and is redolent with the scent of the houses and garages to which the windows once belonged. Because the artist has frosted the panes, light can enter the enclosure, but the visitor's view to the outside is blurred.

The transmission of light -- arguably glass's most poetic function -- is the subject of Ms. Shaffer's "Point of View." In a darkened gallery, she has suspended almost invisible fiber-optic filaments so that they brush against the visitor's face, or has encased them within vertical glass tubes clustered at the center of the gallery. Hidden lights turn on and off at intervals, briefly illuminating the filaments and tubes. Ms. Shaffer has stated that she wanted to replicate the effect of fireflies shining at night, and she has done just that. The effect is appealing, though uninviting. One experiences the pleasure and the limitation of Ms. Shaffer's idea at about the same time. This is also true of Carmen Spera's "Scopa," a room full of painted glass furniture. Based on a folk tradition of painting on glass (a staple of 19th-century America, now widespread in parts of Africa), Mr. Spera's piece is named for an Italian card game. Many of the images that cover his tables derive from tarotlike playing cards and the tables are actually meant for use. But the work has exactly the mixture of function and sheer whimsicality that too often defines and isolates craft as a category.

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The same cannot be said of Steve Tobin's "Water Column," physically the show's most spectacular piece. As much a large sculpture as an installation, it is made up of countless thousands of clear glass tubes hanging in gradually diminishing tiers down three stories from the museum's atrium ceiling. A cross between an outsized crystal chandelier and a cascade of rushing water the column "crashes" on the basement-level gallery floor in a cloud of white splinters that looks as soft as cotton candy.

Mr. Tobin is doing something a bit madder and grander with his medium than anyone else in "Glass Installations," but he is not alone in challenging the art-versus-craft standoff. As many artists over the last few decades have demonstrated, craft can infuse work with a distinct personal content (one thinks of Faith Ringgold's wonderful autobiographical quilts), can blur sex roles (Robert Kushner's paintings-as-costumes in the 70's come to mind) and can subtly address political issues (as Elaine Reichek does in her subversive samplers and hand-knitted tepees). It can also reveal materials and techniques to have a singular and serious magic of their own. That is the effect of the works in this show, particularly Mr. Morris's and Mr. Tobin's, whose ideas could not have been embodied so effectively in any other medium.

"Glass Installations" is at the American Craft Museum, 40 West 53d Street, Manhattan, through July 4.