

Exploring The Hidden

Working with glass poses innumerable challenges for artists, not the least of which is working the line between the sculptural and the functional.

By Jonathan Thomson



Colin Heaney, **Diablo Moon**, 1999, blown glass and cast bronze base. All photographs: Courtesy of Gaffer Studio Glass, Hong Kong.

In the first half of the 20th century glass objects that were more decorative than functional were generally called “art glass.” Small decorative glass sculptures and figurines were produced in Europe from the early 1900s onwards. However, in the 1960s, in America, glass artist Harvey Littleton was among the first to build his own kiln and make his own glass objects. This marked an important break from the work produced either in industrial glassworks or workshops associated with factories and gave rise to the term studio glass. The independence of the artist from the industrial environment freed glass from its utilitarian traditions and established it as a medium for the individual artist. Since then artists have explored the sculptural possibilities of glass.

Glass sculptors have always been attracted to abstract forms, not least because of the medium’s plastic and expressionistic qualities. In the 1970s, artists were fascinated by the technical possibilities of the medium and made work that explored the material’s essential contrary character. It is an extraordinarily variable material with hardness and pliancy, strength and fragility, clarity and color, and the ability to both reflect and absorb light. More recently, critical debate has focused more on the role of the artists and their use of the material than the physical qualities of the material itself. However, these are not binary concerns. A recent exhibition in Hong Kong, at Gaffer Studio Glass, showcased



Colin Heaney, **Lava Mortar**, 1999, blown glass and cast bronze, 54 x 16 cm.

the work of three Australian artists Colin Heaney, Erika Mayer, and Noel Hart—each of whom is concerned both with artistry and technical innovation. Each of these artists is a master of the art of transformation. But for all of them it is not the process, but the supremacy of the aesthetic effect that is their primary motivation.

Colin Heaney, who was born in Vancouver, Canada, in 1948, may be described more as an alchemist than a glass artist. Alchemy is traditionally known as the process of transmuting metals into gold. However, for Heaney, who has lived in Australia in 1968, it is the process of

transmuting metal and silica into art. For the past few years, Heaney has been working on a series of works that he calls *Vitrolith Glass*, from a combination of the words vitreous, as in the nature of glass, and lithic, or stone. He might have also used the acronym V.I.T.R.I.O.L. being the initials of the celebrated formula which encapsulated alchemical teaching—*Visita Interiora Terra Recificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem*—“Explore the inner things of Earth and by distillation you will find the hidden stone.”¹

This formula describes the extraordinary process by which Heaney has created some of the most original and beautiful glass forms ever made. The inspiration for these works came to Heaney in a vision. For years he had believed intuitively that there had to be a way of combining metal and glass. He knew that copper is one of the few metals that is compatible with glass and felt that there must be something there. Every few months he would try different mixes of glass and copper powder but every time he would get the same effect—a blackened cruddy surface that, try as he may, he could not get to stay bright. Then one day, while drumming up on the Byron Bay headland in northern New South Wales, near where he lives, he had the inspiration of a goddess figurine, inviting him to follow her. Back in the studio he made a little goddess mold, and used a variety of earthy colors to suggest something ancient, something that might be found in an archaeological dig. When it cooled, this figure had the same blackened surface as his previous experiments, but he had the inspiration to abrade the surface with a recently acquired sandblaster. To his delight a whole new world of rich gorgeous color was revealed.

Heaney begins most of his vitroliths by building up a ball of glass out of many layers of clear and colored glass



Colin Heaney, **Water Garden Vessel**, 1999, blown and hand-formed glass, 33 x 22 cm.

on a heavy-duty blowpipe. He then dusts this molten ball of glass with copper powder and applies a layer of powdered and granulated glass colors. The ball is returned to the furnace and the process is repeated time and again. Complex chemical reactions result. Glass powders adhere to the copper as they do with baked vitreous enamel and form globules of pure color. Blowtorches are used to fuse additional colors and the molten ball is blown to expand the ball into a spherical shape and depressed or rolled to make other forms. The colors are stretched and pulled into an extraordinary array of complex patterns. But it is only after the work has rested in an annealing oven and sandblasted for up to six hours that its true nature is exposed.

Heaney the alchemist combines artistic virtuosity and technical innovation to make objects in an intoxicating range of colors. Some of these are striking combinations of the primaries such as red, yellow and blue; others have a lush, exotic naturalism. His forms are massive and rather stolid, in counterpoint to their dazzling surfaces. His favorites are the *Mortar*, a utilitarian shallow dish made by depressing and flattening the blown sphere, and the *Coolamon*, named after an indigenous Australian carrying dish made by spinning



Erika Mayer, *Dancers*, 2004, cast crystal, 35 x 25 x 25 cm.

a ball of molten glass into a platter. Another is an urn-shaped vessel that he calls a *Phasmid* or a wide disk with a relatively small central hole. On occasion, Heaney mounts his pieces on a bronze stand which



Erika Mayer, *Waterdancer*, 2003, cast crystal, 32 x 14 x 18 cm.

may be based on arrangements of wooden twigs or a crescent moon.

Heaney is committed to the sculptural possibilities of glass. "I don't relate well to two-dimensional work. I don't have a feeling for it," he says. "I have much more feeling for three-dimensional form, and that is what is most interesting to me." Most of his work is blown but there isn't that much blowing involved. "It just means that it's hollow, it has an inside and an outside. The flat pieces don't have an outside so to speak, they aren't blown, they are spun out like a wine glass foot but on a big scale—it's the one surface right through, but I can get to the inside visually which is pretty enticing." The technique of spinning also adds texture. As he notes, "As the lump of glass on the end of a blowpipe spins, the top spins out and the color gets pushed around to the back. So the color on the back becomes more built-up and intense, while the color on the top, which started at the center, ends up being the whole top surface splayed out. The top side is always very smooth, the bottom is more textured."

For Heaney the attraction of the vitrolith is visual. "When you just use glass colors and glass powders mixed together, it gives you a fairly predictable surface. But once you add the copper as a layer, things start happening," he says. "If you look at any natural material and you keep looking deeper and deeper, it becomes more complex. In comparison, glass isn't really complex. The copper adds levels of complexity. As you look into it, it has shades and gradients and the surfaces are much more natural looking."

From a different viewpoint, alchemy symbolizes the evolution of the person from a state in which the physical world predominates to a spiritual state—the transmutation of base metals into gold equates with the transformation of the human being into pure spirit.² For Erika Mayer, who was born in Stuttgart, Germany, but moved to Australia in 1987, had only worked casting in bronze before she met Colin Heaney, the human body is a spiritual form. She now works in cast crystal. Her wanton goddess forms are volumes of light, floating weightlessly in attitudes of abandon. The transparency of her medium, with its delicate swirls and washes of color such as occur when a loaded paint brush is first

dipped in a jar of water, results in works that are suggestive both of an instant and an eternity. Living and working in the lush tropical hinterland of beautiful Byron Bay, where old-growth rainforest meets the crystal clear blue of the Pacific Ocean and where community values are based on “alternative” lifestyles, gives Mayer a spiritual sense of lightness that is admirably represented in her work.

For Noel Hart, born in 1955 in Geelong, Australia, the third of this group of artists from Byron Bay exhibiting in Hong Kong, it is the flora and fauna that inhabit the rainforest that provides his inspiration. Hart joined the Heaney studio in 1991 as a designer, photographer, and sculpture fabricator. Later, when Heaney took some time out to build his house, he took a much greater role in the running of the studio. Glass is expensive to make and when a great deal of Heaney’s work that had been prepared for exhibition in America was held up in transit in the confusion following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Hart realized that a second line was required in order to save the studio from financial ruin. Hart’s work is much less time-consuming to make than Heaney’s. He works with a team of skilled artisans in the studio, all of whom have had factory experience. The work begins with an assistant making gather or gobs of clear glass on the end of a blowpipe. This gather is then layered and fused with a series of tendrils of molten glass that have been prepared by other assistants under his direction. Hart likens this process to the mixing and loading of a paintbrush with paint. The glass is then blown, and the bubble pulled, stretched, and compressed into a rectangular flattened vase form.

Hart is first and foremost a painter. For him the important thing is not the material but the image that results. “I’m not overly hooked on glass, but then again I’m not overly hooked on paint. I like painting but the paint itself isn’t engaging and glass itself doesn’t inspire me all that much,” he says. “It’s just a tool to produce an image.” As he never trained as a glass artist, Hart is not constrained by accepted practices or the known limitations of the medium. As a result he has been able to explore the expressive possibilities of the material. Hart often exhibits his paintings alongside his work in glass and there are very clear parallels between his richly textured and brightly colored painted surfaces and the dynamic swirls and wisps of painterly color that he captures in glass.

The visual effects achieved by Hart and his team are similar to the vibrant plumage of the birds found in the tropical rainforest. In fact most of his works are



Noel Hart, Pygmy Parrot, 2004, free brown glass, 53 x 43 x 0.9 cm.

given titles relating to specific species of bird. In his work we may discern wing shapes, feathers, or even an eye, but at other times the effect is like the flash of color and movement glimpsed out of the corner of your eye as you walk in the half light of a path on the forest floor. At times his colors churn and eddy within a transparent medium, at others they are densely opaque.

All three of these artists work in hot glass. Hot glass always involves an element of chance as it is always difficult and unpredictable. Different thermal expansion coefficients of different glass types may result in cracking or a failure to adhere, or the result, when cool, may fail at an aesthetic level. Hart describes it as a “tragic material, very difficult” and claims only to have a success rate of some one in four. This to him is acceptable as he is always trying to push both himself and his material. Heaney agrees and notes, “there

are never any second chances with glass.” Intuition and experience both come into play. “Experience gives you a fair idea of what will happen but what works this time may be very different the next,” says Heaney. “Once you start working, you never get a chance to reconsider what you are doing. Once you start working, faster is better as there is less chance of losing what you have got.” Δ

Notes:

1. Chevalier, Jean and Gheerbrant, Alain, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, Penguin Books, London, 1996, pg.1072.
2. *Ibid.* pg.12.

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