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Raising a glass: how fine artists embraced a forgotten medium in Venice



Giant bubbles of glass are used in the Verhoeven Twins' Moments of Happiness at Venice

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At the southern tip of the Venetian island of Murano, just where the vaporetti creak in to dock, is the Fondamenta dei Vetrai – or street of glassmakers.

From the middle ages on, its route was lined with furnaces kitting out Europe's castles and palazzos with the finest mirrors, goblets and chandeliers. So secret was the method the glassmakers used, and so profitable their business to the Venetian Republic, that the only way these master craftsmen could ever leave the island was in a coffin, or without their hands.

Since the 19th century, though, demand for Murano glass has dwindled incomparably; the majority of the island's furnaces lie abandoned, their kilns stone-cold. Today, the Fondamenta dei Vetrai is mostly wadded with shops selling souvenir glass paperweights and wine-stoppers, for the nearly 20 million tourists that visit Venice each year.



Ai Weiwei working in glass CREDIT: KAROLINA SOBEL

In one of the street's former furnaces, though, something extraordinary is taking place. A woman who drew her last breath in the 17th century, when she posed for the French artist Georges de la Tour, has come momentarily back to life. Nearby, corpulent beetles scabble for space among a heap of spiders and midget doodlebug missiles. On the wall, meanwhile, a twitching mouth whispers threateningly: "Name your price".

Each of these pieces (by the artists Mat Collishaw, Rose Wylie and Tony Oursler, respectively) is fashioned from Murano glass and part of the latest Glasstress exhibition, an initiative that was launched at the Venice Biennale of 2009, and which has remained one of the Biennale's most stylish and well-attended collateral events ever since.

Founded by the Venetian Adriano Berengo, Glasstress invites established contemporary artists to the Berengo Studio workshop nearby on the Fondamenta dei Vetrei, where, in collaboration with a glass maestro, they create a new work. Berengo, who is in his Seventies, founded the Studio 30 years ago on the example of the late collector Peggy Guggenheim who in the Fifties and Sixties, alongside the local glassmaker Egidio Costantini (1912-2007), invited artists such as Picasso, Alexander Calder and Jean Arp to Murano to make works in Murano glass.



Shitting Doves of Peace and Flying Rats by Jan Fabre CREDIT: FRANCESCO ALLEGRETTO

To begin with, Berengo says, he had to work hard to persuade artists to participate – it took him six years to woo Ai Weiwei, for instance. These days, they are more likely to be wooing him: the Studio is fending off more requests than it can handle. Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Erwin Wurm, Tony Cragg, Thomas Schutte and Laure Provost are just some of the internationally-renowned artists to have come here to Venice to make work. Berengo is also in the planning stages for a museum, which will be the first in the world to show contemporary art in glass. Next year, around 200 pieces from his collection will be exhibited at The Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

Behind all of it, Berengo says, is “a strange category of the artist’s spirit: they like to play with new things.”

“The material has its own will,” agrees Cragg. “So you end up with most interesting artworks. You start something with your destination unknown and you end up somewhere new and exciting. It’s a creative process without a doubt. Being led by the material, you learn from it.”



Through his 30 year-old foundation, Venetian Adriano Berengo has been instrumental in reviving interest in Murano glass among fine artists CREDIT: HUGO THOMASSEN

Cragg is represented in the current show (which as well as presenting new work celebrates 10 years of Glasstress and 30 years of Berengo Studio) by three pieces: *Untitled* (2009), a sort of spaghetti whirlpool; *Bridge* (2018) – a gentle curve of ice cube-ish blocks – and *Tower* (2017) which looks like Foxes Glacier Mints piled higgledy-piggledy on top of one another.

“It’s not every day that you get a transparent material; a material that you can see both sides of the perimeter and the volume,” Cragg says, explaining his fascination with glass.

“But I think what really interests me is that a lot of my work is based on the structure of materials: the external shape that we see in the light of day – why is it that shape? What’s underneath the surface? And glass, because it is a liquid, tends toward a rational shape of its own accord. Much like a raindrop or a tear, those beautifully-shaped things in physics where if you just let the material run, they have an organic geometry of their own. That’s what intrigues me: that very lively geometry”.

Berengo tells me that 90 percent of the artists who come to Murano to make work at the Studio, fail at their first attempt. “They come with preconceived ideas, but because glass has its own dynamic, I have to try to make them think in glass. It’s unlike anything else they will have worked with.”



Tony Cragg's Glasstress work from 2009 CREDIT: BERENGO STUDIO

The Scottish artist Charles Avery, for instance, whose 2017 piece, *Untitled (Ninth Stand)* replicates eels in a white box – as you might see at a fish market – took a week to find a way to bend the glass and the colour in the way he wanted. “According to him, we pushed the boundaries of his thinking,” says Berengo. “It’s fascinating to watch that process.”

Though many of the artists send drawings in advance, Berengo required every one of them to come to Murano at least once, where they are paired with a glass maestro. Most come two or three times. “The trouble is, it’s really difficult to translate what you have in your head to glass, even with a sketch,” Collishaw explains. “It’s not the case that you can make just anything in glass.”

Berengo gives his artists three pieces of advice: Firstly, “don’t try to reproduce something which is already made in another material in glass, because that turns out very banal.” Second: “put down your ego – because even the most modest artist thinks he is somewhere between Picasso and Chagall. I tell them, ‘you will only be able to produce something when you are able to come to a kind of agreement where the hand of the glass maestro is a continuation of your own’”. Finally, “Go to the city and look at all the ugly shops you can see, because in every kitsch piece there is a technique.”

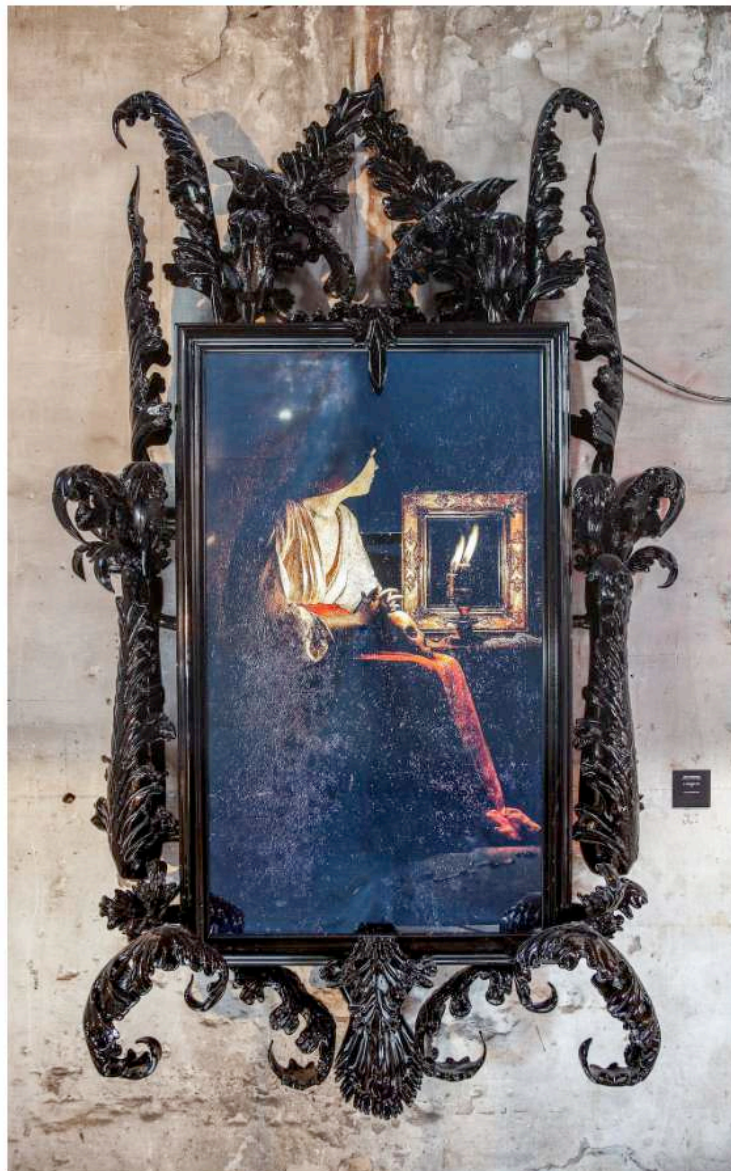


Laure Prouvost working in glass in Venice, 2017 CREDIT: OLIVER HAAS

On the evidence of the current exhibition, they take his words to heart. The Brazilian artist Vik Muniz, for instance, who has also acted as co-curator of the Glasstress exhibition this year, has created two portraits in many thousands of murrine – the tiny colour-patterned, corrugated circles you see in the famous Murano paperweights, created when a multi-coloured glass cane is cut into cross-sections.

Many others have been obviously inspired by Venetian history: there are several interpretations of chandeliers (by Ai Weiwei, Javier Perez and Joana Vasconcelos) and fountains (by Laure Prouvost), as well as Venice's brazen pigeons (by Jan Fabre) and ornate mirrors (by Fred Wilson and Mat Collishaw).

For his work *A Different Self* (2014), in which the above-mentioned de la Tour painting is brought to life via a two-way mirror (such as you might find in a police cell) and a flatscreen TV, then encased in a frame made of black curlicue glass strands, Collishaw wanted “to get at the idea of this other world – the world of fictions, images, imagination; that parallel universe that exists on the other side of the mirror which seems to reflect the one we’re in but is slightly different.”



A Different Self by Mat Collishaw CREDIT: FRANCESCO ALLEGRETTO

In the piece, an unknown woman is captured as she sat for de la Tour, at the moment he turned her into Mary Magdalene for all eternity. Over and over again she turns away from the viewer towards a candle flame, which flickers in a breeze. "I wanted to get back to that poignant sliver of a moment when a living breathing humble person in a mundane room is transformed into a mythical character, an icon or a masterpiece," explains Collishaw.

"It seemed to me that glass was the ideal medium for it because when it's fluid you can coax, nurture and manipulate it so that it takes on the shape you want", says the British artist. "Not unlike the way a painter or a photographer would capture time, and freeze it."

The glass strands of the mirror frame are designed to resemble the plumes of the feather headdresses worn by funeral horses in the East End of London. "So the frame commemorates the death of the person as they become an image in which they'll be preserved forever."



Verhoeven Twins' piece Moments of Happiness

Collishaw made several pencil and three-dimensional drawings of the kind of frame he wanted, along with a plaster model, to help convey exactly what he wanted to the maestro he was twinned with. Rose Wylie's insects and flying objects, on the other hand, were realised from watercolours she had originally made of flying scissors, but which morphed into other flying objects.

"I have consistently drawn doodlebugs, as I saw them in the sky in 1944," she tells me, "and often drawn them in watercolour. It's a medium that's transparent, and seems to translate happily into glass. Insects are ecologically vital, and are endangered, so a pile of them on show in public seemed a good reminder of my empathy and their precarious existence."

The maestros are prepared to go a long way to create an artist's idea in glass, "even if it takes a lot of tries and a lot of errors until we get to a point that's interesting," says Cragg. "It can be very exciting watching it happen."

"I tell them: if the master is doing something that you think is wrong, stay quiet, because glass is very particular," says Berengo. "You cannot command the glass, the glass is commanding you."



Leonor Antunes: A Surface, A Seam, A Hinge, A Knot at the Portugal Pavilion were also made on Murano CREDIT: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, AIR DE PARIS, PARIS; MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, PARIS & LONDON; KURIMANZUTTO, MEXICO CITY & NEW YORK; GALERIA LUISA STRINA, SÃO PAULO/NICK ASH

He believes we are only at the beginning of contemporary art in glass and based on the evidence of the Biennale alone, one would have to agree – even outside the realm of Glasstress, other artists are making great strides with the material.

Leonor Antunes's blown glass and brass lamps at the Portuguese Pavilion, for instance, were also made on Murano as were Renate Bertlmann's 312 glass roses with razor blades at the Austrian Pavilion. At Dysfunctional, meanwhile, the Carpenter's Workshop exhibition at the Galleria Giorgio Franchetti Ali Ca' D'Oro, the Verhoeven Twins' piece Moments of Happiness recreates giant bubble clusters in glass.

"The Director of the Glass Museum in Dusseldorf told me recently that he thinks future art historians will look back at the end of the last century and the first 30 years of this one as the new Renaissance in glass," says Berengo. "And I completely agree."