

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Celebrating Outstanding Glass Artists Who Happen to Be Women

By Sarah Rose Sharp Jan. 8, 2018



"Windex" by Liza Lou, part of *Fired Up* at the Toledo Museum of Art (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

TOLEDO, Ohio — Whenever I encounter a museum exhibition that frames itself as presenting exclusively female artists, I have to run through the same internal debate about emphasizing artists' gender. I recognize the necessity of making a conscious effort to include or exclusively feature female artists — or any other broad swath of the population that has spent the larger portion of art history taking a back seat to Euro-centric exhibitions of male artists — and certainly appreciate institutions when

they choose to do so. The sticking point, for me, always comes when the work is framed as being “art by women.” I identify as both an artist and a woman, but rarely do I head into the studio thinking: “Time to make some women’s art, like the woman I am!”



*Fired Up*, installation view. In the foreground, “Dress Impression” with Train by Karen LaMonte (designed 2005; cast 2007)

*Fired Up: Contemporary Glass by Women Artists* at the Toledo Museum of Art (TMA) showcases more than 50 works of exemplary studio glass, largely from the museum’s collection. The exhibition was co-curated by former TMA Senior Curator of Decorative Arts and Glass Jutta Page and Mint Museum Senior Curator of Craft, Design, and Fashion Annie Carlano; it originated at the Mint and is now enjoying a turn in TMA’s Glass Pavilion, where the Studio Glass Movement has its roots. Since the heyday of the automotive industry in nearby Detroit, Toledo has manufactured auto glass and components, which in the 1960s evolved into a full-fledged art movement. The kilns and techniques that were developed for the industrial market became fodder for artists (of both genders) to question the form and function of glass as a medium.

In this context, there is little to convince me that “female glass art” occupies a necessarily separate category than “glass art.” While the desire to highlight aspects of the TMA’s collection is understandable, especially regarding a hometown art movement, it could just as simply be said that the exhibition is a collection of standout pieces from virtuosos over some five decades of Studio Glass.



Josepha Gasch-Muche, “Pyramid 10/04/09” (2009), broken liquid crystal display (LCD) glass, adhesive, metal, wood

“I think that’s the thing that is special about the exhibition,” said TMA’s director of collections, Halona Norton-Westbrook. “You see how much these artists have worked across all the different iterations of the Studio Glass Movement, so walking into this room, there’s nothing that would let you know these are all women. At the same time, you see what an important influence women have been across the entire movement, and for such a long time.”

Fair enough, I suppose, to make a point of uplifting the women who have always been a part of the push to lift glass from its industrial application, and refashion it into an experimental medium. If, as the exhibition materials assert, women in the early decades of the movement “faced an uphill battle in their demand for fair recognition of their contributions and work,” it is comforting to note that many of the participating artists have prevailed nonetheless in taking their places “among the most innovative and celebrated glass artists” and hometown favorites for Toledo collectors.



A maximal take on a traditional Roman “cage” cup, Karla Trinkley’s *Pink Bowl (Pâte de verre)* (1990)

This includes artist Audrey Handler, who has a 1966 work in the exhibition, only recently acquired by TMA. This early work not only demonstrates the presence of female artists at the very beginning of the Studio Glass Movement, but exemplifies the movement’s conceptual wellspring, which deals with the tension between the vessel’s functionality and experimentation.

“While it still has that very traditional form, you have these clear bubbles on the side, and kind of playing with that,” said Norton-Westbrook. “So that’s a really important piece. In the 1960s, starting here on the [TMA] campus, was that idea of breaking away from being confined to the vessel as a traditional form. Artists built and were working in smaller furnaces where they could be more collaborative with each other, more innovative in the moment, and experiment with shapes and functions of the glass itself. And so you’ll see a lot of glass that’s happened since that time is still playing with that idea of vessel in some way.”



“The Scarecrow Knows How the West Was Won” by Joyce Scott

But not all. Also on display are several works involving glass beading, such as “Windex” by Liza Lou. Using arduously intricate glass beadwork, Lou has recreated a bottle of cleaning fluid at scale, making an elaborately decorative object of a banal domestic product. Women’s issues, indeed. Lou has a longstanding practice of hyper-adorning objects, including the construction of entire domestic settings

covered in glass beads, but the Windex bottle manages to hold its own, even as a standalone object, eloquently and even playfully summarizing the experience of invisible domestic labor.

In an adjacent case is “The Scarecrow Knows Who Won the West” by MacArthur Fellow Joyce Scott, who manages the feat of executing a full narrative in glass beadwork. The symbolic implications of her detailed components — a black figure on a cross, a tasseled corn on the cob, and a Native American figure in clay, seeming to shed or embrace the echo of a skeleton — combine with the title to tell a fully realized story.



Emily Brock, "Deli" (1999), glass, fused, slumped, flame-worked, assembled metal

There is a fanatic attention to detail in *Fired Up*, which also includes one of the signature diner sets of glass miniaturist Emily Brock. Brock's tiny tableaux would be impressive merely as works of miniature; the fact that they are executed entirely in glass (with just a few metal details) pushes them over to mind-melting.

These are the more figurative works in the show, which also contains numerous explorations of form, color, and material. Glass is an extremely versatile medium, as the participating artists have made careers of proving. The work ranges from an oversized version of a traditional, rough-hewn Roman



Flora Mace & Joey Kirkpatrick, "Garden of Ladders"  
(1989) (detail view) glass, blown, enamel

cage cup by Karla Trinkley, to a vase inspired by South African pottery by Mieke Groot, selected from a series wherein the artist recreated vessels encountered on her world travels in glass. The degree to which Groot is able to push glass to resemble the rough crackled, texture of the South African vessel is astonishing, with material so thin between the cracks that light comes through.



Mieke Groot, "Vase" (1997) (detail view), glass, blown, with enamel

Needless to say, it is impossible to draw any overarching conclusions about *Fired Up*, other than to commend TMA and the Mint for putting together an outstanding showcase that will push the understanding of Studio Glass for both novice and enthusiast, regardless of the artists' gender.

*Fired Up: Contemporary Glass by Women Artists continues at the Toledo Museum of Art through March 18.*