

Forbes

Venice's Murano Glass Smashes Convention In New Florida Exhibition

By Rebecca Ann Hughes, Jun 22, 2021



Joyce J. Scott, Buddha (Wind), 2013, Hand-blown Murano glass, beads, wire, and thread, 20 1/2 x 12 1/2 x 13 in.

Venice's 1000-year-old tradition of glassblowing is not an art stuck in the past. A [new exhibition at the Boca Raton Museum](#) in Florida displays the work of international artists who collaborated with Murano glass factory [Fondazione Berengo](#) to tackle issues of climate change, racism, sexual abuse and government authority through glass sculptures, while also challenging preconceptions about the artistic medium.

The *Glasstress* exhibition, showing at the Boca Raton Museum of Art in Florida until September 5th, is a result of a collaboration between 34 contemporary artists, including Ai Weiwei, Fred Wilson and Joyce J. Scott, and Fondazione Berengo. Fondazione Berengo is a cultural institution on the island of Murano, near Venice, that seeks to marry its ancient glass tradition with contemporary art.

Its *Glasstress* exhibitions actually began ten years ago, in a bid to showcase contemporary art in glass. "As time went on it developed into a travelling show as part of our mission to spread the word about what we were doing and creating a platform for the incredible contemporary artists using glass as a medium to create sculptures," says Adriano Berengo, founder of Fondazione Berengo.

Many of the sculptures on display at the Boca Raton Museum are by artists trying their hand for the first time at glasswork. Sculptor Saint Clair Cemin says, "I thought this is a great opportunity to try a new material. I have never tried to work with glass before because I know that the technique is so difficult and I happen to be a sculptor that likes to put the hands in the material." As such, "each develops their own relationship to the medium, they have to find their own bearings with it and that often involves

evolving their own language with the maestros in the furnace, and with the medium itself,” says Berengo. “People have a very fixed idea of what it is and what it can do, we take pleasure shattering those notions and showing them that almost anything is possible.”

With the ancient art form being so difficult to learn, glass masters privy to the centuries-old techniques assisted the contemporary artists in the realization of their pieces. For many, being in the furnaces was an eye-opening experience. Speaking at the Fondazione, artist Laure Prouvost says, “I feel much more connected to the work now because I feel the heat, the precision, the teamwork, this choreography of humans together to bring that piece together.”

Through the contemporary sculptures in the exhibition, Murano glass leaves behind decorative chandeliers and vases — what Berengo calls the “utilitarian straitjacket of the past” — and becomes abstract, spectacular and even broken. As artist Jimmie Durham says, “I think the biggest challenge is still [...] that glass is too pretty.” As such, his contribution to the exhibition involved breaking and smashing elements of his sculpture of eight cougar heads. “My idea of glass is that it is interesting when it is broken because the brokenness vibrates and is a little dangerous.”

The works also comment on some of the most pressing issues facing modern society, including gender inequality and racial injustice. Ai Weiwei’s sculpture *Blossom Chandelier* plays with the fragility and delicacy associated with glass. From a distance, the floating white forms could be branches of flowers. A closer look reveals a sculpture that bursts with unexpected shapes emanating from white glass flowers: menacing handcuffs, Twitter birds, security cameras, and the artist’s hands flashing his middle finger — the latter an angry response to his imprisonment by the Chinese government.

Song Dong, one of contemporary Chinese art’s leading figures, similarly puts a twist on tradition. *Glass Big Brother* is a large-scale installation, 11 feet long, of an ornate chandelier. However, in the place of lights or candles, thirty surveillance cameras are ensconced from top to bottom, looking in all directions.

The first installation that visitors to the Boca Raton Museum encounter is *Sala Longhi* by Fred Wilson. An ornate white chandelier is suspended from the ceiling while the walls are covered with 29 glass panels that mirror 18th-century Venetian artist Pietro Longhi’s paintings. Instead of canvases, Wilson shows the viewer only the whites of the eyes of black subjects in Longhi’s paintings through cutouts in the black reflective glass. He created this series at Berengo Studio after the Biennale exhibited his work about black residents of Venice from the Renaissance to the present.

The work of Italian artist Monica Bonvicini, instead, features deeply psychological themes that address sexuality, power, and relationships in male-oriented domains. Bonvicini’s visits to sadomasochist nightclubs are the inspiration for *Bonded*. She won the prestigious Golden Lion award at the 1999 Venice Biennale.

The *Glasstress* exhibitions defy preconceptions about glass art, but also lead the way for the revival of Murano’s glass industry, which has been devastated first by disastrous flooding in November 2019 and then by the pandemic. The glass workshops rely heavily on tourism for business and [many have struggled to reopen](#). However, Berengo is taking a positive outlook. “The pandemic actually gave us space and time to look back over our archives and appreciate how far we’ve come in just over thirty years,” he says. “Certain venues are clearly suffering the lack of visitors but I think for many it’s also been a useful lesson, it’s inspired people to approach things in a different way and plan for a more sustainable future.”

Irvin Lippman, director of the Boca Raton Museum, also describes the exhibition as “a tribute to the resilience of Venice’s surviving the floods and continuing to make art through the pandemic.”