A Crafts Council
Touring Exhibition

Revealing a New Wave in
British Glass Blowing
Introduction

Glassblowing: A Search for Form

So where are we today?

'And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire…'

Committee

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Films

Acknowledgements
Introduction

Breath Taking presents new work by 17 pioneering and innovative contemporary British makers alongside five exemplary works from the Crafts Council Collection.

The works on display are all created by virtue of the interaction of human breath and hot glass. The breath that has created these new works resonates in the themes and concepts it explores. It continues to animate them even once the original breath has dissipated. Using this sense of breath as a starting point, life, death, sound and movement are considered and manifested in objects as fascinating and unexpected as a glass trombone, hand-grenade and an apartment designed for futuristic living.

This exhibition is timely in a climate that has seen a reduction in the formal learning opportunities to discover the art of hot glassblowing. There are challenges for makers in running a studio furnace due to rising fuel prices and an increased responsibility and awareness of the environmental impact and carbon footprint of the process. However, there is a burgeoning wave of makers who, whilst cognisant of these issues, are passionate about the process and desirous to develop new work.

The works on show are produced by employing traditional and historical techniques that are over 5000 years old. However, it is the contemporary variation developed from these traditional processes, combined with intellectual and creative inspiration, that is new and has the power to excite, to question and to challenge and together present the new wave in British glassblowing.

Image (p.4): Deflated Vessel 2 (detail); 2005; Jessica Lloyd-Jones. Photo: Jessica Lloyd-Jones.
Glassblowing: A Search for Form

First published in 1971, Glassblowing: A Search for Form, written by US glass artist Harvey Littleton (b.1922), remains an important and relevant contemporary work. The selected text below sets the context for Breath Taking. Littleton’s book, in his own words, is both ‘a guide and a revivalist manifesto’, and within it, the founder of studio glass offers a view into the future, predicting how the art form and the practice of the artist would develop.

As well as being an influential and successful glass artist, Littleton is known as an outspoken advocate of arts education. He organised the first hot glass course within an American University in 1962 (the University of Wisconsin-Madison), which in turn promoted the idea of hot glass as a valid course of study across university art departments in the Midwest and North Eastern United States.¹ He famously stated that ‘Technique is Cheap’,² and fuelled debate around the role and importance to the artist of material versus technique and the impact of content in the creation of glass art.
annealing ovens can be built cheaply. But it is through the insatiable, adventurous urge of the artist to discover the essence of glass that his own means of expression will emerge. The artists in glass today have generally come to glass from other arts. They have been sculptors, potters, painters, jewellers, poets or mathematicians. The good ones encounter glass because they want to know what glass is – what they can do with it, and what it can do for them. In glassblowing, if the necessary risk is taken, the outcome must always be in doubt. Artistic creation must occur in crisis, it cannot be planned or divided up. [The glassblower] must immerse himself in immediate experimentation and study, for the glass will not wait.

I have no argument with pleasing form in functional objects. I have no displeasure in using such functionally engineered objects – engineering for production, packaging and distribution. I enjoy pleasant useful objects, but I cannot conceive that any of these aims is in itself art. Unfortunately some of the most experimental work has yet to be seen.

“A search for form is the daily pursuit of the artist. The search until recently somehow overlooked the blowing of molten glass directly from the furnace. There has long been popular confusion about even the term ‘glassblowing’ which has been used to mean... work with the blowpipe using molten glass from the furnace, as well as the traditional use of rods and tubes of glass manipulated in a flame.

Glass, an endlessly intriguing material, remains virtually undiscovered as a medium of artistic expression... Ours is a small segment of the art worlds, and an even smaller segment of the world of glass, but I believe it to be exciting and important to both. The method used by the contemporary artist is a constant probing and questioning of the standards of the past and the definitions of the present to find an opening for new form statements in the material and process. It is even said that this search is an end in itself.

Although knowledge of chemistry or physics as they apply to glass will broaden the artist's possibilities, it cannot create them. Tools can be made; furnaces and
So where are we today?

Glass artist and curator Matt Durran, responds to the words of Harvey Littleton, considering the context for glass art 40 years after the first publication of Glassblowing: A Search for Form:

What strikes me is that art and the making of glass are more popular than ever, but becoming less and less a daily pursuit. The rising costs and distractions of paperwork have led to the pursuit of ideas and creative investigation before the material is even touched. The artistic life seems more complicated today, with the increased amount of technical choice to hand. It is a process of creating through rejection, leading to an economy of making.

With the advancement of switch-off technology for furnaces and small mobile-units, the need for flexibility has been underlined. We need to be able to produce work in small batches of time and the studio space has become a shared, multi-disciplined arena. Of course, some protagonists of hot glass are blowing every day, but even their endeavours have been limited by the need to maintain a viable working space: need that demands artists repeat forms in their

In fact, some exhibitions have rejected pieces because they did not conform to the ‘expressive qualities’ of our earlier work. I maintain that great things are possible in glass, and will continue to happen if the conditions set forth in this book are maintained”.3

Harvey Littleton, 1971


work, hire out the studio, and teach. This all adds to the distraction of creating the art piece.

One of the trends is that an art form, sculpture or installation is only created once the funding has been raised through a proposal-based application. Owing to the high volume of applications, many of these works will never be created or commissioned, and the results will remain as unmade dreams or ideas kept to recycle for future works.

Another trend is the current issue of sustainability in working practice. The development of new sustainable fuels and the recycling of glass materials are adding new dimensions and technical difficulties to all areas of glasswork. There is also a movement towards the upcycling of the material where the life of a product is extended by the incorporation of other functions.

These are the issues that will define the next generation of glass makers.

What has also become evident is the way fine artists and designers are incorporating glass practices and craft into their work; sourcing makers to create work or components for installation. Their inspiration, we can conclude, partly comes from the advancement of the studio-glass art movement and artists working in glass, whose raised profiles and access to global markets with media exposure have informed the fine artist of the possibilities. But this is no one-way street. The artist-maker is also informed by this contact and is allowed to question the preciousness and highly crafted finish, even encouraged to work on content, psychology and personal expression right through to questioning the restrictions of glass. There is value in this, as we are starting to see the crossovers and collaborations, which in turn create opportunities for experimental works to be seen and understood by a wider art community. This conversation has led to activity in many new arenas, including performance, dance, film and animation.

There have been many changes over the years, but there remains the truism that the moment still exists when, in mid-flow, the molten glass can change direction and the artists' skills can capitalise on the moment.

Matt Durran, 2011
'And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire…'

They are busy now before the glory hole, the furnace’s thousand degrees, its tonnes of heat.

And we who watch are mesmerised by molten glass, as they sleepwalk like the hypnotised on some shabby seaside stage: entranced yet unmoved by the near miraculous, folded acres of fire, of changing form: honey dripping from a coiled wooden spoon; a flash of kingfisher rising from a slow moving river.

They stand poles in hand like lost children fishing at the shady edge of a fabled pond.

Cremetorial, the long lulling purr might pull you in, burn your bones, char your skin like yesterday’s newsprint they use to shape a vase, shape a paperweight.
How gently and with what restraint they blow on these their instruments:

a flautist practicing a slow air,
a dreamer breathing in the arms of someone lost unsure if the form they've drawn to them will hold or simply melt away again.

Adam O’Riordan, 2011

The Crafts Council commissioned poet Adam O’Riordan to create a new work inspired by the glassblowing process.

Still from Sheldon Cooney in the Studio; Federico Urdaneta, 2011.

Image (p.12): Reaching an Ulterior Realm (detail); 2010; Joanna Manousis; Photo: Joanna Manousis/Woody Packard.
Having seen some waste glass that had fallen into a bucket while molten and subsequently solidified into a beautiful, glossy, bulbous splurge, design collective Committee wondered if they could produce something useful that effortlessly captured the essence of the material at its moment of formation. Keen to pare back their design process, they staged a simple intervention that revealed the nature of glassblowing itself.

The Blob desk organiser and paperweight was the result; a great globule of glass, blown over a number of basic shapes to give it just enough form to hold a ruler, pencils and a rubber, while acting as a typical paperweight.

Blob, 2010
Glass; Free-blown (by Stewart Hearn);
Commissioned and produced for Established & Sons; Photo: Nick Moss.
Cooney’s working process is and has always been continuous, and consists of experimenting in the workshop with a particular technique in mind. The resulting tests are improved, refined, developed and explored further with finished objects or groups of pieces exhibited at various stages.

A Retorti – Bianco and A Retorti – Nero have evolved over several years through experimentation with the cane-work technique. Coloured glass is cased in clear glass and stretched out to make canes, which are then combined and stretched again while twisting to make more canes, before eventually being blown and shaped as bubbles in the chair (the glassmaker’s bench).

*A Retorti – Bianco* (detail), 2010
*A Retorti – Nero* (detail), 2010
24% Lead crystal glass; Free-blown cane-work, ground and polished; Photo: Nick Moss.
Dickinson's work highlights the unique and opposing characteristics of glass: transparency, fragility, strength and flexibility.

*Black and Silver African Stripe Vase* forms part of a series strongly influenced by West African sculpture. In antiquity and myth a vessel was not solely functional. The notion that it represented a place in which the entire cycle of human life and the hereafter took place was derived from its identification with the female body. Dickinson perpetuates this ideology; her constant experimentation, coupled with her instinctual relationship to the form of the container, is a consequence of her belief in it as an extension of herself, a form she fully understands and has mastered.

*Black & Silver African Stripe Vase*, 1993
Glass, copper, silver; Free-blown, sand-blasted, etched, ground and polished, drilled spots, electroformed, oxidised, waxed; Crafts Council Collection: G69; Photo: Nick Moss.
Known for their engaging reinvention of objects and large scale installations, design collective El Ultimo Grito's more recent work has directly questioned cultural and social preconceptions. Their work considers how contemporary culture incorporates, re-uses and re-interprets the systems and structures that it has inherited. Within this context the challenge is to create new objects, which can be disentangled from our conventional understanding of the world, and thus offer alternative ways to live, work and communicate.

This new direction is embodied in Apartments, which is part of a group of large blown glass installation pieces exploring architectural archetypes, created in collaboration with master glassblowers in Germany. El Ultimo Grito use the flexibility and fluidity of glass to explore new ways of living.

Apartments (detail), 2010
Pyrex Glass; Free-blown; Photo: Michael Tolke.
Fertig’s work explores connection and disconnection, often involving interviews and collaborative performance. She founded the flame-working performance group Torcher Chamber Arkestra, in 2010, that uses flame-working, dance, music and pyrotechnics to bring their technique to a wider audience with innovative and exciting performances.

*Give and Take* plays on the double meaning of the word take; meaning both to teach and be the student of. Concentrating on the breath-centric study of yoga, Fertig took up a yoga class where she collected the breathe from all the students and the teacher in balloons. The breath given was then transferred into glass vessels and sealed. These vessels are connected to each other and flow through a larger open vessel.

*Give and Take* (detail), 2010
Borosilicate glass, rubber; Flame-worked;
Photo: Carrie Fertig.
In the eyes of Hearn, there isn't an odd one out. His groups of objects are "harmonious families" but also allude to society's inclination to identify fault in individuality. The group should be seen as a whole, but the title suggests dysfunction to the audience. *Odd One Out* references individual taste or even prejudice.

This family of liquid glass vessels describe the powerful language of the glassmaker's craft. Hearn uses the same mouth-blown techniques on a daily basis; the skillful control and manipulation and an innate understanding of this ancient trade are combined to produce thoughtfully considered objects, which challenge the material's boundaries, and are an extension of his life as a glassmaker.

*Odd One Out* (detail), 2010
Glass; Free-blown; Photo: Nick Moss.
James' work explores themes of identity and perception, drawing inspiration from her ongoing residency at the Bristol Eye Hospital and collaboration with the Royal National Institute of the Blind.

*Intuition* takes inspiration from the functioning of the human eyes and their interaction with the brain, specifically the 'Tennis Ball Reflex'. This reflex explains why a person is able to move out of the way of an oncoming object before they are consciously aware of seeing it; vital information, particularly about movement, goes directly from the eye to the Superior Colliculus, tucked at the base of the brain stem, complementing the main pathway between the retina and the visual cortex to stimulate instant instinctive reactions.

In this piece, two intertwined black pathways, representing the left and right optic nerves, are joined by a third clear channel that loops around and extends beyond them, representing this 'sixth-sense'.
Merging art, science and technology, Lloyd-Jones's sculpture and installations manipulate materials and light to reveal new perspectives. Her blown glass works reference the anatomy of the human body in both abstract and illustrative forms.

Deflated Vessels capture the fluidity and softness of hot blown glass in forms that appear to have released some of the breath that created them before solidifying. Their anthropomorphic forms evoke ideas about the beauty and fragility of the human body as it is subjected to physical change.

Fresh Air is an artistic response to how human health and well being is influenced by our environment. Drawing analogies between biological systems, it references the glass blowing process as a transition of air from the breath inside our lungs and the fragility of our dependence upon plants for the air we breathe.

*Fresh Air,* 2005
Glass, plastic; Mould-blown and lamp-worked, ground, polished, UV bonded; Photo: Jessica Lloyd-Jones.
Glass is used in Manousis’ sculpture as a vehicle to engage reflection both physically and metaphorically in the viewer. She uses the intrinsic material properties of glass as a medium to “create installations that speak of taste, personal memory and the passage of time.”

*Reaching an Ulterior Realm* consists of three Mylar balloons suspended on a wall, which look to be easy targets for the bronze arrows propelled towards them. They are playful while also being a metaphor of the fragility of life. *Inverted Vanitas* entwines the rich meaning and metaphor of the pomegranate. Its mirrored flesh aims to capture the reflection of its audience, thus accentuating its association with vanity, greed and desire.

*Inverted Vanitas*, 2010
Glass, mixed-media; Mould-blown vessel, pate-de-verre, lamp-worked and mirrored pomegranate; Photo: Nick Moss.
Social situations, overheard conversations, observed interactions and personal experiences hugely inspire Maskrey’s work. Tall stories, elaborate hoaxes and peculiar facts, usually from a bygone era, are then translated into glass, often resulting in flamboyant narratives, theatrical compositions or simple objects with a twist.

Cook’s Eggs is an imagined assortment of delicacies collected during Cook’s first voyage encompassing Australia and New Zealand in 1768. The references come from Cook’s Journals, the visual realisation are the result of Maskrey’s imagination and expert manipulation of glass.

*Cook’s Eggs, 2010*
Glas, printed-paper; Free-blown jars and lids, free-blown and solid formed eggs, lamp-worked details; Photo: David Williams.
Carl Nordbruch

Nordbruch uses technique as a vehicle for transporting abstract ideas into visual reality. He makes pieces that are “firmly rooted in ideas rather than function... where the craftsmanship is still a strong element, but no longer the backbone.”

*Untitled* engineers a tantalising play between exterior and interior space and form, and by extension between the seen and the unseen. The coloured inside, which almost seems to evoke an internal source of illumination, also draws attention to the role of light in our spatial perception.

*Untitled, 2004*
Glass; Free-blown; Crafts Council Collection: G97; Photo: Nick Moss.
Procter initially studied engineering but later chose to focus on agriculture, which was closer to his love of the outdoors. He entered glass-making when creating a gift for a friend.

Procter’s work is a celebration of light. While his sculptures are eminently still, they represent a concentration of energy, full of “sight and sound”. He uses vessel forms, often working with the bowl as a significant symbol of giving and receiving. “With glass, the form is the embodiment of breath – it is the space within which governs the outer form.”

*Momentum* (detail), 1985
Glass; Free-blown rocking form with prismatic cutting and sand-blasting, cut and sand-blasted base; Crafts Council Collection: G39; Photo: Nick Moss.
Glass, a seductive material, can translate potentially harmful objects into beautiful art forms. Rowe’s work advocates an alternative to the anger and conflict that fills our world.

The replicated weapons have been hand-sculpted with extreme precision. The accuracy of each piece has been achieved by creating hot formed elements blown or sculpted as close to the required shape and size as possible. Floral symbols have been strategically placed to promote peace. The works created using the human breath would, if real, also represent the means to exterminate it.

_Picking Daisies 2, 2010_
Glass; Free-blown form, cut, ground, polished and assembled, lamp-worked daisy; Photo: Nick Moss.
With imagination and wit at the heart of her work, Sheldon transforms ordinary, familiar objects into extraordinary or unexpected items. Her works question how we use and view the things that surround us, fitting glass forms onto, or wrapping glass around, everyday objects.

The glass element of Atelier was blown by Sheldon’s partner, Dominic Cooney, while she manipulated the form using a bespoke tool to squash the glass. The bench has been borrowed from her studio, in which imaginative thoughts are transformed into objects.

*Atelier* (detail), 2010
Glass, wood, metal; Free-blown lamp-shade, recycled lamp and table; Photo: Nick Moss.
Sweet makes design-led products using traditional craft techniques. Elements of the familiar are re-interpreted to make a new object; simple forms, with subtle decoration, executed to a high standard. The milk bottle is an environmentally friendly design classic, but holds little value in our society. Reproducing it in 24% lead crystal transforms it into an object to be treasured.

Each piece is hand-blown in lead crystal, which “has the most brilliant twinkle” after being hand-cut and polished.

Spin Sugar Bowl (Fern Cut) (detail), 2010
Crystal Milk Bottle (Fern Cut), 2005
Crystal Milk Bottle (Five Ring Cut) (detail), 2005
24% lead, crystal glass; Mould-blown, hand-cut; Photo: Nick Moss.
Thompson works to a strong visual aesthetic combining elegance with simplicity and making with quality. A recurring theme in his practice is a strong visual interest in the medical aesthetic, drawing upon such visual references as laboratory glassware, scientific experiments and medical apparatus and models.

_Breathe_ draws upon notions of collections and archives, sabotage and deception, reality and fantasy.

_Breathe (detail), 2010_  
Glass, rubber, metal; Free-blown, polished and assembled; Photo: Nick Moss.
Walters is fascinated with the processes of glassblowing and its articulate and malleable nature. He sees the use of technology as a way of elevating his craft to reach more complex assembly and more radical forms. Finding a balance and harmony in the finish and creation of an object, which embraces the industrial and doesn't forget the craft, is his primary goal.

Blown at Manchester Metropolitan University and developed as part of a research project, Chandelier is a fusion of advanced manufacturing techniques and traditional craftsmanship. Radiating from a precision engineered structure, each blown glass trumpet is unique.

Chandelier (detail), 2010
Glass, aluminium, steel, nylon, LED lights, rubber
Free-blown trumpets, computer aided design, water jet cutting, three axis milling, turning, drilling; Produced with the support of Manchester Metropolitan University; Photo: Nick Moss.
Wheater works with glass and neon through performance and installation. An early interest in the process of skill development has been superseded by a thirst for conveying a strong narrative. Interest in debates concerning mankind's relationship with the environment dictated his material choice: glass and light.

*TASCHEN Neon No.1* represents Wheater's interest in 20th century industrial objects and their relationship with the natural environment. It was one of three works commissioned by the Crafts Council to be displayed in the Taschen store front during *Collect*, May 2009. Familiar shapes attributed to the generating of electricity are fashioned in borosilicate glass, filled with gas and excited with electricity.
Many of Williams' coloured blown works are put away once cooled and selected for cutting at a later date, thus being treated as 'found objects'. This can be seen as a reaction to, as well as the elaboration of his own work. So that he's the author of both the found and the finished object, an unusual conundrum of a position.

Williams began making *Bum Bowls*, an accident of form, as an RCA student. Though he initially intended the clefts in the pieces to be reminiscent of peaches or plums, everyone who saw them was reminded of the shape of a bum, so the elegant name stuck!
Williams is inspired by carnivorous plants, false teeth and more recently the environment. She creates transparent glass vessels that represent and explore atmospheric or human breath, juxtaposing such materials as glass, light, ethereal gasses, neon and argon (both composites of the air we breathe).

In the same breath, a hand-blown, lamp-worked glass trombone is created using breath, and in turn can be reactivated by breath as it is played. It serves as a metaphor for breathing; the breath becoming visible as condensation, the glass allowing the viewer to see this.

In the same breath, 2008
Borosilicate glass; Lamp-worked; Photo: Nick Moss.
Within Woffenden’s *Swollen*, the bent bubble has come to represent the figure in an early or embryonic stage. In the glassblowing process it also represents the stage before the material is gathered over and reformed. The claw, another signature element of her work, represents the hand and fingers or suggests whole limbs. Woffenden’s exquisitely beautiful work possesses a powerful capacity to unsettle.

*Swollen* simultaneously evokes giving birth and being born. The sculpture is freed in such a way as to dispense with the need to create any link to function.

*Swollen*, 1996
Glass, lead crystal; Free-blown glass bubble, kiln-cast claw, ground, UV bonded; Crafts Council Collection: G84; Photo: Nick Moss.
“I think in glass, I dream in glass, I cannot imagine life without it.” Woodman has been making and designing glass for 25 years. It is her chosen form of expression, for its rich qualities, and ability to work at both a spiritual and purely visual level. Realising its potential requires a fine balance between control and extravagance.

Soft Edge with Red and Red Stretch are both examples of Woodman’s preoccupation with making dramatic colour statements while Chosen 24 is contemplative, and refers to “the unique standing of every individual in the eyes of God.”

*Red Stretch, 2008*
Glass, slate; Free-blown tubes; Photo: Adrian Sassoon.
Films

The two films commissioned by the Crafts Council, for this exhibition, each explore the practice of glassblowing from the creative and personal viewpoint of the film-maker, offering a unique interpretation of this traditional process.

To watch the films again visit: www.breath-taking.org.uk

Sing in Sand and Roar in Furnace Fire
Glassblowing is highly physical; involving the controlled, balletic, often repetitious and precise co-ordination of two people working together. In order to explore these characteristics, a choreographed work was commissioned to embody the physical involvement and communication inherent in glassblowing practice. The choreography has been generated as a response to a sound score, which is based on recordings of glassblowers at work. A duet between two dancers involves contact work to represent the essential elements of trust, cooperation and synchronicity.

Neil Wissink, 2011, 4.5 minutes

SheldonCooney in the Studio
Elaine Sheldon and Dominic Cooney built their studio in a converted chapel in Staffordshire. They work collaboratively, as well as independently, on commissions, commercial and artistic projects. Film-maker Federico Urdaneta captures the events during a day in the studio. He explores the nature of their collaboration, their working practice and records the rhythm of them at work.

Federico Urdaneta, 2011, 5 minutes

Sing in Sand and Roar in Furnace Fire
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Neil Wissink, 2011, 4.5 minutes
Your Comments

Visit the website to comment on the exhibition, find out more about the makers featured in Breath Taking, to watch the exhibition films again, and much more.

www.breath-taking.org.uk

Acknowledgements

Exhibition Design
Glass Hill

Graphic Design
Sara De Bondt studio

Exhibition Co-ordinator
Charlotte Dew

Printers
Aldgate Press

Audio Visual Design and Display
ADi Solutions

Films
Neil Wissink
Federico Urdaneta

Photography
Nick Moss
Ed Park
A Crafts Council
Touring Exhibition

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ISBN-10: 1903713269