3-29-2011

Behind the plow

Steve Leetch

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation
A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

*Behind the Plow*

by *Steve Leetch*

*March 29, 2011*

Chief Advisor: Michael Rogers
Associate Advisors: Robin Cass, Clifford Wun
Abstract

Over time the farmers barn has expanded to manage larger equipment, so too, glass art has expanded to manage a widening definition. My thesis is a comparison of values in the history of glass art and the architecture of where I grew up in northern Midwest America. The barn, like glass, has come to impact me beyond utilitarian use. They are both sources of inspiration that serve as creative sources. The barn is a symbol of the American frontier, much like glass has become a symbol of my frontier.
In Chemistry sublimation is to refine. Psychologically it is to divert immediate energy to a more social, moral, or aesthetic nature or use. As an adjective it means purified or exalted. There is a thread of sublimation that ties craft to the American barn. There is a substance of relentless pursuit left at the core of these institutions as their values have changed over time. My thesis is like that of a plow, carving through the changing contexts of glass history and how it has enabled my art today.

Glass was America’s first attempt at industry with the first Colony in Jamestown 1607. The shores of Virginia held all the basic ingredients, 60 percent sand for the silica (containing iron, making the glass green), 15% seaweed for its soda-ash (lowing the melting point of silica), 15% ash from a wood fire, for the pot-ash (giving the glass a workable viscosity) and 5% oyster shells for the lime (making the glass durable). Behind the shores were the lush forests to fuel the furnaces fire.

Since that first introduction, advances in American glass have been spurred by three major inputs. Through economics, with inventions like the glass press by John P. Bakewell 1825 in Sandwich, Massachusetts. The press made everyday glass items affordable to the average household
for the first time. Through the craftsman’s’ voice, like that of Luis Comfort Tiffany in the early
1900’s, inspiring new colors and textures in sheet glass. And artists like Marcel Duchamp who opened
new doors to the language of glass.

Marcel Duchamp “The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even” *(Large Glass)* 1923

Marcel Duchamp presented “The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even” (Large Glass) in 1923. It is a piece he worked on for 8 years. It included foil, wire and dust on two large pieces of
glass. Duchamp’s career continually pushed back on the rules of art, “Can one make works which are
not works of "art"?, he asked. Duchamp was never really a part of any specific art movement of his
day, but did take on their styles to push art in new directions. The Large Glass is an example of the
beginnings of an openness to glass in the art making process. Duchamp was expressing an Arts and
Crafts’ language of material to create his work.

Arts and Crafts was founded at the turn of the twentieth century in Britain, formed as a
movement in response to industrialization. Factories where getting better at producing handmade
looking objects. William Morris, accredited founder of the movement, felt that Arts and Crafts held an
importance in modern society. He advocated for the persistence of crafts’ values, such as truth of
material, simple forms and a worked surface. Arts and Crafts faded during the two world wars, but had
resurgence thanks to the start of several institutions.
The American Crafts Council (ACC) began in 1943 by Mrs. Aileen Vanderbilt Webb. She has been regarded as being responsible for the shift in American Crafts from rural hobbies to objects forming part of the New York art scene. She started the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (now the Museum of Art and Design in New York City) and the School of American Craftsmen (now, the School of American Craft, housed in the Rochester Institute of Technology) opening the doors of universities to the materials of craft. Because of the success of the ACC, Webb began the World Craft Council in 1964, whose first meeting, Dominic Labino and Harvey Littleton would present a portable glass furnace.

![Harvey Littleton and Erwin Eisch](image.png)

Harvey Littleton and Erwin Eisch

April 1974

The furnace was built by Dominic Labino, an executive at Johns-Manville Glass Fiber and demonstrated by Harvey Littleton, whose father was the head of research at the Corning Glass Works, along with artists Erwin Eisch, and Marvin Lipofsky. With natural gas or propane, their furnace could melt a batch of glass within one day. They demonstrated new possibilities of glass as an artist or craftsman material beyond that of stained glass and industrial made objects. This seemingly simple invention began a revolution for the independent glass artist. Since then glass has advanced into a material for Artists in their own backyards and become a lure for new students in Universities.
Dale Chihuly on Littleton:

"Without a doubt Harvey Littleton was the force behind the studio glass movement; without him my career wouldn't exist. He pulled in talented students and visiting artists; I used the same concept when I taught at RISD. Also, Harvey was a big thinker - if he wanted a special piece of equipment, he would spend the money; he taught us to think big instead of thinking small - some of that rubbed off on me. And he encouraged us to be unique - Harvey liked that."

Now there are institutions such as the Glass Art Society that links all aspects of the art glass world from artists, galleries, collectors and suppliers. Commerce has within the last 15 years been able to supply everything one needs over the internet, from the individual ingredients for batch and pre-fused nuggets, to furnaces, safety systems and cold working equipment. This progress, along with the institutions started by Webb, gave a glass craftsman an option to be an artist like Duchamp.

Artists Josiah McElheny and Dale Chihuly have helped shape the language of Modern Art Glass today. These two American glass artists are worlds apart in styles, but equally influential to my work. McElheny won the McArthur Fellowship in 2006 and The 15th Rakow Commission of the Corning Museum of glass. Chihuly is in permanent collections around the world, produced TV specials, and the most common modern artist name in popular culture today. Chihuly uses exquisite craftsmanship to exploit the beauty of glass, while McElheny explores history through glass objects. They have both worked with chandeliers that help define their influence on my work.
Dale Chihuly, “Chandelier” 1992, Seattle Art Museum

Chihuly, on his chandeliers states, “What makes the Chandeliers work for me is the massing of color. If you take hundreds or thousands of blown pieces of one color, put them together, and then shoot light through them, now that’s going to be something to look at! When you hang it in space, it becomes mysterious, defying gravity, becoming something you have never seen before.” Chihuly’s chandeliers are rooted in centuries old Italian blowing techniques. They are ambiguous and address a wonderment that inspires awe in a viewer, drawing them into new dreamlike possibilities. His work reminds me of the inherent beauty of glass and recognizes the laxity of the material. Stringent control isn’t always necessary; chance can play a role in the final outcome.

Images from: “Conceptual Drawings for a Chandelier, 1965” 2005, Metropolitan Opera House

McElheny’s approach to a chandelier is a film. He ties together the first evidence of the big bang with the creation of the “Lobmeyr Chandeliers” at the Metropolitan Opera House. He explains, “In these sculptures time is represented conceptually by the length of every rod that extends out from
the center of the sphere. And then at the end there’s a cluster of objects that depict what kinds of things are happening in the universe in terms of the clustering of galaxies at that moment. It’s a kind of pop image of complexity.”

McElheny’s film about these chandeliers is rooted in conceptual art and questions modernity’s effects on society. The chandelier becomes an image of our changing view of the Universe. He is referencing an object made of glass while the craftsman of the glass does not play a major role in a viewer understanding the work.

Both McElheny and Chihuly are making new statements on what a chandelier can be, not unlike a jazz musician would reinterpret “Blackbird” or “Mack the Knife”. They took the idea of a chandelier and made them their own. Both chandeliers are hand crafted, but their processes were completely different. Chihuly’s sculptures are steeped in the history of crafting glass, while McElheny is rooted in the history of the object itself. With these influences I have tried to learn the rules of glass and explore its language.

My thesis work incorporates Chihuly’s understanding of basic glass crafting skills, so I can technically reach my goals and McElheny’s ability to wrap history and thought into a glass object. I also use the ideas of Duchamp to reach beyond the material to create a relationship with the viewer. When I consider where glass, art, and craft fit together, considering their past, their present, and where I may take glass, I am drawn to the image of old barns and buildings and liken the barn to the history of Glass Art.
A wooden building slowly fading back into the soils it helped maintain is a living piece of art when I apply Morris, Duchamp, Chihuly and McElheny’s ideas of art and that of craft. It no longer functions simply as a barn, housing the daily chores of a farmer and his family. The barn holds truth of material, simplicity, a worked surface, beauty, history and a contribution of a viewer to give the barn value. Barns symbolize how I see the sublimation of the present state of glass and craft history.

Heritage barns are found throughout my hometown of Avon Lake, Ohio and throughout the Mid-West of America. They distinguish my beginnings and the effects time has on my memories. I see my home town differently from when I was young. It is much smaller than I remember. It has grown with development and the wants of its people. I have chosen to use the American Heritage Barn, or in a simpler term, the Shed, in my thesis as a shell to fill with my artistic expression and love of crafting this material. It is a grounding form for me. It reminds me of home, a marker of where America’s quality of life once was and when life was sustained by ones own hands. Much like the barn has become a symbol of Americas’ frontier, glass has become my frontier. Glass awakens new challenges for me; it tests my patience and rewards my diligence.

In my thesis I have put my technical skills to a test, set to what a barn builder would demand of his finished building. My thesis pieces are crafted well and constructed soundly. I want them to have the feel of an open landscape surrounding each piece much like how we see these heritage barns today; dilapidated, alone, usually on a rising hill. My pieces need to speak for today, just as strongly as the barn stands for the past. Ohio was the first state planned with the acre system. I chose to reference this by giving the body of work a designed or graphic squared-off look, referencing the patch worked
quality of rural areas. This decision opened up visual doors for a viewer, but placed the idea of the barn squarely in contemporary times and keeping me away from doing models of historic buildings.

I needed this work to be universal as well as deeply personal. The barn forms I have chosen are distinctly American. This is important because I am an American Artist. With the vast history of glass it is easy for me to fall into a role of reinterpreting historic pieces. The American architect Frank Lloyd Wright is a creative hero of mine. He was an advocate for a distinct American style. Some may argue his love of Asian aesthetics helped shape his work, but the time I spend as a carpenter has influenced me just as strongly as Japanese prints did for Frank Lloyd Wright.

The roofs of these pieces are built as a real roof would be built; I raised the walls as a barn builder would. Authenticity was important in my decision making. Milk paint or “white wash” was used on the surfaces of most pieces. I want them to age and flake just like a real barn surface does. I used float glass from the basement of the school, free to use, like the forests surrounding a farm, and molten glass from the furnace was turned into lumber. I wanted the structure for the roofs and walls to create a space for the viewer to fall into and look a little deeper. For these areas I chose cast glass, meant to be a physical cube of time and space, cut from the atmosphere of where one might imagine these architectural elements to be. I left out most of the floors purposely to aid this notion of an imagined space within a landscape.

While roofs and walls are universal, I had in mind specific memories that guided the ultimate shape. I recalled memories from my formative years growing up in Northern Ohio that reference personal experiences; like a child hood friend’s apple orchard, my great grandmothers home, and a
five and dime where I bought candy with money I made from raking neighbors leaves and shoveling their driveways. These memories however are from the past and a frontier is a place yet to be seen. A level of an unknown quantity must be present for a frontier to exist. To embody this notion, I left walls completely nonexistent for the viewer to imagine what could be. The adventure of a frontier is in the act of doing. If I were to draw a circle, of which only three quarters is there, ones eye will fill in the rest with memory and imagination. I use this concept in these pieces to grab a viewer’s attention.

A broken down barn with missing walls, siding and doors symbolizes a kind of romance and longing, and even distain. Everyone has experiences of home, or the physical structure of a home. “The poetics of Space” by Gaston Bachelard bases his book on phenomenology and lived experience of architecture when in “our corner of the world”. When we think of our homes or shelter, Bachelard says “it comes down to the primitive nature to dream that helps us describe it”. My work is colorless, almost black and white, or clear and white. I wish to reach into that primitive dream of dwellings, ambiguous and void of pre set colors. I chose this color palette so as not to skew that dream one way or another. I want these pieces to be unobtrusive and welcoming. I want them to be like that of the space within a key hole. A physical form of open space with the viewer acting as the key, filling that space with the colors of their memories, unlocking that universal dream of what home is.

Roberta Smith a contributing art critic for the New Yorker Magazine, when critiquing art is “always on the lookout for a spark of necessity - a feeling that a particular artist had no choice but to make a particular artwork this particular way. That is the only way authenticity or even originality can start to emerge.” This statement reflects that of Harvey Littleton. "In glassblowing, if the necessary risk is taken, the outcome must always be in doubt. Artistic creation must occur in crisis.” Old barns
where built out of necessary and America was a risky adventure. This reflects my inherent passion I put into these pieces and my desires to see glass grow as an artist’s material.

Glass has had a young life in the world of Art in comparison to other materials. But as Duchamp explains, “The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.” It is ultimately up to the viewer to decide a work’s placement in the corner of their world.

This work will eventually fade into the body of my work, as the barn has in history. As I consider my desire to see what is new my work will reflect those experiences. This work will form another layer of my foundation and added language to my vocabulary as an Artist. The barn is as much a portrait of me as an artist, as it is a reminder of where I too once was. Necessity and risk, barns and art, history and relentlessness; they are intertwined in thought, to form my thesis, “Behind the Plow”.
“Gammy”  Cast, Fused Glass  9x9x16
Shelter  Cast, Fused Glass  9 x 4 x 14
Five and Dime  Cast, Fused Glass  9 x 3.5 x 14
Schmidt’s Orchard  Cast, Fused Glass, Wood  18 x 6 x 41
Tom Pong  
Cast, Fused Glass, Wood  
12 x 10 x 13
Acre  Cast, Fused Glass, steel  8 x 2 x 36
Thesis Bibliography


http://www.spab.org.uk/what-is-spab-/history-of-the-spab/