

Art: Design: Culture

# Glass

The UrbanGlass  
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Analog Responses  
to Digital Overload

Stacey Neff's  
Desert Heart

Exclusive Excerpt:  
*Glass: Virtual, Real*

Christina Bothwell



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PULLING APART NARRATIVES AND COLLAPSING THE LINEAR,  
**CHRISTINA BOTHWELL'S** WORK BLENDS SPECIES AND MEDIA.

BY WILLIAM WARMUS

# THE EXTRACTIONIST



OPPOSITE PAGE: *Dreaming in Color*, 2013. Cast glass, ceramic, oil paints. H 14, W 12, D 7 in.

PHOTO: ROBERT BENDER

Thinking about this still-new century brings to mind the work of Christina Bothwell, an artist whose focus is on when we give birth, when we die, and how those two dates define the time in between. Her tender sculptures never seem to coincide exactly with themselves; they seek to step outside, go beyond, or hide within. Perhaps they are uncomfortable in the present, preferring the transitional territory defined by the processes of birth and death? Bothwell's gentle figures evoke words of the poet Osip Mandelstam: "Like a child's tender cartilage is the century of the newborn earth." Her message? This new century is tender in our hands. Be kind, respect its fragility. And what of the old 20th century, of all the centuries past? It is the duty of the contemporary artist to find ways to weld the present to the past, new to old, as in *Dreaming in Color* (2014). In this sculpture, an ashen-toned figure reclines as if asleep or even dead, while a colorful new figure, birdlike, with a fresh face, emerges like a rocket.

## BEING BOTHWELL

Christina's mother Rosemary is a realist artist focusing on portraits, and her father James was a psychology professor. They were devout atheists, her father a hoarder who collected old organs and pianos (there were some in every room of the home). The house next door was occupied by several siblings who lived together in their old age and who owned dozens of Victorian dolls. She found the place spooky, the dolls like sculptures or lost children. As a child, she recalls asking (and presumably alarming) adults about when they were going to die, because she thought that if we know our birth date, we ought to know our death date, too.

Her parents would take her into Manhattan to see art exhibitions, where she especially remembers Forum Gallery on Madison Avenue and the shows of caricaturist David Levine and magical realist painter Gregory Gillespie. (Disclosure: I was the registrar at Forum in the period just before she visited the gallery, and can see how Gillespie's universe would have made a powerful impression.)

In art school at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, her mentor was Will Barnet (1911–2012), known for paintings depicting humans and animals in transcendent states, both brooding and placid. After school she lived in New York City (in the late 1980s) until she felt nature-starved and moved to the countryside in Stillwater, Pennsylvania. Bothwell's father was not supportive of her decision to attend art school, saying that only one in a million succeed. But it was the only thing she wanted to do. And once there, she often heard professors say things like, "If you are over 30, it is nearly impossible to get your work shown" and "Forget about ever having a gallery in NYC if you don't live in Chelsea,"

**IT IS THE DUTY OF THE CONTEMPORARY ARTIST TO FIND WAYS TO WELD THE PRESENT TO THE PAST, NEW TO OLD, AS BOTHWELL DOES IN *DREAMING IN COLOR*.**



*Nest (commission) (detail)*, 2016. Cast glass, ceramic, oil paints. H 28, W 22, D 10 in.

PHOTO: ROBERT BENDER



and “You might as well kiss your whole career goodbye if you ever have a child; having a kid is the kiss of death for an artist.”

In a comment thread on Facebook, Bothwell writes that:

*Hearing this type of helpful advice was not actually that helpful, and even though deep in the recesses of my mind I wanted a child, I put the whole prospect out of my mind until I was in my late 30s. It didn't help that most of the women artists I admired didn't have children themselves. But one good thing about getting older is that it increasingly takes too much energy to listen to unasked-for advice, and eventually, against the guidance of well-meaning childless artist friends, I moved from Manhattan to rural Pennsylvania, and had three children.*

It is in this countryside that Bothwell has developed themes of nature and nurture, as in *Nest* (2016), which explores Victorian and modern themes of safety and fragility as if to say, “Against all guidance, I make this family nest.” The nest became for her, paradoxically, a symbol of rebellion.

#### METAPHOR AND NARRATIVE

Bothwell has established herself as a master of narrative. In the glass community, I suspect that when we say *narrative*, we usually mean a mixture of metaphor, allegory, and narrative. So while a given work might be metaphorical, as in *Old Soul Baby* (2014), in which the child is likened to the old man embedded within, it may be part of the overarching narrative that Bothwell is developing about the nature of children. A given work can be both metaphorical and narrative: in *Old Soul Baby*, a bird on a limb is painted on the surface of the baby, creating the elements of a story about a child, aging, and nature. In *True Love* (2012), a school of fish swims across the two independent figures of a mermaid and merman, connecting them in time, in space, in love.

Bothwell's work is all about time, as befits an artist who as a child was seriously interested in when people would die. Her sense of time is like Augustine's “threefold present.” For him, the mind, existing in the present, needs to be stretched to encompass the past and the future. That is what thinking does: it pushes and pulls and tugs and twists as it struggles to comprehend the essence of time. And you can see Bothwell performing the same contortions as she struggles with her fourth medium, time (assuming that painting, ceramics, and glass are her first three media). When her figures fuse together or break apart, it is generally a sign that time is flowing, on the move, toward the future from the past.

**WHEN HER FIGURES FUSE TOGETHER OR BREAK APART, IT IS GENERALLY A SIGN THAT TIME IS FLOWING, ON THE MOVE, TOWARD THE FUTURE FROM THE PAST.**

THIS PAGE: *Old Soul Baby*, 2004. Cast glass, pit-fired ceramic. H 24, W 10, D 6 in.  
PHOTO: ROBERT BENDER

*Dreaming*, 2011. Cast glass, cast aluminum, ceramic and wood. H 5, W 15, D 4 in. (each)  
PHOTO: ROBERT BENDER



*True Love*, 2012. Cast glass, ceramic, oil paints. H 42, W 11, D 7 in. (each figure)  
PHOTO: ROBERT BENDER



*I'll See You in Spring, 2014.*  
Cast glass, ceramic, oil  
paints. H 12, W 18, D 9 in.  
PHOTO: ROBERT BENDER



THE SCUFFED, SCUMBLED, HALF-ERASED SURFACES OF THE GLASS, AT TIMES REMINISCENT OF THE WORK OF CY TWOMBLY (ANOTHER STUDENT OF WILL BARNET), SERVE TO MASK AN INNER WORLD THAT IS INDEPENDENT OF THE SURFACE.



*Seahorses*, 2010. Cast glass, ceramic, found objects. H 17, W 6, D 6 in. (largest).

PHOTO: ROBERT BENDER

*Octopus Girl*, 2006. Cast glass and ceramic. H 17, W 24, D 21 in.

PHOTO: ROBERT BENDER



#### IN THE ABSTRACT

I have described Bothwell's work as narrative, but not strictly realist. It has abstract tendencies, in the sense that abstraction means considering something independent of its concrete reality: her work frequently shifts shape from the real to the ideal. The scuffed, scumbled, half-erased surfaces of the glass, at times reminiscent of the work of Cy Twombly (another student of Will Barnett), serve to mask an inner world that is independent of the surface: for example, the diffuse band of red inside the upper floating figure in a work like *Dreaming* (2013). To abstract can also involve the process of removing something, such as water from a stream: abstraction as extraction, removal, separation. Many of her figures seem to be pulled from the larger mass of the glass, and again this extraction is a result of pushing and pulling in order to comprehend the essence of the temporal. In *See You in Spring* (2014), color seems to have been bleached or extracted from the now monochromatic heads of the deer and the child, while the ears and body are drenched in springtime hues yet to come.

I argue that skill is still essential to the creation of art, but that today mastery of a single skill gets you an entry ticket to the art world, and once in, you are free to master other skills—unlike the old art world, where there was less freedom of movement. So Bothwell mastered the skill of painting and then a second skill: ceramics. And a third: glass. Rather than occupying a single branch on a tree, she found a way to climb around, as if in a web or on a scaffold. Her art shows her progress:

first painting, then painted ceramic, then glass-and-ceramic composites, then glass and ceramics and wood and other media. In ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, the statues of gods and kings were frequently made from component parts, partly for practical reasons; a material might be too precious, like gold, or too difficult to cast, like glass, to allow an entirely solid composition. Today, artists make composite sculpture

**MANY OF HER FIGURES SEEM TO BE PULLED FROM THE LARGER MASS OF THE GLASS, AND AGAIN THIS EXTRACTION IS A RESULT OF PUSHING AND PULLING IN ORDER TO COMPREHEND THE ESSENCE OF THE TEMPORAL.**

mostly for aesthetic or conceptual reasons—Bothwell, for example, in a work like *Seahorses* (2013). Each component medium in her composite sculpture is freighted with meaning: ceramics as dolls, symbolic of the past and of death; glass as a spiritual substance, implying the future and a life after death; painting on the surface as a lively carefree embellishment, implying the present.

In addition to hierarchies that establish distinct “species,” we live in a world where some species, like coral, evolve by blending together. Such species blending seems central to Bothwell’s iconography, as in figures like *Octopus Girl* (2014) that are part human, part animal. In such a blended world, there are no longer distinct styles of art: they blend, disappear, reappear, are repackaged. It all leads to a messier art world than in the past. So, too, with judging these changes: we need no longer decide on worthy work by solely using the old (unblended) good-better-best criteria. Rather, we judge by determining location and direction. How far away is this from traditional painting? How close is it to sculpture? Is it functional? Or is only a single part functional? All these questions help point the way to Bothwell, helping me to triangulate her location. I cannot claim to locate her without reference to them, and what I find are different approaches to blending. In *Tethered to My Heart* (2015), two forms fuse together, while in *Dreaming* (2013), the forms seem to repel one another as one levitates above. In a big work like *Wide Awake* (2016), a tall figure holds a wild deer closely to its bosom, as if Bothwell is herself unsure about just how far she can, or should, take the blending of two species, two styles, two eras.

### ENDINGS

Bothwell and I share a youthful admiration for the artists Levine and Gillespie. Our sensibilities were linked by that shared substance. So it doesn’t surprise me that I find Bothwell while attending to other projects. I am avidly reading a new, albeit controversial, translation of ancient

Egyptian pyramid texts by Susan Brind Morrow. She writes that “The point of this entire body of mystical poetry is the emergence of the naked eye, freed to range throughout the universe.” And that “Matter becomes light and flows with the flow of the universe.” Morrow points out that in Old Egyptian, the word *mut* can mean “mother” or “death”: “Death is the mother, the mother is death.” All of this makes more sense to me because I have Bothwell’s sculptures to look at as illustrative of some of these eternal ideas. Brind’s explication of a line of hieroglyphics from the passageway to the sarcophagus chamber in the pyramid of Unis is pure Bothwell. “The soul becomes a baby hawk, with soft, fragile bones made of light ...”

Every era is full of chaos. Communication between individuals and nations, and everything in between, is always impossible. There is never enough time. But there is art. A spinal cord that, snakelike, threads the individual vertebrae of the centuries together, making the dream of one humanity and one history possible. Deep inside the pyramid of Unis, a poem talks of bones made of light. And today, the artist wills it so. ■

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*Tethered to My Heart, 2013.*  
Cast glass, ceramic, oil  
paints. H 8, W 24, D 12 in.  
PHOTO: ROBERT BENDER



... A TALL FIGURE HOLDS A WILD DEER CLOSELY TO ITS BOSOM, AS IF BOTHWELL IS HERSELF UNSURE ABOUT JUST HOW FAR SHE CAN, OR SHOULD, TAKE THE BLENDING OF TWO SPECIES, TWO STYLES, TWO ERAS.

*Wide Awake, 2016.* Cast  
glass, ceramic, wood,  
mixed media. H 60, W 20,  
D 20 in.  
PHOTO: ROBERT BENDER

