

Struggles, Objectives and Criteria Of Fine Art

By Debbie Tarsitano

Recently the organizer of a very successful fine art show which exhibits paintings, sculpture and multi media told me: “We do not allow any glass into our show because glass is in that fuzzy area between decorative art and serious fine art.” This woman organizes the show to include only work by artists respected by mainstream art critics and museum curators; she promotes the show to a large audience of fine art collectors. I surmised from her comments that there is a problem with the way that people look at glass art.

The idea that anyone in the fine art world would declare glass art, (all glass art, no matter what artist) unacceptable in a fine art show surprised and upset me. I began thinking about what is needed to move at least some glass art that deserves fine art status out of the “fuzzy area” and into greater acceptance by mainstream fine art shows and galleries.

As a fine art student at Hofstra University in the 1970’s, I entered the world of art through painting, which provided me with well-defined choices. If as a painter I wanted to make fine art, I had to study and work by the historical artistic standards set by the best paintings. If I wanted to make decorative art, different standards applied. Some of my friends decided that they wanted to create decorative art. I chose to paint subjects that portrayed real life. Eventually I went on to study oriental painting in the realistic palace style, under one of the last great Chinese court painters Mrs. Sun Lee. Just selecting this medium automatically set a standard and expectation for my work – and they were very high standards indeed. The purpose of the instruction that I received was to create serious original fine art. My instructors pushed me and juried my work based on artistic criteria that had evolved through many years of creating and criticizing at the high-level of the greater world of mainstream art. My instruction gave me no other choice than to live up to the standards set by the greatest work that had gone before. However, in striving to meet that well-defined challenge, I always felt that my own artwork would be judged by the highest standards of achievement in painting. Sculpture, the closest fine art category to glass, has much the same expectations as painting in fine art.

When discussing sculpture for example, I learned by looking at the fundamentals. When you apply those fundamentals to glass art, you find that most glass works are sculptural *but not sculpture*. In the fine art world sculpture has a real definition in terms that let the observer distinguish between what is and what is not sculpture. If we want the art community to view us as artists, our work has to meet the age-old criteria of art. To be a real sculpture the piece must contain elements of form, gesture, volume, dimension, line, texture, shape, proportion, and stimulation. The composition should create an important relationship to a human body in the space it occupies. A sculpture changes as the viewer walks around it. Sculpture confronts the viewer in real space first, it connects physically and then it connects with the viewer intellectually. Sculpture is not functional. Sculpture is molded carved or assembled in a three dimensional form exhibiting height, depth, and width.

Not all-contemporary sculpture or fine art is beautiful. Contemporary art makes statements about the world we live in. It bears witness to our world; it is a silent scribe to what our lives are like. Can glass art be contemplative? Mainstream art does not have to

be beautiful, yet profound concepts give it its most powerful appeal. Rodin's *Thinker* is not pretty in any decorative sense but it is profound, powerful, enduring and moving in concept. That piece meets all of the fine art world's criteria for sculpture. As glass artists, are we encouraged to make such strong statements in glass? Is the glass community ready for statements and concepts that are not beautiful but more powerfully designed and more meaningful than pretty? When I joined the fine art community as a student many years ago I expected my work to be held to the highest standards and never lumped in with or compared to work that intentionally aimed to satisfy merely decorative standards.

As an art student I also enjoyed reading art magazines and books along with the arts section of the New York Sunday Times. I followed the art world closely and studied the latest American and European art trends. I visited many mainstream art museums and viewed their shows and collections. Once I entered the glass field, however, I unconsciously and gradually narrowed my reading until it consisted mainly of publications and books about art glass with only an occasional fine art book. (I continued to go to museum shows, but primarily to see glass.) Last summer, while looking at art magazines in Barnes and Noble I found more than 20 non-glass fine art magazines that interested me. I bought a dozen or so of the most interesting magazines and have enjoyed reading them and catching up on what is going on in the art world outside of glass. Contemporary fine art offers so much stimulation which complements and expands the vision for my work in glass. Reviving my interest in serious art has sped up my growth as an artist. However, the exclusion of glass from "fine art" by relegating it to a specialized category – "art glass" – presents a definite problem for glass artists who, like me, are now struggling to make fine art in glass and have that work accepted as serious art at events outside of glass.

The general audience for fine art has come to understand the difference between an Elvis painting on velvet and a fine art painting. Glass artists that come from mainstream art are less likely to make decorative and functional work. They see glass only as another material to work with. For example September 2002 *Sculpture* magazine published an interview with Maya Lin, the designer of the famous Viet Nam war memorial in Washington D.C., She told about her residency at Pilchuck where she made monoprints. Maya Lin is not a glass artist, yet she saw glass as a medium for expressing her love of the smooth stones she found in the Pilchuck River near the school. Working with glass gaffers at the school she created her work entitled, *Rock Field*, out of 46 asymmetrical blown glass components. Maya Lin found that she had to re-train the glass artists to see art and balance in asymmetrical glass designs, (they wanted to make her glass components symmetrical). The magazine quotes her as saying, "I'm not about fabricating. It's more an idea." Artists like Maya Lin bring higher forms of design to glass. A fine-art painter who comes into glass may find ways to use glass in a painterly style. A fine-art-trained sculptor may carve or engrave glass or even sculpt hot glass in a way never seen before.

As mainstream artists work with glass, their new thinking will open up exciting formats for glass art. However, for mainstream artists to choose glass as their medium we must develop a more sophisticated and defined structure of artistic standards including categories of glass art. Just as the standards and choices of painting were clear at the University, in the glass art field we need to evolve those same understandings and classifications if we want the general public to accept art made in glass as Art. These

standards will permeate all aspects of the glass art field: education of artists and collectors, galleries, art criticism and artistic development. Terms from the art world like *realist, abstract, multi-media, minimalist, architectural designer, sculptor*, must now be applied to glass artists who will fit new criteria for glass as Art. We all can no longer continue to work within a “fuzzy area” and, more importantly, new artists need to decide where they want to fit.

Unlike painting and sculpture, glass is more a part of every day life. We store our food in glass, we eat out of glass, we drink from glass, and we even drive our cars by looking through glass windshields. Most people see the world from childhood to death through glass used primarily for its magical function. Artists working in glass need to consider that for the average American, glass is something they load into dishwashers and separate for recycling. For most people the only sophisticated glass they have in their homes is decorative, as in a lighting fixture, a chandelier or perhaps pieces of fine tableware or flower vases. How can we make glass special for the interested public and set it apart from the mundane?

In the last fifty years certain artists and art lovers have seen glass differently, as an artistic medium, rather than as a merely functional or decorative substance. The glass art movement is still new compared to other fields of art. Painting and sculpture have been accepted as fine art for thousands of years. Glass as fine art has only been considered since the 1950's. Prior to that time, most glass was (and was thought of) as decorative or functional. Some will argue that all art glass is fine art, that it has been appreciated, admired and collected for thousands of years. Ancient glass beads are certainly appreciated as art as well as many magnificent vessels dating to the early centuries. During the Victorian era admirers eagerly collected glass such as Gallé and Tiffany. However, what serious artistic standards does this history set for today's contemporary glass art and design?

The history of glass use and appreciation creates confusion and debate that now puts glass in the “fuzzy area” between decorative and fine art. In glass, the confusion arises from a lack of definition, appreciation and understanding of what makes one object decorative art versus what makes another object fine art. Here is where categorizing contemporary glass comes in. In the greater art field, there is no confusion even among the general audience between where a portrait of Elvis on velvet fits, in contrast with an original oil or acrylic painting by a contemporary fine artist. But in glass each artist must struggle with the question largely alone: Where does my work fit in the greater art field? As a field, do we glass artists need to define ourselves in artistic terms that suggest categories of glass art that are accepted by the world of fine art lovers? Do we want to remain separate from fine art? I do not think so.

So many glass artists that I speak with feel the strain of non-acceptance in both the glass art market and the mainstream art market as well. If you as an artist try to make statements that reach a high level of fine art, but you have not reached a status comparable to Lino Tagliapietra or William Morris, you are probably feeling frustrated about where to go. Only a handful of galleries support the idea of glass as fine art and these galleries are difficult to get into. Your choice is the most famous fine glass art galleries or a gallery that is pleasing but will probably show your work next to less serious work whose intention is purely decorative. There is a great need for middle

ground galleries and shows for serious glass artists already making and working towards making fine art.

Glass art seems so separate from mainstream art although it need not be. We judge ourselves from within; *but are our judges and critics from within the field creating standards that hold up in mainstream art?* When we artists step outside glass art we find that there is a whole art world that considers us outsiders. With so much judging from within the glass community, no wonder many fine art lovers consider us outsiders. If glass art is to be accepted outside of glass galleries and glass events, we need to critique our work more from the world outside. We should invite mainstream galleries to educate us in fine art as we educate them in why we create fine art in glass. The field of art glass cannot help but be stimulated by involving fine art galleries, dealers and curators in our critiques. Although some healthy cross over from fine art to glass art is already happening, we need much more of it with a stronger emphasis on the art side of glass art education.

Right from the start, more groundwork needs to be done to educate students entering careers as artists using glass in the standards and expectations that define fine art. Glass galleries that uphold these higher standards might want to share their understanding and insights with students of glass. Students need more education in fundamentals of art to understand their choices as they decide whether or not to strive to make work of such advanced creativity that fine art circles will accept it. But there is a second, unique problem in the education of glass artists as the following incident shows.

Last summer, a visiting young glass artist asked my advice on how to develop his career. He was entering his senior year in a glass program at a college and had been busy learning all the skills needed to create his ideas in glass. When I told him to begin reading about the great masters of fine art; Picasso, Michelangelo, Pollack, Van Gogh and several other modern masters, he did not understand why. The college program he was immersed in did not even begin to go there. I told him that he should understand the greatest artists' struggles, objectives and criteria for their work. It was vitally important for him to understand the innermost visions of great art and to learn about the journeys of the great artists. By studying the greatest and most enduring, he would also learn about the meaning and integrity of their work. Studying the prominent artists would educate and inspire him in the elements and process required to create enduring great works of art. I tried to give advice that would excite him to advance his thinking beyond the technical.

Blowing, shaping, forming, casting, sculpting and working in glass are so technical, that current glass art education stresses technical ability. This sets up glass artists for much unexpected criticism of their work later on. Many artists spend years developing glass-working skills only to find out they have no design power. They are great at handling the glass but lack the ability to create captivating visual images and shapes. Because most of their education was spent acquiring the technical skill to work such a difficult substance as glass, there was no time to learn and master the fundamentals of design. As a result, when critics from mainstream art look at glass art they object to the lack of mature conceptual elements that the work should exhibit judging by fine art standards. With proper education artists can achieve both a high standard of design and technical ability. When conceptual elements are strong they elevate glass from decorative art to fine art. The development of new artistic talent often overlooks the importance of defined design elements in creating Art.

Young artists often look only to the most popular glass artists as role models. Just as with my student visitor, they do not look beyond other glass artists as role models to learn from. For their future success, however, it is important for them to learn from other disciplines of art in order to enhance the structure of their designs and to look beyond ideas commonly portrayed in glass. The reason for this importance is very, very basic – by creating fine art, glass artists can appeal to a much larger art market than the smaller market now in place specifically for fine art glass. This expansion of opportunity is especially important for the many young artists who look forward to successful careers over the next 30 years.

When I was still painting as a student, I could show my work in any of a large number of fine art painting shows of high integrity throughout the United States. There were also hundreds of fine art galleries to choose from – at least one or two in every small city and often hundreds in large cities like New York. These galleries would only show my work next to other fine art work of equal importance because they understood and applied artistic standards in selecting work to exhibit. These standards helped to guarantee the enduring value and integrity of the artwork they sold. Contrast the situation in the fine art market with that in the glass art market. Except for the top forty or so art glass galleries, in all glass galleries throughout the country that I have visited in the last twenty years I find serious pieces by recognized artists casually juxtaposed with inexpensive decorative work. Yet painting galleries, often located on the same street as the glass galleries, only show work of a certain range of value based on levels of artistic accomplishment and standards. In the small town where I live there are *two* painting galleries that only show work with values at over \$1000. Neither of these galleries will ever display a one hundred dollar painting because including such work, however decorative the paintings might be, would confuse collectors about the standards of artistic merit the gallery represents and of course, value.

The small percentage of art glass galleries (by comparison to mainstream fine art galleries) that clearly uphold serious artistic standards offer too few outlets to support the many artists wanting to get their work into them. How many artists can those few top galleries carry? Economics force most fine art glass galleries to carry the same short list of 40 high-end artists because gallery space is limited. A quick check of the top gallery web sites shows that all the top galleries carry the same list of 20 to 30 artists, with a few additional names in each gallery. In the fine arts, a painting gallery usually represents about five to ten main artists and each artist relies on one or two main galleries for support. Most fine artists who paint only have one or two shows per year at one or two galleries. So, using those rules of thumb, and comparing it to what goes on in glass, the current market in the finest glass art galleries can only support a very small number of fine glass artists and there are many, many more artists worthy of representation. On the other hand the hundreds of high quality mainstream art galleries can support thousands of fine artists – judging by the published listings of major artists today in all categories of art. The opportunity and audience is larger because the field has developed education and standards over a long time.

A few high quality glass galleries are exploring how to bring fine glass art to the serious art market right now at a big art show. The fine art show, Art Palm Beach, January each year includes glass art, which is a great step forward for the art glass community. This prestigious show which includes original Picasso's and Monet's for

sale, lets knowledgeable fine art collectors and dealers see glass art in a gallery setting next to the best fine art. Art Palm Beach is not a show of functional art like SOFA; it is a fine art show that does not accept functional art. Nine progressive glass galleries have joined the show and are pioneering a path towards the acceptance of glass as fine art. Out of fifty-four or so exhibitors, there are a few art glass galleries like Tom Hawk, Heller Gallery Habitat gallery and Thomas Riley gallery. By exposing glass art to an audience already involved with fine art painting and sculpture these nine galleries are taking a gigantic step forward. It is important for the health of the entire glass community that glass be seen at this prestigious show; we should all commend the galleries who step forward to broaden the audience for fine glass art and wish them success. It will take time, perseverance, more opportunities for fine glass artists, and more powerful work by many artists for glass art to be recognized in fine art circles. It becomes not as important for glass artists to be accepted by top glass art galleries but to be accepted in serious mainstream art galleries -- period -- beside serious painting, sculpture and multi media work. Each important art gallery that shows glass as another worthy art form moves our field forward.

Ironically, while the number of outlets for serious art in glass is so limited, glass art education centers regularly invite me to teach glass technique. Although I could easily teach, I question where teaching technique will get most of my prospective student artists if those students do not know how to design their own work so that they can create art. I would love to teach young artists, but I feel a responsibility before I start teaching, to develop a class that provokes and nurtures design power. To educate each artist to realize that their greatest most precious unique gift, which will lead them to success, is making powerful designs. Without cultivating design power, learning glass-working technique from me will not help these learners build a realistic and successful future as artists. I am not even hinting that technique is unimportant, but that it is only one element in the tremendous education of a serious artist, and the need for education does not stop there.

The collecting audience also is in need of education so they can be intelligent judges of the works offered to them. Without artistic standards and criteria, however, art lovers will merely be confused rather than educated. Confusion about artistic merit is one reason why it has been so difficult for many fine art lovers to perceive glass as fine art. Clair Raabe of Fellerman-Raabe Glass in Sheffield, Massachusetts shared with me that she has spent many years clearing up wrong ideas the public had about glass art. Raabe found that she needed to educate the public constantly in order for glass buyers to understand and appreciate work that goes beyond the decorative to express a well-defined concept. More of this type of education is needed to reach out to new collectors as well as to educate galleries and museum curators outside of the glass art field.

I have spoken with many collectors who acquire mainstream painting and sculpture and who also love glass (that is how I met them). The fact is that some conventional art lovers take on the task of educating themselves sufficiently to invest in glass art. Development of glass art is not just a matter of differentiation by galleries and evolving connoisseurship of collectors; it includes making the relationship between fine glass art and fine art more transparent and more intelligent. For glass to be understood as art we will need to define the field in terms of acknowledged fine art categories, so that all work and artists are not so lumped into one class -- "art glass." Perhaps we artists all know where we fit, but the public does not. At present most art lovers cannot tell the

difference between inexpensive production works from high quality one-of-a-kind designs. To them it is all “art glass.” Defining clear categories of glass art is a first step toward educating the art public so that they understand, admire and collect what we create. However, some glass artists will disagree with and dispute the desirability of fitting the best in glass art into the broader field of serious art.

Recently a famous glass artist told me that he thought that few glass artists were interested in moving into the fine art field. Speaking for himself, that same artist told me honestly that he “enjoyed being a big fish in a small pond and that there was a level of comfort there.” At present glass art is a small but rapidly growing pond compared to other, more mature fields in art. When talking about change, one has to start where people are and let them decide for themselves. It took me several years to decide to return to my fine art training after well over twenty years working in glass. Many artists, like the big fish in the small pond, probably are where they want to be and they will prefer the status quo forever. But those who want to enter the wider world of fine art face risk, uncertainty, opportunity, challenge, growth and a real test of their talent and design power.

Challenges Before the Art Glass Field

- Broadening the education of glass artists to include fine art history and design;
- Exposing glass artists to the standards and aesthetic expectations of other fine art circles;
- Expanding the interchange between the glass and the fine art communities;
- Defining the categories of glass art to make it easier for taste and artistic development to progress together;
- Defining criteria for what Art is;
- Separating functional and decorative glass from fine art glass;
- Expanding expert criticism and dialog from outside the glass field;
- Introducing art theory education into glass instruction;
- Clarifying which galleries uphold fine art standard at all levels of accomplishment and price in contrast to the galleries that offer decorative and craft production;
- Expanding the number of galleries that promote fine art glass along with the development of more mid range fine art glass galleries.
- Mainstreaming fine glass art into fine art galleries that now carry fine paintings, and sculpture but not glass art (which may be the real answer);
- Including both fine art and fine glass art in art shows as a means to educate the public;
- Expanding the commitment by gallery owners to educate the public in the difference between fine art and decorative art.
- More publications and articles, educating the artistic community and the public on this subject. As well as open and honest dialogue on the issues raised in this article.