



GLASS

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W IS NOT ALL ITS CRACKED UP TO BE D

Response by Brett Littman



In the last issue of GLASS (Winter, 1998, #73), Thomas McEvelley's essay, "The Sound of Broken Glass," explored the role of glass in contemporary art. McEvelley argues that Marcel Duchamp's glass sculptures *Large Glass* and *To be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass)* with *One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour* opened the door for artists like Gordon Matta-Clark, Maura Sheenan, Francesc Torres, Bernadette Cotter (and I would add Bing Hu and Maya Lin) to use broken and shattered glass in a thoroughly post-modern way. According to McEvelley, "glass has become an avant-garde material not through a celebration of its special aesthetic qualities, but through the refutation of them. Glass has been incorporated into the recent art as a signifier of the collapse and possible reconstitution of society—a symbol not of the wholeness or integrity of the art object, but of the shattered debris of accident and disaster."¹ For McEvelley the decontextualizing and destabilizing of glass by breaking it allows its art usefulness to shine through. Broken or shattered glass is outside of the realm of commodification. In this unidealized form glass can act as a powerful expression of complex socio-political and economic ideas.

While I completely agree with McEvelley that glass can convey complex meanings beyond the concepts of beauty, design and form, I disagree with his conclusion that broken glass is the primary expression of this materials usefulness. Glass is complex, broken or whole. It is nature and artifice. It is a solid and a liquid. It expresses authenticity, beauty, strength and translucency in one moment and in the next moment simulation, waste, fragility and opaqueness. It is a decorative material, but is also one that is mundane and functional.

I propose that we take a more holistic approach and look at Duchamp's whole oeuvre to fully understand the role of glass in post-modernism. Duchamp not only broke things to make art he also created meaning and ascribed value to things through construction, collage, manipulation and display. Works like *Fountain* (1917), *Hat Rack* (1917), *Traveler's Folding Item* (1916) and *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) attempt to elevate found or ordinary objects into the realm of art through a process of indifference that completely ignores traditional aesthetic values. These works, which are called "readymades," have had just as much impact on the use of glass in contemporary art as *Large Glass*. Artists such as Richard Marquis, Walter Zimmerman, Evan Snyderman and Einar and Jamex de la Torre have all been influenced by the "readymades." Richard Marquis has created a series of pieces that juxtapose and contrast glass with found or collected objects. He states, "I made these things in order to present my pieces in the context that I normally saw them in: on shelves in my

house and studio mixed up with all the junk that I collected. As opposed to on a white pedestal with heroic lighting in a Museum or gallery." *Shaving Brush Box*, 1993–94, a mixed-media glass box which contains a blown glass teapot, a collection of shaving brushes and a Mr. Peanut figure and *Rempel Wall*, 1994, an installation made up of four glass objects surrounded by plastic Rempel rubber squeeze toys, are perfect examples of Marquis' attempt to equalize the value of ordinary things and handmade glass. By placing his own fabricated glass pieces alongside "junk" from his collections he invests his work with a sense of personal history and aesthetics that is opposed to easy commodification and consumption. These works also have a sense of humor and playfulness which can be interpreted as a nod to Duchamp's legacy.

Walter Zimmerman's sculptures also use fabricated glass and found objects. Zimmerman says in his catalog *Past, Present, Future Tense*, "I choose glass for its implied spiritual qualities of innocence and fragility, for its actual strength, toughness and adaptability... I choose found objects for their character and traces of purpose, and precisely because they have been discarded, lost or forgotten. Intuitively, I begin to make connections between the "precious" glass and the "valueless" detritus." Zimmerman's pieces are darker and more melancholy than Marquis' assemblages. They evoke a sense of alienation, disposability and sickness. *Safety Yellow*, 1996, a tented cart that holds several glass objects which are connected by and filled with wires and electrical cords, is a visceral reminder of the relationship between science and human pathology. Zimmerman finds inspiration in the work of the Outsider Artists and junk artists who are indirectly related to Duchamp's "readymades." Artists like Simon Rodia, who built the Watts towers, Clarence Schmidt, the creator of the Woodstock Environments, and Tyree Guyton, who was responsible for the Heidelberg project, all employ similar techniques of scavenging, numbering and constructing in creating their environments.

Evan Snyderman's work further conflates the distinction between found objects and glass by recasting the found or collected object as glass. Recent work by Snyderman includes a 1950s toaster with glass toast, a vintage fan with a glass fan blade and a scooter with glass wheels. In *Street*, Snyderman's solid sculpted glass parking cones, parking meters, fire hydrants and phones make us think of world where everything could be considered as art. By breaking down the boundaries between the outside environment and the gallery environment we are forced to consider what criteria we use to make distinctions between non-valuable ordinary object and works of art. This is very reminiscent of Duchamp's *Fountain*



Previous page:
Therman Statom,
Eurasian Summer,
glass, mixed
media, 60½ x 48
x 5", courtesy of
Maurine Littleton
Gallery.

Top: Richard
Marquis, *Dog and
Mountie Box*, 1998,
glass, mixed
media, 16½ x 12½
x 5½", courtesy of
Elliott Brown
Gallery.

Above: Richard
Marquis, *Shaving
Brush Box*, 1993 –
94, glass, mixed
media, 19¾ x 11¾
x 3¾", courtesy of
Elliott Brown
Gallery



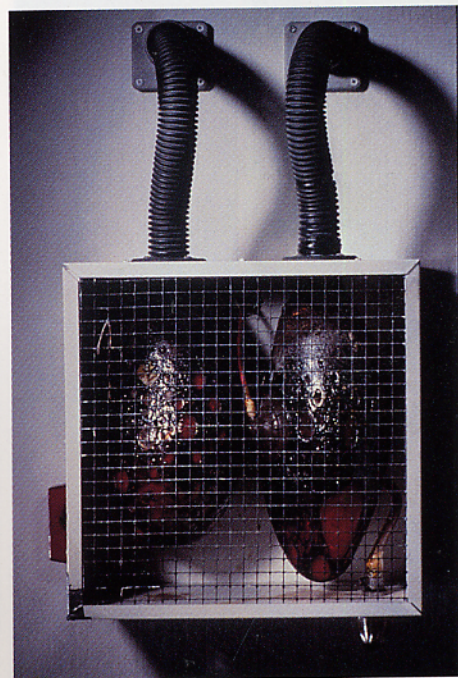
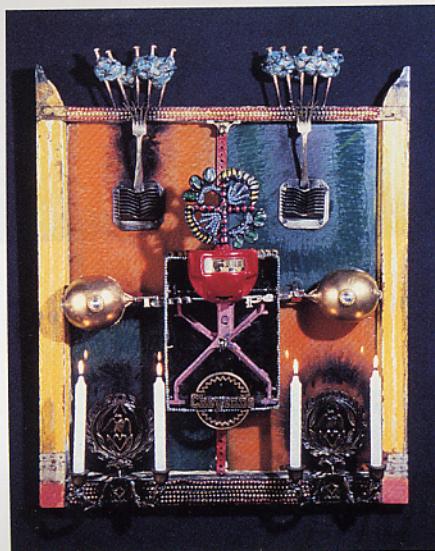
1. Thomas McEvilly, "Essay: The Sound of Broken Glass," GLASS, Winter '73, 1998, pg. 37

2. Tina Oldknow, Richard Marquis Objects, University of Washington Press, 1998, pg. 3. Everson Museum of Art, "Artist Statement," Walter Zimmerman, Past, Present, Future Tense, Syracuse, N.Y., 1998, pg. 26

Above: Evan Snyderman, Installation view Street, 1998, glass, wood, steel, aluminum, paint, 5 1/2 x 25 x 4'.

Top right: Walter Zimmerman, When in Use, 1994, glass, mixed media, 22 x 13 x 10".

Right: Einar de la Torre, Tempest, 1995, glass, mixed media, 34 x 28 x 6".



or *Comb*, 1916, which also challenge pre-conceived notions of what should be considered artwork.

Einar and Jamex de la Torre's collaborative and individual work explore the concept of borders and boundaries. Their work is informed by the long history of Mexican folk art: *retablos*, which are iconographic religious drawings usually done on metal; shrines; altars; and Day of the Dead imagery. *Tempest*, 1995, a mixed media piece by Jamex, combines fur, blown and flameworked glass and tries to erase and cross the borders between glass and found objects. However, the de la Torre's work poses other questions beyond just issues of aesthetics and ascribing value. Their sculptures are dealing with cultural identity, assimilation and the conflict between folklore and modern life.

But why is it important to include these artists in our discussion of glass in contemporary art? I feel that we mustn't overlook the more "positive" side of the Duchampian project which is the "readymades." Layering, building, constructing, collage and assembly are just as important in post-modern art as deconstruction and decontextualization. If we only highlight broken glass in contemporary art and do not recognize the influence of Duchamp on the work of Marquis, Zimmerman, Snyderman and the de la Torre brothers, we lose out on an opportunity to expand

Brett Littman is a New York based art critic and Assistant Director of UrbanGlass.

the cannon and discourse on the importance of glass.