

SPECIAL HARVEY LITTLETON ISSUE

Glass



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New York, May 26, 1998

Arrive at JFK and meet Mark Ferguson and Raven Wilson, artists who work at UrbanGlass, on their way to the Glass Art Society (GAS) conference in Seto, Japan. Mark introduces me to Hiro Fukawa, a Japanese sculptor, who teaches at Hartford University. Hiro and I talk about customs in Japan, particularly regarding *machae*, the presentation of business cards. Hiro also explains to me the *shinkansen* (bullet train) schedule and deciphers the restrictions and rules of my one week railway pass. We all go to the Duty Free Shop to make some very important last minute purchases, bottles of Irish whisky, that we will give to people as gifts. There is a palpable excitement in the air as we compare our post-conference travel plans. I will be traveling to Osaka, Kyoto, Fukui and Tokyo after the conference. Mark and Hiro are scheduled to give a series of lectures in Kyoto with Alan Klein, the head of Massachusetts School of Art's glass program and are planning to go to some ancient bath houses. Raven is planning to meet a friend in India and travel there for about a month.

Narita/Nagoya, Japan, May 27, 1998

We arrive in Narita after our 13 hour flight and head to the gate to make our connection to Nagoya, the largest city near Seto. There are Japanese men in cowboy hats watching TV surrounded by young American glass students decked out in dreadlocks and earrings. Almost everyone on the connecting flight is heading to the conference. I run into Pike Powers, Artistic Director of Pilchuck. We talk about her involvement in the post-conference collaborative workshop that Hiroshi Yamano has organized in his new glass studio in Kanazu, about three hours northeast of Nagoya. After a one hour flight we arrive in Nagoya. There is mass confusion at the airport as 400 non-Japanese speaking artists try and figure which bus will take them to their lodgings. Since Seto, the site of the conference, is such a small town it has limited accommodations. Many of the conference attendees, myself included, are staying in Nagoya, which is about a one hour bus ride away from the conference site. Some students and artists have opted to stay in dorms that are about 15 minutes away from the conference site—and now they are all concerned they will not arrive before the curfew. After an hour of total chaos, our bus heads towards

Nagoya. As we enter the limits of the city I am overwhelmed and amazed by the endless procession of neon signs and pachinko parlors. My first impression of Nagoya is that it

is a cross between Las Vegas and Times Square. The streets are teeming with young kids going to video arcades, bars and discos. When we get off the bus at the hotel there is quite a scene going on in the lobby. I guess that this hotel is a center of nightlife for Japanese businessmen and the lobby is full of men in suits and their dates. I check in and meet up with John Perreault, UrbanGlass' Executive Director. John has already been in Japan for several days taking a pre-conference tour of Osaka and Kyoto. He tells me some funny stories about the tour guide who seemed to have talked incessantly in what John describes as "cubist" English. In love with her microphone, she also sang songs from *The Sound of Music* when the bus was stalled in traffic on the highway from Kyoto to Nagoya.

Bunka Cultural Center in Seto, which is where the technical displays, exhibitions, lectures and opening ceremonies will be held. It is a modern complex, built in preparation for the World Expo which will be held here in 2005. Seto is the home of one of Japan's seven ancient kiln sites and is renowned for its art ceramics and its "Kamagaki," which are walls inlaid with broken ceramics and ceramic tools. According to the tour literature, Seto produces about 80% of all the ceramic novelties sold in Japan. Seto also has an abundance of silicate-rich soil; silica is needed for both ceramics and glass. John and I set up our booth and then head down to the town to do some shopping. We scout out several ceramic shops and also make an important discovery—we can buy boxes of sushi in the local supermarket for about \$5. After wandering around for a while we head back up the hill for the opening ceremonies. Almost all of the 1,700 attendees have now arrived in Seto. The auditorium is packed. The ceremony begins with a welcome speech by Bonnie Biggs, the current President of GAS, and Michael Rogers and Takako Sano, the site coordinators. There is a demonstration of Kodo drumming by a group of young musicians. Lifetime Achievement Awards are given to Alice Rooney, Dan Dailey and Japanese glass legend, Kyohei Fujita. The keynote address is delivered by the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma who has used glass in some of his recent projects. He shows slides of an incredible glass mediation room complete with glass chairs and table that he designed for a private residence. The room is connected to the house by a lighted glass walkway and overlooks the Pacific ocean and some small islands. He stresses the importance of the relationship of a house to its surroundings in Japanese architecture and explains the importance of the glass in this work as a "transparent mediator" between the inside and outside. At the end of the opening ceremonies we are all ushered outside for a 1,700 glass sake toast. All of the students in Japan have made sake cups and everyone is trying to find a matching set to take home. The next two days are spent talking to artists and students from all over the world and comparing notes with people who are planning to open up artist-access glass studios in London, Amsterdam and Finland based on UrbanGlass. On Saturday, John, Geoffrey Edwards (Curator of Sculpture and Glass, National Gallery of Victoria, Australia) and I took a side trip to visit the Aichi Prefecture Museum of Ceramics where "Contemporary Japanese Glass: One Aspect" is being shown. A cast glass vessel by Akihiro Isogai, a multi-media sculpture by Kaori Okano, a blown and fused piece by Shunji Ohmura and a metal and glass sculpture by Harumi Yukutake point to new and more experimental directions.

Tokyo Ga Ga by Brett Littman

Nagoya/Seto, May 28-May 31, 1998

We wake up at 7AM and get ready to go to Seto. UrbanGlass has a booth in the technical display area and we will have to set it up this morning before the conference begins. On the bus we talk to Mary Shaffer and she introduces us to a glass artist from Estonia. The bus ride to Seto is quite grim. John comments that it looks like we are going through the Japanese version of Queens. I am thinking a lot about how Japan embodies the struggle between modernity and tradition. Rice patties are adjacent to neon pachinko palaces; ancient temples and shrines are shadowed by modern glass skyscrapers; and the formality of Japanese traditional culture coexists alongside the powerful influences of modern western music and fashion. We arrive at the

**Gallery Enomoto,
Osaka.**
Photo: Taku Suiki.



Glassblowing demonstration at the Ezra Glass School, Kanazu

Glassblowing demonstration at the Ezra Glass School, Kanazu

Tokyo Glass Art Institute.

silica pit as a Japanese band dressed in their best heavy metal gear is belting out versions of American rock and roll songs. It is a strange closing image for the conference.

Osaka/Kyoto, June 1-5, 1998

I spend the next couple of days traveling between Osaka, Kyoto and Nara. In Osaka I stayed at my friend Hiroko's family's house. Osaka is the second largest city in Japan after Tokyo and it is extremely modern and crowded. During my stay Hiroko's sister Yuki took me to see the Australian Glass show at the Enomoto Gallery. I had met Mr. Enomoto in New York during the UrbanGlass Awards Dinner and he and Kaki, his assistant, showed us around the gallery. The exhibition highlights the work of ten Australian artists including, Klaus Moje, Jane Bruce, Brian Hirst, Deborah Cocks, Ben Edols and Kathy Elliott, Warren Langley, Stephen Proctor, Kirstie Rea and Meza Rijssdijk. The upstairs part of the gallery has work by Japanese artists, many of whom were featured in the glass show at the Ceramic Museum. Mr. Enomoto and I talk about the plans for a glass school which will open in Osaka in several years and we trade ideas and insights on glass. At the gallery I buy two sake cups by Hiroshi Yamano and contemplate buying a set of fused chopsticks by Klaus Moje. In Kyoto, I meet up with Tomoko Aoki. I know Tomoko from New York and we have worked together on several projects. She takes me to visit a monk who collects glass. As it turns out the monk had bought a Chihuly piece several years ago and had created a see through glass floor to display it. When Chihuly visited Japan to create his Nijima floats, he went to see the piece in the shrine and was so impressed by the glass floor that he used it as a basis for his swimming pool at the Boathouse. In return for the idea, he gave the monk a set of Persians and some drawings which are now displayed in the shrine. The monk also has an eclectic collection of Italian goblets and other glass pieces which complement the Chihulys. Later we go to Kiyomizu, the temple on the hill and Sanjusangendo, the hall of a thousand Buddhas. We also visit the studio of Daniel Kelly, an American artist who paints on handmade paper and tatami mats, and Soren Matz, the manager

of Kohseki, a famous woodworking company. Soren shows us the woodworking studio and gives us a tour of his own showroom where he sells modern Danish, Swedish and Italian production and art glass. He also shows us the product line he is working on with Laura de Santillana from Venice and tells us about the opening they are planning this weekend in Tokyo. That night I decide to stay at Myoren-ji, one of the only Buddhist temples in Kyoto that allows foreign visitors. In the morning I wake up at 6AM to participate in a ceremony in the temple building with the monk. After the ceremony I go and sit in the temple's rock garden and meditate on how soulful and quiet Kyoto is compared to the noise and crowds of Osaka and Nagoya. Later I meet Yuki and we go the 31 shrines and temples on Mt. Kurama. We have an incredible ten course lunch at Hiroya, a special restaurant on Mt. Kurama, where you eat on tatami mats over a river.

Kanazu, June 6-7, 1998

On Friday I decide to take the *shinkansen* from Osaka to Hiroshi Yamano's new studio in Kanazu, which is near Fukui. Hiroshi has invited Einar and Jamex de la Torre, the B Team, Pike Powers, Daniel Clayman, John Raymond Leighton, Preston Singletary, Brian Hirst, Yoshihiko Takahashi, Thomas Farbanish and Michael Scheiner to participate in a six day post-GAS conference workshop/collaboration entitled GLASS ART DOCUMENT to inaugurate the new facility. This event is modeled after the famous Harvey Littleton workshops that gave birth to the studio glass movement. The intention is for the artists to share their knowledge with each other and the student teaching assistants and to create a body of work which will be on display in the new on-site museum/gallery opening this fall. When I arrive, Dan Clayman is blowing glass (his first time in 12 years), Michael Scheiner is gaffing for John Leighton and Pike Powers is working with her partner/husband Scott Benefield. It is amazing to watch the 20 studio techs, TA's and Japanese glass students help these artists create their work. Brian Hirst talking about his experience working with the Japanese assistants confirms my sense that glass can act as a common language between people of different cultures. After the demos, all of the participating artists gather together to watch slide presentations by Pike Powers and Dan Clayman. After the slides, we pile into cars to go to a tea ceremony at the house of a famous temple carpenter who is one of the sponsors of the event. The next day is the open house and more than 2000 people show up to watch the artists and attend a glass and ceramic craft/art show. In the afternoon I get a ride to the train station and head to Tokyo, my last destination in Japan before I leave.

Tokyo, June 7-9, 1998

I arrive in Tokyo station at about 9PM. Norie Fukuda and Matsu Hiroyuki, two Japanese architects have graciously invited me to stay with them. When I arrive at their apartment, Norie informs me that we are going to go to "Department H" a roving underground rave party organized by Tokyo drag queens. The theme of the party is Austin Powers and the organizers have invited fashion designers and dancers to create something relating to the film. The performances and clothing are quite outrageous and the evening soon devolves into a series of dance/strip skits. We leave around 4AM and head out into the streets of Tokyo which are still packed with throngs of young people. The next day we visit the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum to see the "Italian Glass/Murano-Milan 1930-1970" exhibit. The museum is an art deco mansion which was built for Prince Asaka in 1933. The show is incredible and has many great examples of work from the great Italian maestros and houses. In the afternoon Matsu and I go to visit the Tokyo Glass Art Institute which is located about 40 minutes south of the Shinjuku station. This is the oldest and most famous glass school in Japan and many of the top Japanese glass artists have graduated from here. We take a tour of the facility and watch the first and second year students paint, etch and blow glass. I am quite impressed by the scope of their program and compare ideas with several of the administrators and teachers about possible exchange programs. I also get an English translation of their world renowned *Introduction to Pâte de Verre* book for the students at UrbanGlass to use as a reference. My trip to Japan is almost over. I pack my bags and thank Norie and Matsu for their hospitality and then head out to Shunji Ohmura studio in Narita. This is my last stop before I go back to New York. Shunji is one of the first graduates of the Toyko Glass Art Institute in 1970's and has taught at Nijima and Pilchuck. He now runs a small studio in the the suburbs of Narita where he and his assistant create one-of-a-kind artwork and a small production line of vases, glasses and goblets. Shunji, his assistant and I have a lot to talk about and we stay up late into the night drinking sake and whisky talking about glass, art and design. In the morning we wake up early so that they can drive me to the airport. Thinking back on my travels over the last two weeks I feel very strongly that art critics, writers and curators are going to have pay close attention to direction that Japanese glass and, for that matter, visual art and sculpture take in the next couple of years. This is a culture that can quickly adapt and absorb new ideas and the energy and intensity of the young Japanese art students far surpasses their American and European counterparts.