

The Danes

The story of Danish contemporary glass very closely mirrors the story of the American studio glass movement. Both are born from the desire to free glass from the factory and functionality and the ambition to create unique and expressive glass sculpture. This philosophy has a profound impact on Denmark. For the past thirty years Danish glass has continued to move away from industrial production and more towards individual artistic production. Small glass studios have popped up in all over in Copenhagen, Ebeltoft, and Bornholm creating a supportive network for experimentation and production. As well, for the younger generation of students and artists, glass making is still considered a vital component of an applied arts education.

The six artists in "The Danes - Contemporary Glass at Heller Gallery": Lena Bødker, Marianne Buus, Steffan Dam, Micha Maria Karlsund, Tobias Møhl and Stig Persson represent the second generation of glass art in Denmark which came to maturity in the 1990's.

Lena Bødker, who has been working with glass since early 90's, has been mixing cast glass with metal, concrete, aluminum, and lead from the beginning of her practice. In her more recent work Bødker has explored the surface of the glass and has created tactile sculptures and functional objects that retain a sense of their hand crafted genesis.

Marianne Buus asymmetrical blown glass forms draw ones attention to the relationships between the interior and exterior. Buus works the exterior of the glass to create tactile surfaces while leaving the interior smooth and shiny. Her bowls which look like they were made using the ceramic technique of hand building have a somewhat raw unfinished look. Their bumpy undulating surfaces perfectly capture the idea of glass in flux as it hardens from a molten material to a solid.

Steffan Dam started working with glass in 1985. Originally trained as a tool manufacturer, Dam developed an insatiable passion for glass which led him to endless experiments with the medium. Today Dam's work is recognizable for its incredible technical complexity, its clarity of color and his treatment of boring wholes into the surface of the objects.

Micha Maria Karlsund, Dam's partner, has been working in glass since 1993. Her recent series of vessels are homages to Brancusi and a nod to the proud traditions of 1950's Scandinavian "good design." The pure black and pure white blown glass forms play with relationships between sculpture, function and space.

Tobias Møhl, the youngest artist of the group, has been focusing on the merging of the Danish and Italian glass traditions. He has been a gaffer for Lino Tagliapietra for the past several years and one can see the direct influence of the

master glassblower on Møhl's work. His finely crafted vessels and objects using the reticello, murrine and filigree techniques reference the great works from Venini in the 1950's and 60's but have an more modern sensibility.

Stig Persson, one of Bødker's classmates at the Danish Design School, also began experimenting with cast glass sculpture in the early 90's. Persson's work since that time has become more minimalist and reductive in terms of its geometry and presence. He has also introduced a series of bowls, dishes and vases to his repertoire that straddle the fine line between function and pure sculptural form.

Between September and October 2005 I conducted an on-line interview with these six artists. I personally have been very interested in the new directions being taken by the contemporary Scandinavian art, design and craft scenes and wanted to find out more about these artists opinions on certain issues that I have found have relevance for artists in Scandinavia. As can be expected, their answers are complicated and varied. My hope is that through this interchange American audiences can gain a deeper and better understanding of the thoughts, debates and ideas that form the philosophical and practical approaches to glass art in Denmark.

Brett Littman (BL): How do the Danes approach the material of glass from a personal and cultural standpoint?

Lene Bødker (LB): As I see it, Danish glass has over the past 20 years moved in two directions, one represented by Per Lütken, who mainly did industrial glass for Holmegaard Glassworks and the other represented by Finn Lynggaard, who was instrumental in introducing the concepts of the studio glass movement to the Denmark and in 1986 founded the Glassmuseum in Ebeltoft.

Up to the early 1990's Danish studio glass was very much focused on the Bauhaus dictum "form follows function." The reason for this focus was rooted in our educational system. Most of the Danish glass artists studied at and graduated from the former School of Applied Art (Skolen for Brugskunst), now The Danish Design School. The philosophy there at the time (and to some extent still today) was that the students should focus on making functional objects.

In the early 1990's artists like Stig Persson and I began to challenge these ideas. We were among the first Danish glass artists to use the lost wax casting technique for making sculptural objects which were personal artistic expressions not tied to the Bauhaus philosophy. There was quite a fight about this at the time.

Steffan Dam (SD): I feel that most Danish glass artists approach the material in a very personal way.

Micha Maria Karlsund (MK): The Bauhaus has always had a strong impact on the people working in the field of architecture, design and crafts in Denmark and also on the public's reception to these disciplines. This has led to a formal simplicity in expression and a restrained use of color. I think the reason for this can be found in our landscape and climate.

Marianne Buus (MB): Just an observation – not an explanation. These days Swedish glass is mainly made by industry, even most of the one-of-a-kind work that is usually associated with small studios. The Danish glass industry hardly exists now, but a strong group of individuals have been working with intensity to further their ideas and skills. There is a great appetite to stretch ones self creatively here in Denmark.

BL: Is the education system rigid in Demark? For instance if you studied glass or ceramics in university did you have a lot interchange with the fine arts departments? If not is this something that is changing in Denmark? Is there more interchange between art, design and craft?

LB: Unfortunately, there still seems to be shutters between the educational institutions. While Fine Art is studied at the Academy of Fine Art, craft and design are taught at the Design Schools. We do not unfortunately have the American system of integrating the various practices.

MMK: As far as I know there are lots of interchanges between craft and design. As for the students of the Royal Academy of Art (fine art) they couldn't care less. Everybody's talking about how the boundaries between the areas are falling, and you can see very small signs of recognition of our work from the fine art museums and galleries, but reality is that it will take ages before anything radical happens like glass art being shown at the Statens Museum for Kent (the National Art Museum).

MB: If you study glass or ceramics in Denmark these days there is a very open field for exploration. However, the schools who teach glass and ceramics are different from those who teach 'Fine Art' and interchange between the two types of schools is rare.

BL: Do you any of your currently work in other materials? If you do how do you compare or contrast that work with your work in glass?

LB: I do work with materials other than glass. In my work I combine glass with lead, concrete, bronze, and aluminum to create a contrast and dialog between the various materials. I am fascinated by the inherent personalities of each material.

SD: I'm a qualified toolmaker. I make the glass, I do the photographing, I build the furnaces and all the studio equipment, and I grow the garden, do the plumbing, restore the windows, do some of the cooking and tend to the kids. It's all the same - it's about understanding what's in front of you. In glass I skip the rules and do it exactly like I want to.

MMK: I loved Steffen's answer to this question! I actually have been painting a little during the last year. It has helped me to get closer to what I want to express in pictures as well as in glass. In my latest work I have combined glass with textile, nylons, gauze, and latex. I was very surprised by what the textile did to the glass, adding an intense intimacy and sensitivity that I really liked.

MB: I do not work in other materials, as I am still smitten by the fluid glass. However –metal casting and working with clay or wood carving often catches my attention.

BL: Do you sketch out your ideas or do you work at the furnace?

LB: Since I am working with sculptural glass my creative process always starts with paper & pen, leading to sketches in clay.

SD: Yes, I sketch my ideas, especially the ideas I have in front of the furnace because there more than anywhere I might have to change my plans in split second.

MMK: Yes. I always sketch and if it's something I haven't done before (which is quite often the case) I can be absolutely sure that it will change while I'm working the piece. This is the great poetry of being a crafts person. The interaction with the material that can only happen when you know your skill, forget your knowledge, listen, be open, unconscious and conscious at the same time, intuitive and know exactly when to stop.

MB: I mainly develop new work directly in the hot glass – often over a longer period with time to review work in progress.

TB: Yes I sketch. Often it is in a form of notes for new ideas. Most of my sketching is done in glass. The material itself acts as a form of spontaneous inspiration. I am constantly looking for new structures and details which, in my everyday encounter with glass, suddenly appear before me. I then try to put this into context. It is a long on-going process of exploring, developing and refining. (Nothing romantic, I am afraid...)

Stig Persson (SP): I generally start a project by working with models and moulds. For me an unsuccessful firing fuels new ideas about shapes and

surfaces. In the beginning of my career the creation of my work consisted of 3 phases: the idea + the creation = 1 work. Today I devote more time to investigate and develop the potentials of an idea or inspiration and as a result many of my works are serial in character.

BL: Where do you look for inspiration?

LB: I admire people like Brancusi, Andy Goldsworthy, Richard Deacon, Tony Cragg, Anthony Gormly, and Rachel Whiteread but my main sources of inspiration are nature, architecture, and the spiritual side of life.

SD: It doesn't help looking - the original ideas are sometimes just there - one just has to be open.

MK: I really don't look, but suddenly I see things - and I see them everywhere, books, newspapers, TV, the shoes and clothes people wear, things in my garden.

For instance in my sons library books with pictures of cars from the 1940's to the 1960's. I just love those shapes and I thought that my next boxes should be of that family. I'm also inspired by the ordinary life that we have to live with all the pain, ugliness, hidden issues and the pure miracle of life itself.

MB: All over I think

SP: Inspiration can come from totally unexpected places. For instance I can be inspired by a 50's car bumper to the shape and texture of bubble wrap to the stomach of a pregnant woman. Even though my inspirations can come from very different sources I always seem to end up expressing my ideas through geometric shapes like the circle, the square and the oval. For the viewer this may seem like a limited visual universe but for me simple geometry is a fountain of eternal innovation and expression. I want to mention that the specific inspiration for the current work at Heller Gallery is a brick with built in vent holes.

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