Melt-off and Migration

At the time of writing this essay, I will not have seen the exhibition to which I am contributing. However, I can safely predict it will consist of artworks that fall under at least one of the following descriptions: transparent, colourful, bubbly, heavy, fragile, glowing, multifaceted, and, of course, shiny. Instead of considering the artwork specifically, I wanted to focus this short piece on the human and non-human factors that comprise the fragment of the world – a place – that produces British glass. What, actually, is British glass? Does it exist? What are its endearing or enduring qualities?

Self-made, locally sourced artisanal products are both timely and trendy. The things we hold, eat or wear have narratives of making, often documented in detail, then shared through social media and dramatised on television. This is exposed brilliantly in the Great British Bakeoff, which I consider our greatest media export. Egged on by a panel of celebrity experts, the bakers compete in three tasks per episode: an interpretation of a classic, a technical challenge (often the replication of a foreign obscurity) and a showstopper. Bakeoff and its many derivatives in makeup, pottery, sewing, portraits and landscapes, captures the twee and simple pleasures of making. Unlike the grinding intensity and suspenseful soundtracks of its American cousins, we are presented a charming mirror of ourselves, a diverse group of Brits from all walks of life.

This exhibition, a Great British 'Melt-off' of sorts, is a periodic marker for excellence in our field. The Biennale event could be seen to define British glass by providing a regular snapshot of our context, in which internationally celebrated artists can be represented alongside exciting newcomers. It captures making trends, and thematic tendencies, making visible what might be considered fashionable and/or critical in our time. It celebrates interpretations of classic forms (such as the gravity-slumped decorative bowl), technical challenges (updates of Italian baroque and Scandinavian design classics), and show-stopping installations, sculptures and objects.

But how British is this Biennale? We could read a different narrative of cultural transmission and migration of people, making and materials. Placemaking in the context of this exhibition is about how British glass embodies much more than form, colour, and function. Instead each of the works represented here is about the intention of the maker, their particular training and its lineage, their path to migrating here in the UK, and how the process of making has its own history.

For example, it is possible for the aficionado to read the glass objects presented here in terms of their making techniques. For example, the typical 'hot shop' in Britain will have a mix of Italian hand tools, Swedish blowpipes and aluminium optic moulds from America. Possibly originally developed to create stained glass windows and blanks for crystal cutting, the remnants of a comparatively ungainly style can be seen in British glassblowing. This has been refined by modern British masters to include Scandinavian techniques of keeping the heat and focusing on the roundness of the bubble, the Italian love of pattern, the American approach to glassblowing as a team sport, or the expressionist bubble contortions of the Baltic States. Kilnforming influences from Portland, Kramsach and Canberra are easy to pick out, and the colour depth achieved in the illusionist modern forms of the Czechs is an enduring point of departure.

Unless the work is made in float glass whose origins lie just outside of Liverpool, British glass in a country with little remaining industrial production is a peculiar notion. Consider the path by which the glass arrives at one's studio. With the exception of a handful of recent creative projects focused exclusively on the generation of glass from raw materials, all of the glass in this exhibition is likely to have been made from a glass supplied by a manufacturer specifically for makers, coming in the form of sheet, billet, cullet, tubing or pelletised batch. These can be traced to the Bavarian forest, the mountains of South Carolina, or as far afield as Auckland, New Zealand. The colour range in glass art was once described to me as more akin to a box of crayons, and many of us could pick out product numbers being used in the artwork. Therefore, though we utilise colour to provide a sense of location in our work, the glass itself isn't particularly native.

This same formula might apply to the representation of the artists in this exhibition. The foundations of British glass are traced to Sunderland, where fragments of 7th century liturgical windows can be found, and much later when Pyrex graced kitchens throughout Europe. British glass is not so tied to industrial production but rather the sharing of creative expression and technical making. As an American who has found his home in this glass community, I am only one of many who have crossed borders in both directions to contribute. European influence is

well represented both in participating artists as well as their diverse international educations – a family tree of descendants from various glass schools. Artists of Chinese origin represented in the Biennale are particularly interesting to me, as Keith Cummings and Wolverhampton were early ambassadors of glass art education to China, and there is now a burgeoning scene that is showing signs of influence.

When we hold up a mirror to ourselves, we see that British glass is global. Like our much-loved television show, I sense a reverence for and a delight in that which is made (by us), embracing tradition, humility, and humanity, neither ostentatious nor severe. This is expressed in the most British ways possible: with dry wit, cheek and a proverbial stiff upper lip. The lasting impression I get from British glass is that it is a community of practice that celebrates its deep roots while embracing international influences and innovative research. I hope this year's British Glass Biennale exposes an understanding of British glass in both its specificity and pluralism.

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