



## INTERIOR VISTAS AND CRAFTED SUBVERSIONS

Dr Jeffrey Sarmiento

If I were to describe the work in this exhibition as expertly blown glass amassed in huge, hanging arrangements, one might think I was standing in the foyer of a museum in Seattle or London or a hotel in Shanghai or Venice. Instead I find myself in the Nave of Canterbury Cathedral, a centre of pilgrimage since the 12th century, contemplating the inherent meaning of a vessel – both container and ship. I am staring up at one hundred amphorae suspended from the ceiling, composed into the gracefully curved, abstracted form of a boat.

There can be a big gap between an artist's intention and a viewer's interpretation. While artists have inner motivations for the statements they want to make visually, it isn't always obvious how much they intend to share. Can this change over the course of a career? That is what I will attempt to unpick through exploring the iconography and narratives in 'Under an Equal Sky'. In parallel with (and in some cases notwithstanding) their artistic aims, it is my contention that it is Baldwin and Guggisberg's career-long devotion to craft and process that gives this work its formal and thematic anchors, conceptual underpinnings and potential for multiple interpretations. In addition, the metaphor of the container and the craft of glassmaking will be used as a lens to expose the content of the exhibition's ambitious installations and sculptural objects.

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on the human condition, both past and present**

I have known the work of Philip Baldwin and Monica Guggisberg for more than 20 years. I first discovered it flicking through the pages of Glass Quarterly magazine. If you had asked me back then about the meaning behind their work, I would likely have considered their primary concern to be form, colour and surface, allied to a concern for the finest craftsmanship. Their visual signature consists of blown objects combined with cutting and carving through layers of colour to achieve texture and pattern. Modular elements are carefully arranged in multiples that delight in symmetry and balance. Over the years, I have subsequently seen this work in decorative arts museums and the major functional art fair, SOFA Chicago. In a departure from more familiar surroundings, this installation in Canterbury Cathedral represents a leap of faith for the artists. It is a calculated risk as to whether what has been envisioned in the studio can succeed in a vast, sacred and public space. There are a number of instances in which contemporary sculpture has been embedded in a tourist attraction and failed miserably, most recently in Pompeii, in which outsized neoclassical figure fragments confused visitors and ruined the views. Philip Baldwin and Monica Guggisberg carefully avoid this fate, however, through the distinctive contrasting of a vibrant modern palette and the precise geometry of their forms with the Cathedral's medieval stonework and considerable quantity of handmade coloured glass in its windows. Their challenging spatial compositions thus break away from the fabric of the church building in a series of ten compelling interior vistas.





The experience of navigating a pilgrim's route through the building makes for a surprise encounter: with their work and, in a sense, with the artists as well. These are not comforting works of craft, vessels you can easily take home and display on your mantelpiece. In fact, the artists are somewhat irreverent in their treatment of the vessel form, juxtaposing the preciousness of craft with the monumental. While visually distant from Minimalist sculpture of the 1960s, these works function in similar ways. They confront you on a human scale and thus compel you to respect their presence. While content can be found in the titles that allude to the subject matter, these sculptures are the embodiment of the artists themselves. Observing the work is an encounter with the artists, who are laying bare their opinions, declaring their vision and even sharing a bit of their life with you.

This biographical and sculptural approach is most clearly evident in 'Peoples' Wall', which stands squarely inside the bright interior of the Cathedral's Chapter House. Eschewing preciousness, a large vitrine is stacked randomly to the top with hundreds of incredibly fragile, handmade objects. Bulging at the seams at three metres tall, the glass façade gives a feeling of precariousness, a disclosure of the artists' process, and in the vast quantity of glass items evidence of their sheer industry as makers. While the title may allude to the congregation, community or the world, this work can refer equally to Philip, Monica and *their* people. The piece bears witness to forty years of collaboration as a team, working with the support of an ever-changing cast of emerging glass artists who have served as apprentices.

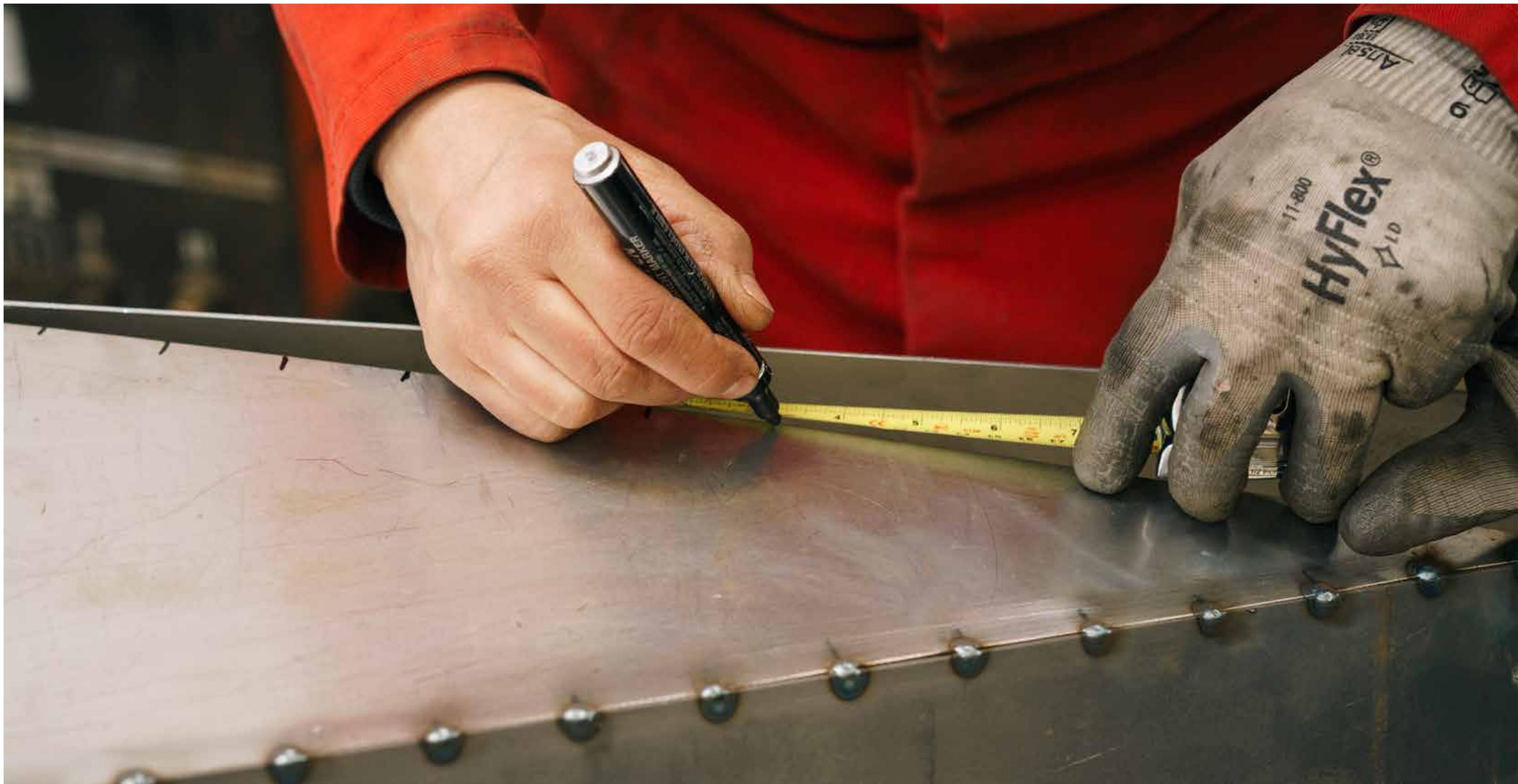
The Canterbury intervention is their second attempt at creating work on this scale and in this type of context. 'The Cathedral Collection', a 2016 installation in St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh, was composed of blown glass vessels arranged in boats, as hanging mobiles and in structures with glass mounted like beads on a string. The exhibition appeared as though the artists were treating the church as a laboratory for their work, experimenting with their formal language in a site laden with its own symbolism, textures and colours. The new setting seemed to inspire new 'containers' for their glass, and was pivotal in the direction of their most recent practice.

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A cathedral is a place that encourages reflection on the human condition, both past and present. Baldwin and Guggisberg rise to the challenge with 'Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow', the one work linking both exhibitions, in which they have filled three vitrines with material: sand and glass shards, colourful blown vessels and styrofoam packing material. The piece is a visualisation of the artists' concerns about human impact on the planet. It is a universal theme, but it can also be interpreted as a deconstruction of the glass artists' process: evidence of craft and materials, piles of (possibly unrealised, incomplete or destroyed) work, and a ubiquitous packing material for transporting glass.

'Under an Equal Sky' is the outcome of a lifetime spent working with a single medium. Baldwin and Guggisberg are able to use and (gently) abuse their glass through sheer volume of production, their work here embodying perfectly their peripatetic existence and global influences. Its craftsmanship may force visitors to stop and marvel at just how they did what they do. But it could also be true that the seamless nature of such work can turn discussion away from technique and towards a consideration of content. By mastering their medium, they are able to venture out into territory that can be difficult for most people working in craft. Baldwin and Guggisberg are thus able to use the Cathedral as a context for a shift towards a political commentary, creating subtle acts of subversion in which strong messages are conveyed by placing arrangements of beautiful objects in the charged atmosphere of a church. They accomplish this through a creative reflection on the vessel, from decorative object to functional container to transport.







One work that appears to combine all the above is 'The Pilgrims' Boat' containing a crowd of ornate, brightly coloured and textured glass forms seated in an abstracted steel barque. At a passing glance, comparison might be drawn with the baroque floral works of Dale Chihuly. But where Chihuly's work veers towards extravagant spectacle, Baldwin and Guggisberg's impulse for display is more nuanced, with carefully edited forms and equally considered colours taking us in the direction of the European tradition of still life painting, in which the balance of the composition and symbolism of the object are key. On closer inspection, there is content lurking in Baldwin and Guggisberg's more tightly controlled tableau. Their use of the Italian incalmo technique connects different, coloured glass bubbles at the waist and neck, making for a single continuous vessel form. Playful shapes with dramatic undulating curves identify diverse individuals within a group, referencing the berobed and behatted clerics of Europe who came to make their obeisance to St Thomas. Looking again, one can see the crowding together of these shapes within the boat form – is it a celebratory party or an overcrowded transport? Or both? Baldwin and Guggisberg appear to be treading a line here that connects Canterbury's pilgrims of past and present with the wider story of human migration.

One of the boldest works in the exhibition, and a departure from the artists' usual practice, is 'Ordnance Boat', a simplified, curved sheet-glass-and-steel construction containing ammunition of various sizes instead of their typical blown glass forms. This allows a direct comparison with their use of blown forms and vessels elsewhere, as it highlights the aesthetic pleasure to be found in the multiplication and repetition of objects. By replacing the gleam of gold leaf and glass, they force us to question these weapons and their effects even as we admire their smooth metal surfaces. Extending the message of this work (and perhaps in an effort to stimulate discussion among viewers), Baldwin and Guggisberg have replaced the contents of display cabinets below 'Ordnance Boat' with a series of compelling statistics relating to the refugee crisis.

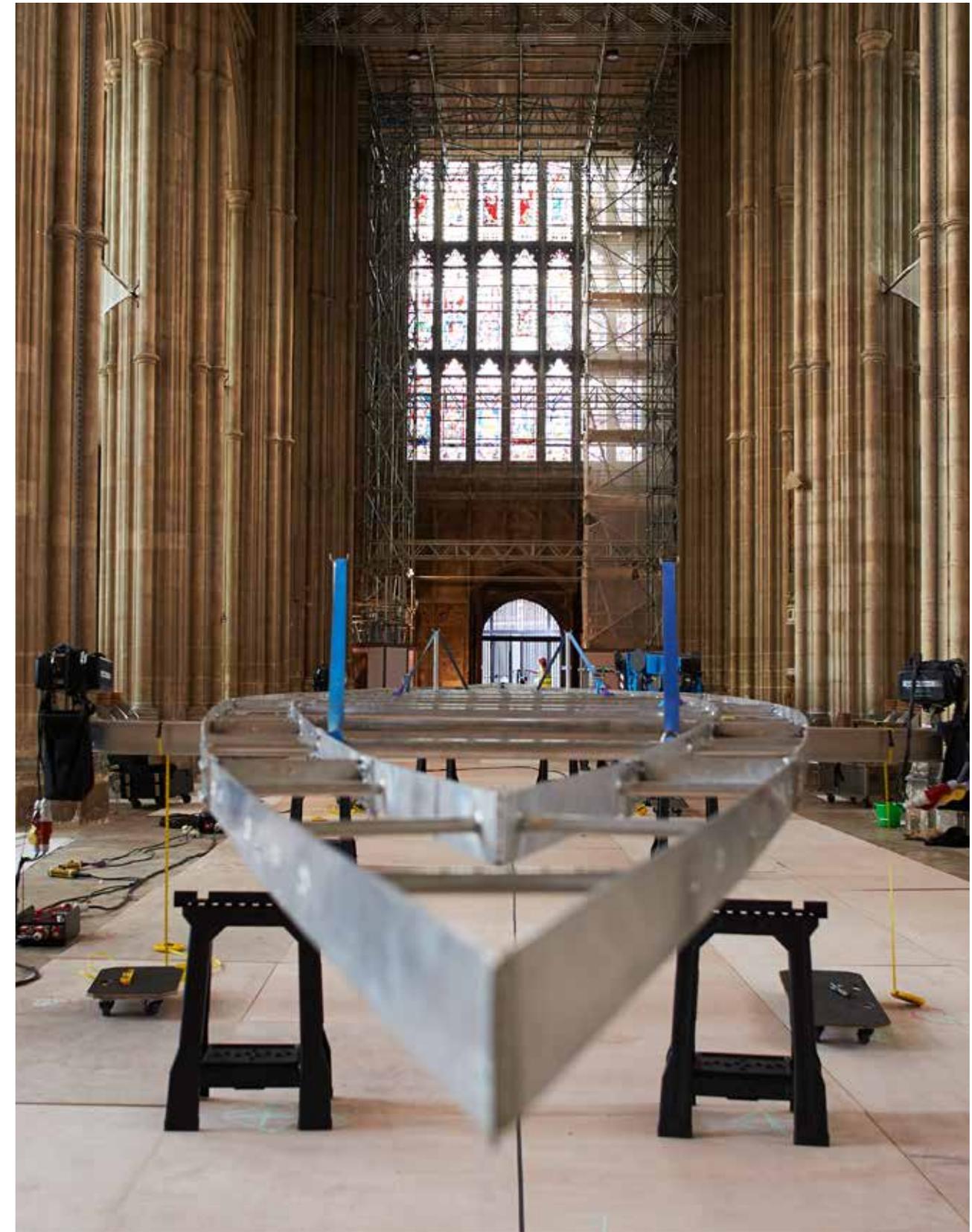


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The artists, who have not historically asserted socio-political content in their practice, want to use their platform as key figures in their field to make a timely statement about the state of the world. But I would argue that equally powerful meanings can be found in the actual making. This exhibition, and indeed the career of Philip Baldwin and Monica Guggisberg, draw strength from their nearly exclusive use of the glass vessel form in their work. These works thus epitomise craft theorist Louise Mazanti's concept of the 'super-object', which advocates the interpretation of works of contemporary craft through an embrace of their objecthood, materiality, decorativeness and domesticity. We should not ignore these core values in Baldwin and Guggisberg's work in the service of engaging in a fine art dialogue. Instead, by appreciating the works' craft associations, we can find new interpretations that traditional sculpture does not allow.

It is possible that the decorative qualities of the work – its insistence on beauty – could be perceived as antithetical to the context of modern and contemporary sculpture. But looks can be deceiving, or even subversive. Instead of seeing this as frivolity, I believe the artists utilise their skilled vessel-making as a language, a vocabulary of forms that builds on global traditions and histories, and through these are able to inject a sense of personality, individuality, humour and sobriety. Further, it is the connection of the vessel to mundane material culture and its historical role as functional, ritual and symbolic object that make it possible for this humble object to be transformed into something capable of carrying such a bold and universally understood statement. As makers, Baldwin and Guggisberg are in full command of their material, choice of form and its potential for expression. Their work has always been meaningful, even if that intention has not been as explicit.







In the context of Canterbury Cathedral the hundreds of vessels in this body of work take on an anthropomorphic quality. Through their placement in particularly resonant locations, transport and pilgrimage are linked. They manage to embody both refugee crises of the past century and burning issues in current world politics. Baldwin and Guggisberg have achieved a sparseness in their practice, a distillation in their approach and created sculptural work that is at one level all about the vessel, at another a story of their own craft history, while addressing themes of displacement, pilgrimage, refugees and war.

This brings me full circle to their magnum opus where I began: 'Boat of Remembrance' was born from the possibility afforded by the scaffolded roof – part of the ongoing restoration of the Cathedral – to support work in the Nave. Their first truly epic installation, this 'Boat' is a gathering of clear vessel forms suspended from a ship-shaped construction attached to the scaffolded ceiling. These amphorae are large and have no supporting foot at their base, a formal nod to their Greek ancestry as hanging (or buried) containers for storing and shipping food and drink. One is also reminded of the model ships that hang from the ceilings of otherwise unadorned white churches in Denmark. The Danish word for nave is *kirkskib* or church-ship, and the 'Boat of Remembrance' is effectively a visual translation of this. At one level the piece serves to commemorate the war centenary, but it also allows for many other interpretations, reflecting like a prism ideas about pilgrims, ships and movement, or indeed people as vessels or containers.

I end my own pilgrimage marvelling at the individual vessels above me, which make up a *sailing* vessel inside the belly of a pilgrimage church and place of sanctuary (a boat within a boat – 'nave' coming from the Latin for ship, *navis*), recognising how these artists have achieved a new level of sculptural intent by holding on to their craft principles.



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