

HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS

Florida's Love for Shiny Glass Art Takes a Surprisingly Political Turn

In a city where decorative glass art is embarrassingly popular, *Glasstress* at the Boca Raton Museum of Art highlights sociopolitical subjects.

Monica Uszerowicz
May 11, 2017



Glasstress: Boca Raton installation view at Boca Raton Museum of Art

(all images by Eduardo Chacon unless otherwise noted)

BOCA RATON, Fla. — Glass art in South Florida's Broward and West Palm Beach counties is unanimously, embarrassingly popular. I have distinct, repetitive memories of traversing galleries along Ft. Lauderdale's Las Olas Boulevard as a child, peering through the glass windows at more reflective surfaces: smooth blue dolphins, orange fish, angel-shaped fountains that made twinkly bell noises when the water hit the basin. Within a particular radius, I am quite sure everyone's grandmother had a jewel-toned knock-off Murano glass paperweight on a coffee table.

Glasstress, on view at the Boca Raton Museum of Art and curated by Kathleen Goncharov, is an exhibition of 33 artists who've shown at the Venice Biennale event of the same name, and a

<https://hyperallergic.com/377181/floridas-love-for-shiny-glass-art-takes-a-surprisingly-political-turn/>

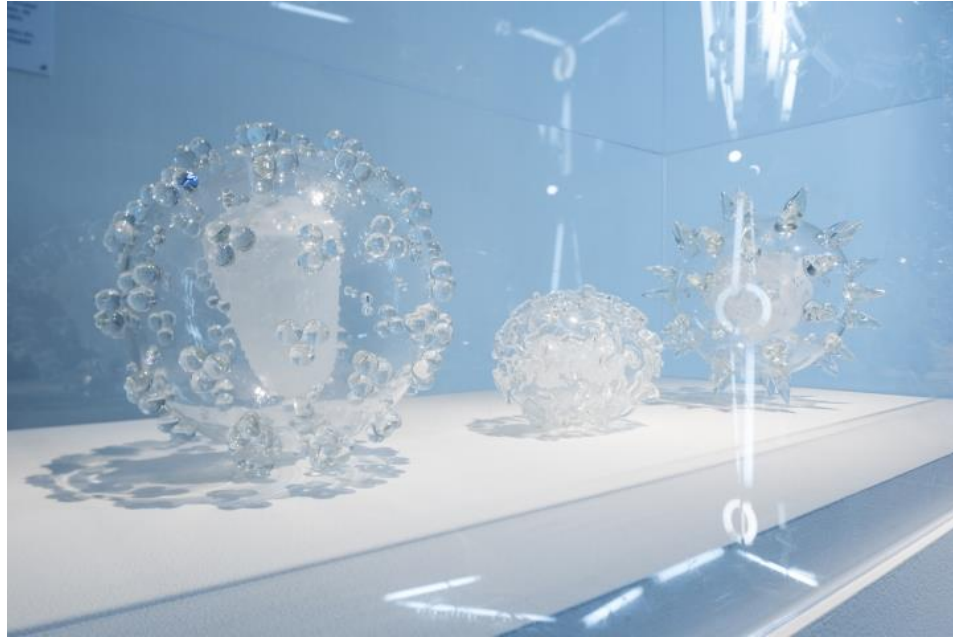
study in the versatility and beauty of the material. Glass is for examining closely — both at oneself, in mirrors, or at another, with eyeglasses and magnifying glasses; when we’ve seen too much, our eyes ache, becoming glassy themselves.



Glasstress: Boca Raton installation view at Boca Raton Museum of Art

Glasstress is also an international organization and studio, founded by Adriano Berengo of Fondazione Berengo, that tries to bridge the craft of Venetian glass-making and contemporary art. The artists, most of whom have never worked with glass before, create works unique to their own thematic arcs under the tutelage of Berengo and other Venetian Murano glassmakers.

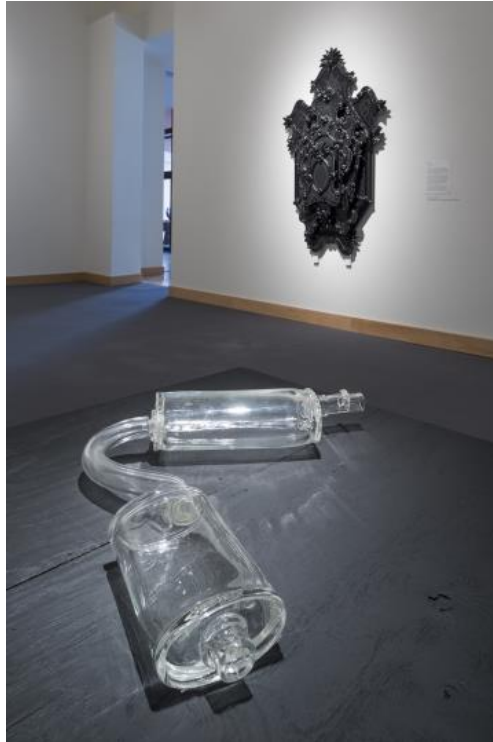
While *Glasstress* was also exhibited in New York at the Museum of Arts and Design, it has new meaning in the ornamental glass-festooned Boca suburbs. Almost none of the 46 works on view are decorative. Rather, glass is used to highlight sociopolitical subjects or allude to biological forms, some mesmerizing and others grotesque. At first glance, Luke Jerram’s “Glass Microbiology” pieces look like unassuming, decorative orbs; upon closer inspection, they depict various diseases, like HIV, smallpox, and the unsettlingly titled “Untitled Future Mutation” is loaded with sinister spikes and filled with a soft, sticky-looking coil.



Luke Jerram, “HIV (large, series 3)” (2015) (left), flame-worked blown glass; “Smallpox (small)” (2010) (center), flame-worked blown glass; “Untitled Future Mutation (large)” (2012) (right), flame-worked blown glass

Koen Vanmechelen’s “Protected Paradise-C.C.P.,” part of his Cosmopolitan Chicken Project, features a taxidermied falcon resting atop a net of amber-yellow glass eggs. (It’s noted that the falcon died of natural causes.) The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project (CCP), Vanmechelen’s chicken-cross-breeding endeavor, seeks to create a bioculturally diverse chicken that carries the genes of the planet’s entire chicken species. In the context of the CCP, the eggs’ shiny perfection might allude to some kind of evolutionary excellence by way of chickens, which is weird and somehow wonderful, and ultimately a reminder of how much glass actually exists in a chemist’s lab.

Some pieces pay homage to — and then immediately thwart — Venetian tradition. The details of Fred Wilson’s nearly seven-foot-tall “Iago’s Mirror,” a reference to Shakespeare’s *Othello*, are so textured that it’s difficult to not touch them: mirrors are piled on top of each other, thick and flowered and almost cakey, black as onyx and just as beautiful. The glass’s flip side is black and has the effect of both deepening and darkening one’s reflection.



Gavin Turk, “This Is Not A Pipe” (2013) (foreground), glass;

Fred Wilson, “Iago’s Mirror” (2009) (background), glass

It’s the racist Iago, betrayer of Othello, who may have, in the poetic imagination, crafted this mirror. The piece, inadvertently, is given new context in light of a recent and sickening tragedy, when a Gambian migrant drowned in a Venetian canal this past January — witnesses stated that onlookers reportedly laughed and shouted racist retorts as he drowned. Incidentally, it’s impossible to divorce Venice from its migrant population: tourism is partly driven by the city’s glass and souvenir salespeople, many of whom are migrants; after a tornado in early 2015, dozens of volunteer migrants turned out to help clean the streets of debris and rebuild homes.

The relationship between predominately white or colonial Europe and its migrant population is examined further in Pascale Marthine Tayou’s “Colonne Coloniale,” a towering piece comprised of white metal pans adorned with European flower motifs, stacked nearly to the ceiling. At the feet of the structure stand glass versions of traditional wooden African figures in Western clothing. While these bodies seem to be confronted with the dishes’ mass — they are so much smaller — the whole lot of them are encroaching upon the tower, intent on either dismantling or studying it.

<https://hyperallergic.com/377181/floridas-love-for-shiny-glass-art-takes-a-surprisingly-political-turn/>



Glasstress: Boca Raton installation view at Boca Raton Museum of Art

That's what's strange about a room full of glass: there are a million sets of eyes to watch you closely, even if they're your own, and truths become magnified or distorted by the material's form. Adel Abidin's "The Reward," a set of glass Medieval torture masks, is the result of his work for *Glasstress Gotika*, an exhibition organized by the Fondazione Berengo, the 2015 Venice Biennale, and the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Abidin's masks are scary, because it's unnerving to simultaneously see clearly through them and and imagine their dense and violent history.

There's a kind of allegorical irony in viewing works that showcase historical violence and repugnant biology with the most translucent of materials: historically speaking, we've been unwittingly complicit in atrocity and our own demise, despite its visibility. In Song Dong's "Glass Big Brother," a chandelier comprised of glass surveillance cameras, the object's purpose is again upended by its material: both the lens and the camera itself are glass. When you stare at the chandelier — it's mammoth, almost oppressive—you expect to feel yourself being watched, but there is only your reflection (and even that is unclear). In a glass chandelier of cameras, there is nothing for the lenses to see but themselves.

Glasstress: Boca Raton continues at the Boca Raton Museum of Art (501 Plaza Real, Boca Raton) through July 2.

<https://hyperallergic.com/377181/floridas-love-for-shiny-glass-art-takes-a-surprisingly-political-turn/>