



GLASS

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ave women glass artists recently created a new sculptural paradigm? When the work of Masami Koda, Jocelyne Prince, Kait Rhoads and Anna Skibska is examined closely the likely answer is yes. In a fascinating interface with contemporary sculpture in general, these artists are doing more than re-introducing multiple-element sculpture after a time of arid conceptualism, often so hostile to the object. They are collectively (and quite independently of one another) pushing sculpture closer to a new possibility, one of shifting centers, massing, disembodied volumes and intricately translucent compositions. Coming in the wake of Neo-Conceptual Art, however, their work nods to content, but only on the most primal, subjective plane. Since craft art is often about the nature of its own making or assembly, these four artists working in glass allude to construction and process but, by virtue of their chosen techniques (blowing, lampworking, casting, etc.), use such approaches as metaphorical stand-ins for broader references. Claiming the additive sculptural process as a feminist strategy (as in Louise Bourgeois, Louise Nevelson, Judy Pfaff and others), Koda,

Prince, Rhoads and Skibska are all creating images of generative growth, protective forms, open linear networks and clusters of circular, feminine forms.

Femcluster is a term that might describe this cumulative effect. Each artist in her own way contributes to the private terrain of Femcluster: by gathering and piling up pieces of glass that result in open-ended forms redolent of outward growth and open visibility. Leaving behind the opaque, volumetric units of Minimal Art, for example (as in the masculine architectonic structures of Ronald Bladen and Robert Morris), the Femcluster artists present the viewer with fragility strengthened through intertwining, and delicacy enhanced by the inherent properties of glass.

To be fair the work of at least one male artist—the chandeliers of Dale Chihuly (1992 to the present)—provide a very substantial precedent for the massive clustering of individual, related glass elements. However, their size is so overwhelming as to remove them from the intimate realm of Femcluster. Similarly, the lucid transparency of James Carpenter's glass and metal architectural constructions anticipated the connectedness of, say, Rhoads' glass igloos but, again, is so overscaled by comparison as to cease attaining any sculptural, or feminine, potential.

With *Megapathogen* (1994), Jocelyne Prince posited her own, dense vision of Femcluster. At once preposterous, humorous, poignant and beautiful, this work combines duct tape, real pumpkins and blown glass blobs into a strange science-fiction, off-kilter sphere of imposing presence. Here and in the low-to-the-ground *Thaw: A Wasting Disease* (1997), Prince employs extreme informality of construction. The clear and frosted glass plates and silvered blown elements piled atop one another reject the confident, finite size of conventional sculpture, not to

Previous page:
Jocelyne Prince
Thaw: A Wasting Disease, 1997.
Blown and silvered
glass, 20 x 140 x
230cm.
Photo:
Paul Litherland

Anna Skibska
Structure, 1995.
(detail). Lampworked
glass, 37 x 24 x 1"
Photo:
Anna Skibska



mention leaving any decorative arts legacy of the vessel a million miles behind. Instead, Prince at least retains a sense of reflective finish common to much glass art while avoiding color altogether.

Like Robert Smithson's prophetic mirror sculptures, *Eight Unit Piece* (1969) and *Alagon* (1972), Prince's *Thaw: A Wasting Disease* is downbeat, messy, dirty and shiny, all at the same time. Its juxtapositions of shiny and matte, grungy and glitzy are also oblique spins on what Donald Kuspit once referred to (in writing about '70s artists Rodney Ripps, Lynda Benglis and John Torreano) as "cosmetic transcendentalism." The viewer is jolted into another state of consciousness by the shiny surfaces but, in Prince's case, dragged back to reality by the dingy glass plates or, in *Megapathogen*, by the startling mundanity of the pumpkins. Even more dismissive of masculine scale and the macho density of foundry-cast volume, Masami Koda adapts lampworking techniques to feminine clusters redolent of flowers, female anatomy and delicate insect chrysalises and seedpod forms. *Sunflower* (1997) is an icon of Femcluster. Carefully assembled of clear, pale green and angry red "petals," *Sunflower* is a mesmerizing work that sidesteps the dainty in spite of its revelation of delicate, time-consuming process. Part sunflower, part sea anemone, part vagina, its vivid red center seems slightly predatory in appeal.

Orbit (1998), a cluster of bunched, pale pink "new blooms" hovering above a clumped-together group of desiccated husks or podlike forms, is even more assertive. Part pseudo-science,

part ceremonial offering, *Orbit* uses glass, paper and copper to convey metaphors of nature, community, death and rebirth. Extending the cluster idea to one of mock architectural construction, Kait Rhoads falls short of betraying the sculptural object into the area of building arts. While some of her "huts" are pedestal-size (*Doublehut*, 1999), several larger works (*Blue Dome*, 1995; *Pas de Deux*, 1999), have been shown in installation settings in Seattle and Astoria, Oregon. In these works, the clustering is activated by assembling colored pieces of glass into ice-blocklike, stacked rows underconnected by diagonal patterns of steel wire. Realms of protection, places for nestling or contemplation, the "huts" or "shelters" expand the scale of glass sculpture through feminist studio strategies similar to knitting or sewing. The casual, diagonal wire networks undercut potential fragility or collapsibility. Volume is avoided by the emphasis on a central surrounded void.

In these ways and others, the Femcluster artists are redefining glass sculpture and contributing to a broader contemporary art dialogue that challenges the macho monolithic legacy of large-scale Minimal sculpture. Polish-born artist Anna Skibska is making her own substantial contributions. Since her widely hailed U.S. debut in 1996, Skibska has extended her meticulous forays into more intimate glass networks, accentuating see-through forms alluding to nature, microscopic structures and ways that glass can be used to attain scale and presence.

The former Soros Fellow from Wroclaw has completed recent temporary installations in Seattle; New York; Portland, Oregon; and St. Louis. Her earliest American works, such as *Tympanum* (1992), were done in New York on a Kosciuszko Foundation fellowship. Purportedly inspired by New York, its streets and skyscrapers, Skibska did not fully come into her own as an artist until she arrived in Seattle. Coming into contact with other women artists, Skibska's art became less jagged, more rounded, more graceful and colorful.

Her sense of form led to groupings of objects as in *Owe* (2000) wherein irregularly hung oblong shapes of lampworked glass networks are suspended in "crowds," like ghostly figures gathering on a darkened moonlit night. As with the other three artists under discussion, Skibska has arrived at a Femcluster sensibility through a gradual and growing technical evolution of her own ideas rather than drawing on any group-think, theory, or even loosely knit women artist's support group. Independent yet acutely aware of the advantages of community, Skibska's use of interconnected glass filament networks and her glowing, transparent effigies shift her work from nature to figure, from singular to effective multiple-element compositions. Femcluster may inform or describe her work, as with the others, but it does not define or direct its future. Those possibilities are solely in the hands of the artists.

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Left:
Masami Koda
***Sunflower*, 1997.**
Lampworked glass,
8 x 10 x 10"
Photo:
Richard Nicol

Below left:
Kait Rhoads
***Doublehut*, 1999.**
Glass, wire and
steel, 11 x 18 x 12"
Photo:
Roger Schreiber