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Really? It's All Made of Glass?

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO DEC. 30, 2007

"Is that glass?" gulped the young girl to the docent taking a group of schoolchildren through "Shattering Glass: New Perspectives," at the [Katonah Museum of Art](#). "Yes," the docent replied, "every single thing you see in this exhibition is glass."

I know how the schoolgirl felt, for many of the two dozen artworks here are of infinite beauty and wonder. Some of the displays don't look like glass, and the exhibition is so rich in stylistic diversity that it is hard to believe everything is made of the same material.

Working with glass is not easy, the material imposing all sorts of limitations on artists. Paramount, also, are safety concerns. At the same time, hot liquid glass is intrinsically malleable, able to be coiled, twisted, bent and broken into all-over-the-place shapes.

Inventiveness abounds in "Shattering Glass," beginning in the foyer, where Sharon Loudon has attached hundreds of buzzing, energized squiggles of colored glass to the walls, floor and ceiling. Here the artist is literally drawing in glass. The installation is flush with a sense of joy and pleasure.

There is a fine line in glass art between pleasure and kitsch. I am thinking of those fabulously excessive decorative glass displays you sometimes find in hotel lobbies, the kind of things designed to appeal to audiences visiting from all over the taste map. Such displays are not so much art as interior decoration.

Fortunately, there is no kitsch in this exhibition, for the curators, Neil Watson and Ellen J. Keiter, have been judicious in their selection. In fact, the accent is more on contemporary artists who happen to work from time to time with glass rather than what you might call contemporary glass artists, who tend to be associated with glassmaking as a studio-based craft.

Richard Klein, an established artist, often uses eyeglass lenses to make sculptures. Showing here is "Transparency" (2007), a wall-mounted construction made out of found ashtrays and hundreds of recycled eyeglass lenses. The varying shapes and magnification of each of the pieces of glass refract light, much as a stained-glass window does. The work can, however, be somewhat dizzying to look at.

Josiah McElheny is another well-known contemporary artist who works with glass. He was trained as a studio glassmaker but has forged a reputation for himself in the New York contemporary art world. On display here is his "Modernity Circa 1962, Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely" (2004), consisting of eight hand-blown mirrored glass vessels inside a mirrored cabinet. The reflective environment makes it seem as if hundreds of vessels were on display.

Several other artists work with optical illusions. One is Thérèse Lahaie, who makes kinetic wall sculptures consisting of a rotating motor that flutters a piece of fabric behind a mottled, vividly lighted sheet of tinted glass. The combination of motor, glass and light creates the illusion of waves ebbing and flowing like the ocean tide. This is probably not the most complex or conceptual work in the exhibition, but the visual effects are beautiful, even hypnotic.

The fragility of glass — something we take for granted — is never really made apparent in this show, except in Beth Lipman's "Still Life With Metal Pitcher" (2007), an eye-catching display of 400 hand-blown glass vessels on a dining table. There is no metal pitcher here, or not one that I could find, but it doesn't really matter because this work is all about visual delight. It is a densely packed optical extravaganza modeled after Dutch still lifes.

A willingness to experiment with placement is what distinguishes this show from other, run-of-the-mill glass exhibitions, which tend to treat the art as a precious object. There are no barriers to viewing here, with artworks mostly installed directly on the walls or floor. The curators have allowed the displays to spill out of the galleries into the public areas, where you will find, among other works, Arlene Shechet's lengths of ice-blue cast crystal rope lying along the walls and floor.

Another artwork, by Bill FitzGibbons, is installed in the museum's two street-front windows. It consists of computer-activated LED screens that emit a wildly fluctuating colored light show, the colors morphing and mixing together. Sometimes the light even dances between the windows, as if in conversation — a playful invitation to anyone passing by.

