

IN VENICE, THREE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS ARE UPDATING THE TRADITIONAL CRAFT OF GLASS.



BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ

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Yoichi Ohira's *Cristallo Sommerso* series of hand-blown glass, 2008.

In 1291, the rulers of Venice ordered all glass foundries to relocate to the little island of Murano, about a mile to the northeast of the main cluster of islands, because of the fire hazard they posed to the city's wooden buildings. Ever since then, the island's name has been synonymous with hand-blown, luminously colored, deftly crafted glass. It is produced by skilled artisans using techniques that have been passed down over many generations, allowing them to shape what is essentially molten sand into everything from tableware and decorative vases to walking canes, paperweights, souvenir figurines and beads.

Laura de Santillana's *Bodhi* series, 2006, hand-blown, shaped and hand-ground glass with mirrored interior.

But there is more to Murano than tourist keepsakes. Over the years, some of the island's oldest glass-making companies have also worked with product designers to bring a distinctly modernist sensibility to such functional objects as lighting fixtures, office furnishings, clocks and mirrors. In addition, some artist-designers who work in a fine-art context have developed close working relationships with certain glass foundries and their master glass blowers and carvers. In many cases, such *maestri*—master artisans—are the descendants of skilled craftsmen who had been associated with the same venerable firms in the past.

In this closely collaborative setting, steeped in tradition and technical expertise, the Venice-based artists Laura de Santillana, Cristiano Bianchin and Yoichi Ohira have been creating mostly abstract objects in glass for many years. From their shared base in a city that has always looked outward even as it has fastidiously guarded its secrets—Murano artisans are famously not keen on giving away

their techniques—these artists have gained renown for their aesthetic and technical experiments. The intriguing looks and hard-to-classify forms of their art glass creations bolster their admirers' claim that, when it comes to sculpture today, glass is the new bronze.

This year, the work of all three of these innovative artists is being featured in Venice's own exhibition at the Venice Biennale, which will remain on view through Nov. 22. Meanwhile, *Venice: Three Visions in Glass*, a 10-year collective retrospective of their works, will be on view at Barry Friedman, a gallery in New York's Chelsea district, from Oct. 29–Jan. 16. From there it will travel to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, the Naples Museum of Art in Florida and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

If the Friedman presentation offers a quiet riot of luscious colors and unusual forms, it also proposes one of the strongest arguments to date that, as De Santillana puts

it, "Glass has the same expressive potential as any other material that is typically used to make art, be it marble, resin, bronze or clay." Although glass as a material has gained considerable acceptance in recent decades, thanks largely to the accomplishments of artists like De Santillana, she notes that "working with glass is a road that must still be fully traveled."

Ohira started his own journey on that road of invention in 1969. He graduated from a design school in Tokyo, then did an apprenticeship and later worked as a full-fledged glassblower himself at glass-making factories in his native Japan. In 1973 he headed to Italy, where he studied sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice. After graduating five years later, Ohira exhibited contemporary-style sculptures made of welded iron and plate glass and in the late 1980s was invited to create art-glass collections for the De Majo glass-making concern on Murano. By that time the Japanese artist was already known on the island

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thanks to his association with the artist-entrepreneur Egidio Constantini of the Fucina degli Angeli glass company.

Since starting to work as a glass artist on Murano, Ohira has enthusiastically embraced and even dared to refine the island's creative tradition, in which a designer-artist like himself presents his ideas for any new work to a foundry's blower and carver. Speaking in Japanese, Ohira reverently uses a keyword from Italian, which he has come to speak fluently after more than three decades in Italy: "The *collaborazione* between myself, the glass blower and the glass carver who puts the finishing touches on a new piece is seamless. We have much admiration and respect for each other's skill, talent, experience and vision, all of which come together to make a new work. It's as though we were one person with three minds and three pairs of hands."

Breaking with tradition, Ohira went on to establish one of his own: For many years now, on the bottom of each piece he creates, he has made sure to inscribe the names of his collaborating blower and carver along with his name. The works for which he is best known have been made at the Anfora glassworks on Murano, first in collaboration with the master glassblower Livio Serena and later

with Andrea Zilio, and with the master cutter and grinder Giacomo Barbini. Ohira always carefully selects and prepares a tray filled with an arrangement of the pieces of colored or transparent glass canes and materials he will need to create a particular patterned object. That material is heated and then, after the molten mixture is soft and cool enough to be handled, is shaped according to the exacting instructions the designer-artist has sketched out in a preliminary drawing.

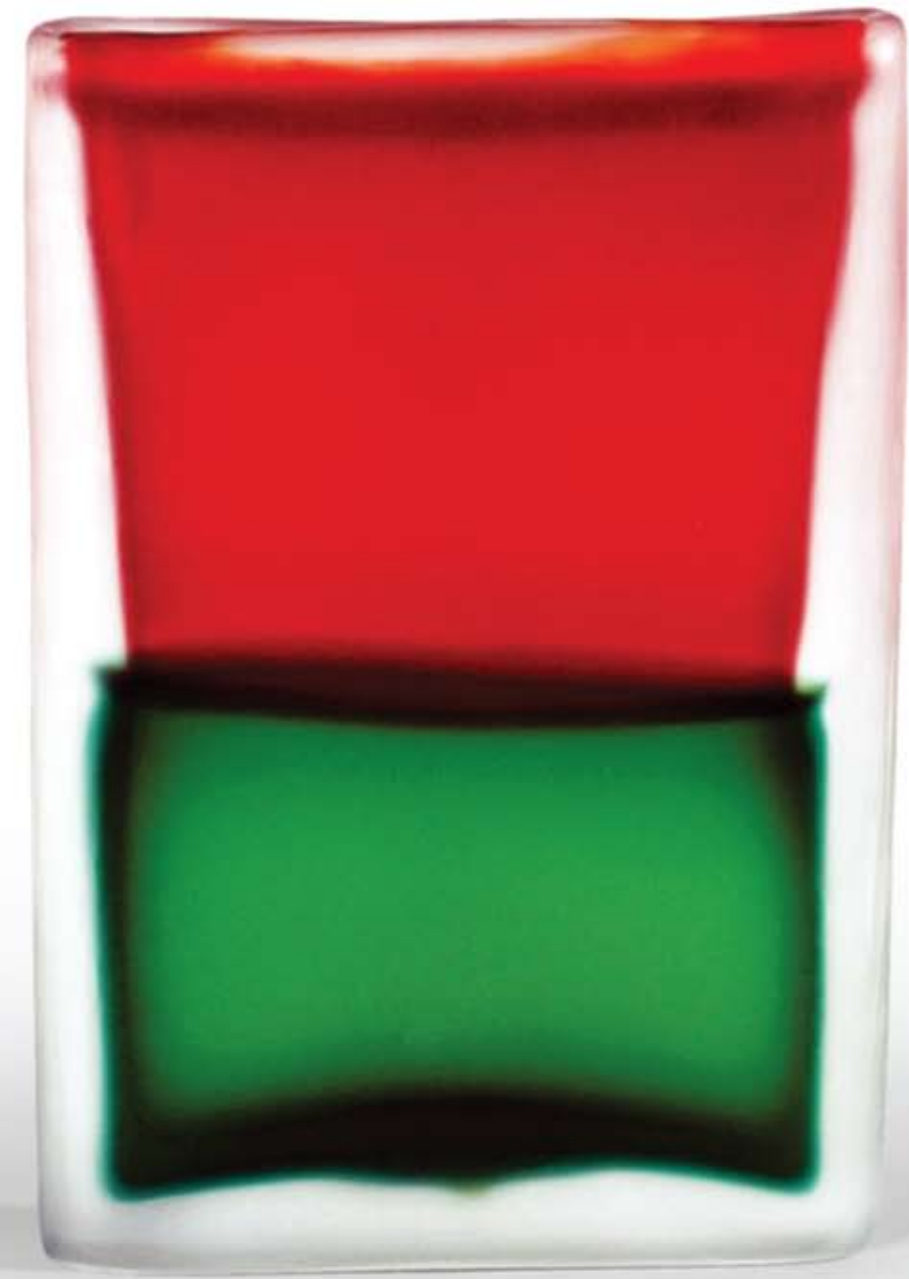
Attilia Dorigato, a former director of the Museum of Glass on Murano, has compared the surfaces of the corpulent, curvaceous objects Ohira creates—they are never vessels in a conventional sense, although many boast tiny, stem-like spouts—to abstract artists' canvases. Indeed, both Ohira's process and the results of his art-making in glass have been largely expressionistic. David Revere McFadden, chief curator at the Museum of Arts & Design in New York, which owns works by Ohira and De Santillana, says that Ohira "has introduced a rich Japanese aesthetic into Italian glass-making; it relates to the Japanese lacquer and textiles traditions. It's a very different approach from that which had been taking place in Italian glass-making for a long time. The last big innovator who changed the medium so dramatically was Carlo Scarpa in the 1960s." (The Venetian-born Scarpa was a versatile creator of designs for buildings, gardens, furniture and glass.)

Ohira often works in series. Pop art colors and flecks of transparent glass embedded in their sides mark the pieces in his early *Pastello* group of bowls and gourd-shaped vases. By contrast, some of the shapes of the objects in his *Pasta Vitrea* series evoke those of classical vessels, while the ribbons of earthy browns or water-inspired blues and greens in the vigorous decorative patterns on the objects in his *Lagoon* series add up to an abstract, atmospheric love note to his adopted city. His *Lagoon* works exude such an air of history that they call to mind the recovered remains of ceramics from the ancient civilizations of Japan and the Mediterranean; as for glass, a centuries-old document identified by the Museum of Glass indicates that blown glass was being made in the region as early as the late 10th century.

More recently, Ohira created his *Cristallo Sommerso* ("submerged crystal") series. Its title refers to a difficult technique in which one layer of glass, usually colored, is set against another to create a kind of vessel-within-a-vessel form. However, Ohira's submerged works dispense with color altogether and look more like stacks of big chunks of crystal-clear, otherworldly ice.

"As glass artists, we're absolutely present throughout the glass-blowing and shaping process, working closely with the *soffiatore*—the master glass-blower—in the short, precious time when the hot glass is just soft and cool enough to be handled," says De Santillana. The artist is a granddaughter

Because of the depth and radiance of their colors and their simple compositions, De Santillana's *Tokyo-ga* works have often been compared to Mark Rothko's emblematic paintings of floating bands of colors.



From left: *Chrysalislike*, *Little Buddha*, 2007; *Urn*, *Canopic Jar*, 2005, both by Cristiano Bianchin; *Tokyo-ga XV Rosso/Verde*, 2008.

of Paolo Venini, the cofounder, in 1921, of the Murano glass company that still bears his name. In New York in the 1970s, De Santillana studied graphic design at the School of Visual Arts and worked in the studio of the legendary Milan-born graphic designer Massimo Vignelli.

Later, back in Venice, with her father overseeing the family business, De Santillana became a designer at Venini, whose renown as a center for innovative glass production had long since spread far beyond Venice. In 1968, for example, Venini had welcomed Dale Chihuly, from Tacoma, Wash., and hosted the young American's Fulbright Fellowship residency. Other artists from the U.S., such as James Carpenter and Richard Marquis, also spent time at Venini during that period and would become indelibly associated with the American studio glass movement of the 1960s and '70s.

After working as a staff designer at Venini and at another company in Venice, De Santillana began to focus on her own work as a fine artist. She is perhaps best known for her enigmatic rectangular forms, which completely reject the traditional role of glass works as functional vessels. To make these sculptural pieces, collectively known as *Tokyo-ga*, after the title of a 1985 Wim Wenders film (the phrase means "Tokyo picture"), De Santillana allows their thick, broad sides to collapse in on themselves and even to touch. The resulting freestanding forms, whose glass might be opaque, transparent or highlighted by wide bands of color, are more like those of paintings or strange headstones than those of any conventional glass or ceramic vessels. Because of the depth and radiance of their colors and their simple compositions, these works have often been compared to Mark Rothko's emblematic paintings of floating bands of colors. De Santillana has also experimented with iridescent color and more voluminous, abstract forms in her round, squat *Bodhi* sculptures. Their series title refers to the concept, in Buddhist thought, of enlightenment, or spiritual awakening; the Italian artist has long been interested in Buddhism.

She acknowledges the magnitude of the challenge posed by all the technical difficulties she faces in making blown glass perform in ways that might contradict its natural inclination. She describes her relationship with glass in emotional terms, noting that, in giving it form, she feels a need to "reach the point of my own freedom at which I can express myself without the material making me its slave." Her own spirit, she says, "is very joyous," but she hesitates to interpret what her works might mean. For viewers, as for the artist herself, she says, her unusual art is very simply about "color, a transparent material and light."

Cristiano Bianchin, another native Venetian, thinks and speaks like a poet who savors the uncomplicated but resonant splendors of the everyday—what he calls "the sumptuous architecture" of Venice and the sights and sounds of its narrow, labyrinthine streets. Like Ohira, he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, but he majored in painting

instead of sculpture. Bianchin recalls that when he was a boy, his father worked in a 14th-century palazzo that housed an exhibition of regional craft works. Visiting his father there, he felt an "irresistible desire to examine and touch the objects" on display, including glass works, ceramics and artist-made jewelry.

Bianchin made works in other media before turning to glass in 1992. Since then, he has made sculptures whose shapes vaguely recall those of ancient ceremonial or perhaps funerary objects. Using opaque black glass whose surface is satin-finished using grinding wheels and sanding belts, Bianchin has created his *Chrysalis Forms*, a series of objects whose shapes bring to mind sci-fi spaceships, giant-insect sarcophagi or pods. Bianchin's other series of related works include his *Urns* and *Urns With Stoppers*, some of which are partly "clothed" in snugly fitting, sock-like bags of beige-colored crochet. The visual and physical contrasts between the slightly rough and exquisitely smooth surfaces of Bianchin's fiber and his sleek, even erotic black glass are at once unexpected and alluring.

Evoking the "slow passage of time and decadent beauty" he feels in his hometown of faded glories and meandering canals, Bianchin says he has come to regard glass as being similar to a cell "of the human body, in which all of a person's genetic code is packed into his DNA." He suggests that it is the primordial character and inexplicably expressive power of this ageless material, which starts out as molten sand, that intrigues and captivates him.

Tina Oldknow, the curator of modern glass at the Corning Museum of Glass in New York, notes that as glass continues to "become more well known and generally more accepted" as an artistic medium and not just a material for decorative functional objects, "we'll see less of this divide between fine art and craft." Artists like Ohira, De Santillana and Bianchin might be working with vessel-like forms, she adds, but in doing so, "they're exploring relationships between traditional decorative arts and contemporary sculpture." Cara McCarty, the curatorial director at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York, says that glass art "is no longer a fledgling art form" and observes that "for many people who respond to and collect glass art, there's a 'Wow! How did they do that?' factor; people appreciate fine craftsmanship, and often their reactions are visceral." Similarly, Jane Adlin, an associate curator of 19th-century, modern and contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, says, "I think the public loves it. It's a very seductive medium."

Individually and collectively, in collaboration with some of the most-skilled craftsmen in the world, Ohira, De Santillana and Bianchin have helped create a whole new genre of sculptural art. And as *Venice: Three Visions in Glass* convincingly shows, even as these artists' careers are reaching new creative peaks, the next chapter in the history of modern art glass may now be heating up. **A**



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From left: Yoichi Ohira, *Notturmo con due Montagne*, 2006; Yoichi Ohira, *Notturmo: Montagna Rocciosa con la Luna*, 2006.