

ARTIST STATEMENT

Elemental Mutability: An Exploration in Glass

These kiln-formed glass pieces are the result of a productive and intensive period of time spent working at the Factory Research and Education Center at Bullseye Glass Company where I had been offered a month-long artist residency in 2012. I had just returned from a month abroad studying the natural and altered landscapes of ancient Britain when I arrived to work in the studio at Bullseye so ideas about the historic responsiveness of early peoples to the natural elements of weather and time were fresh in my mind at the outset of my creative endeavor. It occurred to me that these same elements have continued to influence our relationships with the celestial and terrestrial phenomena of change in the landscape of our present so this interplay became a kind of springboard from which to explore the medium of kiln-formed glass and its inherent properties. I set out to experiment with the parallels of how we experience these changes in the landscape and how they might also be manifested in the medium of glass. In the process, I learned something about what glass can do, what I could do with it, and what it could do with me as an artist if I remained open, engaged and responsive to the creative interplay the medium offers.

For the first series, I sought to impose some changes onto this new medium by introducing the elements of size, shape, position, hue and brightness in the form of scraped and re-layered frit; working from the specific to the general as I repeatedly fired the works. Employing this process (which was directly opposite that of my painting technique) allowed me to explore what possibilities glass held before boldly undertaking the next series in which I discovered what could be done in the medium. Sand and minerals continually shift through the forces of wind, rain and gravity. When they are brought to a high temperature they become molten, fluid and transitory. They move from this state of flux into a more plastic or malleable stage before cooling and hardening fast as glass so we think of this medium as being stable, permanent and fixed. However, rather than it being unchanging or immutable, glass remains in a constant state of change and is subject to the gravitational pull of the planet as if the material meant to return or revert to its elemental state as it does in geologic time. To paraphrase Bill Bryson in *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, all glass is still viscous and flowing as a result of gravity relentlessly dragging it back down to earth so that when observing old panes of glass in the windows of European cathedrals one finds that they are visibly thinner at the top than at the bottom. With these notions of viscosity and reversion to an elemental state in mind, I created pieces suggesting the remnants of constructed circular landforms I had seen abroad in the process of resettling back into the earth or water of the landscape. This, in turn, led me to respond to glass as if it was a scape of its own as I introduced elements suggestive of air, atmosphere, space, and minerals in creating the next series of pieces examining immediacy and distance in our present.

Ancient peoples acknowledged that their world embodied opposites; light and shadow; night and day; winter and summer; above and below ground; solar and lunar; life and death so these works encompass a kind of ongoing interrelationship of human beings with the celestial and terrestrial. Some of the pieces explore the inherent tension between stillness and motion just as we experience the phenomena of tidal shifts, plant growth, seasonal changes, or the aurora borealis creating curtains of shimmering light. Even planetary bodies can appear stationary in the sky when viewed from earth while they actually experience slow but constant movement. So the final, larger scale works deal with the notion of coastlines, ice floes, lava beds, edgelands and other liminal spaces or scapes appearing fixed – especially if seen from a distance (and from above) as in satellite imagery – but actually engaged in a process of continual change. The transformational quality of these elements is reflected through both, process and theme in the bodies of work I created during this residency period. Conceptually, I had some ideas to explore around the mutability of elements that make up our bodies, our planet, our solar system and the process of experiencing the immediate landscape of our present and I wanted to see what shape or form they might take in the medium of glass. I approached the process by discovering what I could make of glass as an artist and discovered instead what it would make of me as I became more responsive to the material and its inherent properties rather than simply forcing its responsiveness to technical changes I imposed upon it as part of my process. Creatively, I enjoyed the challenge of expanding the parameters of my art practice through this introduction to glass. I am grateful to Bullseye Glass Company for having offered me the opportunity to explore the medium of kiln-formed glass through this intensive, productive artist residency and I hope to work with their skilled support staff again in the future to learn and create anew.

James B. Thompson