



ART OF
JANUSZ WALENTYNOWICZ

***Moments of Respite: The Glass Sculpture
of Janusz Walentynowicz***

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Walentynowicz is one of the most important figurative artists working in glass today. His work is in museum collections around the world and will be seen this fall at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Janusz Walentynowicz belongs to the first generation of glass artists determined to move beyond the sheer thrill of technical innovation, that dominated the first two decades of the contemporary studio glass movement. Coming of age as artists in the 1980s, some twenty years after the movement's birth, the new generation has sought to use the extensive range of technical knowledge bequeathed to them by their elders to explore ideas and expressive possibilities well beyond the confines of their material's natural beauty. Some have even chosen in their work to deliberately deny glass's traditionally prized qualities of brilliance, clarity, and translucence.

Concern over whether contemporary glass should be defined as a craft or as fine art continues to plague this current generation, with some confidently asserting that "glass is on the verge of transcending its historic connotation as a craft material," while others already committed to glass as fine art bemoan the dismissal of the medium as "the pretty girl of the art world" who "has to try harder to prove [herself] serious." Regardless of formal definitions, in the last decade glass has formed strong links to mainstream sculpture.

Many younger artists trained in glass have embraced the use of mixed media, combining glass with materials such as paint, wood, marble and bronze. In turn, glass has

increasingly attracted mainstream sculptors as a legitimate medium to use in their own work. The blurring of distinctions among media is becoming more common, and the question of craft or fine art may someday simply become irrelevant as studio glass becomes fully integrated with other media. What is certain today is that many artists are increasingly asking what they can say in glass rather than what they can do with glass.

Janusz Walentynowicz is certainly one of these artists. His primary concern has always been to find a way to express in artistic form his interest in what he calls “the intimate levels of human relations.” The medium he has chosen to use and the form his work has taken are direct results of his search to express this purpose. Like many glass artists, Walentynowicz came to glass through ceramics, which he studied throughout his formative education. In fact, he worked independently as a ceramist in Tølløse, Denmark for two years before continuing his studies in ceramics in 1978 at the Skolen for Brugskunst (School for Applied Arts) in Copenhagen. There he discovered the medium of glass and abandoned ceramics to study with Finn Lynggaard, for whom he would later work as an assistant in Lynggaard’s private studio in Elbeltoft. In 1982 Lynggaard introduced the aspiring young artist to Joel Philip Myers, head of the glass program at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois. Walentynowicz entered the Master of Fine Arts program in glass at Illinois State that same year. He remained at the university working closely with Myers until 1991 when he deliberately chose not to complete the requirements for his academic degree so that he would not be tempted to fall back on a teaching career. Since then he has worked as an independent artist, living in Bloomington, Illinois. What has remained constant throughout his long process of development as an artist has been Walentynowicz’s expressive purpose: “In a way I’ve kind of completed a circle. . . .What I was doing in ceramics has the same kind of concerns that my work has today. That has been kind of constant. Moving into glass I didn’t know how to work with it. . . .I tried everything -- and then I found that I could use glass for expressing those same interests. I still didn’t know enough about the process. But now I’ve got the expertise and I can use the glass the way I once used ceramics, while exploring the exciting new qualities that glass has to offer.” And it is the artist’s intention and his attitude toward his work rather than the medium he uses wherein he finds a critical distinction between craft and fine art: “Being an artist is, for me, definitely not an occupation it’s a way of life. For me that’s the only way it can be. When you’re dealing with crafts you give all your energy and all your time. However, when you deal with art you give your life.”

Indeed, Walentynowicz’s work is highly personal. The themes are drawn from his own life experience. His sister, his father, as well as his own portrait are frequent subjects. The autobiographical undercurrent in the work is in fact so alluring that the viewer almost can not help but speculate about the artist’s life. Almost no critic who has written about Walentynowicz’s work to date has not felt compelled to report the fact that the artist’s father, a commercial fisherman, drowned while his son was still a boy. Many writers have also mentioned that the family had emigrated from their native Poland to Denmark as political refugees when the artist was only four years old and that his father’s death occurred on the eve of the family’s intended move to Australia.

Like expressionist predecessors such as Vincent Van Gogh or Edvard Munch, the threads of Walentynowicz's life cling to his work and seem at times almost inseparable from it. Who, after all, even if they have only heard the name in passing, does not know that Van Gogh cut off his ear, sent it to a prostitute, and then painted a self-portrait featuring his bandaged head? Who, knowing even the briefest facts about Walentynowicz's life, does not look at works such as *Father and Son -- Hate Me* and wonder about the artist's unresolved relationship with a father who did not live to reach the age the artist is now? Who can look at the *Burden* reliefs and not think about the lifelong psychological effects of a father's death on an uprooted family? Even works that have less obvious autobiographical content, like *Rabbit Boys*, bear the weight of these events. After hearing his life story it is not difficult to imagine the artist haunted by questions of self identity, pondering the various masks one wears in the course of a lifetime.

The true expressive power of Walentynowicz's work, however, does not lie in speculative intrigue over the details of the artist's life. If it did, the work would grow stale as quickly as gossip does. Rather, like all successful expressionist works, the sculpture's power is in the tension the artist creates between his personal experience and the universal human experience. The works transcend the specifics of his own life allowing us as viewers to respond to their intensity on our own terms. In the end we experience the burden in Walentynowicz's series of that name as our own.

Walentynowicz himself is keenly aware that to succeed his sculpture must liberate itself from him: "The themes I work with come directly from personal experience. Still, when a piece is finished for me I want to find myself in the position of the beholder, as surprised and as intrigued as anyone else could be by the evidence of the complicity of human nature and the simplicity of survival." As an artist he is interested in what he calls the element of recognition or moment of personal connection between the viewer and his work, the moment when the viewer sees himself reflected in the work. Though his sculptures are insistently figurative, in order to heighten this element of self-recognition for the viewer, the artist is not particularly interested in narrative: "I don't necessarily want people to look for a story. If they do that, they're looking for my story, which isn't important. What's important is that it shows a direction, then the viewer can look at it and put their own experience into it, and color it their own way. It's never a story with a beginning and an end, it's a slice of something, you add your own experience to it." In fact, Walentynowicz describes his sculptures as "points of balance, moments of respite from dilemma -- of the past -- of the future. . . . Moments of quiet renewal, which ask no questions and give no answers." Because of their fragile elusiveness these evocative moments, like dreams or memories, haunt us long after we have seen the work. Walentynowicz's approach to his medium is consistent with the expressionist tradition of which he is a part. He is willing to do anything in order to achieve his expressive intention. It is not particularly surprising to learn that even though he is a figurative sculptor he does not work from a life model because it would be irrelevant to his purpose. His figures, particularly his male figures, often appear stiff, awkward, and out of proportion because their form is essential to his meaning. The seeming naivete of many of his figures, which have been compared at times to those in European folk art in spite of the difference in origins, is more accurately

linked to artists such as Medardo Rosso or Alberto Giacometti. Walentynowicz's deliberate, informed naivete is that of a very accomplished artist who is in full command of his medium. One has only to look at the sensitive, almost classical beauty of some of his figures, such as his Anna in Respite or the Untitled figure from the Columbus Museum of Art to fully appreciate this.

Walentynowicz works in cast glass, creating both figures in the round and large wall reliefs. He has faced major technical challenges over the last five years as the scale of his work has increased to life size. For his wall reliefs he has developed a negative casting technique in which he casts the space around a hollowed-out figure, which then projects a positive image when the relief is viewed from the front. Although he makes quick sketches of an idea before he begins, he prefers to work out his ideas in the wax from which he will eventually make the plaster mold. He does a considerable amount of cold work after the cast is removed from the mold, including not only grinding and polishing but in most of his pieces painting. He paints from both the front and the back in the case of the reliefs, using paint both to strengthen the viewer's identification with his figures and to intensify the mood he wants particular sculptures to evoke. In works such as Madelaine -- She Danced impressionistic daubs of paint create a bed of fallen leaves from which his figures emerge like an unearthed memory. In Burden -- Holding On, a crowd of painted, staring faces float, remote and unreachable, beneath the surface of the glass slab which the figure, whose own physical presence is dramatically heightened by being painted, hugs to his chest with such passion that he must close his eyes.

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The subtle, seductive quality of Walentynowicz's sculpture challenges the viewer to transcend a simple contemplation of the work's tactile beauty. "Art should make a statement," he asserts. "I admire work that has guts and deals with issues that are interesting and controversial. Art is not out there to give us what we want. Art gets the viewer to look at things in a different way. Many times initially, it is something we don't like that will eventually win us over."

Nannette V Maciejunes, Senior Curator, Columbus Museum of Art.