

## ESSAY



by James Yood

The prospect of exhibiting his sculpture at the Glasmuseet in Ebeltoft is more than a terrific opportunity for Janusz Walentynowicz to show his work at a prestigious institution. Literally, it is a chance for him to come home. To bring his work to Denmark, where he began the artistic journey that has led him to America and his position as a highly honored contemporary sculptor must be extremely satisfying for him. In its way it is a completing of a circle, an affirmation of a career, and a moment of both pride and humility. Janusz Walentynowicz experienced something special in Denmark—specifically, at and around the Skolen for Brugskunst in Copenhagen--something that changed his life forever. While it is never a place or a school that makes an individual an artist, I have never met an artist who isn't grateful to the site where he or she learned his or her craft, where vision was formed and possibilities began to percolate as to what just might be achieved. For Walentynowicz that place was Denmark, and while he has worked and lived in the United States for a quarter of a century, to this day he identifies himself as a Danish artist, born in Poland, residing in Illinois. (Even his career in the US is rooted in Denmark; it was in Denmark that he met Joel Philip Myers, head of the glass program at Illinois State University and himself an artist with strong connections to Denmark. Walentynowicz initially came to the US to study with Myers, and continues to live and work in central Illinois.)

This quality of a multiple or diverse heritage, this sense of shifting amongst potentially contradictory identities, is more than obliquely confirmed by the nature and range of Walentynowicz's work. While it would be incorrect to argue that experiencing an exhibition by Janusz Walentynowicz is like attending a group show, there is almost a palpable restlessness to his work, a refusal to concentrate narrowly on one or two particular styles or approaches, and the sense that he functions as peripatetically in his work as he did in his life. There is, of course, his signature move of casting glass, his preferred way of handling this material, one that he has plumbed over his career. But the variety of ways he does that, the other elements, both physical and pictorial, that he introduces into the realm of cast glass, the way he sometimes makes his work appear to be anything other than, well, cast glass, his insistence on the possibilities of narrative, all these make him one of the most pluralist artists working in contemporary glass. One could argue that his best-known approach has been to create a context where a human figure seems embedded within, seemingly beneath, a slab of glass, how through a series of molds he creates a body-shaped cavity whose rippled surface he then paints with oil paint creating a wonderfully illusionistic evocation of a figure (usually a nude woman). He walks a delicate line in these works, they are both planar and volumetric, two- and three-dimensional, sculptural and painterly, abstract and figurative, an art of surface and of depth, and physically imposing and psychologically fragile.

And they echo one of the core templates of the European tradition in the visual arts, that there is, for male artists certainly, something incessantly evocative and fulfilling in the consideration of the personhood and bodies of women. Walentynowicz never tires of this motif, and the eloquence with which he makes it touch on issues of desire, poignancy, companionship, loneliness, intimacy, the activity of looking, privacy, etc., both affirms and extends a tradition of which he becomes a part. His extension of this subject into

freestanding figures of women also touches on his position as heir to a great legacy, now in kiln cast glass rather than in pristine white marble. While for much of his career these women breathed a kind of delicacy and tenderness, a sort of wistfulness and vulnerability that almost has them seem outside time, in recent years these women have sometimes gone more fragmented and cubist, roughhewn, stacked up in what appear to be chunks of colored glass.

Walentynowicz's strategies of back-painting and casting recur in his other series as well. His long residence in America has not inured him to remnants of its frontier mentality, and guns, and the sudden and overwhelming violence they offer, seem to him to mark his adopted homeland. The ironically titled "Guns Save Life" series sees guns everywhere, tucked away in a woman's purse, encased in the pages of a book, as the tools of assassins and part of the backdrop of America. If his sculptures of women are Walentynowicz at his most subtle and teasing, luxuriating in a kind of open-ended sense of mystery and wonder, his images with guns show him at his most blunt and insistent, as if the issues at play here are too important to tiptoe about. And there are more, his recent series of abstract jigsaw puzzles, his wonderful set of chains, dysfunctional anvils, some self-portraits and images of kings, etc., a kind of ceaseless sense of alternatives laid out before him, as if he will not be a prisoner to any single style or subject.

For Walentynowicz takes his world with him wherever he goes, his is a case where it is not the place that comes fully to define the person. His center seems to be at some spot where things, both formally and conceptually, start to test one another, both constructing and deconstructing themselves. It is typical of him, for example, to make chains out of glass, at first glance a seeming contradiction. But these are thickly cast glass chains, their links look more secure than one would guess, he manages to conjoin fragility with a hint of bondage, as if these chains are something both actual and metaphorical. This is a position in which Walentynowicz always thrives, a zone where art is both representational and metaphysical and also both prose and poetry, a zone extending beyond the place of his birth, training, or current residence.

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