

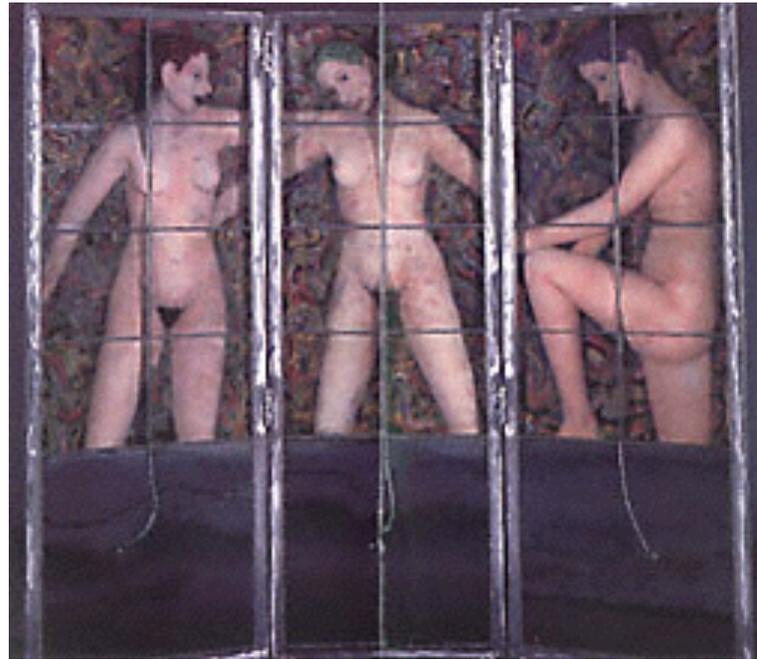
Confrontation: Glass or Art?

Janusz Walentynowicz
ABSOLUT VISION Chicago 4
July 9 - August 31, 1999

Marx-Saunders Gallery Limited
230 West Superior
Chicago, Illinois 60610
Telephone: 312/ 573-1400
<http://www.marxsaunders.com>
M-F 10-5:30; Sa/Su 11-5; and by appt.

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

Preludes, T.S.Eliot



Janusz Walentynowicz sculpts space of ambiguous dimensions. And he paints on air. And the experience of his current solo exhibition at the Marx-Saunders Gallery, Chicago, brings to the fore the feelings evoked by several master artists, but the sculpture he creates bears little in likeness to any of their works. His inspiration is as subtle and encompassing, as his execution is flawless and unanticipated. He sculpts in glass.

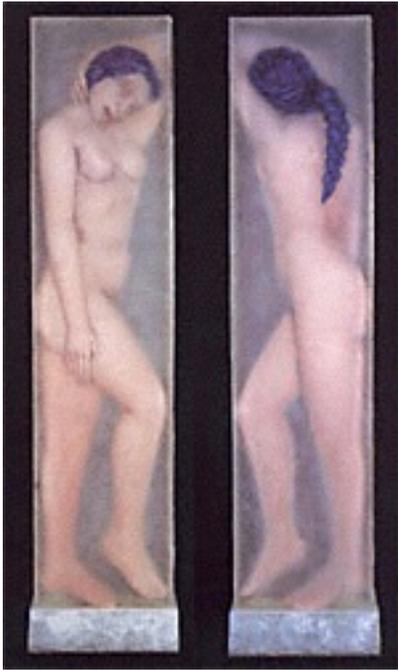
Three Muses, 1999
Kiln cast glass, steel, oil paint
75 x 80 x 16"
© Janusz Walentynowicz

"Glass insists that we look into it, that we not stop at the surface of what is shown. The emotional states depicted here are points of easily disturbed equilibriums between inner and outer states. The traces of surface, color and texture both hold back and reveal clues. You can look past these external details of identity right into the scars and stress of experience which are still evident and threatening internally though healed on the surface." This was the statement of Walentynowicz himself in an interview with Nannette V. Maciejunes, Senior Curator of the Columbus Museum of Art (*Glass Focus*, April/May 1995). The current exhibit confirms the direct honesty of that statement and documents the frank consistency of the artist's self-knowledge.

"Respite" (1999), on first encounter, seemed to have the feel of a Renoir about it. Walentynowicz, working sculpturally within three dimensions, has captured the gentle sensuality one might think possible only on a planar surface. The piece measures 72 x 17 x 10 inches and is created in kiln cast glass with steel and oil paint. It is Walentynowicz's expertise and originality in an unconventional medium which unites and exploits the expressive potential of both oil painting and sculpture. And how he achieves this in itself deserves notice.

As noted in the catalogue for this showing, Walentynowicz takes a rubber mold from a clay or wax form he has fashioned, and proceeds to fill it with a mixture of ground silica and plaster. The artist then casts the glass over this. This progression of castings, three times removed from the original forming, creates the internal volumes, and surfaces which he then paints. In essence he sculpts an internal space, and paints a skin on air.

Art critic, James Yood, in his introduction to the current show's catalogue concludes: "...Walentynowicz overcomes the flatness of painting and gives it mass, and even if we do not sense all the complexities of his procedure, we respond to the physical presence it delivers."



Respite, (Front and Back views)
1999
72 x 17 x 10"
Kiln cast glass, steel, oil paint
© Janusz Walentynowicz

And the work of Walentynowicz is a strong physical presence -- expressively so -- and displays a human quality beyond the conventional bounds of sculpture. Past sculptors took pains not to 'bruise' their alabaster, to preserve the natural, 'flesh-like' translucency of the stone. But stone must always create a clear-cut surface -- it can offer no impressionistic soft edge. In his choice of medium, Walentynowicz has achieved both translucency of reflection and refraction, *and* the option of soft edge surface reversed out into the matrix which surrounds his forms. His work confirms glass as a unquestionable fine arts medium. The artist's exploitation of semi-opaque and textured glass, and of internal paint layers puts to rest any reservations about whether, as Suzanne Muchnic asserted in the *Glass Art Society Journal* (1985), "glass is on the verge of transcending its historic connotation as a craft material."

In "Her Garden" (1999) there is an unexpected resoluteness and tense concentration to the work, and, as with many of the exhibited pieces, a rough elegance in execution that accords well with the focused and intimate confines of the glass sculpture. The dark steel frame mount, asymmetrically offset by two abraded bright squares worked at the lower right, adds further focus to the captured act, and the actor's concentration. For a reason I cannot explain, it gave an impression of reversing the allegoric legacy of Eve. In "Her Garden" the white bark trees and distinct periphery of flowers lend a balanced, if not subdued movement to the composition.

Walentynowicz's triptych, "Three Muses" (1999), harkens back to a Classical typology. One thinks of Greek sculpture, Sandro Botticelli or the nymphs of Jean Goujon. We call the Classical and the Classic by those names because they transcend and endure the mundane, and Walentynowicz, much like the artists of the *Fin de Siecle* movements, very effectively exploits the resonance in an expression that is distinctly modern. The three female nudes might more aptly be the Three Graces in dance, linked, as they so often were, to the Muses. The sensibility of the rendering, however, almost evokes some of the currency of a Duane Hanson polyvinyl casting -- the figures might well be just beyond a gallery window -- but Walentynowicz's very individual 'sculpting from within the glass' and his active artistic interpretation set the piece as an art object of expression and intent. Walentynowicz with deliberation fashions his view of spontaneous human impulse, allowing the viewer much latitude for response. He is not bound to the immediate actuality of mere representation.

In "Three Muses" the multicolored ground is dynamic and abstract, which further adds focus to the dimensionality of the figures. The window-like fretting, together with the rich blue and silver-blues of the frame mount heighten the illusion of viewing into a scene beyond the viewer's vantage point.

"At Ease" (1999) and "Hong Kong Night" (1999) display even stronger ground pattern and ornament, and are somewhat reminiscent of Gustave Klimt's technique of contrasting vivid artifice of pattern with a pronounced natural flow of human form. The ground is more subdued in Walentynowicz's pieces. In "Hong Kong Night" the ground accentuates the thematic content, both in its palette and in the manner in which it varies, reading from left to right, from a regimented diamond regularity to an increasing burst of free flow.

In his free-standing pieces, such as "She Tied" (1999), he evokes the effects of precious stone, where translucence, tonal densities, and colorations contribute to a soft, quasi-flesh-like glow. And Walentynowicz manages surface texture with skill and insight, contributing both to the psychological impact of the piece and the viewer's awareness of it as an art object. The seeming confrontation of glass as art or as craft, in the work on display at Marx-Saunders Gallery, seems an academic quibble. Walentynowicz proves that the artist, not the choice of medium, resolves that debate.

Two of the pieces on exhibition, "She Tied" and "Tied" (1999), and perhaps even a third, "Red Rag" (1999), do touch upon the model bound. While pieces such as Michaelangelo's "Bound Slave" exhibit a rather outward gaze and resistance to the binding, Walentynowicz's pieces seem introspective and acquiescent. The work conveys more of a sense of limitation about the model, than a feeling of imposed bondage. In "She Tied" and "Tied" the situation of the figure seems to constitute its object of *meditation*; the portrayed implies no external anecdote or consequence.

In "Tied" the frame mount itself presses in toward the form from all sides, and as in "Her Garden," increases the sense of closed intimacy. It is as if the creative act of the artist and the viewer's subsequent presence close the subject in.

In "Red Rag" the male nude seems to invite an anticipated binding -- there is the sense that the figure is both sacrificator and sacrificant in an unexplained and perhaps secular religiosity. But, whether metaphysics, metaphor or profane impulse, it conveys a sublimate dignity. It is regrettable that this last piece has not been included in the current catalogue. One viewer described the piece, with its two over-folding doors that conceal the central image (much like medieval portable altars) as a jewel box. And indeed many of the exhibition's pieces display some of the formal and decorative elegance of the jeweler's art. But the total expression of each piece extends well beyond the material's formal qualities.

In his 1996 interview for the Polish Museum of America exhibition catalogue, Walentynowicz told Nanette V. Maciejunes: "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."

That statement betrays a fine artist who wishes to communicate with the individual viewer. And does. It is excellent work. Much of it is gentle. Some of it poignant, perhaps akin to T.S.Eliot's "infinitely suffering thing." It is worth taking time to see the glass sculpture of Janusz Walentynowicz.

Walentynowicz states in the above catalogue interview: "Being an artist is, for me, definitely not an occupation. It's a way of life."

The exhibition runs until August 31st.

--G. Jurek Polanski

Jurek Polanski has previously written and art edited for Strong Coffee in Chicago. He's also well known and respected among the Chicago museums and galleries. Jurek is currently a Visual Arts Correspondent for ArtScope.net.



She Tied, 1999
Kiln cast glass
29 1/2" x 16" x 30"
© Janusz Walentynowicz

