

Here's a crystal-clear example of glass as an artistic medium

Art review

"Glassworks: 20 Artists"

Works that explore glass as an artistic medium
Locations: The Memorial Union Art Gallery and the
Richard L. Nelson Art Gallery, UC Davis
Schedule: Through May 20. Hours at the Nelson Gallery
are noon to 5 p.m. weekdays and 2 to 5 p.m.
Sundays. Hours at the MU are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
weekdays and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays

By RICHARD SIMON

SACRAMENTO UNION STAFF WRITER

"GLASSWORKS: 20 Artists," on view through May 20 at both the Memorial Union and the Richard L. Nelson Art Galleries at UC Davis, provides striking proof of a revival of interest in glass as an artistic medium.

The artists represented in the show have, for the most part, eschewed the functional forms that have led some to consider glassworking as a craft. Instead they have sought to look at the medium afresh. They have explored new techniques and developed new forms in their desire to once again establish glass as fine art.

In that effort, they follow ceramicists, photographers and weavers who have worked diligently to broaden the horizons of their respective media.

It seems particularly fitting that a work by Frederick Abrams dominates the exhibition in the Richard L. Nelson Gallery, for Abrams has worked as a craftsman in the field. He became bored with the limitations imposed upon him as an artisan, aspiring to seek a more personal expression.

He has given striking form to that yearning in two works on view, "Les Routes de la Grande Odalisque" ("The Large Brain") and "Reason for Love."

"Les Routes" is a very large work, one the artist describes as "the culmination of a series begun in 1974 which interprets diagrams derived from biological and technological systems."

The system that inspired "Les Routes" is the map of the Metro underground in Paris that guides passengers to the proper lines and stations.

Abrams has substituted whimsical names and routes for the stations in Paris in this impressive work. The stops are "Folie a Deux" and "Zone of Tolerance" instead of Pigalle or L'Opera.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the work is that it does not resemble a window at all — the ultimate negation of the stained glass perspective some viewers bring to the medium.

The fascination of glass as a medium is strikingly expressed by Linda R. Carpenter in "Memory," in glass and gold, sterling and brass wire.

Carpenter says she seeks in her work "to incorporate some of the fear we all feel toward glass — broken shards ready to cut and danger-

The Sacramento Union

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ous cracks predicting collapse.

"Memory" succeeds brilliantly in suggesting those fears as well as revealing her fascination with the play of light and color she finds in the medium.

There is something child-like in the three works of Lynn Criswell on view, and that impression is confirmed by the artist.

"My work alludes to personal experiences which oftentimes are recollections from childhood," she reveals.

The works suggest those recollections include gabled windows, for the three works are all in that format — and the evocation of a childhood home on the East Coast is heightened by the borders of the three works — brick, wood and glass tile.

Since recollections of childhood are the capital on which she often draws, it is fitting the figures in the works are of the young, and that they are conceived in child-like renderings.

Every viewer may see something different in the oil-on-glass shapes by Jay Musler, but I see an evocation of totemic masks in the cylindrical shapes pierced by slits. That is not the only mystery about them, however. They rise provocatively from gridded bases, suggesting that the thrust of the shapes contains a metaphor on freedom.

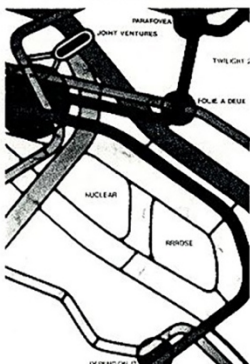
Although the show represents artists from every corner of the country, it projects a certain homogeneity. Almost all works are either abstract or non-objective. Only one exploits glass for the creation of vessels — perhaps the most traditional use of the medium. It suggests an implicit consensus to take glass as far as it can go, and the results are enlightening.

CONTINUING THE ART-CRAFT DISCOURSE

Davis / Christopher French

Glassworks, at Richard L. Nelson Gallery and the Memorial Union Galleries at the University of California, Davis, provides a candid evaluation of the possibilities and problems facing artists who work in glass. The frustrating aspect of this exhibition is that many of the constraints apparent in the assembled work have largely been self-imposed by the artists. Like the ceramicists who over twenty years ago began to incorporate sculptural esthetics into what had previously been a largely decorative or functional medium, a growing number of artists working in glass find themselves at a crossroads between the loosely defined territories of art and craft.

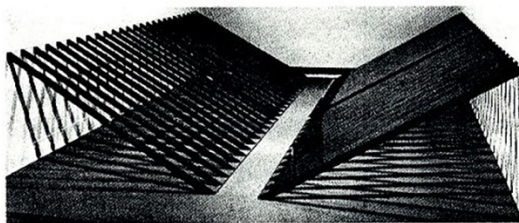
The twenty artists selected for this exhibition are for the most part young, and their work is more often shaped by a background in craft and by the demands of salability than by artistic conventions. Rather than presenting a survey of work by the established stars of the medium, *Glassworks* offers explorations of an art that, though full of potential, is represented here by as many false starts as concrete beginnings. The largely self-imposed, often contradictory issues that these artists wrestle with are the problems of a



Frederick Abrams, *Les routes de la grande Odalisque* (The Large Brain), detail, 1980-83, leaded glass and wood, 120" x 132" x 72", at Richard L. Nelson Gallery, University of California, Davis.

medium still in the process of its birthing.

The conflict between the role of crafter and that of artist is the underlying theme for much of this work. *Les routes de la grande Odalisque* (The Large Brain), by Frederick Abrams, clearly demarcates, perhaps inadvertently, the extent of glass artists' isolation from the general art community. Ostensibly a diagrammatic map of the subways, roadways, and points of in-



John Dooley, *The Result of Extreme Heat*, 1984, glass and wood, 36" x 72" x 144", at Richard L. Nelson Gallery, University of California, Davis. Photo: Pam Maddock.

terest in Paris, this enormous freestanding facade of twelve leaded-glass panels set within a wooden frame is, in fact, an edifice built in homage to the imagery and sensibilities of Marcel Duchamp.

Glass was an integral component of much of Duchamp's work, and by ascribing Duchampian characteristics to his own piece, Abrams details the narrow boundaries traversed by the majority of artists working in glass. Instead of freely combining elements to suit the subject, the central discourse of glass artists in this exhibition still centers on distinctions between art and craft, an argument one would have assumed Duchamp himself had comfortably laid to rest earlier in this century.

Fleshing out the skeleton of the ultimate French city with Duchampian metaphors and references, Abrams gives Paris the dimensions of an enormous pulsating brain. Depending on a playful outsider's knowledge of art history, *The Large Brain* can suggest parody as well as homage and a cul-de-sac rather than an avenue of possible exploration.

If glass seems the perfect component for a Duchampian requiem and *The Large Brain* a portentous church window dedicated to a favorite patron saint, Abrams's other work—a benign, self-contained geometric construction of shards of delicately colored leaded glass—concisely illustrates the narrow ends to which glass can be adapted. This open juxtaposition of two opposite approaches to the medium is an accurate description of the middle ground at which most of these artists arrive. Whether reflecting the demands of the market or the intentions of the artists, the narrow range of possibilities that is traversed in much of this work serves to constrict, rather than to expand, the medium.

John Dooley's installation, *The Result of Extreme Heat*, employs glass as a constructive element in the alteration of a regularly defined space. Four large sheets of glass, propped against two walls of a narrow side gallery, are supported by a

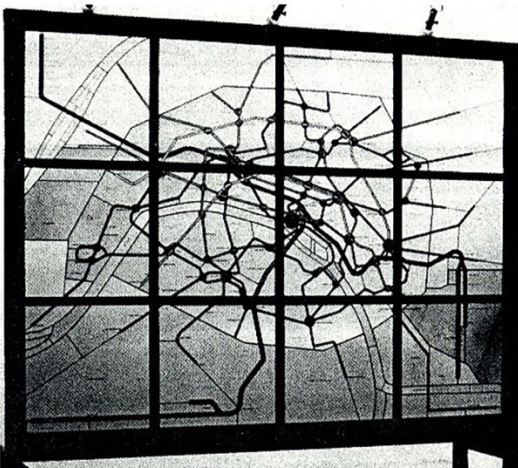
series of charred beams and separated by a small channel of floor space which suggests a path. Dooley's installation produces a spatial contortion that depends on a strong emotional response—anxiety bordering on vertigo. Reflecting his background in site-specific constructions that utilize a wide variety of materials, Dooley's approach is successful because of its directness—there is a refreshing lack of craft involved in either wood or glass; these are simply props selected for their

object with its surroundings, but the object itself is ultimately too subtly stated and passive to compete with the dynamic interplay of shadow and light that it produces.

Lynn Criswell, Stephanie Skalsky and Therman Statom emphasize the possibilities of glass as a transparent surface for paint. Criswell's mixed-media houses combine a tactile, immediate material sensibility with an insistence on graphic readability and pattern that inevitably dilutes the toughness of her depictions of women and their surroundings.

Therman Statom uses glass as a foundation for gesture; his untitled house or figure structures combine alternately smooth or jagged sheets of plate glass, emphasizing a sharp aggressiveness. Statom's application of paint serves to underline the vigorous contrast between the fragility of plate glass and the toughness of his surfaces and to transform and reduce a flat, transparent material into a largely opaque, dimensional one.

Other artists—among them, David Burton, Michael Hansen and David Rible—make elegant, refined objects which are shaped by decorative or functional esthetics. Reflecting more traditional ap-



Frederick Abrams, *Les routes de la grande Odalisque* (The Large Brain), 1980-83, leaded glass and wood, 120" x 132" x 72", at Richard L. Nelson Gallery, University of California, Davis.

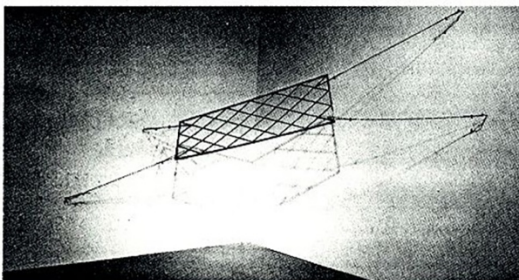
effectiveness in driving home Dooley's concise spatial metaphor.

Like Dooley, Daniel Weiner includes glass in his work rather matter-of-factly, combining fragments of windows, mirrors and other existing sources of commercial glass with wood and occasional found objects. The cumulative wall hangings that result depend for their impact on the piece's projection of a vulnerability; much of the tension produced by Weiner's work comes from the possibilities inherent in a large mass of glass and wood that is suspended at some distance from the floor.

Steven Schauer's constructions use the tactics of leaded glass to arrive at a problematic relationship between an object and the space surrounding it. *Long Beach #1* consists of a bridge-like lattice of clear glass that hangs across the juncture of two walls. The light passing through this grid marks a convoluted series of shadows on the wall behind it. Although the object itself is neutral and inert, it provides the subtle demarcations that are the heart of the piece. Schauer inexorably links his crafted

proaches to glass, their blown or manufactured forms maintain a perfection of technique that only partially offsets their overall lack of content. Their work provides a counterbalance to some of the more experimental approaches to glass, however, and demonstrates that the differences which exist among these artists have breadth as well as depth.

What emerges from *Glassworks* is not an image of a medium whose use is limited by a scarcity of new approaches but one of a medium burdened by an overabundance of possibilities. By exploring the obvious contradictions that exist in the work of these developing artists, the curators of *Glassworks* set forth the premise that the ambiguous and often irrelevant boundaries that constrict this most changeable medium are the major obstacle to its continued development. They hint that artists working in glass should take advantage of the flexibility inherent in their medium and pursue an open dialog with artists working in other mediums, rather than continuing in their own semi-isolation. □



Steven Schauer, *Long Beach Series #1*, 1981, glass and metal, 84" x 132" x 72", at Richard L. Nelson Gallery, University of California, Davis. Photo: Pam Maddock.