

**On Fire:
Surveying Women in
Glass in the Late-
Twentieth-Century**



On Fire: Surveying Women in Glass in the Late-Twentieth-Century is a snapshot of a crucial period in contemporary glass. Seen through the eyes of women, it reflects developments with the medium as an art material two and three decades after studio glass concepts were being implemented into university programs and contemporary practices. With work drawn from RAM's collection and centered on the 1980s and 1990s, this exhibition outlines the concerns of artists dedicated to exploring the sculptural, visual, metaphorical, and creative potential of glass.

Toots Zynsky
Untitled #9, ca. 1990
Glass
4 7/8 x 9 3/4 x 8 7/8 inches
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of Holly Hotchner and Franklin Silverstone
Photography: Jon Bolton

CONTEMPORARY GLASS

Used in many different ways, glass really has multiple histories—not a single history. The use of it in a decorative context still exists, but the twentieth century also saw the academic establishment of it as a viable art-making material. As noted in RAM's 2015 gallery guide, **Contemporary Glass at Racine Art Museum:**

"The use of glass as an unabashed medium for self-consciously made art—as sculpture and not only vessel, window, or ornament—was given a push forward in the 1960s as new explorations regarding the medium began to develop.

The beginning of the American studio glass movement is most often traced back to 1962, when **Harvey K. Littleton** established two glass workshops at the Toledo Museum of Art that brought artists, scientists, and experienced professional glassblowers together. These early proponents envisioned independent studios for glassblowing, a scenario that was not possible up to that point with the established technology.

R | A | M

Racine Art Museum
441 Main Street
Racine, Wisconsin
262.638.8300
ramart.org

(below)
Concetta Mason
Instant Recall, 1985
Glass
8 x 6 3/4 inches diameter
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of George and Dorothy Saxe
Photography: Jon Bolton





Such workshops provided forums for information sharing across disciplines and launched glass programs at universities while simultaneously sparking an interest by artists to experiment with the material. Littleton went on to establish a glass program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, while others worked to do the same at institutions across the country. These efforts encouraged experimentation and secured a place in contemporary craft for this compelling and dynamic medium.”

ON FIRE

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includes various examples of work produced within the studio glass framework—as self-consciously made art that reflects artistic investigations of materials, processes, and ideas.

Artists include **Sonja Blomdahl**, **Kimiake Higuchi**, **Concetta Mason**, **Flo Perkins**, **Kari Russell-Pool**, **Ginny Ruffner**, **Acquaetta Williams**, **Ann Wolff**, and **Toots Zynsky**. Numerous topics are explored, including identity, beauty, color, pattern, nature, abstraction, form, the figure, metaphor, process, and the properties and abilities of glass as a material.

There are also a range of techniques represented including blowing, lampworking, casting, fusing, carving, polishing, *pâte de verre*, assembling, and various surface treatments. In essence, the exhibition summarizes the experimental nature of the artists and of studio glass in general.

The exhibition title alludes not only to certain techniques of physically working with glass but also to the idea that some artists were innovating and making names for themselves—that they were “on fire” in their art world trajectory.

WOMEN ARTISTS AND GLASS

As just a small selection of makers who identify as women shows, the efforts to push this medium in broader art-making directions critically involved women as instructors and innovators. For example, **Audrey Handler**, a founder of the international organization, **Glass Art Society**, began working with the material in the 1960s and has conducted numerous workshops worldwide since then.

Linda MacNeil has been involved in both studio glass and glass jewelry since the 1970s. Based in Germany and Sweden throughout her career, **Ann Wolff** has also chosen glass as a primary medium since the 1960s. She is considered one of the founders of the international “Studio Glass Movement.”

Toots Zynsky, who studied with **Dale Chihuly**, became assistant director and head of the hot shop at the **New**

York Experimental Glass Workshop

(now UrbanGlass in Brooklyn) in 1980. As times progress, other issues arise that need attention, as the efforts of **Helen Lee**—current head of glass at UW-Madison—reflect. Lee is the founder and director of **GEEX (Glass Education**

Exchange)—an online platform geared towards reinventing the contemporary glass field by increasing accessibility and



(above left)

Ginny Ruffner

Envisioning Series: Envisioning the Weather, 1995

Glass and enamel paint

15 1/2 x 8 inches diameter

Racine Art Museum, the Karen Johnson Boyd Collection

Photography: Jon Bolton

(right)

Kari Russell-Pool

Sunflower Bottle, 1990 – 95

Glass

10 x 7 x 15 1/2 inches

Racine Art Museum, Gift of Michael L. and Anne Brody

in Honor of Judith and Stanton Brody

Photography: Jon Bolton

diversifying leadership models, suggesting new strategies of evaluating value, and developing new networks of support.

An article from the **Corning Museum of Glass** indicates that women have long been employed in manufacturing various glass items, including as decorators and, sometimes, as designers, in an industrial context.

Some, associating women with the more recent popularity of certain techniques such as **slumping**, **painting on glass**, and **pâte de verre**, suggest that it is because of women that these techniques have maintained or increased interest. And while there is not an argument about the roles several women have played, there has also been discussion that historically, women were, as a whole, shown less support than male counterparts—a characterization not unique to the glass field. While none of these factors are immediately accessible as ideas in the works of art on view in this exhibition, they contribute to rich discussions about the roles of women artistically and professionally. They are heady topics that provide a necessary subtext for conversations about women—and, ultimately, gender politics of all scope—today.

Recent years have also seen more work by women artists working with glass in museums and galleries. RAM and RAM's Wustum Museum are exceptions to this—having shown work in various media by women artists for decades. For example, theme exhibitions from the 1980s and 1990s included glass-focused work by **Sonja Blomdahl**, **Audrey Handler**, and **Laurie Thal**.



As the collection—comprised of North America's largest contemporary craft collection and works on paper—has grown, so too has the representation of women. To date, **41% of the artists represented in the collection are women**. Focusing on glass alone, this percentage includes: several of the artists mentioned above; all of the artists included in *On Fire*; many artists who have built or further developed their careers over the last twenty years, such as **Cassandra Blackmore**, **Carol Cohen**, **Katherine Gray**, **Judy Jensen**, **Karen LaMonte**, **Silvia Levenson**, **Beth Lipman**, **Melissa Schmidt**, **Anna Skibska**, **April Surgent**, and more; and several who work in collaborative duos.

A critic of another recent all-female glass exhibition lamented about needing to draw attention to the fact that all of the artists were women—are they artists first or women first? And these conversations can also be limiting as they sidestep more fluid gender dynamics.

(above right)
Kimiake Higuchi
Cyclamen, 2000
Glass
12 1/16 x 12 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Ann and C.A. Wimpfheimer
Photography: Jon Bolton

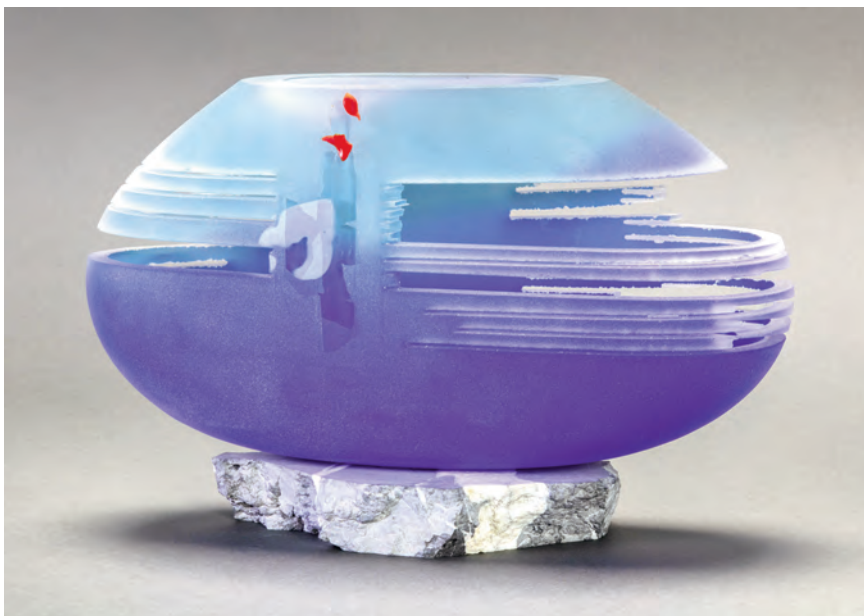
(left)
Flo Perkins
September Cactus, 1987
Glass
17 x 12 x 7 inches
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Dale and Doug Anderson



Yet, in this particular moment, it is important to draw attention to components that are beyond the objects themselves. Who the makers are and how they move through the world impact the work, even if it is not the identifiable subject matter.

While pleased to highlight artwork incorporating glass at any time, RAM is especially proud to do so in 2022, which has been designated the **International Year of Glass** by the United Nations to celebrate the heritage and importance of the material in all facets of life.

Lena Vigna
Curator of Exhibitions



(above)
Ann Wolff
Boll-Hus (Ball-House), 1999
Glass
7 5/8 x 12 3/4 x 5 1/8 inches
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Barry Friedman, Ltd.
Photography: Jon Bolton

(left)
Acquafetta Williams
Cut Vessel, 1989
Glass, enamel paint, and found rock
8 1/2 x 13 x 4 inches
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Michael L. and Anne Brody in Honor of Judith and Stanton Brody
Photography: Jon Bolton